







# CHAPTER SIX

## TRADITIONAL FOOD

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## Bread and its varieties

*Nān* (bread) is one of the essential staple foods in Tajik food culture consumed on daily basis. It is hard to imagine life among Tajiks without bread, thus in popular culture bread is highly valued as a 'holy food' and revered.

In traditional gatherings foremost the *nān* is put on the table. Ladies who come to different functions, such as wedding, mortuary ceremonies bring bread with them. Whenever a guest comes to a Tajik home he is given bread first.

In Tajik traditions there are many ceremonial gatherings that are closely attached to the bread. The *ordbēzān* (sifting a flour), *ravghānrēzān* (pouring of oil), *kulchāpazān* (baking kulcha),

*nānshikanān* (breaking the bread), *nānbandān* (bread baking) ceremonies are some of such cultural events to name.

During their long history Tajik people have invented various types of bread and there are multiple regional variations of bread present today as well. Different types of bread are given names based on their content and form, such as *nōni čapāti* or *tunuk*, *girdačā*, *fatīrxāmir*, *fatīr*, *fatīri kurak*, *fatīri varakī* or *žad-žad*, *qalamā*, *kumāč*, *kulča*, *nāni kordī*, *kulčāi kalān* and so on.

*Čapāti* or *tunuk* is type of bread made from the leavened dough. It contains yeast thus it







requires resting three to four hours prior being baked. The dough for *čapāti* compare to other types of bread is kneaded softer. It is than stretched flat into thin sheet and baked in one or two minutes. Due to its texture and substance *čapāti* is baked very quickly in high heat and among other types of breads known among Tajiks is the only one, which is not baked till it is red and it keeps white, flour-like color after being baked.

*Čapāti* is a sort of ceremonial bread, which is baked in large quantities during various cultural traditional events. Usually it is prepared and consumed in weddings, festival parties and mourning ceremonies as well.

***Girdača*** is a type of widespread bread in Khatlon province, Hisar and Rasht valley. It's dough is made with yeast and when put in oven

few holes are made so the hot air get through and while baking it does not burn. The *girdača* is thicker than *čapāti* and before taken out of the oven small amount of water is splashed on it to help it get a glossy texture.

***Fatīr*** is perhaps an oldest bread type across Tajikistan. The main differentiating feature of *fatīr* from the leavened breads is that it contains milk and oil and it is much thicker compare to the regular breads from three to five centimeter. *Fatīr* is decorated by the needle bread stamp throughout making cross-through fine holes. Main local dishes such as *ķurutob*, *šakarob*, *fatīr šurbō* is all consumed and made with the *fatīr*. During the fieldworks people carry *fatīr* to be eaten as it is considered to have more calories and being healthy. It has different types such as *ķad-ķad*, *ķazzadār* (with the tail fat), *gardmāl*,



*kurāk* and *piyāzdār* (with onion).

**Qalamā** its preparation is similar to *fatīr*. In olden days it was baked over the coals or heated pans, but now it is deep-fried in cooking oil. *Qalamā* is ceremonial form of bread and is made in weddings or other cultural events. For example, six to eight *qalamā* is exchanged between the bride and groom's family during the wedding ceremonies.

**Tahmāl** is similar to *qalamā* the only difference being that in tahmol dough sugar is added and it is also deep-fried. The dough for tahmol is made with the cream. It has round shape and can vary in size. It is also used as a gift offering in ceremonies.

**Kulča** is prepared for both festive and mourning ceremonies. Usually close relatives







during the weddings bake *kulča* and bring it to the wedding as a gift. On basis of its size *kulča* is differentiated as *kalān* (big) and *māida* (small). The small *kulča* can be round and large as a regular bowl mouth with the thickness varies from two to three cm. To ensure it is baked through the middle part of *kulča* is stamped with the needle stamp. The dough for *kulčai kalān* also referred as *nōni kalon* is made with milk and oil only. It has 60-80 cm diameter with the thickness up to seven centimeters. Among population another name for it is *kulčai tuyāna* (wedding *kulča*) as it is made and used from the proposal offering ceremony to the wedding day in both bride and groom's families. The bakers decorate *kulčai kalān* by using appliqué patterns from the dough or using knife making floral designs.







