



» *Sunrise in Thimpu.* To the right, the National Memorial Chorten (stupa) built in 1974 in memory of the third king of Bhutan, His Majesty Jigme Dorji Wangchuck, “the father of Modern Bhutan.”

Bhutan: Shangri-La wi

THE mission to find and eat the most local of local dishes around Asia has taken me to some exotic places. In this case it’s one of the most exotic of all—and surprisingly, it didn’t even take a plethora of street food options to win me over! I can’t say I knew what to expect from Bhuta-nese food, only that it involved cooking with lots of chillies and melted cheese. This was enough for me. If two of my favourite ingredients are a significant part of the national diet, then I figure Bhutan is the perfect place to continue my mission.

The landscape of Bhutan itself is stunning. But words like stunning, together with amazing and awe-inspiring, really mean nothing until you’re standing there yourself, jaw dropping at the vistas and valleys dotted with ancient temple fortresses known as dzhongs. Involuntary clichés

like Shangri-La or Eden might tumble out, but it’s hard to visit Bhutan (Land of the Thunder Dragon) without them entering your mind.

From the moment you step off the plane, the land’s energy seeps into your bones, and you experience a calming feeling of being in the moment, open to everything around. The people, charming and hospitable, are proud of their heritage and culture and can talk about them in colourful detail. The capital, Thimpu, a small town of 40,000, is clean and charming. It’s also full of laughter and great cooking smells.

Bhutan, now a constitutional mon-archy, is the only Buddhist king-dom left in the world. It had, until recently, an absolute monarchy that had reigned since the cur-



th Cheese and Chillies

Photography by Oliver Strong; text by Salman A. Nensi, with Jon Southurst

rent royal family was voted into power in 1907. Despite the best efforts of powerful neighbours and outsiders, it has never been colonized. The current king, Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, on the throne since November 2008, is, at 31, the world's youngest monarch. He has maintained his father's plan to improve the lives of the Bhutanese while retaining their strong identity and culture. This country has the amazing ability to pick out only those elements of "progress" it wishes for, and the courage to discard the rest. Thimpu is not Bangkok or Kathmandu and (perhaps thankfully) will always be an alternative to the region's other cities.

Tiny Bhutan is remote and mountainous, with only 47,000 square kilometers (18,147 square miles) of land, but it produces a surprising diversity of local fruits

and vegetables. From peaches and apples in the south to hardier vegetables like potatoes and peppers in the north, the local markets overflow with a great variety of produce at prices that haven't climbed as sky-high as they have in many nations.

Local restaurants are mainly family run—always the best kind—and small, with only a few bringing in chefs from outside the country. Although we sampled some terrific Indian, Chinese and Tibetan specialties, our desire was to eat local and preferably street food. Bhutan, though, doesn't appear to get into street food as much as its Asian neighbours. Perhaps it's the size: with a population of 700,000 the vibe is more country town, with no one rushing to grab a quick street meal on the way home. The roads are not clogged with cars and

bikes all competing for the Loudest Horn medal, and homes are large with decent-sized kitchens, unlike Seoul or Tokyo where a two-burner hot plate is very often “the kitchen.”

Our guide, the fabulous Ms. Chimi, tells stories about dinner parties, pot lucks, and meals for friends given as gifts, and sometimes ingredients are brought as gifts so that people can cook together. This is fast becoming a country I’d love to relax in for a while.

The Bhutanese might not do street food the way others in the region do, but they definitely do food and it’s a

huge part of the culture. After eating a few hotel and restaurant meals we were lucky enough to get into the kitchen at the Lakhi Yangchek hotel in Paro, Bhutan’s second largest city. Head chef Tshering Deema, along with her two assistants Karma Dorji and Sonam Tshering, treated us to two great nights of cooking and learning the ins and outs of Bhutanese cuisine.

And while experienced travellers will tell you that the best food experiences are not usually found in fancy restaurants but rather in street stalls and small cafes, where people who know their dishes have spent years practising and refining them, the chefs at the Paro hotel certainly seemed to know their dishes.

From them we learned that the spicing of most Bhutanese dishes consists of salt, chilli, grated datsi cheese and ginger. Carrots with the skin still on are also used as a major flavouring ingredient. This is great, since the skins and peels of vegetables are full of vitamins and nutrients.

Datsi cheese, made from yak or mare’s milk, is quite mild and pleasant with a nice chewy texture. Its low melting temperature helps it to incorporate into the sauce of any dish it is added to. Prepared in small soft rounds of about two inches across, the slightly thicker rind is sliced off and added to dishes while the softer, less ripe interior is then put under some cloth to ripen so that the next day there is more rind to use in cooking. The Bhutanese produce a few other cheeses, including a rare one that sounds akin to a French Stilton. But as with most things in Asia, foods are seasonal so we’ll have to go back when it’s time to make and eat those cheeses.

