

THE AWASH FARMS

A SHEWAN BOUNTY



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FARM & FRESH

The Awash has never been easy to tame. Originating from the highlands west of the capital, this most beloved of Ethiopia's rivers has an unfortunate reputation for excessive flooding during the rainy season, swallowing up vast tracts of land in the areas of Sebeta and Koka under what seem like seasonal lakes. While this seasonal and rather dramatic ebb and flow of the river is a boon to the avian life of the area, it does make farming a bit unpredictable and, on some occasions, disastrous if the river was to come and claim a plot. This situation where the river surges on in contention with the large human population surrounding it happens pretty frequently with rivers such as the Awash and Omo, but is quite rare for Ethiopia's other mighty rivers such as the Wabe, Moghor and even Abbaya. While the Awash and Omo have huge spans of length where they flow in relative ease across a much flatter land with the occasional rapides and smaller waterfalls, the Moghor Abbaya and Wabe rush through massive gorges that make them wholly unsuitable for humans to make use of the water for farming. Tucked away in their massive gorges, these rivers meander through the Ethiopian highlands, ever retreating into the deep paths they keep forging.

The Awash, on the other hand, is called Ethiopia's most loyal river. It follows the Great Rift Valley past the Awash National Park and into the otherworldly scenes of Lake Abyei close to the Djibouti border where it sinks into the sandy marshes, in a seeming attempt to keep its reputation of loyalty to the country. Certainly, the Awash is Ethiopia's most important river. Even with the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Abbaya is yet to have the kind of impact the Awash has on the lives of tens of millions of people. What the Awash accomplishes in terms of agricultural productivity for areas that would otherwise be arid is something that is near miraculous. The story of how the Awash waters the parched lands of Merti and Melkasa dripping life into an arid landscape whose natives used to flee to greener pastures when times got worse is too big to cover here, but there are a few anecdotes we can look at to see what the Awash and its tributaries mean for parts of East Shewa.

The Aqaqi river is mostly known for cutting the capital Finfinnee into two, but it is also the site of Ethiopia's first hydroelectric dam, the Aba Samuel, and is extensively used to irrigate the lands to the southeast of the capital. A major tributary of the Awash, the Aqaqi enables farmers to grow vegetables



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A farmer works on a plot of tomato farms around Qoqa

📷 Ashenafi Yemane

of all kinds such as onions and tomatoes at seasonal farms that lie close by the main highway leading to Finfinnee. The produce from these farms is some of the freshest to reach the capital and has created a boon in the availability of some much sought after vegetables in the driest season.

Further south, past the town of Modjo is where the Awash comes into its own, inundating thousands of hectares of land every year as it floods and inspiring songs of isolation in the rainy season among the Tulamaa Oromoo. Of course, the floods recede in the dry season and it is then that the vegetables to feed a whole nation are planted. From Qoqa to Meqi and Batu, the Awash gives rise to some of the most extensive vegetable farms in the country with thousands of hectares of tomatoes and onions that find their way to every farmer's market in the country including that of the capital.

This bounty of the Awash and its tributaries as well as Lake Dambal has given rise to two important developments that should help revitalize farming in these parts. The first is the branding of the Meqi-Batu Onion as an agricultural product. This is a major step forwards for a country that relies heavily in agriculture to extract as much value as possible

from the sector. This will, hopefully, accelerate the move towards creating designations of origin for many agricultural products, in yet another win for Awash.

The second is the inauguration of the Bulbula Integrated Agro-Industrial Park. This is a state-of-the-art industrial park designed specifically to support industries working to add value to agricultural products and its location cannot be any more perfect. Spread across 294 hectares of land close to the small town of Bulbula, the park has access to not only Awash's bounty to its north, but to all the fruits and vegetables that come to Shashemene to be distributed to the rest of the country all the way from places like Arba Minch. This should help take advantage of the area's unique geography to develop and market high quality value added agricultural products.

With a newly developed brand and an agroindustry park, the future looks bright for farming in Awash's stomping ground. This beautiful dip in the Great Rift Valley is quickly becoming an unlikely breadbasket, one among many the Awash casually sprouts.



A view of the mighty Awash around Qoqa

📷 Ashenafi Yemane



A fruits stand around the town of Batu

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The gates of the Bulbula Integrated Agro-Industrial Park

📷 Soko.et

After a short trip through the capital, Finfinnee, the Akaki roars and rushes its way past ravines and flat terrain that, it irrigates to join the Awash for an epic trip through the Great Rift Valley.

📷 Ashenafi Yemane



