

4.10. TRADITIONAL FOOD AND BEVERAGES

Bhutanese cuisine is varied and every region has its own specialty. Rice is a staple meal with vegetable or meat cooked with chilli and cheese is common across the country. Chili dominates all Bhutanese curry and is considered almost as a vegetable. Therefore, traditional curry is lavishly flavored with either fresh or dried red chillies. The popular Bhutanese cuisines are briefly described below:

Emā Datsi

Emā datsi is chili-cheese curry and most popular in Bhutanese cuisine, and some have even begun to consider it as Bhutan's National Dish. Many Bhutanese claim that their dish is incomplete without *emā datsi*.

Different varieties of chillies may be used: fresh green chilli, sun dried chilli or blanched chilli. Chillies are often used as vegetables than just mere seasoning. It is easier to make *emā datsi*. The ingredients required are fresh green chilli/dried red chillies/blanched chillis, cheese, tomato, onion, garlic (optional), cooking oil and salt and the quantity of the ingredients will depend on one's likings and depending on how one likes to eat. The cheese in *emā datsi* is home-made from the curd of cows or yaks.

Phaksha Pa

Pa is a general term referred to the chunk of stewed meat. In this case, *phaksha pa* is a pork dish well cooked and added dried or blanched chilli to enhance the taste. Spinach or radish can be included. The dish is seasoned with crushed garlic and ginger. Salt, butter or oil forms the most essential part of pork paa.



Nosha Pa

Nosha Pa is a favourite menu for most Bhutanese. It is cooked in the same way as pork paa with the same seasoning.



Kewa Datsi

Kewa Datsi (potatoes with cheese and chilli) is a vegetarian specialty. It is made from potatoes, local cheese, chopped onions and tomatoes (optional), oil, salt, and fresh chilli or red dried chilli depending on one's taste.

There are specialities such as *shamu datsi* (Mushroom with cheese), *nakey datsi* (fiddle head with cheese) among many others.

Jasha Pa

Jasha pa is exquisitely stewed chicken dish. It is cooked very simply by either frying chunks of chicken or boiled evenly and added with chili towards the end. In the olden days, mustard oil was primarily used as cooking oil before the factory-made vegetable oil was available. Dried red chillis are preferred but fresh green chilli can also substitute. Crushed ginger and garlic paste are added to give the curry a good whiff and taste. Also, coriander leaves and (or) spring onion are sprinkled over the cooked dish to give it a green outlook and also to enhance the taste of the curry.

Ribs Pa

Ribs pa is prepared during special occasions like New Year celebrations or dinner parties and social gatherings. Pork ribs are cooked with spices like dried

red chilli and chilli powder sprinkled to make it hot. Fresh radish is also added but potato can be a rare substitute if one cannot find radish at all. If neither radish nor potato are available, dried or sometimes even fresh turnip-tops is also used to complement the ribs. Crushed ginger, garlic and Szechuan pepper are also added to enhance the taste of the dish. Coriander leaves or spring onion are sprinkled over the final dish to add freshness. Pork ribs are preferred to beef ribs.

Kou Pa

Kou is the animal hide roasted dry. Here, the dried skins of cow or yak are edible and considered one of the highly preferred dishes. The roasted hide has to be thoroughly cooked in water until it becomes soft and tender at the touch of fingers. Then it is stir fried in oil with the addition of chili powder, crushed ginger and garlic added to enhance the taste. Spring onion or coriander leaves are added towards the end but it is optional. Crushed Szechuan pepper is also added because of its explosive effect. Yak meat is considered to contain high protein value and is quite expensive.

Kangchung Maru

This is a dish made out of the leg bones (*kangchung*) of animals. The bones are chopped into pieces and cooked for long time until the skin becomes soft. It requires chilli powder to make it hot, crushed ginger and garlic, salt and oil for taste. Nowadays chopped tomatoes are also used to add sourness. This dish basically comes out as a side dish. It is normally served with thin gravy.

Kangchung Pa

The *kangchung pa* is the same material as *kangchung maru*, but it is boiled and then semi-fried with chili, garlic and Sichuan pepper. It is also considered exquisite and is only cooked by a family during special occasions. These days, it is readily available in restaurants with slight modification of tastes inspired by global cuisine. Kangchung paa is usually explosive in taste with chilli powder and Sichuan pepper.

Marsha (Red Meat)

Marsha is fermented red meat of yak. A piece of yak leg is wrapped in a cotton cloth, and kept in a cold place of the house for about five to six months to let it freeze naturally. The best month to preserve this meat is from 8th to 1st months of the lunar year.

Jaju

Jaju is a vegetable curry with lots of thin gravy prepared from freshly chopped green leafy vegetables cooked in a little oil. Fresh local cheese or slightly fermented cheese is the main ingredients in *jaju*.

