

LETTER FROM SOMALIA

NOW SERVING

Terrorists keep targeting a Mogadishu chef's restaurants, but he won't shut down.

BY XAN RICE



Ahmed Jama at Village Sports, which was attacked by suicide bombers last year.

In the summer of 2008, a forty-two-year-old chef named Ahmed Jama left London to live in Mogadishu, the capital of Somalia, where he was born. To his family and friends, it was a puzzling decision. Twenty years earlier, Jama had arrived at Heathrow Airport with a forged passport, no local contacts, and little command of English. He was now a British citizen, and the owner of a successful restaurant in London. He had a wife and three young children.

Mogadishu was in ruins, and at war. In the latest of a series of conflicts that started in 1991, a group of Islamist insurgents, the Shabaab, was battling Ethiopian troops, who were propping up Somalia's transitional government. In the previous eighteen months, gun battles and shelling had caused eight hundred thousand people—Jama's mother among them—to flee the city. Jama, with fifty thousand dollars in savings, flew to Mogadishu, where he checked into a hotel and started looking for a site to open a restaurant.

One of the few roads that were reasonably safe was Makka al-Mukarramah

Street, which ran northeast from the airport toward the Presidential Palace. Jama found a plot of land on the street, near the derelict national theatre, and paid off the young men who had claimed it. As armored vehicles barrelled past, on their way to the front lines, he carted off seventy-two bags of rubble and trash. He planted trees and hired laborers to build a circular barista station. Inside it, he mounted an Italian-made espresso machine, its electrical innards removed, above a charcoal fire.

The Village restaurant opened in April, 2009. The sound of gunfire was so regular that Jama came to think of it as a drumbeat—the soundtrack to his new life. Soldiers shook him down for money. A boy with an AK-47 threatened to shoot him after being asked to pay for tea. When Jama chastised a neighbor for throwing trash into the restaurant, the neighbor sprayed Jama's car with bullets as he sat in the driver's seat.

It was calmer in the kitchen. Jama made date cakes, doughnuts, and samosas on open fires and in wood-burning ovens. Eight-ounce shark steaks and

pink swordfish filets sizzled on a barbecue made out of an oil drum. By 2010, the Village had a loyal clientele of government officials, journalists, and businessmen who dropped in for lunch, or for cappuccinos that cost the Somali equivalent of sixty cents. Jama decided to expand.

At night, Mogadishu was at its most beautiful; a salty ocean breeze supplanted the day's heat, and the darkness cloaked the epic destruction that, in places, resembled Stalingrad at the end of the Second World War. But few residents went out: it was safer indoors, and there was nowhere to go. One day, while driving through the Hodan district, a wealthy area before the war, Jama noticed an abandoned villa. Its front garden had been turned into a cemetery for victims of the violence. Jama hired a gravedigger to remove the bones, and then planted Chinese cabbage, spring onions, carrots, and spinach, as well as guava, lime, and mandarin-orange trees. Nearby, he installed wooden tables, plastic chairs, and flat-screen televisions. He paid for these investments, in part, by selling a piece of local land that he had bought a few years earlier, while he was in London.

The Shabaab, which controlled territory a hundred yards away, had banned everything from pop music to dancing and the public viewing of soccer games on TV. Jama's new restaurant—open for breakfast, lunch, and dinner—was called Village Sports. At first, few customers came at night, but soon there were crowds until closing time, especially if a big Barcelona game was being broadcast. A gate blocked the entrance, and guards patted down guests, but inside the atmosphere was casual and as lively as a restaurant without alcohol can be.

More than a few Somalis thought that Jama was out of his mind, especially when he started building a hotel fifteen miles south of the city, at Jazeera Beach, the site of a massacre in the nineteen-eighties. When Jama broke ground, the battle for Mogadishu was still fierce: although the Ethiopian troops had left, an African Union military force, known as AMISOM, had picked up the fight against the Islamist militants.

AMISOM lost many hundreds of soldiers, but its forces gradually gained the upper hand. In August, 2011, the Shabaab announced its withdrawal from the

capital, though it still controlled most of southern and central Somalia. Mogadishu began returning to life. Two decades of violence had dispersed Somalis all over the world, and these exiles started coming home, from as far away as Melbourne and Minneapolis. Many of them congregated at Jama's restaurants.

On March 19, 2012, the national theatre, still missing its roof, reopened. Two weeks later, Jama attended a function there to mark the first anniversary of a national television station. When the Prime Minister stood to speak, a bomb exploded. Jama's face was cut by shrapnel and singed by the heat. A young woman, sitting a few rows behind him, had blown herself up. She had been sent by the Shabaab, which had announced a formal alliance with Al Qaeda a few months earlier. Ten people were killed, including the heads of Somalia's Olympic committee and soccer federation.

