





Haftu Kabsay, operations manager at the Swamp Water Café at Billie Swamp Safari in Big Cypress, is hands-on in the kitchen. (Beverly Bidney photo)

BIG CYPRESS — Like every other male growing up in Ethiopia, Haftu Kabsay was banned from the kitchen. Even if he just wanted some salt, he had to ask someone to get it.

It's hard to say if that forbidden fruit led him down the path to culinary school, but it certainly influenced his path in life.

Today, an ocean away from his African homeland, Kabsay is the operations manager of the Swamp Water Café at Billie Swamp Safari in Big Cypress. He loves his chosen profession in the restaurant industry. His degrees in culinary arts and hotel management from Kenya Utalii College in Nairobi more than qualify him for the task of improving the Café, which is what he has done in the six months he's been on board. His years in an array of kitchens add to his experience.

Kabsay's entrée into the U.S. came through a contest conducted by the Nestle corporation while he was a college student in Kenya. The company, which makes Cremora, challenged students to make something creative with the coffee creamer product. The steak sauce Kabsay made was the winning creation, which earned him a large cash prize and a one-year internship at a Chicago hotel.

When the internship ended, he moved to Las Vegas and worked in the kitchen at Craftsteak at the MGM Grand. His next job was at the Seminole Casino Coconut Creek, where over the course of five years he worked his way up as a line cook, head cook, chef and food and beverage supervisor. He enjoys the challenge of leading the Swamp Water Café.

"Cooking is all about passion," Kabsay said. "I want customers who come here to eat to empty their plates. When I see plates half full, that really bothers me."

Kabsay has implemented innovation at the restaurant. He started the \$4.95 employee lunch special

to reach out to the 723 Big Cypress employees for business. The program has been successful in part because of the price and the fact employees can get in and out in plenty of time to clock in after lunch. Kahsay tested the menu based on flavor, speed and accuracy.

“The special is a little smaller, simpler and tasty,” he said. “The impact on sales has been good.”

Kahsay has big plans for the restaurant. He wants to create a full-service counter where food is cooked to order as customers watch the process. He noticed that Americans like to see their food being prepared and gave the example of the popular stir fry restaurants in shopping mall food courts. His plan for the counter includes a different theme every day such as stir fry, pasta and carving stations.

Other ideas include creating a sports bar in the old casino room complete with pool table, video games and lots of TVs. Kahsay wants to encourage the community to frequent the restaurant so they won't have to travel to Naples or Miami.

“We will have great food,” Kahsay said. “We want to bring the community here and give them good food with a reasonable price.”

Another goal is to provide an affordable lunch to the busloads of kids who visit Billie Swamp Safari. Early on Kahsay discovered that the kids often brought their own food because the buffet price was too high at \$10.95, so he lowered it to \$8.95.

“We are starting to see groups come in and eat here,” Kahsay said. “We will continue to grow.”

Kahsay is a man engaged in his job and is thankful for the support he gets from upper management.

“I have great bosses. They inspire me and are very supportive,” he said. “My children also inspire me.”

Kahsay lives in Coral Springs with his wife Mearnnet, son Abel, 8 and daughter Helina, 4.

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