Culinary Delight

by Laura Kelley

Want to know a secret? Bhutanese cuisine will be the next great discovery of the food world. It is inevitable, because the breadth of ingredients, the variety of dishes, and the enduring ritual use of food, is rivaled only in the much better known cuisines of Korea and Japan. The diversity of its ingredients and dishes is made possible by its varied geography and climate, which ranges from sub-tropical to alpine and from lowland to highland. This allows for an extraordinary variety of foods to be cultivated or gathered and eaten. Bananas and oranges thrive in the South while the highlands yield the delicious and characteristic yak dairy products used in many Bhutanese dishes.

Although many people keep vegetarian, a selection of meat abounds from the commonly enjoyed pork and chicken, to beef, water buffalo, and yak. The many lakes and streams of Bhutan also provide a bounty of fish that range from the familiar river trout to the less familiar fresh water shellfish. Traditionally, a lot of meat (including fish) is smoked or dried before being added to stews and curries, but this is changing rapidly as many people adopt modern lifestyles.

Delicious vegetables are everywhere. These include broccoli, cauliflower, corn, cucumbers, and cabbage to potatoes, radishes (daikon), and carrots. Eggplant is also enjoyed and can be incorporated into stews and casseroles or fried and salted in thinly sliced chips. Wild and native plants like mustard, turnip and radish greens, river plants and greens, fiddlehead ferns, wild flowers, and mushrooms also contribute to the incredible diversity of ingredients used in Bhutanese cooking. Likewise, several onion and garlic varieties are used to flavor dishes, with both the greens and the roots being used, depending on the season and the desired flavor. Of course, the ubiquitous chili peppers count amongst Bhutan's cornucopia of vegetables with long, thin peppers being used most commonly in the North and the small, round, red chilies more commonly seen in the South. The round chilies can be cooked, but are most often eaten as pickles with or without other vegetables, such as asparagus.

About Chili Peppers

In Bhutan, chili peppers are eaten as vegetables and also used in large quantities to flavor dishes. Bhutanese long peppers are spicy, but they are nowhere near as spicy as some peppers, for instance some Habeneros. They look like robust, finger hot peppers but their heat falls somewhere between a finger hot (which is around 30,000 on the Scoville scale) and a Thai chili pepper (which can pack over 100,000 Scovilles of heat). The long peppers come in three colors, green, red, and white and also have a range of heat associated with them. Some are milder than others and are eaten raw while others are much hotter and are used in cooked recipes. Thai chilies are used (especially in the South), but the Bhutanese generally think less highly of them than they do their own long peppers, and complain that the Thai peppers are too strong and promote ulcers and other stomach ailments. The plain truth is that the spiciness of Bhutan's chili peppers has been wildly over exaggerated by foreign food writers. When you travel to Bhutan, you will surely fall in love with Ezay, a kind of Bhutanese salsa found on almost every table. It is made with roasted and crushed red chili peppers blended with onion, ginger, garlic, tomato, and salt, often with a bit of butter. It is delicious when used to flavor Bhutan's unique red rice.

Sweet and Sour Flavors

Bhutan has many beautiful orchards and well tended fruit trees also adorn the courtyards of most homes. Commonly
Red Rice Pilaf

1 cup uncooked Bhutanese red rice
2 tablespoons butter
1 small-medium onion, minced
3-4 finger-hot chilies, minced
1 tablespoon ginger, grated or minced
2 teaspoons garlic, peeled and diced
Zest of 1 mandarin orange (if unavailable, substitute other orange zest)
1 teaspoon salt
½ teaspoon Szechuan peppercorns, roasted and ground
1 teaspoon perilla seeds, roasted and ground
2¼ cup water

1. Melt the butter in a medium sauté pan. Add onion and sauté 5 minutes or until tender. Add chilies, ginger, garlic, orange zest, salt, pepper and perilla, and stir well. If necessary add a tablespoon or two of water or orange juice to moisten.

2. Add water and rice and stir well. Heat to a boil and then reduce heat to a high simmer and cook covered for about 30-40 minutes until rice is tender and water is absorbed. Check the rice occasionally, but don’t stir too much. When rice is done let sit covered off the heat for at least 10 minutes before serving while preparing the other ingredients.