Jama, though shaken, decided to stick to a plan to bring his family to Mogadishu for two weeks in July. He had been away for four years, and although he spoke with his wife and children on the phone twice daily, he missed them. If they could see how the city had changed, and what he had achieved, maybe they would understand why he was there. It was the kids' first trip to Somalia. By that point, Jama's beach hotel had opened; the kids enjoyed swimming in the sea, but they were otherwise unimpressed with Mogadishu. Jama's thirteen-year-old daughter, Hayat, told him, "Call us back when you have better roads and spray to kill all the bugs."

On a Thursday evening in September, 2012, Jama was working at the Village. A few minutes after he left to run an errand, two suicide bombers walked in and detonated explosives. He rushed back to find five members of his staff dead, along with at least nine customers. The Shabaab claimed responsibility. He and his employees scraped human remains off the walls and the ceiling of the dining room, and applied three coats of paint. Twenty days later, the Village reopened, and the mayor of Mogadishu came to show his support.

That November, during the lunch-time rush, two men from the Shabaab arrived at the Sports restaurant, posing as customers. When guards at the gate insisted on frisking them, they shouted

"Allahu Akbar!" and blew themselves up, killing one of the security men. Jama, who was inside, was knocked off his feet by the blasts. His immediate reaction was disappointment: how could his countrymen have done this to him again? The feeling turned to anger. Jama put on a pair of gloves and picked up the heads of the two bombers and placed them atop a pile of garbage down the block. That evening, the restaurant was open for dinner.

I flew to Mogadishu in early May, six months after the second restaurant attack. The hotel where I was staying provided guests with round-the-clock security; I drove to meet Jama with five armed men in a pickup truck leading the way. The Sports restaurant resembled a fortress that had endured repeated assault. The front gate was scarred by shrapnel, two metal booms further barred entry, and a pair of guard huts were surrounded by sandbags. After I had been cleared by security, a sentry in a watchtower yanked a rope and a pedestrian gate swung open. Jama was talking to some of his lunch customers in the outdoor dining area, which is filled with ferns and potted trees.

His appearance does not suggest defiance. A slim man with a shaved head and a sparse goatee, he dresses modestly: untucked shirt, yesterday's khakis, sandals. ("The way I see myself, I'm not better than anyone on the street," Jama said at one point. "So I don't dress up.") He speaks English with a British accent and has a vocabulary that includes words like "unexpected," which can mean "unexpected," "incredible," or both.

He took me around the back of the house to a separate café area, with a dirt floor, fans mounted on the walls, and wooden partitions separating the tables. Groups of young men were huddled around laptops or smoking hookahs, scenting the air with apple-flavored tobacco. A waiter served us ginger-and-cinnamon tea.

"To be honest, I thought a few times about leaving," Jama said. Business at the two restaurants had declined since the bombings, and his family had implored him to return to London for good. "My younger son said to me, 'Dad, why are you staying in Somalia? This is your home.' And I said, 'Yes, it is, but

Dad is an African man. That's where I come from.”

There were other reasons to stay. A hundred and forty employees depended on him. The local economy was growing fast, and Jama saw the potential to become a major entrepreneur. Most of all, he did not want to bow to the militants. “Someone has to stand up and say, ‘We are here,’” he told me.

After tea, we drove a few hundred yards to a second hotel—sixteen rooms, fifty dollars a night—which he had opened in February. A blue, three-story concrete building with arches and balconies, the place caters mainly to Somalis visiting from abroad. (A 2009 United Nations report estimated that a million Somalis, out of a total population of seven and a half million, lived outside the country.) Many in the diaspora knew of Jama even before they arrived in Somalia. The BBC and other news agencies had reported on the restaurant attacks, and the African Union produced a short film about him.

One of the blue hotel's first guests was Yassin Nur, a doctor who left the city in

1992 and returned earlier this year, with his wife and daughter, to work in a private hospital. They are still guests there. Like other Somali returnees I spoke with, Nur considered Jama a hero. “He is very brave to have done all this,” Nur told me, over a cappuccino in the hotel's courtyard. “He is everything that is not extremist, and that makes him an enemy for the Shabaab.”