## Dough-based dishes

The most complex and biggest part of the Tajik cuisine consists of the dough-based dishes. Below are the description and preparation recipes of some of the wide-spread and common dough-based dishes of Tajikistan.

***Oshi burida***- is a dough-based dish common to all regions of Tajikistan in some areas also called *oshu tuppa*. It is in essence a noodle soup with its own specific local features. The noodles for the *oshi burida* are prepared 20 minutes before the dish is prepared. Noodles are plain: flour, water and some salt. To make noodle soft dough is prepared and left to rest for sometime and then it is rolled into thin sheet and accordion folded. Then on a long chopping board called *takhtai zuvola* it is laid and cut finely. After finishing the cutting it is then taken and some flour is poured on it so in process of stretching the noodles do not break. After the noodles are stretched to the desired length and they are put into sieve to remove the flour remainders on them. While the noodles are prepared in cauldron the soup in-

gredients vegetables and grain products such as beans, peas etc. would be cooked. Sometime to give the *oshi burida* extra flavor some onions are fried before adding water and the grain products. Once the grain products are cooked the noodles are added and stirred so they do not stick together. It is boiled for 10 minutes and is removed from the fire. The ready dish is served in large plates seasoned and with salads. *Oshi burida* is eaten also in bowls and yogurt is added into the soup. The other variation of the *oshi burida* is when the noodles are cut into square resembling lasagna pasta. *Oshi burida* also can be prepared with meatballs.

***Umoch***- is another dough-based dish prepared for people who are on special diet. The cooking method for *umoch* is similar to *oshi burida*. The main ingredient for *umoch* is a dough-crumbled mixed by hand with little water and some salt. Depending on the taste and appetite of the person various grain products and vegetable can be added into the broth in which *umoch* is cooked. It is served hot with yogurt.

***Mantu*** is another dough-based dish which is most common and popular in Tajik cuisine. *Mantu* in Tajik cuisine and Central Asia are usually larger in size. They are steamed in a multi-level metal steamer called *mantupazak*. It consists of layered pots with holes, which are placed over a boiling stock and water.

In Tajik cuisine, *mantu* are usually made of one (or a combination) of the following ingredients: lamb, beef, herbs, on-







ion, potato or pumpkin, with fat often added to meat *mantu*. Steaming, frying and boiling are all common.

*Mantu* is prepared from water based dough, which is unrolled in layers 4-5 mm thick and cut in squares of 12×12 cm. Meat, vegetables or spices can make up the stuffing. *Mantu* is steamed for 35-45 minutes in a special pot. *Mantu* is served with sour milk or sour cream.

Depending on the season *mantu* can be prepared also with herbs only or vegetables only.

***Tushbera***- is similar to *mantu* only different in cooking mode. If *mantu* is steamed *tush-*

*bera* is boiled and also *tushbera* is much smaller in size than *mantu*. In other Central Asian cuisines it is also known as *chuchpara*, *chuchvara*, *tushpara* or *barak*, which is a small dumpling typical. It is made of unleavened dough squares filled with meat and it is similar to the Russian *pelmeni*, but in observance of the Islamic dietary rules, the meat filling is strictly halal. The dough for *tushbera* is made with flour, eggs, water and salt, unrolled in a layer 1-1.5 mm thick, and cut into squares. A dollop of meat filling, seasoned with chopped onions, pepper, salt and thyme, is placed at the center of each square, and the corners are pinched and folded. *Tushbera* is boiled





in meat broth until the dumplings rise to the surface. It can be served in a clear soup or on their own, with vinegar or sauce based on finely chopped greens, tomatoes and hot peppers. Another popular way of serving *tushbera* is topped with *chakka* (strained yogurt) or with *jurghot* (sour cream).

***Sambusa-*** is another Tajik dough-based dish or snack consisting of flaky or plain pasties with various fillings, both served at ceremonies and eaten in an everyday life. *Sambusa* may have different shapes (square, round or triangle) and forms and be cooked in a multiplicity of ways, such as in firewood *tanur* or electric oven.

Today's *sambusa* is usually filled with meat (mutton, chicken or beef) either chopped into small pieces or minced, vegetables (pumpkin,

potato or onion), eggs, peas, herbs. However, as in most of the Tajik dishes, it is the spices, such as *zira* (cumin), black and red hot pepper, and sesame (covering *sambusa* on the top), that make the taste of the pasties really unique.