As in my mum’s kitchen, all ingredients are added by eyeballing them, tasting what’s already gone into the pot or simply having a sixth sense that says, “Add more salt now!” It’s a sign of well-honed

» ABOVE: *Even tastier.* Chillies and erna datsi cheese.

» BELOW: *Ezsee.* Bhutanese chilli salad, made with chillies, onion, tomato, datsi, salt and oil.



dedication to the cuisine and dishes being prepared when the chef knows what feels right and can change the spicing depending on the quality, freshness and quantity of the ingredients.

Bhutanese chillies are larger than Indian chillies and significantly larger than Thai chillies. Milder in heat but strong with pepper flavour, they are used in almost every dish. Since Bhutanese chillies are hard to find in Western grocery stores, large, light green Korean chillies make a great substitute if you have an Asian grocery store nearby. If not, a combination of green peppers for the pepper flavour with some smaller chillies for heat might suffice, but you'd have to do some experimenting.

Flash frying or wok frying chillies is wonderful to watch: the flames shoot up over the pan, and the flesh of the vegetable chars while releasing stunningly flavourful oils and smells into the food and air. You do have to make sure the kitchen is well ventilated lest you, and your cooking guests, end up in fits of chilli-fume-induced coughing. Chillies are, remember, the main ingredient in defensive pepper spray weapons.

While we'd been told the Bhutanese love chillies and vinegar, we didn't see much vinegar, which is a shame as my palate says a little tang would have brought out even more the unique and delicious flavours we were experiencing. There were two small Nepalese-style limey lemons in the hotel kitchen and, being a fan of tangy and chilli, I ate both in one meal without realizing that unlike in Nepal, where citrus is readily available, in Bhutan the two small fruit were precious.

Did we mention the salt? The uninitiated should be prepared, because the Bhutanese sure love salt. It must be the high-altitude need for it, because whenever we turned around, head chef Tshering Deema was adding another sprinkle of it. If



it wasn't her, the two assistants were ready with pinches of their own to add, encouraging us to add more if we felt the need. The Bhutanese even put salt in their morning tea, just like Tibetans do. Such practices seem counter to everything a Western cup of tea should be.

I've noticed Koreans using scissors in the kitchen in place of a knife, and I have to say I'm with them there; it's much easier for many things to simply snip-snip over a pot than to fiddle and chop. The Bhutanese kitchen has no scissors; for them it's a machete with a massive tree trunk as a chopping block. And again, just

» ABOVE: *Cutting meat.* Two ubiquitous Bhutanese kitchen tools—a tree-trunk chopping block and a machete.

» BELOW: *Sha Hint Shoe Datsi* a la Tshering Deema



» Head Chef Ms. Tshering Deema and a tray of delicious Datsi cheese.

“**Bhutan** is like the salt on curry between two huge countries”

meat here is preserved—by drying or smoking—and is tougher than any beef jerky I’ve ever had in the USA or elsewhere. Use of a pressure cooker to tenderize the meat and bring out all the flavours trapped inside is essential.

The dried meat is hacked into bite-sized pieces and put into a pressure cooker along with spinach and/or turnip leaves and fresh chillies. Once this is cooked, the datsi is added and the whole concoction is heated on a stove top, allowing the melted cheese to permeate all the ingredients, making one with the beef and broth to sumptuous effect.

One last thing to note: these meals should be eaten piping hot, to help bring out the maximum flavour, especially any dish that includes the cheese. Any cheese lover in any country will tell you that melted cheese needs to be eaten quickly.

And eat it quickly we did, because the food was delicious! At the Lakhi Yangchek hotel we were fortunate to come across so many experts in one place all working and tasting and creating together like a well oiled machine. Bubbling broths, charring chillies, machetes hacking and chopping and gorgeous huge open flames to cook over. All are powerful reminders you are no longer in downtown London or New York—this is how real food is made for real people.

as in my mum’s kitchen, you save your used oil for next time. Just strain out the fried bits for the dog or any family member who enjoys them. Take note of what you re-use the oil for, though. No one should use oil from fish-frying for anything other than more fish-frying, for reasons you can probably imagine.

One of our favourite meals included sha hint shoe, a tasty dish made from strips of beef that are first hung outdoors to dry and cure. (“Dried chillies are best with dried meat.”~ Bhutanese kitchen wisdom.) The drying usually takes two to three days if it’s nice and hot outside but can take from five to seven days if the weather is cooler. As with many cuisines of Central Asia, pressure cookers are ubiquitous in Bhutanese kitchens. Due to the mountainous nature of the country and the historic price of meat, much of the