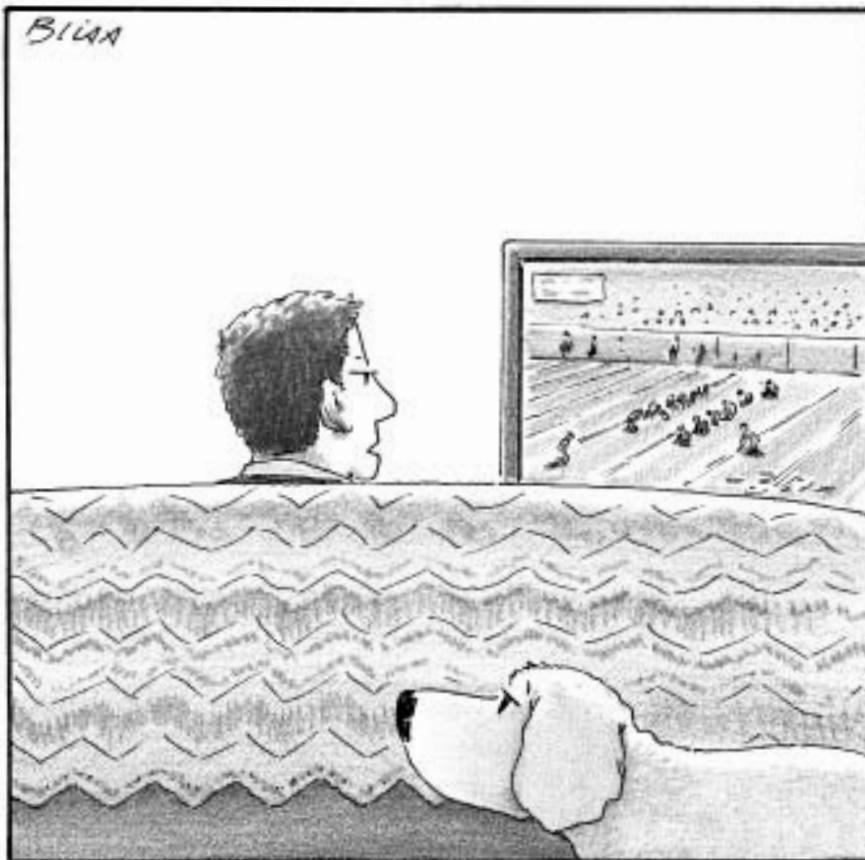
Until recently, Jama lived in the villa that contains the Sports restaurant; now he has a room in the hotel. (When it is fully booked, he said, “I sleep on the roof.”) To run his business, Jama acts as everything from deliveryman to C.E.O., but he is happiest when he is cooking. One morning, in the kitchen of the Sports restaurant, Jama examined several large pots bubbling over fireplaces that had been built into a tiled work surface. Somali cuisine has been shaped by the Horn of Africa's dry climate—camel meat is the most prized source of protein—and by its colonial history. Middle Eastern and Italian ingredients are common. One pot contained *soor*—a Somali staple, made from cornmeal, which resembles grits. Another held a bright-red

pasta sauce of cherry tomatoes, onions, and pumpkin. Jama picked up a ladle and dipped it into a third pot, which contained broth with chunks of camel meat; he poured some soup into two glasses, and handed me one. It was rich and velvety, with just the right amount of saltiness. “We say in Somalia there are three people you have to watch carefully—the man who shaves you, your doctor, and the man who cooks for you,” Jama said.

At Jama's restaurants, I had several meals that were among the best I've had in the nine years I've reported from East and West Africa. Slow-cooked ribs of baby goat were especially fine, the tender meat redolent of wood smoke and citrus. I asked Jama about the marinade. “That's a secret,” he said, smiling, and then gave it away: lime, tamarind, coriander, and tomato. One evening, he brought out a plate of *yicib* nuts. Chewy, with a pleasant chestnut taste, they had been harvested from an evergreen shrub that is indigenous to the Horn of Africa. He was testing them in various dishes. “What do you know about a chef?” Jama said. “He tries to make something up, and if it's nice he puts it on the table.”

Word of his cuisine had spread beyond the local population; an order had just come in to supply meals to a small U.N. team, mostly expatriates, who were working in the fortified AMISOM base near the airport, which serves as Mogadishu's Green Zone. Jama had prepared a lunch that would appeal to foreigners: chicken sandwiches; rice with carrots, raisins, and cardamom; a green salad; and strips of roasted potato, pumpkin, and plantain. After loading trays of food into the back of his Suzuki jeep, he wedged a salad-dressing cruet between his legs and drove out of the restaurant.

Jama navigated bumpy dirt roads, shouting at goats and pedestrians and dodging piles of litter. He kept the radio tuned to the news, in case a dangerous situation broke out across town. Behind high walls, you could see the tops of ornate, airy villas, many of which had horseshoe arches and other Islamic flourishes. Some of these mansions now rented for more than seven thousand dollars a month, Jama said, as wealthy Somalis returned to Mogadishu and found that undamaged houses were in short supply. Property is not the only sector that is booming: there is



“I hear you quietly rooting for the Patriots back there.”

now a First Somali Bank, and several Internet companies provide wireless coverage throughout the city. When Jama arrived in Mogadishu, donkey carts were one of the most common forms of transportation; now there are regular traffic jams, and bank ads promote “approved car finance.”

