



The garden filled with plants and challenges for interpersonal communication.

Inside the shop's one-of-a-kind SoHo reminiscent space.



For many months, this column has been my opportunity to gas on for several hundred words about my craft. I am given the chance to tell Capitol Hill all about my love of all things green. When assigned the task of covering the coffeehouse Sidamo, I started to think about how to approach a gardening article on a coffee house. Would I talk about the ancient art of coffee growing and all of its age-old secrets? Would the gardens in the rear of the Sidamo be interesting enough to focus on only the gardens that a green-conscious business owner has created

The Owner and Visionary

As soon as I arrived, the story of Sidamo began to write itself. I was greeted by Kenfe Bellay, the proprietor of Sidamo Coffee & Tea located at 417 H St. NE. The coffee house is something right out of a SoHo haunt – vaulted ceilings, post war industrial outfitting, and a huge coffee mill that occupies the front window position. There is local art on the exposed brick walls and funky forward seating that is reminiscent of a time when the allure of your hang out said much about you and your neighborhood, not much about the predictability of a rigid corporate cookie cutter model. The



Sidamo Coffee & Tea

Where Coffee Growing and Village Unity Come Full Circle

BY DEREK THOMAS

atmosphere is warm, inviting, and very bohemian chic.

Kenfe had a gentle glow as he spoke of his vision in creating the space of Sidamo. In his country of Ethiopia, “coffee country” as he refers to it, there is a culture of unity that has been built around the coffee trade and its customs. “I love coffee,” says Kenfe. And his love began with the tradition of coffee and fellowship, “When I grew up, every mother roasted her own coffee. There was a social society that was created around the coffee. We broke in mid afternoon for coffee. We used traditional clay vessels for the boiling of hot water and roasted the coffee as needed. This ensured only the freshest coffee for our break times.” This was, and is, how coffee is served up in Kenfe’s household.

Discussions about the village and town are always on the agenda and coffee was the social lubricant that kept the discussions lively. Every Sunday the shop hosts a traditional Ethiopian coffee ceremony at 2 p.m. where the tradition of coffee as a unifying catalyst is honored.

The Location

Kenfe chose his shop’s location for two principal reasons, its close proximity to the Capitol and the sense of community that he experiences on H Street. “H Street is different than any place in the city. There is a pulse and unity that



is unique to here. In fact when we were opening the shop, someone broke out the window to attempt a burglary, and the entire neighborhood came out to support our efforts and help with the clean up. I knew I had made the right choice for my businesses location,” says Kenfe.

The Coffee

The coffee served at Sidamo is always shade grown, fair trade and organic. They roast the coffee on site each day, and there is a unique fresh roasted taste that you will only get from just-roasted coffee. There are numerous varieties available, and if you ask Kenfe which you should buy, he will gladly share his recommendations for what type, and why that type will perfectly suit your taste preferences. His love of coffee and all its intricacies shines through to every fiber of his craft.

The Gardens

OK so now that you know where to go for your next cup of joe, let me share with you an added bonus – the rear garden of Sidamo. You enter the gardens through the back of the store, up a flight of stairs and past the kitchen, and suddenly you are whisked away from your day, your week or just your last trying moment, to a garden that is lush and inviting. Kenfe humbly says he does not know much about plants, but knew the layout he wanted to have.



ABOVE: Proprietor Kenfe sits in the back of Sidamo Coffee & Tea.

LEFT: Even the neighbor's wisteria has joined in on the good feeling garden room at Sidamo.

The hardscape is a series of three cement circles with unifying elements contained within each. There are all the elements of great garden design -- repetition, naturalness in flow, staggered placement of plants, and interesting artistic elements that complement the design. The plant palate, although quite simple and utilitarian, is very well constructed. There are lush, soft hosta that are full and delicate. There is nandina, fern-like and interesting in structure. The large magnolias provide natural screens for the three circles which contain a table and chairs creating a lush hide-away effect. Even the neighbor's wisteria has joined in and now long purple drops cascade along the fence line. There is a feeling of tranquility and solace in the garden.

Though seating is limited, the circular design of each space is inviting and almost challenges you to join a table where folks are gathered, break the ice, dig deep and pull out that lost artifact of communication. While sitting in one of Sidamo's circles it becomes very easy to understand the craft of Ethiopian coffee time. So order up your favorite coffee, turn off your phone and computer and join a group from the human race in some good old fashioned community unity in a garden that is reminiscent of all things lost in our overly complex and isolated information age. Enjoy.

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