In the former times *sambusa* was cooked only in a *tanur* oven. *Sambusa* baked in a *tanur* has specific taste and flavor and is filled with small pieces of meat, onion and some amount of fat from a sheep's tail. Nowadays, some sorts of *sambusa* are cooked in gas or electric ovens, which is faster and more convenient and, at the same time, makes *sambusa* retain its original qualities.

In Tajikistan and other Central Asian countries, *sambusas* are often sold on the streets as a hot snack. They are sold at special kitchens, where only *sambusas* are made, or alternative-





ly, at places where other fast foods are sold.

***Bichak***- is another *sambusa*-like pastry, which can have potatoes, meat or herb fillings. The only difference between *bichak* and *sambusa* is that *bichak* is deep-fried in oil whereas *sambusa* is baked in the oven.



***Chagaldak***- is a dough-based savory snack food served hot or cold. The dough for *chagaldak* is very soft and onion, paper and green herbs (spring onion, coriander, parsley, dill and basil) are added. *Chagaldak* is deep fried in hot oil and since the dough is very soft like doughnut it can have irregular shapes. It







is fried until turning dark red.

**Orzuk** is savory and sweet snack cooked by deep-frying. The dough for *orzuk* is unleavened and is prepared in similar way as *fatir* dough with milk and oil. Once the bread is prepared it is pierced through with fork or other sharp ob-

ject, than it is cut into rectangular or square pieces and deep-fried. If the dough does not contain sugar after taking it from fryer sugar powder is sprinkled on top. It is usually prepared for festivals and ceremonial occasions.







## Milk-based dishes

Milk-based dishes and dairy products are large part of the Tajik cuisine from the old days. Geographical conditions of the country allow both animal husbandry and agricultural activities providing food from different sectors. The main dairy products in Tajikistan are yogurt, *chakka* (type of yogurt which kept in sac for water to drain), *kurut* or *kashk* (dried yogurt balls), cream, soured cream, clotted cream, *dugh* etc. Milk-based dishes in Tajikistan are the dishes eaten for breakfast largely.

*Shirchoy* is prepared from milk and loose-leaf tea. Other additional ingredients that maybe added are salt, pomegranate peel or willow tree peel and walnut. It is prepared by boiling the milk and adding to it loose leaf tea, which would be moisten in some hot water beforehand. After it boils and the tea color turned the milk slight red it is salted and taken off the fire. *Shirchoy* is served with butter.



**Shir rughan** is similar to *shirchoy* the only difference is that it is boiled with butter. It is served in the wooden plates and eaten by putting bread in it.

**Shirbirinj** is a milk dish similar to rice pudding. It is cooked with milk, rice and salt is added as needed. When the dish is ready it is served





on the plates and sugar, butter and or linseed oil is added on top. Among Tajik people *shirbirinj* is referred to as the «prophet's food» and is prepared both regularly and during the rituals or other occasions.

***Shirbat*** is a type of porridge prepared with milk and flour, and in some regions of Tajikistan it is also known as «otalai bo shir» or «otalai safedak». To prepare *shirbat* some milk is brought to boil and than some flour is added it while keeping it stirred continually until it gets thick. Slat and sugar is added as required and served with butter.

***Shirkadu*** or also called *kadubashir* is a dish



prepared with milk and pumpkin. First a ripe pumpkin is taken, peeled and cleaned and than chopped into fin small pieces that it is added to milk and cooked together for 20-25 minute until pumpkin is soft.





**Ordbiryon** is a dish prepared from milk and flour like *shirbat*, but in this dish the flour is fried in linseed oil or butter before the milk is added to it. Thus in some places it is called as *gardsuz* or *ordob*. It is also slightly liquid than *shirbat* and served in bowls. To make it extra tasty additional linseed oil is added on top of it when served.





## Meat dishes

In Tajik cuisine meat dishes are most diverse and got a significant place. Meat dishes in Tajikistan are prepared by frying, steam cooked and boiling. Tajik meat dishes are primarily prepared from domestic animals e.g. sheep, goat and cow and poultry and bird meats. Tajik cuisine similar to other Islamic cultures follows dietary laws given in the Quran.