At a roundabout known as Kilometre 4, the billboards were blank: the previous day, a Shabaab car bomb had exploded there, blowing out the advertisements and killing at least eight people. Fearing further attacks, government security forces had erected roadblocks, using old tires, scrap metal, and branches. Scruffy-looking soldiers—some of them wearing sandals, others boots—stood watch, and blew their whistles and raised their guns when motorists became impatient. “These young boys are told by their big boss to fire if anyone does not listen,” Jama said. “They work long hours and get paid late, but they are still out here. Maybe this morning they did not even have a cup of tea. They have families, so you have to understand what a difficult time they have.”

A welter of concrete barriers marked the entrance to the Green Zone. A Ugandan soldier working for AMISOM, wearing a helmet and a bulletproof vest, approached the car. Jama had spoken to him that morning while delivering breakfast, but the soldier did not recognize him. “I am the catering guy—still black, bald, and ugly,” Jama reminded him, smiling. The guard waved him through.

Jama was born in 1966, six years after British Somaliland and the former Italian Somalia were joined to create the independent Somali Republic. Prospects for stability appeared good: although clan allegiances ran deep and were often divisive, most Somalis shared the same ethnicity and Sunni Islam faith. But when Jama was three the civilian administration now referred to as “the corrupt government” was toppled in a military coup, and Major General Mohamed Siad Barre took over. Every morning before class, Jama, like all Somali children, sang a song that praised Barre as “the pioneer of victory, the father of knowledge, our hero.”

Jama’s parents did not get along, and they separated soon after he was born.

He and his four siblings lived with their mother in a one-bedroom corrugated-iron house, in a district known as el-Hindi. She sold fruit and home-baked bread in the local market, but the family was poor. When money ran out, the children were sent to stay for months at a time with their father, a camel, goat, and cattle trader in the northern city of Berbera. Jama did not excel at school. “I was a lazy boy,” he said. When he was eighteen, he hitchhiked to Nairobi, where he found work at a Fiat repair shop, and then as a truck driver’s assistant. He travelled to Uganda and Sudan—where there was “civil war, twenty-four-hour rain, and mosquitoes”—and on to Tanzania.

Eventually, he saved enough money to buy a Tanzanian passport that had been issued to someone else, a warm coat, and a ticket to London. When he arrived there, in November, 1988, immigration officials noticed that the original photograph in his passport had been replaced with one of Jama. Under questioning, Jama admitted that he was Somali. The officials assumed that he was seeking asylum, since Siad Barre had been bombing cities in northern Somalia at the time. “I told them I was not a refugee—but I could be one!” Jama told me. “I think they had a sense of humor.”

After being held in a detention center for a few days, he was granted temporary residency, and sent to a hostel in North London. He was anxious to move on, but did not know where to go. So he spread a map of the U.K. on the carpet and tossed a coin into the air. It landed on Exeter, an ancient city in the southwest of England. The next morning, he took a bus there, and rented a room from a local couple. After a few months, the landlady offered to help him find a vocational course. Jama had sometimes assisted her in the kitchen while she prepared roast lamb or beef. She had also seen him cook spaghetti bolognese for himself, which her ten-year-old son enjoyed, too. Jama recalled, “She said to me, ‘You’re good at cooking. Why don’t you try that?’ I told the lady that, in our culture, the man does not cook. She said, ‘But *you* cook.’ And I said, ‘Yes, but it’s only because I

am alone. If I was married, I would not be cooking.’”

One night, the landlady took Jama to an Italian restaurant, where he ate seafood lasagna and observed how the food was prepared in the kitchen. The next day, he started working as a dishwasher, and resolved to become a chef. In September, 1989, he enrolled in a cooking course at a college in Birmingham, in the Midlands. Twenty-three years old, he was the only black student in his class.

During this time, Mogadishu was being levelled, block by block. In 1991, Siad Barre, whose rule had become increasingly oppressive, was ousted. Two clan militias then turned on each other, flattening the downtown district. In a three-month shelling battle, some thirty thousand people reportedly died. The clashes eventually complicated efforts to address a famine, prompting the U.S. to lead a U.N. intervention to open food-supply routes. Somalia’s warlords felt threatened, and one of them, Mohamed Farah Aidid, openly challenged the foreign presence; his militia killed twenty-four Pakistani peacekeepers. The U.N. placed a bounty on Aidid’s head, but the operation to capture him, in October, 1993, ended in disaster: two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down and eighteen American soldiers killed, along with hundreds of civilians. In 1995, with anarchy continuing, the U.N. withdrew from Somalia, leaving the warlords to battle it out. Around the world, the country had become known as a failed state. Jama was dismayed to find English friends talking about Somalis as if they were inherently prone to violence.