The Dumpling of Haa

Buckwheat is one of Haa District's major crops, and the *Haapi Hoentoe* is not to be missed. The buckwheat flour is made into dough, which is then rolled, patted and made into dumplings stuffed with various ingredients like dried leaves of turnip, fresh cheese, garlic and cloves, Sichuan pepper, finely chopped ginger, peeled and coarsely grated onion, hot chilli powder and unsalted butter. These ingredients are mixed and ground before filling in the dumpling. It is then steam cooked until the dough becomes tender. Dipping the dumpling in spicy pepper sauce is a special treat as it numbs the tongue.



Jangbuli

Jangbuli is noodle made from ka (wheat flour) in Bumthang and some parts of Mongar districts and bears the local name. The wheat flour is kneaded and sliced into flat noodles which is boiled to cook and then fried in mustard oil, butter or vegetable oil. Numerous spices like garlic, chilli and dried Szechuan pepper are grounded and added to the dish along with coriander and onion leaves. Sometimes eggs are also added to improve the richness. Jangbuling is usually accompanied by *thrami* (local name for chilli sauce) cooked as curry. Whey (a by-product of cheese) makes a perfect beverage to complete the dish.

Drengo

Buckwheat, barley, wheat, maize and millet flour (*khala*, *guntshong*, *bong*, *kongpu* respectively in *tshangla* dialect) are cooked in pre-boiled water for a few minutes and then kneaded with the help of slightly flattened pestle called *drengo*. *Drengo* used to be the main food

for farmers in the eastern half of Bhutan when rice was in short supply. This item can go with any vegetable curry except fried ones and ezay (chili salad).

Buckwheat Pancake and Noodle

Putu is a replica of noodle made from buckwheat in Bumthang and Trongsa. Buckwheat flour is kneaded into dough with the right thickness and squeezed into a wooden box with multiple holes manually and comes out as noodles at the bottom. It is then prepared in the same manner as Jangbuli (described above) and served. In accordance with the preference it can be served fried or fried and mixed with thin curds. This is a popular dish in few restaurants in the urban centres.



Khule is also made from buckwheat flour. The flour is mixed with water and stirred into thick liquid or batter. The liquid is then poured evenly over a hot griddle or pan. When one side is dried, it is turned on the other side and left until cooked.

Preserved Cheese

Preserved yak cheese popularly known as *zoe thue* is made in Merak and Sakteng communities of Trashigang district where its local name is *chora nyingba*. The cheese is filled in the leather bag especially of a sambar deer skin and is preserved at room temperature for long period



of time. It is used in small amounts to add flavour to curries.

Kharang

Kharang is coarsely ground granules of maize. Traditionally, maize is ground in quern/stone hand mill (rang thag) as explained earlier, where it gives two different products – coarse particles which is *kharang* and the fine flour. These two products are separated with the help of a large bamboo sieve. *Kharang* produced out of wheat is called Bongkharang. Maize *kharang* is usually



eaten mixed with rice or whole *kharang* in those places where there is lack of rice. Maize flour is used to make dough known as *drengo*. This flour is also used to make corn flour porridge. *Kharang* is the most important food crop especially in eastern and south central Bhutan.

Tea Leaf

Bhutanese people used to make indigenous tea leaves from various types of locally available plants, blossoms and leaves. These include the blossoms of *Malus*



Sikkimensis, the late autumn leaves of the *yalei tree* (*Sorbus Cuspidata*), parasitic plant called *yumsHING*.

These leaves, blossom and barks are heated in ash water in a frying pan, stirring until all the liquid dries up. Ash water is made by seeping water through the ash collected in a small basket. The oxidation process turns the colour of the materials into dark brown. The boiled leaves and bark are put in a sieve and kept under tap water to wash down all traces of ashes. While churning the tea, ash water may be added to allow the oxidation process to take place to attain the desired color and taste. The tea leaf, however, is good only for *suja* (churned in butter and salt).

Rice Flakes

In the western parts of the country such as Wangduephodrang, Punakha and Paro people produce *jaa sip* or rice flakes from paddy harvested before they are fully matured. The unhusked paddy is boiled and then put in a basket to drain out the water. Then it is once again roasted in a pan and pounded in the mortar and flattened. *Sip* made from the tender rice tastes sweeter. These flakes are usually consumed as snacks with tea.



Rice Cracker

The Bhutanese version of rice cracker is called *dzaw* which is prepared by roasting rice in frying pan until it becomes crunchy. It is a popular snack in Bhutan. The process of roasting rice is as follows: the rice is soaked over night in a bowl of warm water that makes it soft. It is then emptied into a basket to drain out the water. The soft rice is mixed with small quantity of oil. Then a handful of rice is roasted at a time in a big pan called *lhang-gna*, stirring constantly. When the rice in the pan begins to crack and changes to light brown, it is poured into a basket. Preparation of *dzaw* is a tedious job especially when the quantity is large.