The Bhutanese love to vary dishes. Sometimes 5-6 different variations in ingredients or preparation methods are accepted as the same dish in Bhutan when these would be divided into different dishes in the west. If you’d like to try a variation on this pilaf, try a fine dice or sliver of nuts or add some crushed black mustard seeds for additional flavor.
enjoyed fruits are apples, delicious pears, and also mandarin oranges, but quinces, a large selection of berries, peaches, plums, cherries, persimmons, and jack fruit are also eaten. One of several variety of tomatoes are added to most stews, curries and casseroles, and pumpkins also being used sometimes by itself as in a soup, or more often mixed with other fruits or meat, and vegetables. Other sweet flavors come from cane sugars, honey, or on the wild side, sap from local trees.

Almost all dairy, except that for feeding of young animals and a few beverages is eaten as butter, cheese, or yoghurt. Although milk from cows, goats, and buffaloes is used to make mild tasting dairy products, yak is probably the most commonly used milk, with its distinct richness and sour tang to it. Traditionally, yak butter is used to add flavor and nutrition to some of the teas enjoyed in Bhutan. Yak dairy is also dried and used as travel food. These mini pucker bombs can be spiked with chili peppers or other flavors and are great snacks – a tradition the Bhutanese share with numerous other cultures from Central Asia to Mongolia.

Bhutan is also a cheese lovers’ paradise! Cheese (most often made from cow and yak milk) is used in most curries and stews, and salads or cold or raw vegetable dishes are also spiked with it. The most famous cheese dish is probably Ema Datsi, or cheese with chilies. Truth be known, Ema Datsi can actually be several different dishes depending on the type of cheese and chili used and whether onion greens or other are vegetables are used to flavor it. Too many foreign travel and food writers have declared this to be hot beyond compare. This is another piece of bad public relations for Bhutanese food, because most of the time, it is cooked no more spicy than a chili laden Mexican queso blanco dip.

Herbs and Spices
There are numerous accounts on the internet about how the Bhutanese don’t use herbs and spices to flavor their foods; they instead use only salt and chilies. This is an unfortunate rumor, because the Bhutanese have a large armamentarium of flavorings ranging from sweet, sour, hot, astrigent and bitter that they regularly add to dishes. The dual foci of spice that many recipes use is Szechuan pepper and cilantro (green or seed), but a wide variety of greens offer flavor as well. Herbs include mint, fennel (bulb and seed), Indian bay leaves, wild onion leaves, as well as lemon grass and keora. Commonly enjoyed spices are cinnamon, green and black cardamom; ginger, long pepper (Piper mullesua), turmeric, sesame, nigella (onion seeds), cloves, saffron, and perilla. Juniper berries and Indian gooseberries are also potent flavoring agents.

Pulses, Rice, and other Grains
Pulses include several types of peas and beans as well as lentils. These can be curried, added to rice dishes, used as accessory flavors in dishes with many different ingredients, or stewed into a sauce and served as a table condiment. Grains eaten include rice, barley, wheat, millet, and maize, and flour is also made from buckwheat and pulses. White rice is common, but not to be missed is Bhutan’s delicious, native red rice which lends a nutty flavor to dishes as a base for a curry or stew, or when made as a pilaf to accompany roast meats and fish. Dumplings stuffed with cabbage or meat (often chicken) are made from wheat (Momos) or buckwheat flour (Hapai Hantue), and are enjoyed with or without dipping sauces.
Roots and Relationships

Although the area now known as Bhutan has been inhabited for millennia, it saw major Tibetan migrations in the seventh Century ACE. The Tibetans brought with them their food culture, but that culture soon began to incorporate new ingredients that they found in Bhutan's fertile valleys and hills. This adaptation continued until Bhutanese food developed its own unique character. Of course cuisines are always evolving, and Bhutan's cuisine too is changing rapidly.