By then, he had moved to London, to gain experience in restaurants there. He started dating a Somali woman, Amina Fiqi, who had studied chemistry in Pakistan, and in 1999 they married. When he was off work, he liked visiting the Brick Lane area, in the city’s East End, sampling the many South Asian restaurants. He realized that although thousands of Somalis were living in London, nobody was cooking for them.

“There was nowhere for people to go to understand our taste and culture,” he told me. “I wanted to get Somalis to mix



with other communities.” In 2001, he opened a four-table Somali restaurant in North London, which he called Hayat, for his newborn daughter. Over the next few years, he started four more restaurants, with different partners and varying success. In 2006, he struck out again on his own, opening the fifteen-table Village restaurant, in a basement space in Hammersmith, in west London.

That June, the warlords’ reign in Mogadishu was finally ended by the Union of Islamic Courts, an alliance of tribunals that enforced Sharia, or Muslim law. Peace was brief. Although the U.I.C. had popular support, its senior members included irredentists and Al Qaeda veterans, worrying Somalia’s neighbors. With U.S. approval, Ethiopian tanks entered Mogadishu, causing the U.I.C.’s leaders to flee. An insurgency quickly developed, however, led by the U.I.C.’s armed wing, the Shabaab, which had been formed by Somali jihadis with experience in Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Jama’s restaurant in Hammersmith was becoming one of London’s main gathering spots for Somali exiles. (A recent *Time Out London* review said that Jama’s menu, which substitutes braised lamb for camel, was “delicious” and “gratifyingly handmade,” and noted that sauces were “served in polystyrene cups.”) But the ongoing tumult in Somalia made Jama restless. Already associated with warlords and famine, Somalia was becoming notorious for fundamentalist rebels and pirates who had turned the waters off the Horn of Africa into the world’s most dangerous shipping lanes. Although Jama felt proud of his heritage, he was ashamed of the state of his country. Many people in the diaspora felt the same. In 2009, after the British couple Paul and Rachel Chandler were kidnapped on their yacht, Somalis in the U.K. were so appalled that they launched a “Save the Chandlers” campaign designed to embarrass the pirates, and to raise money for a ransom. (The Chandlers were freed after more than a year in captivity.)

“Everyone you met, even Somalis, said what a terrible place Somalia was,” Jama told me. “Someone has to start somewhere in history to change a nation. I wanted to show what could be

done, to make people forget about hunger and bloodshed, to learn to live with each other. I wanted to become a man of hope.”

When Jama began preparing menus in Mogadishu, he decided to make some modifications to the local cuisine. Rice and spaghetti are Somali staples, but Jama felt that people consumed too much of them. “I wanted to get people eating more vegetables,” he said. Somalia has an image as a dry place, but parts of the south are lush and fertile, and Mogadishu’s markets are full of fresh produce. He began pairing Somali sourdough pancakes, which resemble Ethiopian *injera* flatbread and are usually eaten with honey or a meat stew, with medleys of vegetables, including spinach, carrots, garlic, tomatoes, and chilies.

When Jama visited the city’s markets, he found that meat and chicken were not always available, so he decided to focus on seafood, which was plentiful—thanks, in part, to the pirates. They had scared away foreigners who had taken advantage of Somalia’s lawlessness to plunder the coastal waters. He filled samosas with ground shark, grilled spiny lobsters, and served shrimp with mango and lime.

Jama now makes daily purchases at Mogadishu’s main fish market, a narrow building with peeling paint that overlooks the beach where, as a boy, he learned to swim. One day during my visit, dozens of traders sat at wooden ta-



bles, displaying the morning’s haul: kingfish, grouper, red snapper. Gray sharks were being chopped into filets with a rhythmic thud. “The mess always makes me want to run away,” Jama said, snapping open the gill of a tuna to confirm that its flesh was deep red. “But the fish is fresh.”

Jama’s attempts to change the city’s eating habits have been only partly successful. At the Sports restaurant, he initially left rice and pasta off the menu,

offering potatoes instead. After countless complaints, he relented, and now imports spaghetti from Italy. He also buys vast quantities of bananas, which are placed on all the tables and often eaten with the main meal. (A member of my hotel’s security team dropped slices of banana into his pasta.)