Dzaw is often made special by mixing it in sugar, butter and *zimchi-nam* (*Perilla frutescens*).

Chugo

Chugo (cheese cube) is a hard and dry cheese and is a popular dairy product in Bhutan. This product comes in three shapes – cubes, slice and slab. The cubes are put into garland of twenty pieces each on a yak hair string. This garland is kept hanging on a pole in the tent or kitchen and allowed to dry until they become hard. It can also be sold semi-dry. The sliced shape comes mainly from Haa, so it is often called *Haapi chugo*, and larger in size and square shaped. It is smoke dried which is why it has a brownish tint. *Chugo* can be preserved for a long time. The slab *chugos* are soft and sold by slicing pieces according to the need of the customer.

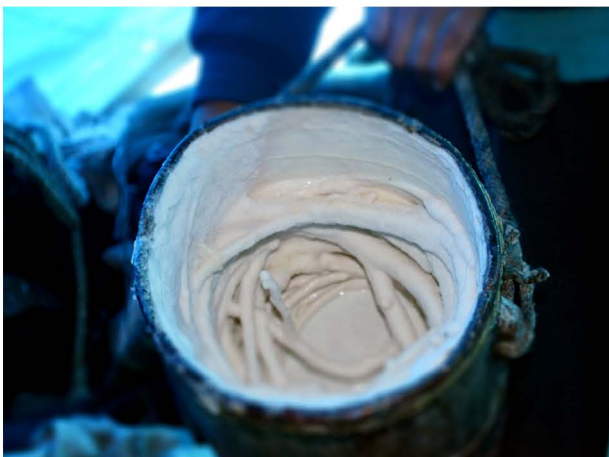




While hard, dried *chugo* and *haapi chugo* are chewed like dried fruit, semi-dried cheese are fried in butter and sweetened by adding sugar.

Philu

It is a milk product, considered to be a specialty of the highlanders in Western Bhutan. Wreaths of fir branch are placed over the rim of the milking pail before milking the *bji* (a female yak). The sprays resulting from milking the cow are captured by the spikes of fir needles just like frost on the blades of grass. After the milk is emptied into the churn, the pail is turned upside down with the wreath still covering the brim to let the remnants of milk in the pail drip onto the needles. This procedure is repeated over couple of weeks until long gummy strands are formed on the wreath. This sticky substance is then removed from the wreaths and boiled in a container. The boiled content is put into a piece of white cloth and hung from the ceiling until the water completely drains out. It is then placed between two flat stones, and dried in the sun. It is then fried or cooked with chilli to make a rich dish with a smooth gummy substance that has the taste of matured cheese.



Shel Roti

Shel roti is a specialty of the Southern Bhutanese. It is a kind of fried bread looped. It can be eaten as snack or as meal. It is made from rice flour mixed with various ingredients like banana, cardamom, milk, eggs (optional), and other spices depending on preference. It is usually made during the festival of *Dasai*.



Gunduruk

Gunduruk is another specialty of the southern community. It is made from mustard leaves and stems of turnips and radishes. The process begins with the washing and drying of fresh leaves of mustard, turnip and radishes in the sun until they wilt and soften. These wilted leaves and stems are then put into a 100-120cm deep pit in the ground and crushed with pestle. The pit with the contents is covered with straw, banana leaves or other broad leaves. The covers are pressed down with heavy objects like boulders, and logs. After two to three weeks of fermentation the leaves and stems are dried in the sun to become gunduruk. It is stored in a container for up to three years.



Butter Tea

Tea is an important item for social custom in Bhutan. It is used to welcome and see off guests. Butter tea is popular among the Bhutanese irrespective of age and status. Tea leaves, prepared as described earlier, are brewed in a pot until the water becomes dark brown and then more hot water is added until it turns brown. The liquid is poured into a cylindrical container called *jasum*, and then salt and butter along with a pinch or two of bicarbonate soda are added and then churned with the help of a piston. Although butter and soda are used as a catalyst to draw out the taste and colour, it is actually the vigour with which the liquid is churned.

Today, the use of traditional ja-sum is replaced by electric blenders except in rural areas. For few people tea is made using a wooden twirling stick turned vigorously between two palms.

The tea is poured into kettles or pots and served hot. Tea is first offered at the altar for the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas and the deities, to the malevolent spirits and hungry ghosts and served frequently during ritual sessions.

Rice Cake

Locally called *men gye* this cake is made from teamed rice mashed and evenly pasted flat on a tray like container. Salted butter is thinly spread over the surface and eaten either with tea or *ezay*. This is popular in the district of Wangduephodrang.