Before preparation of meat dishes first of all meat is selected in accordance to receipt of the food it is needed for, it is washed and salted. For example, for cooking *khomshurbo* (clear soup where vegetables are not fried before cooking) only ribs and parts of

meat with bone is used whereas for kebabs primarily boneless and lean meat is used.

**Tandurkabob** or *tanurkabob* is prepared from mutton by steaming-smoking technique in the fire-wood oven. A leg or large shoulder of the mutton is taken and after seasoning it is hung in the bread baking fire oven (*tanur*), which is preheated and has some charcoals left. Than the *tanur* is sealed completely and left for 6 to 7 hours before the *tandurkabob* is ready. It is served cold or hot.







**Lulakabob** is a meat dish prepared from mutton, beef or chicken. Only minced meat is used and additional ingredients can include breadcrumbs, onion, seasoning spices, rice or even processed potatoes. It is a traditional form of cutlet. It is fried cooked.

**Jigarbiryon** is a meat dish prepared from the cow, goat or sheep liver. However, in this dish regular meat, heart, kidneys and lung is also added. It is prepared on the cauldron in the high fire. First the meat ingredients are fired and than onion, bell paper, tomatoes and some potatoes are added and left to simmer to cook until soft.







**Seekh-kabob** is a popular dish of skewered and grilled cubes of meat. The word kebab denotes a wide variety of different grilled meat dishes. *Shikh-kabob* is popular in the whole of Asia. It is similar to a dish called *shashlik*, which is found in the Caucasus region. The meat prior to be grilled is marinated overnight and in skewers is put with sheep tail fat for making the meat moist and soft. It is grilled on the charcoal and served with onion and green herb salad.



**Murghbiryon** refers to poultry dishes prepared either by frying, boiling or steaming. If the whole chicken is prepared the traditional method is to hum-

mer the chicken flat and marinates it overnight in vinegar and herbs. It is than cooked on a frying pan by putting a weight or a metallic plate over it. This





allows meat to cook even and have a flat form. Some people call that also *tobagi* or *tabaka*.

***Kalapocha*** is a traditional dish prepared from the head, foot, tongue, stomach and intestine of the goat or sheep. All the ingredients in this dish go very

through cleaning process by boiling and bleaching them. It is cooked by boiling and together with grain products, tomatoes, onion and variety of the scented herbs. It takes long hours to prepare it as the products of this meat dish take longer time to cook and become soft.



## Oshi palav

*Oshi palav* (pilaf) is a traditional highly valued dish of communities in Tajikistan which is referred to a “shohi taomho” (king of dishes). *Oshi palav* is a central and main dish of all traditional gatherings of Tajik people and is prepared in all types of social and cultural gatherings. *Palav* is cooked in different varieties at home and is served also in public restaurants and teahouse. It is host’s duty to prepare *oshi palav* when a guest arrives.

*Oshi palav* has a long historical root among the Tajiks and considering that the ancestors of the Tajiks. It maybe postulated that the tradition of rice growing was transferred to the ancestors of the Tajiks i.e. Sogdians and Bactrians in 2 century before the Common Era from India. It was hence developed among them since one of the main parts of their economy was agriculture.

*Oshi palav* is prepared from a set of ingredients such as carrot, rice, meat, oil, and onion and additional fragrant spices such saffron, cumin, black paper, lemon, including grains such as chickpea. *Oshi palav* has three-stage preparation recipe: frying the main ingredients, preparing *zirbak* (a both in which rice is cooked), the simmering of the rice. Each of these stages has their own timing and *oshi palav* is cooked in cast iron pots.

In the course of its century long development history *oshi palav* among Tajik people has evolved different types and varieties that each is unique to the type of additional ingredients used. For example, *palavi bargitoki* (*palav* prepared using vine leaf) *oshi za’faroni* (saffron *palav*), *oshi mavizi* (raisins *palav*) and also depending on the type of meat used such as *bedona palav*









(quail palav), *murghpalav* (chicken palav) and so on. In addition depending on the regions where certain forms of palav or recipe has reached the types of palav would carry those region's name such as *oshi Uroteppa* (Urotepa palav- a region in the north Tajikistan), *oshi Uyghuri* (Uighur palav) and so on. In total there are close to 200 types of the palav prepared among Tajik people. Nowadays, the types of palav is also attached to the restaurants and canteens where they are prepared such as *oshi Tayga*- latter being a name of a restaurant in Dushanbe city or *oshi Sariosiyo* – osh prepared in the area called Sariosiyo etc.