All of Jama’s restaurants feature open kitchens; he wants his customers to see how the food is prepared. Initially, he did all the cooking himself, but as he expanded he trained a team of chefs. These tutorials involved a lot of yelling. “The biggest things I had to teach them about were food storage and hygiene,” Jama said. “My guys would take food out of the freezer, defrost it, and then put it back. Someone blows his nose in the kitchen and then carries on working. I have to say, ‘Go and wash your hands *now*.’”

During the past two years, several other restaurants have opened in Mogadishu, including a few that overlook a swimming spot called Lido Beach. They are more exclusive establishments than Jama’s but have less character. At the Village eateries, you never know who will show up. One day at the Sports restaurant, I chatted with Mohamed Jimaale, a Dubai-based businessman with interests in London, Johannesburg, and Maputo; he had come home to set up a travel agency. At another table, a young Somali journalist tapped at his laptop. Everyone looked up when a sedan entered through the gate. The driver got out, helped a disabled man into a wheelchair, and pushed him to a table. The man, a diabetic who had been injured in a bomb attack, lifted his T-shirt and, with a wince, plunged a syringe filled with insulin into his stomach; he then ordered his usual meal, *soor* with spinach. All the while, a young boy from a displaced persons’ camp flitted among the customers, shining shoes.

The Shabaab’s withdrawal from Mogadishu offered an opportunity for political change. In August, 2012, after twelve years of transitional—and largely ineffectual—government, clan elders elected a new parliament in the capital. Jama cooked meals for the hundreds of delegates as they deliberated, for three months. (He has not been paid and estimates that he is owed three hundred thousand dollars.) In September,

THIS ONE

This One got to keep the Warhol.
That One got an S.T.D.

This One left & kept on walking,
making That One his Penelope.

Friends at first sided with This One.
Later they jumped to That One's side.

Razor, pills, noose, & tailpipe
for This—or That—One's suicide.

"Fifty-fifty's fair!" shouted That One.
So This One cut their dog in half.

X marks the spot on That One's cheek
where This One slapped his autograph.

That One drinks hot tears for breakfast;
This One whiskey-on-the-rocks.

When This One got the seven-year itch,
That One scratched her chicken pox.

Since This One left, That One's singing.
How should they divide the pelf?

Now This One's alone & so is That One.
Each One wants a couplet to himself.

—Jane Shore

2012, M.P.s voted for a President; the incumbent, Sheikh Sharif Sheikh Ahmed, a former U.I.C. leader, lost to Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, an academic who had recently entered politics. Mohamud, a moderate, has promised to restore confidence in the government.

Jama was asked to serve food at a function celebrating the new government, which is why he left the Village a little early on September 20th last year, shortly before the bombers struck. "I had music on in my car, and so I did not even hear the explosion," he told me. "When I started getting calls, I thought someone was taking the piss. It was like a slaughtering place when I got there." One morning, we drove to the Village, which is separated from Mogadishu's main road by only a barbed-wire fence. In a leafy garden, a few dozen customers drank coffee or sweet tea while

seated at tiled, concrete benches and tables, or under shelters that have corrugated-iron roofs with a layer of thatch underneath.

As the espresso machine hissed above glowing coals, Jama explained how the attack unfolded. The first suicide bomber had pulled out an AK-47 and started shooting. His accomplice, pretending to be a bystander, had shouted that the gunmen had a rocket-propelled grenade launcher, and that people should run toward a small indoor dining room. Jama walked me over to the room, which had a few tables decorated with blue tablecloths and plastic flowers. The second bomber had followed the panicked customers, tossed a hand grenade, and blown himself up. Jama pointed to a saucer-shaped crater in the floor where the grenade had landed. He had decided not to repair it. "Whenever I come in

here and look down, I feel the pain," he said. "This is my memorial."

Although the Shabaab continues to lose ground to AMISOM forces, its capacity for insurgent-style attacks has not diminished. In April, in the deadliest single incident in years, nine militants raided the Supreme Court building in Mogadishu, detonating bombs and firing on civilians. At least thirty-five people died.

It is not unusual for Somali civilians to carry weapons for self-defense, but Jama refuses to carry a gun or have a bodyguard in his car. He is not a practicing Muslim, but he believes in fate. "My time will come, and when it does I will die," he told me. "To be honest, I just try to look dumb and carry on."

From the Village, we drove toward the el-Hindi district, where Jama grew up. At that time, it was a safe, working-class area, and Jama and his friends had the run of the streets. Twenty years ago, the neighborhood acquired a new name, Bermuda—because those who entered it rarely came back out alive. More recently, the neighborhood was occupied by the Shabaab, which had engaged in bloody street battles with Ethiopian and AMISOM troops. Some houses were still empty, their crumbled walls freckled with bullet holes, but the neighborhood was reviving. Jama stopped to look at his old elementary school, which had been badly damaged during the Islamist occupation. It has been rebuilt and painted yellow.

