

On a Gourmet Trail to BHUTAN

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It's impossible not to think of lushgreen landscapes, cloud-kissed misty mountains, happy people and an overwhelming sense of serenity when it comes to Bhutan. But little do people know about its rich culinary history. For an epicurean, ready to experiment, the possibilities of delightful discoveries are aplenty. Here are a few delicacies that shouldn't be missed by any self-respecting foodie.

Kiss of Chilli and Cheese

The foodies who go to Bhutan looking for a unique gourmet experience, get a eureka moment when they get up close and personal with ema datshe—a dish where chilli plays the main lead and cheese, a strong supporting role. It is a stew, which is extremely hot and the more authentic variety is made using molden Bhutanese cheese. Keeping an average traveller's palate in mind, these days several chefs use tinned cheddar cheese imported from India too. You can enjoy this delicacy with rice or bread, but are advised to keep a few glasses of water nearby. Yes, a few. I tried both the varieties—with and without the molden cheese—and preferred the fresh cheese one. Those who love the sharp taste of blue cheese, must opt for the latter. A word of caution: since this is supposed to be their national dish, Bhutanese people consider it a slight if you criticise the strong flavour of the dish.

Home-Grown Wellness

Cheese seems to be a thriving cottage industry in Bhutan, and it's sold in tea shops, grocery shops as well as colourfully painted roadside tiny stalls and bus stops. Carefully wrapped in individual poly bags, small cheese mounds are sold by petite Bhutanese women, dressed in colourful handwoven kira (their national costume). Sold at '50 to '60 a piece, this datshe is enjoyed as a stand-alone snack with tea and is also used to prepare various Bhutanese delicacies. Dry cheese cubes are also sold in the market arenas. A fellow Indian traveller and former diplomat, Dr Santosh Ganguly, who I met on this trip added another insight to this cheese trail. "It tastes amazing with wine or a glass of whiskey." His wife Swapna, a passionate chef, who loves to pick up exotic ingredients from all over the world, bought a lot of Datshe and aspragus for salads to be made back home. Mushroom cheese soup, also known as shamu datsi; phaksha paa is another delicacy.

Tea and Meikhu

A visit to any part of Bhutan—right from the border town of Phunsheling to its capital Thimpu and popular river-side destinations like Punakha and Paro—is incomplete with-

out the traditional cups of tea, an integral part of the country's heritage. But what doesn't change is the availability of meikhu (large crispy swollen puris) in the entire length and breadth of this small highland nation. "My morning doesn't begin till I enjoy a couple of meikhus along with butter tea, made by my wife," said our guide, Jimmy Dorji. You may not exactly take to it immediately, since Meikhu isn't seasoned with spices, but after a couple of days, its bland crispiness almost grows on you and complements the sweet and tangy taste of butter tea.

Meats on the Menu

If you traverse the Bhutanese landscape by road and observe things from close quarters, you realise that the people of this country love their meats. "Pork, beef, and lamb are mostly imported from India, along with vegetables and fruits," informed Yeshey Namgay, a grocery shop owner. Fried pork is a delicacy that is favoured by these highlanders, although most of them also love to have dal and rice for lunch or dinner along with an interesting potato pickle. Drolma, a businesswoman, shared: "Meat is an integral part of our daily meals. Phaksha paa, a pork dish made with red chillies, is a delight. For snacks as well as side dish, momos are most favoured, especially those with pork or beef filling."

Vegetarians can gorge on some amazing steamed momos with cheese, onion and cabbage filling. In Paro, you also get fried momos, which add a different dimension to this delicacy.

And after completing your pilgrimage to Punakha Tzong, Tiger's Nest Monastery, Dochula Pass, National Museum, Royal Textile Academy of Bhutan, Buddha Point, Motithank Takin Preserve, Tongsa Tzong and various other live relics of history and culture, when it is time for you to go back home, the sublime, yet diverse, flavours of Bhutan linger on in your taste buds.

Popular Baby Names

The most popular boys' name for babies born in the UK this year was Muhammad. Which are other most popular names in culture across the world? Sophia tops the list for girls' names both in UK and USA, while the top boys' name in the USA is Noah. In France, it is Nathan and Emma; in Brazil, Miguel and Sophia; while in Russia, it is Artem and Sofia. The list contains the top Indian baby names for boys and girls? Aarav and Saanvi.