

Fake cash on upswing with bills just blowin' in the wind

The Extra stumbles onto funny money and checks it out

By MARK HEDIN

THE SECRET SERVICE, everyone knows, protects the safety of presidents and president wannabes. They're in charge of dead presidents, too. The Secret Service is the lead agency in the government's battle against counterfeit currency.

And here in the Bay Area, we're keeping them busy. So much funny money is circulating, one can almost trip over it.

On a hot July afternoon, the smell of urine wafted strong on the wind blowing east down Natoma Street from Sixth. Near the corner, a little piece of paper coated in chlorophyll tumbled toward the ink-stained wretch walking the other way. He quickly bent down to snatch it up, and another rolling along right behind it.

On their face was the scowling visage of the scoundrel President Andrew Jackson, slave owner, Indian conqueror and renowned racist. Jackson is soon to be banished from U.S. currency in favor of abolitionist and underground railroad conductor Harriet Tubman, but this afternoon, he was a hero again.

But Satwinder "Bill" Multani, the ever-cheerful proprietor at Dalda's market on the corner of Eddy and Taylor, did a reality check the next day. Speaking with authority and a smile, he declared those ersatz Jacksons phony as a \$3 bill. He said he sees the like regularly, and showed an array of fakes he keeps taped to the wall behind his cash register to remind his workers to take better care in what they accept. Jackson, Hamilton and even Lin-

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One of two counterfeit \$20 bills found by *The Extra* on Natoma Street in July

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CHECK OUT TRUMPTY DUMPTY

He could be ready for a very big fall

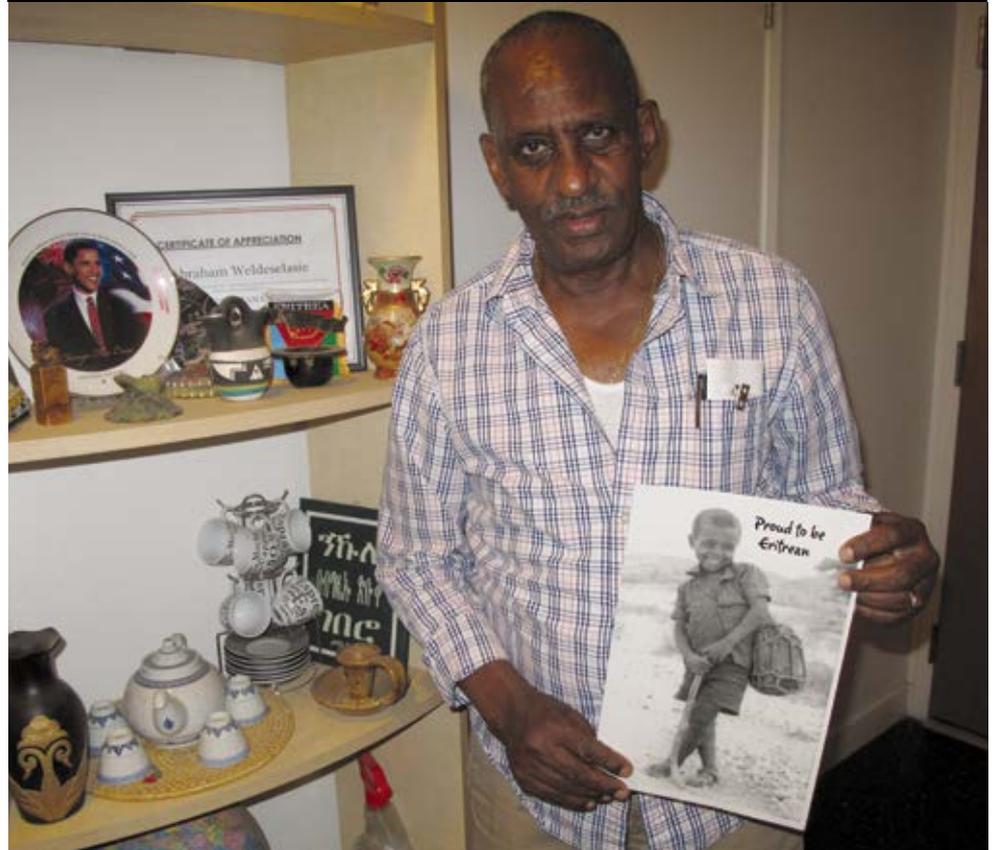
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CENTRAL CITY



SAN FRANCISCO

DIVERSE CITY



In his Curran House studio, Abraham Weldeselassie shows his pride of country with an Eritrean poster. His shelves display a commemorative plate of President Obama and family mementos.

New American's dream

Eritrean survives adversity, finally finds a good life

STORY AND PHOTOS BY TOM CARTER

SPICY, PUNGENT AROMAS from a steaming dinner platter 2 feet in diameter throw Abraham Weldeselassie gleefully back in time and into a reverie.

The highly seasoned East African food swirls in his head before it hits his mouth. Succulent chunks of lamb, beef and chicken surrounded by an array of delicately seasoned vegetables fill the platter — in the middle, to counter the heat: the traditional scoop of yogurt.

"All mothers in Eritrea cook this way," Abraham says and smiles, his dark eyes wide and gleaming, his hand inviting. "This is our culture."

One other table is occupied at 5:30 p.m. as Matheos Johannes, who opened Assab Eritrean restaurant on Geary Boulevard near Masonic Avenue 13 years ago, comes by with steaming plates of injera. This spongy flatbread is made of teff, the ancient, tiny, gluten-free grain grown in the Horn of Africa. Teff is a new specialty crop in four states, including California. Tear off a piece to scoop up the food.

"Would you like a fork?" Johannes asks.

"No thanks," I say, I'm going native.

The meal is the zenith of the Eritrean experience that Abraham has promised me following many hours over months discussing his

history. He's a diminutive, sincere man of 64 given to reminiscing about his homeland and proudly pulling up pictures of it on his mobile phone.

Even so, he's in the land of his dreams. He has put his rocky times behind him — he has a criminal record dating to his early days in San Francisco — and has settled into his Curran House studio in the Tenderloin. He lives on a thin income as a part-time cabbie but is secure in his Eritrean community that extends to cousins in San Jose and a niece in Seattle.

Abraham fills us in about the Bay Area's close-knit Eritrean community. There's another Eritrean restaurant in town, over on Ninth Avenue, but Oakland has the mother lode, more than a dozen. And Oakland, with 6,000 Eritreans, is the center of the Bay Area Eritrean community and its 12,000 population. San Francisco has an estimated 2,000, but Abraham isn't sure how many, if any others, live in the Tenderloin.

Besides their food, Eritreans love their independence. After 32 years of fighting, Eritrea, the size of Indiana with 5.3 million people, in 1991 shook free from Ethiopia's annexation. On May 24, the celebrated day, countrymen from San Jose, Santa Rosa and hundreds from San Francisco flocked to Oakland's Eritrean Community Cultural Center to celebrate.

Abraham and 10 others took the nation's red, green and blue flag with centered gold olive branches to Mayor Libby Schaaf's third-floor office, asking her to display it in the hall next to the California flag.

Abraham left his homeland with his father's blessing when the conflict heated up. Young men in Asmara, Eritrea's capital where the family lived, were getting drafted, or shot

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