Nearby, another school destroyed in the conflict had been converted into a medical campus. Several hundred undergraduates were studying to become doctors, paying tuition of a hundred and twenty-five dollars a month. In a courtyard, young men in Western dress mingled with women wearing veils or headscarves. During exams, women had to remove such coverings, to prevent cheating.

The school had acquired ten new microscopes, and was building a teaching hospital with space for seventy patients. A doctor, who had studied in Sudan and returned home to work at the school, showed me around the whitewashed classrooms. "This is a diamond in a rough area," he said.

Another staff member told me that "during the war there was only one place to study to become a doctor, and



"It's the best thing since bread torn into little pieces."

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learning was often disrupted because of the fighting." He went on, "Mogadishu now has four schools, many scholars returning, and classes full of students." He had recently come back to the capital after decades in Europe, and, like Jama, he had struggled to explain to his children why he felt the need to return to such a dangerous city. "This place is on its knees, largely destroyed, yet we Somalis still think we have the best country," he said.

For him, the hardest part about coming home was adjusting to the cultural changes. He grew up in a cosmopolitan Mogadishu, with cinemas and night clubs, and learned to speak Somali, Italian, and English. Although he came from a family of Muslim scholars,

his mother never wore a veil. "We lost our values as a moderate, tolerant society," he said. "Before we advance again, we must regain our traditional values."

I watched him as he addressed a group of freshmen, telling them about the time, before they were born, when it was safe to walk around in the city at 3 A.M. Mogadishu's bad reputation was entirely the fault of Somalis, he said, and it was up to them to help change that. But he stopped short of criticizing the Shabaab. Few returnees are willing to speak out against the insurgents, for fear of retribution.

The militants' list of enemies includes many of Jama's patrons: government officials, journalists, people with liberal attitudes. "That's why the Shabaab at-

tacks the Village restaurants," the staff member said. "They are places where they can cause maximum damage." He said that he sometimes ate at Jama's restaurants—the cooking was "top level"—but made sure not to stay for long.

The world has begun to notice that Somalia may finally be changing for the better. Turkey has pumped millions of dollars into Mogadishu, building schools, staffing hospitals, and fixing infrastructure, including the airport. Turkish Airlines now flies four times a week from Istanbul to Mogadishu. In April, Britain became the first Western country to reopen an embassy in the city—four metal cabins in the Green Zone. U.N. agencies are also constructing temporary quarters there. To capitalize on the expected influx of expatriates, the American security company Bancroft Global, which has been training AMISOM troops, has spent more than six million dollars building hospitality facilities in the Green Zone, including a hotel with a swimming pool, restaurants, and coffee shops.

As Jama saw it, Bancroft posed a threat to his ambitions. "I need to be able to go head-to-head with Bancroft," he said. "I can supply meals for cheaper, and all my ingredients are local—not frozen food that is flown in." One morning while I was in Mogadishu, he sought help from a senior Defense Ministry official who was a regular at the Village restaurants. The official called him in for a meeting. We drove to his office, and Jama passionately made his case. Foreign contractors seldom left the Green Zone, and missed out on the local culture and food, so why not bring it to them? "We also need to help Somalis benefit from this investment in Mogadishu," he said. "If people are isolated, and they are not given a chance to support their families, what are they going to do?"

The official told Jama to write a proposal explaining how his business would benefit AMISOM and the U.N. "I can get you the land," he said.

We got into the official's S.U.V., and followed a military escort into the Green Zone, where the official introduced Jama to a Ugandan peacekeeper who was responsible for vetting new projects in the camp. The man promised to help Jama, but did not sound

convincing. Bancroft, it seemed clear, would not want a local competitor in the Green Zone.

Back at the Sports restaurant, Jama asked a waiter to bring him a hookah. Looking deflated, he blew thick cords of smoke from his nostrils. Although he was always surrounded by people in Mogadishu—his staff, his customers—he was lonely. “I don’t chew khat, drink, or socialize much,” he said. “I just work like a machine.” He felt guilty about being away from his family. In April, he had visited London for the first time since the attacks; he went to the movies with his children, and took his boys to watch a soccer team, Queens Park Rangers, that is based in the White City district where the Jamas live, in a rented three-bedroom flat. He was able to relax in a way he never could in Somalia. “Even my bed felt warmer there,” he said. But after two weeks he returned to Mogadishu. His wife admonished him. “She said, ‘You cannot give even one month to be with your children? Your boys need a father, someone to take them to the playground on a Sunday,’” Jama told me. “She made sense. I need to spend more time with my children, I’m not denying it. I am trying to figure out how to do this.”