In Tajik culture different type of the *oshi*

*palav* prepared for certain specific events would called after the event for which it is prepared. For example *oshi nahor* – an *osh* prepared for the early morning feast given in the weddings, *oshi tagi chodar* – *osh* which has been prepared to be eaten under the bridal curtain during the wedding or *oshi sebegaha* – *osh* prepared to commemorate the third day after the funeral etc.

Oshi palav as a nomination file in 2016 has been included on UNESCO's Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.



## Soup (šūrbā) and its types

*Šurbā* – soup is one of the widespread dishes in traditional Tajik cuisine having many varieties. Soups are cooked from vegetables, meat, and grain products and are seasoned with various scented herbs and spices. This is how regularly the soup is prepared: first the cooking oil is heated and meat, which usually takes longer to cook, is fried first. After the meat is moderately fried other ingredients such as onions, potatoes, carrot, turnip and depending what type of soup is additional vegetables are added. The ingredients are seasoned with salt and spices and stirred every 2 or 3 minutes to give them regular fried texture, particularly the care is given not to burn the onion, which more delicate than other vegetables. The final taste and texture of the soup depends on the degree of initial 'light' frying of the ingredients. Water is added after the frying of the main elements and it is left to slowly simmer and bring to boil. When the vegetables and meat are nearly cooked chickpea, beans, lentil and other types of grain products, again depending on the type of intended soup, is added and cooked by simmering.

The way of cooking all types of soups is

identical and the distinguishing features are types of main products, which are added. In the Tajik cuisine there are nearly twenty types of soups, of which most popular are being *xomšūrbā* (clear soup), *murgh-šūrbā* (chicken soup) *būdana-šūrbā* (quail soup), *dum-šūrbā* (oxtail soup), *kabk-šūrbā* (partridge soup), *rezā-šūrbā* (finely cube-cut vegetable soup), *lūbīā-šūrbā* (beans soup), *nakhud-šūrbā* (chickpea soup) *nāsk-šūrbā* (lentil soup) and so on.

From the types of soups named only the cooking method of only *murgh-šūrbā* (chicken soup) and *rezā-šūrbā* (cube-cut vegetable soup) is slightly different. *Murgh-šūrbā* (chicken soup) is considered to be most nutritious and is advised to feed people with internal organ (digestive system, stomach) illness. In this soup cooking oil and potatoes, which has high starch content is not used at all.

In cooking *rezā-šūrbā* all ingredients are finely cube-cut, thus the name *rezā-šūrbā* literally meaning 'finely cut'. In its content *rezā-šūrbā* is similar to that *mastāba* (rice soup). The main difference being that the latter has rice but *rezā-šūrbā* contains only vegetables.





## Traditional beverages

In line with the traditional dishes Tajik people from ancient times have also been known for types of traditional seasonal and regular beverages. If some beverages are made for quenching the thirst in the hot seasons some of them are meant for refreshing and nutritious purposes. Traditional beverages for the warm season are compotes (from fresh or dried fruits), *dugh* (yogurt drink), *sharbat* (type of juice without carbonate) and tea. Compotes are prepared from the local grown fruits either single fruit or mixed fruit. In addition, various medicinal herbs are used to prepare beverages, such as rose, hip rose, basil and mint etc.

Fruity beverages are prepared from both dried and fresh fruits through boiling them. Since sweet beverages in the summer season makes one thirstier the summer beverages are less sweet. Compotes are also prepared to be preserved for the winter period in cans and jars.

*Cholob* or *dughob* – refers to a yogurt drink made from natural yogurt either fat free or full fat. Usually *cholob* is achieved after processing the yoghurt to extract the butter. For what is left after the process than fresh green herbs and some vegetables such as bell paper or cucumber is added with seasoning. It is a healthy drink for quenching the thirst and contributes to stamina and balanced health.

