



MARQAA

SUBTLE FLAVORS FROM THE
HIGHLANDS OF OROMIA



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Most Oromos live in the highlands of Oromia consisting of much of Wollega, Illubabor, Jimma, Shewa, Arsi, Bale, and Hararghe. The Oromos in these highlands practice a sedentary lifestyle growing cereals such as wheat, sorghum, corn, teff, and, of course, barley. Now, barley is by no means anything special as it is grown all over the world, but the relative resilience of the grain compared even to wheat and its unmatched flavor has made it a favorite of the Oromian highlands. Barley dishes also happen to pair very well with dairy which is another major product of these highlands. Granted, Oromia's lowlands lead not just Ethiopia, but even Africa in terms of the number of cattle, its highlands are also powerhouses of dairy production. And all of this comes together in one simple dish that has conquered all of Oromia and beyond over the past several decades.

Marqaa has a few different names across Oromia, and the dish does vary a little bit in the way it is made and/or assembled. But the basics hold true everywhere. Marqaa is a porridge made from finely ground barley flour eaten with melted and clarified butter made the Oromo way.

Let's start with the porridge. Barley is first ground and depending on the area, some other ingredients are added but are never allowed to overwhelm the barley-ness of the flour. Water is added to Okkotee (a narrow necked pot made out of clay) and boiled. The Okkotee rests on three separate Sunsumaa (stands made out of clay) between which is the fire - a sort of open air oven on its own. Once the water has boiled, the barley flour is added to it. It is first battered and once it is thick enough, mashed. This mashing is what gives Marqaa its distinctive smooth and soft texture. The porridge is mashed while on the fire at first and once it has really thickened, it is taken off the fire and mashed again. It is then returned to the top of the three Sunsumaa and cooked a bit before it is taken off and mashed again. This can go on for hours depending on the amount of Marqaa being made. Regardless, the Marqaa is only done once it has attained the distinctive texture it is known for.

*A beautifully decorated Qorii
along with the Fal'aana - spoon
made out of animal horn
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SAGALEE

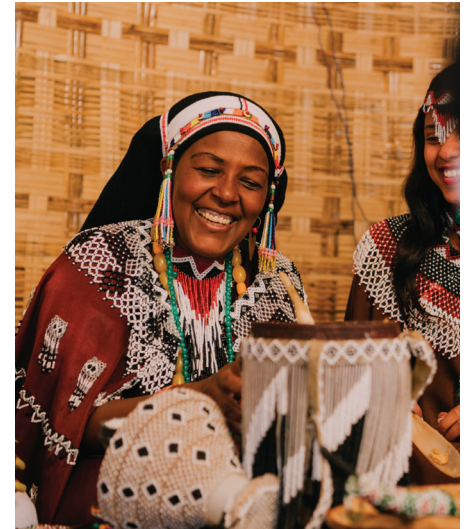




A woman prepares the flour for the Marqaa by sifting it



The woman mashes the Marqaa inside the Okkotee vessel while it cooks

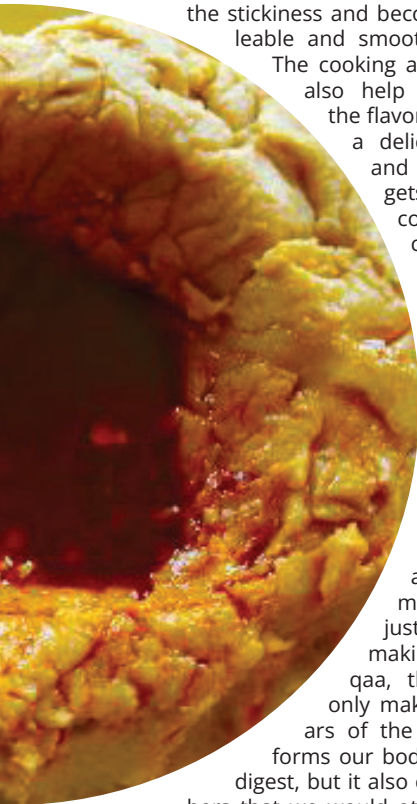


The woman serves the Marqaa in a Qorii to be eaten with traditional utensils

Before it cooks properly, the Marqaa is sticky and gooey. After it has been mashed and cooked for a long time, the Marqaa loses the stickiness and becomes a malleable and smooth porridge.

The cooking and mashing also help to develop the flavor. Barley has a delicious flavor and one that gets better with cooking. You can see this by just frying some barley grain on an open fire and eating it. In fact, the most common traditional snack across Oromia, Akaayi, is just that. In the making of Marqaa, the fire not only makes the sugars of the barley into forms our body can easily digest, but it also cooks the fibers that we would otherwise not digest and persuade them to release delicious flavors. The end product is one of the simplest dishes with some of the most subtle flavors you will always remember once you've tasted it.

A top-down view of the Marqaa dish with the Dhadhaa - buttery sauce in the center



The second ingredient in assembling a proper Marqaa meal is the Dhadhaa - clarified butter with some more ingredients. Dhadhaa is rendered out of milk through a process that takes a few days to a few weeks. Once the cow has been milked, the milk is then stored in a large container called Guchuma. It should be noted that all Oromo milk containers are made out of grass and/or wood that has been treated with butter and other animal products for a long time which imbues them with a very distinctive flavor that is very hard to replicate. Once the milk has been stored for a few days in one of those containers, it turns into yogurt. This yogurt is then churned in another vessel for quite a long time until it has an even consistency. The next process is called Raasuu and it means rocking the milk in a constant motion for hours while checking if the butter has coalesced into tiny balls after which a sort of round motion is done to collect it all together. The butter that is obtained through this process is very high in fat and is already flavorful. But it is further clarified before it can be used in food. The clarification process is quite straightforward. The butter is put in a clay pot and cooked with a lot of spices and herbs such as dried basil and rosemary. Once most of the impurities have been removed, the butter is then cooled down. This clarified butter is more than clarified and the aroma of it is an intoxicatingly delicious smell that wafts throughout the Oromo home. The making and clarification of the butter is only done once every few weeks or months though since Dhadhaa doesn't spoil for months or even years.

The final ingredient can be optional, but usually isn't. This is the Barbaree. The Barbaree is a mixture of chili, garlic, ginger and an assortment of other herbs and spices that is then ground together with some salt. The fi-

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nal powder is deep maroon in color. It is very hot (but can be made to be less so) and has an unmistakably complex aroma.

Once all three components are ready, the Marqaa is assembled in a Qorii. The hot porridge is first ladled into the Qorii and made to assume its shape. Then, a large hole is gouged out in its center into which the Dhadhaa and Barbaree are placed. The Dhadhaa melts from the heat of the porridge and the Barbaree dissolves giving this quite literally central sauce a reddish color.

After assembly, the Marqaa is eaten using Fal'aana (spoons made out of horns) or steel spoons by gouging out a large bite and dipping it into the Dhadhaa while still hot. The Qorii is always shared and many people can eat out of it at the same time.

Marqaa is a very common communal meal that is eaten across Oromia and beyond. It puts together the best of the highlands of Oromia and the final product is something roundly enjoyed.