

# Beat some drums for Tam Tam

By Betha Whitlow

SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH

"I just ate goat, for crying out loud," my friend Brad exclaimed in disbelief as we left Tam Tam, a Senegalese restaurant in north St. Louis County.

I rarely begin with final reactions, but our experience at Tam Tam was so unusual that it seems a fitting tribute. I'd recently read an article about Senegalese food that was mouth-watering enough to make me consider a spontaneous trip to New York City, a hotbed of the cuisine. Then I found Tam Tam in my backyard.

Well, perhaps not exactly, but near Interstate 270 in a Florissant strip mall, Tam Tam was a worthwhile jaunt for my first experience with Senegalese food.

A tam tam is a small African drum, as well as the name of a well-known restaurant in Dakar, Senegal's cosmopolitan capital city. Senegal is a largely Islamic nation, but French, Vietnamese, Indian and Middle Eastern influences infuse its native West African cuisine with subtle, global elements that were fully on display at "our" Tam Tam.

The dining area at Tam Tam, decorated with African textiles, was pleasant enough, but it was our gracious server Esi who really filled the space with warmth. She recommended their juice blends (\$2.50), unfamiliar combinations that proved to be utterly invigorating. I chose the Ginger and Bissap (red sorrel) juice, which was fruity and bracing. Brad's Ginger-Bouye (baobab, or monkey bread, fruit) juice leaned toward milky and fragrant.

Alongside a tasty complimentary appetizer of crispy fried flatbread, and a tomato, onion and green pepper salsa with open, slightly spicy flavors, the juices were a cooling contrast.

We also had starters of fried plantains (\$2.95) and Fataya (\$3.95), fried puff pastries stuffed with fish. While the medallions of plantain were a trifle oily, they were perfectly browned, drawing out the sugars in the ripe fruit. The Fataya were also described as samosas, suggesting that they might resemble the better-known Indian appetizer.

Instead, the large pies of blistered, golden pastry enveloped shredded whitefish in a red chili sauce, which lent brightness to the meaty, mellow combination of fish and pastry and established



## TAM TAM

35 Florissant Oaks Shopping Center (North Lindbergh Boulevard and Patterson Road)  
314-921-3805

**Hours:** 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m. Tuesday-Thursday; 11:30 a.m.-1 a.m. Friday-Saturday (kitchen closes at midnight); Noon-5 p.m. Sunday

**Smoking:** No

**Wheelchair access:** Yes

**Payment:** All major credit cards

the distinctly Senegalese character of the dish.

Maffe (\$7.95), a meat and peanut butter stew, was Tam Tam's Friday special. The rich, deep sauce of peanut butter, tomato and spices coating a mélange of falling-off-the-bone lamb, carrots and potatoes really appealed to me, and worked well with a large mound of white rice.

I was surprised by the several, large bones in the stew, but the meat was so tender and the dish so satisfying I found myself willing to work around them.

And now the Nyama Choma (\$11.99), a brilliant goat steak. The perfectly grilled lean meat possessed an earthy smokiness and was both enlivened and balanced by a fiery slaw of marinated onions and jalapeño in a tangy mustard sauce.

A cold onion and red pepper chutney was lovely with a mound of saffron-tinged cous-cous served with the dish. We ate every last bite, but not before we took pictures of it like it was a favored vacation destination.

A few weeks later, I'm still looking at those pictures and thanking Tam Tam for one of the most distinctive food experiences I've ever had. No plane ticket to New York City for me.