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Dining at Chez Aunty

By Rosemary Reed
 WI Contributing Writer
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Dining at Chez Aunty Libe may be a little off-putting for many English-speaking Americans. The wait staff speaks Spanish, and French, but only passable English in many cases. But the menu is written in English, and for those who have done any traveling, believe me, you can figure out some way, pointing and smiling, to order your food.

It's the real thing. The real deal. It's not cookie-cutter, the same, fast-food quick.



Photo By Rosemary Reed
 Liberate Ehembrahas, owner of Chez Aunty Libe, opened a restaurant on Georgia Avenue because there was no other Senegalese-Gambian restaurant in the area.



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In Chez Aunty, you will have literally found, in Washington, D.C., a spot that is similar to thousands of little restaurants in Morocco, Asia, Caribbean, and Africa - all around the world.

I found Chez Aunty when I returned to D.C. from the West African country of Guinea. When I returned from Guinea, I wanted to continue the wonderful ambience that I got in the small, friendly country, with its French-West African cuisine. I found Chez Aunty's on Georgia Avenue. Right in my back yard!

The Gambia, which is English-speaking, is located on a piece of land lodged inside the West African nation of Senegal, which is French-speaking. The Gambia is the country where the late author Alex Haley found his ancestors, on which his best-selling book, *Roots* was based.

Liberate Ehembras had the restaurant for over 10 years. She either does the cooking, or she has trained the cooks. Her family helps out with waiting, and the whole, small restaurant reflects her smiling energy.

The place is modestly decorated with African palms and face masks. It's definitely not a 'tropical joe's' restaurant-type knock-off.

I asked a friend - a Senegalese friend, Souleye Cisse - what to eat there. It's one of his favorite places, too. He suggested yassa, a grilled chicken with lemon juice, which turned out to be most succulent. He also directed me to the traditional national Senegalese staple of cebu jenn -- onion, rice and fish.

The more exotic dishes are cooked with cassava leaves, which are similar to collard greens, and white rice, pieces of lamb or beef in a sauce. Cisse mentioned to me that dessert is not a traditional African concept, but that cacri, which is millet with a sweeten yogurt, is always enjoyed. Look for ginger beer - bissap, which is similar to a rose hip drink -- to cure your thirst.

But the main thing is to leave your *hard-nose* restaurant criteria at the door. There is no time limit of three minutes before the waitress gets to you - no five minutes before the drinks return and 10 minutes before the meal is presented to you. Each meal is cooked to order. You are there to talk, to join friends, to enjoy your meal.

I sometimes have to remind the waitress about something I ask for more water and things like that - but I enjoy stepping into another world. If I can't find the time right now to trek to another country, then I can trek over to my favorite place, Chez Aunty's, and smile as I remember that there are other colorful, buzzing, worlds outside of this city of work, work, work.

Chez Aunty Libe is located at 6115 Georgia Ave. NW. The restaurant is open 11 a.m. to 8 p.m. Monday through Sunday. Please call 202-291-6454 for more information.