On the Silk Road, Bhutan also served as an important link and trade partner between Assam and Bengal in the South and Tibet in the North. The Bhutanese traded ponies, sheep, and dogs, chilies, textiles and other spices and in return received rice, betel, dried fish, and all important rock salt from its trade partners. Other items brought into India by Arab merchants and into Tibet by the Chinese and Central Asians were also traded. So, far from being isolated, the Bhutanese were part of the Old World's global economy brought about by the Silk Road. Thus cinnamon from Sri Lanka and cloves from Indonesia were incorporated into the litany of Bhutanese spices.

Even today, some Bhutanese dishes bear the marks of Silk Road connections with Western and Southern Asia. One of these, the Kamrupi Biryani, shows how the Mughal passion for layering got translated and adopted as far as far away as Bhutan. In this dish white rice and turmeric colored yellow rice are layered with chicken, eggplant, and broccoli into a delectable casserole. Each part of the dish is flavored differently with cloves, green or black cardamom, ginger and garlic, or cilantro, so the flavor changes by the mouthful.

Another couple of rice dishes hail from ancient Persia or one of its territories. These are Dresi, a delicious mixture of white rice, butter, sugar, golden raisins and saffron and Zow, a lightly tossed fried rice mixed with sugar, butter, and sesame seeds. Both dishes are said to be favored by His Majesty King Jigme Singye Wangchuck, and are served on special occasions.
Melt butter in a large sauté pan over medium heat and add the onion slices when butter is warm. Stir and separate the onions as they warm and after a few minutes, reduce heat to low, cover and let the onions rest as if you were caramelizing them. Let the onions cook quietly for 15 or 20 minutes and then resume cooking over medium heat by adding garlic and ginger and stirring liberally. Cook for 5-8 minutes, or until the garlic starts to swell. Then add the chili peppers and the tomato, stir and cover again and cook for 3-5 minutes.

Add the water or the orange juice (this can be done earlier if the contents of the pan are too dry) and stir well. When the water is warmed, add the fish stock stir and cooked until the contents of the pan are warmed. Now add the oranges and cover to cook. After about 3-5 minutes uncover and stir again, pressing down on the orange and tomato segments to let them release their flavors into the sauce. Then add the salt, Szechuan pepper and perilla seeds and stir well.

Chop the fish into serving pieces. I cut mine home style, crosswise through the fish in two or three places. Then just lay the fish pieces into the sauce and ladle the sauce over the fish. When all the slices are in the pan, cover and let cook for 5 minutes or so. Then uncover and spoon some more sauce over the fish and repeat for about 5-10 minutes to ensure the slices are fully cooked. Cooking time will vary according to the thickness of the fish. Do not flip or turn the slices unless you are confident that you can do so gently without breaking the slices apart. When done, uncover, remove from the heat and plate. If desired, add a bit of chopped cilantro as a garnish just before bringing it to the table.

* Fish stock is easy to make from stored bones or shells with remainder meat from other meals. If you don’t store shells and bones for stock making, dissolve some Hon Dashi Japanese fish stock in a cup of water and use that instead. There is no substitute for fresh stock, but reconstituted stock works in a pinch. ** If you are making the Red Rice Pilaf to serve with the fish, don’t forget to use the zest from one of the oranges.
Food Travel in Bhutan

The best way to experience Bhutanese cuisine is to have a friend or acquaintance invite you to their home for a meal. If you lack friends or family in-country, the best way to experience Bhutan’s food is with a visit to the Bhutanese Folk Heritage Museum in Thimphu. Here you will find displays of food related items and artifacts from the rural households, as well as docent led programs to teach skills such as proper etiquette for eating with one’s fingers, extracting oil from seeds or brewing Ara, the traditional moonshine.

The best kept secret about the Folk Heritage Museum is that since 2012, it runs a restaurant that is educating visitors about Bhutan’s rich and delicious food culture and cuisine. Arising out of the patronage of the Queen Mother Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuck, the restaurant is a welcome addition for those who would like to learn more about Bhutan’s traditional cuisine. There are over 160 dishes (60 vegetarian and 100 non-vegetarian) on its seasonal menus, and ingredients are sourced from local farmers. Like all of the best secrets, Bhutan’s Folk Museum restaurant is best shared with friends.

Laura Kelley is a scientist, world traveler, researcher, and writer. She explores connections between historical and modern cuisines and cultures in her book and blog, The Silk Road Gourmet.