*Sharbat* is prepared by extraction of juice from the fresh fruits or by boiling fruits. All sorts of fruits are suitable for preparing *sharbat* and some are compatible for being mixed together with another fruit or even vegetal, such as carrot and apple. Traditionally people prepare *sharbat* from overripe fruits by collecting them into a piece of fabric and squeezing the juice out of them; the piece of fabric played a role of filter. After the extraction they also sometimes boiled the juice once to make it extra sweet. Then *sharbats* were kept in jars and served



chilled or room temperature.

Wine is another widespread form of beverage produced and consumed. Tajik wines are made from local grapes. Production of wine is common with other cultures of the world, starting with selection of the grapes or other produce and ending with bottling the finished wine. After the harvest, the grapes are taken into a winery and prepared for primary ferment. At this stage red wine making diverges from white wine making. Red wine is made from the must (pulp) of red or black grapes and fermentation occurs together with the grape skins, which give the wine its color. White wine is made by fermenting juice, which is made by pressing crushed grapes to extract a juice; the skins are removed and play no further role.









## Traditional desserts

Desserts and sweet dishes make a significant part of the Tajik cuisine. The most widespread forms of desserts are halva, crystallized candies, *nishalo* - a frothy sweet made from egg white and sugar and herbs, grape syrup and jams. In addition, each types of desserts and sweet dishes are sub grouped by the main ingredients that they contain, for example for there are multiple types of halva distinguished by its main ingredients such as white halva (which has not been caramelized when baking), red halva (caramelized or with food coloring), milk halva, walnut halva, almond halva, carrot halva etc.

*Nabot* is one of the kinds of national candies of yellowish color as well as representing the craft of producing glassy crystals. The producing way is the following: two parts of sugar and one part of water are put into a cauldron and are boiled on a very slow fire. Syrup is formed from them. Syrup is stirred and boiled till foam appears, then the foam is put off and some egg is added into the syrup, the syrup continues being boiled and appearing foam is constantly put off.

Then, in special cauldron, cotton threads are parallel tightened, gluing the ends of the threads

to the cauldron. These threads are poured with syrup boiling. In an hour, a thin layer appears on the syrup. Cauldron is shut with a special lid. In this condition, the cauldron is left for some seventy-two or eighty hours. During this period sugar crystals are formed around the threads, which gradually will be increased for account of the parts newly added to them. Crystallized ingots are put in the dish to be dried.

The remainder of the sugar syrup that has not crystalized are called *parvarda* is used in culinary.





White halva is one of the wide spread forms of halva prepared for festive days, including commemorative feasts for departed. It is common to all the regions of Tajikistan. It is made from sheep tail fat or butter, flour and powdered sugar. First butter or sheep fat is added into cauldron and after melting flour is added in slightly fried. After it begins to boil up it is removed from the fire and let to cool down a bit. After it cools down powder sugar is added and than it is thoroughly mixed until the entire mass turns white and sugar melts into the fat and flour mix.

Red halva is usually prepared for the weddings. When the groom's family brings presents to the bride's house they will bring red halva. Red halva is prepared in cotton seed oil. Than soft

dough is prepared and added to heated oil and is mixed and cooked until it begins turning red. This, in common language is called «blooming of halva». Afterwards the cauldron where halva is prepared is taken off from the fire and sugar syrup is added and mixed thoroughly. If needed it is put on the fire again for a short time to allow all the ingredients to mix and absorb thoroughly. It takes 3 to 4 hours to prepare the red halva.

*Nishalo* is one of the frothy desserts prepared for both festive and mourning feasts. In



particular, *nishalo* is regularly consumed during the Ramadan month. In this month *nishalo* is sold in halva markets. *Nishalo* is prepared in the following manner: first some licorice root is boiled in water and after being filtered it is let to chill. The licorice water than is added some egg whites and beaten well until it become foamy. The warm sugar syrup is than added to the foam produced from licorice root and egg white and beaten further until it becomes thick and frothy.

The sweet table of Tajik cuisine is very specific, variable and extensive. Tajiks as well as other nations of the Central Asia, do not know a dessert as a final dish. Sweets, drinks and fruit which in Europe crown any meal are served twice during meals in Tajikistan, and sometimes even three times - they are served before, after and during meals.



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