He had invested close to half a million dollars in his Somali businesses, but he did not own the properties where he had established his restaurants and hotels. It would not be simple to extricate himself financially. He told me that he was getting advice from a lawyer on franchising the Village, so that he could spend several months a year in London.

The main thing that prevented him from leaving Somalia was pride. One afternoon, he told me, “My target was to live my life historically.” He wanted to be remembered as someone who had contributed to Mogadishu’s rebirth; despite all that he had endured, his legacy was not yet secure.

My final day in Mogadishu was a Friday, the start of the Muslim weekend and the busiest time at Jama’s Jazeera Beach hotel. At noon, we headed south out of the city, parallel to the ocean, along a potholed dirt road with stray patches of tarmac. Before the war, this had been an industrial area, home to candy manufacturers and an oil refinery.

Now it looked like the ruins of an ancient civilization. On the seaward side, families displaced by the conflict had used sticks and rags to construct igloo-shaped dwellings. Half a dozen flamingos stood tall in a tidal pool. We crossed some dunes and approached the hotel, a one-story structure perched above a tranquil bay. Jama led me past armed guards and into a courtyard, where a group of men knelt, praying, on a carpet; we then passed through the restaurant and onto the beach.

On the white sand, a venter had laid out a blanket with cowries, coral fragments, and turtle shells. Pyramids of firewood had been stacked for evening bonfires. A woman wearing jeans, a polka-dot headscarf, and large sunglasses introduced herself to Jama. Her name was Zahra Mustaf, and she was an architect who had recently returned to Mogadishu from Australia, bringing her two children, aged eight and eleven, with her. “It makes me proud to see somebody coming back *with* their family,” Jama replied, wistfully.

Men in shorts and women, fully clothed, were swimming in the bay. Several people were taking photographs with iPads. The old Somalia hadn’t been entirely left behind, though. More than a dozen militiamen with machine guns and ammunition belts stood in clusters on the beach; some of them were there to guard a dead warlord’s son, who was taking a joyride in a fishing boat. The other militiamen were employed by Ahmed Daaci, a former warlord who is now a councillor from Mogadishu; he had booked lunch for seventy people. Daaci was renowned for having fought against the Shabaab. They had tried to kill him by bombing his car; he had lost a leg in the blast, and hobbled around the restaurant with a cane.

Customers were waiting for tables, and the waiters looked harried. Jama disappeared into the kitchen, where he began spooning vegetables onto a plate, and arranging fish filets on top. Even though some diners were eating with their hands, Jama was not about to let his presentation standards drop. Once the rush subsided, he sat down at an empty table, his pink shirt splattered with gravy. He was happier than I had ever seen him. He looked out at the sea: if only he could stay the night. “You come here, and you feel the pain leave you,” he said. “You

wake up at 6 A.M., see the sunrise. At night, you watch the moon in the sky. It’s a million-dollar holiday.”

After I left, the Shabaab attacks in Mogadishu continued. In June, the militants killed twenty-two people during a raid on a U.N. compound; in July, they attacked a residence for Turkish diplomats. A month later, a Swedish politician was shot after delivering a lecture on democracy at a university. Each assault seemed designed to show the international community that the city was anything but normal. Still, Jama tended to be upbeat whenever we spoke on the phone. Late one evening in August, he called to tell me that he was about to speak at the MAD Symposium, an annual food festival in Copenhagen that had been founded by the Danish chef René Redzepi. The theme of the festival: “Guts.” Speaking before an audience of six hundred people, Jama declared that Somalia was becoming a “better place to live,” and added, “I knew that with food and great hospitality perception can be changed easily, and that food is the only way to integrate society.” He received a standing ovation.

A week later, just before noon on September 7th, a car bomb exploded in a parking lot outside the Village restaurant, which was packed with customers. The blast shattered the walls of the covered seating areas in the garden and tore open the corrugated-iron roofs. Shrapnel scythed through the restaurant. Outside, many passersby had been injured, and people rushed to assist them. As a crowd gathered, a man wearing a suicide vest walked over and blew himself up. Fifteen people died in the two explosions, including several young boys who washed cars for a living. Jama was not at the restaurant at the time, but he raced over when he heard the news.

“They hit me again,” he said, when I called him a few hours after the attack. “These people do not give up.”

Neither would Jama. He had called his wife and children to tell them that he was O.K. When he said he was going to rebuild the restaurant again, they did not object. The next morning, as he was cleaning up the mess, a Shabaab spokesman announced that Jama had become a direct target, because he was a spy for the British government. Jama, who recently created a Twitter account, logged on and issued a denial: “All I do is cook food.” ♦