Hollow Crispy Bread

Meykhu is a round crispy muffin fried in oil. It is made from rice flour mixed with a bit of salt. People keep the rice soaked in water and grounded into fine flour. It is again sieved to make sure no coarse materials are left in the flour. The flour is then finely kneaded into dough and then dipped into boiling oil until it swells into crispy muffin.



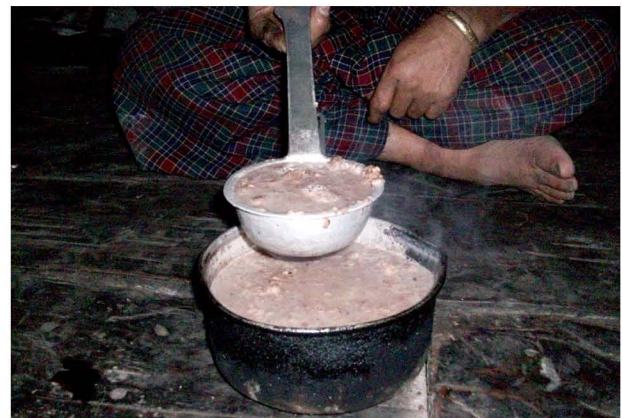
Yam

In ancient times cereals were rarely available for cultivation. So, people especially of the Eastern Bhutan used to collect yams (tubers) like *borang juktang* (*Dioscorea hamiltonii*), *pantang* (*Dioscorea pentaphylla*), and *bozong* (*Calocasia sp.*) from the forest. Yam is boiled and eaten like potatoes with *ezay*. Sometimes, yam can be dried, mashed into flour to make pancake, cooked like a soup or baked in hot embers. People also put yeast in yam to make drinks.



Changkoe

Changkoe is usually made from cooked rice mixed with yeast and allowed to ferment in airtight containers. One can easily make out if the *changkoe* is ready to use when a sweetened smell emits from the container.



Changkoe is easy to prepare. Heat butter in a pan and fry eggs (optional). Then the required amount of fermented mass is put into the melted butter and fried eggs. For those who wish to take as a soup, they add water and heat until it is hot but not until boiling point.

It is made especially for the mother after child delivery. It is believed that this broth will help to relax her and facilitate milk production and flow. It is also served to all relatives, friends, and well-wishers who visit her to see the new baby.

Bangchang

It is the most common local brew made from wheat/maize. It is usually served in a special pot called thro (khro). A bamboo strainer is immersed into the utensil filled with the mass and warm water. A round ladle is used to scoop out the liquid from the strainer and served.



When there less water, hot water is added to the mass and stirred with some force so that the core of the grains is smashed. The liquid is strained and served until the taste has deteriorated. It is also served cold in hot places as *sinchang*.

The process begins as the maize is grounded, then boiled. Once it is cooked, it is left to cool in a tightly woven bamboo mat. Then yeast is scattered over and stirred to mix up properly. It is then stored in a basket and wrapped with warm cloths to increase the temperature for a couple of days. When the liquid starts to ooze out of the container, it is sealed in polythene can or earthen pot and sealed until full maturation. It takes about three days during the summer and few months during the winter time to mature. People often drink *bangchang* on any occasion, but beer and factory made alcohol has pushed this drink out of fashion. If it is wheat, the grain is directly boiled for fermentation with the same process.

Ara

Ara (distilled alcohol) is a traditional beverage and a common drink in the country. *Bangchang* is boiled in a long cylindrical container called *ara-zang* placing an empty pot above the boiling mass supported by a wooden tripod. Another pot is place on top of the cylindrical container and sealed tight so that warm steam does not escape. The pot over the container is filled with cold water. This is to allow the steam inside to condense and drop into the pot which is the distilled alcohol. As the water warms up it is replaced with cold water again and again for a few times. Afterwards the pot on top is removed and the distilled liquid is taken out. The result is *ara*. In olden days people in the eastern Bhutan used *bokpi* from *fadi bodi*, *khalaktang*, *phantang* and *bozong* (all kind of yam grown wildy in the forest) instead of grains.

Ara is used for any occasion like it is offered as *dongchang* to guest, as *tsbogchang*, all of which are already explained in the Chapter 3.

Yeast

Yeast is called *phab* in Dzongkha and *pham* in Tshangla dialect. There are three wild plants locally known as *yangrim* that is used for making yeast. They are called *chong yang rim*, *ru yang rim*, and *bainang yang rim* in Tshangla dialect. While *chong yanrim* and *bainang yangrim* are plants, *ru yangrim* is a climber which is also known as *pham ru*. For making yeast, people use the leaves of *chong yangrim* and *bainang yangrim* while they use the bark of *ru yangrim*.

The leaves or bark is cut into small pieces and dried. It is then pounded into fine particles, sieved and then mixed with maize flour and rice husk which is finally prepared as *drengo* (described above in this section). When the dough is cooled, it is moulded into muffin like shape called *bae* (yeast ball). The old yeast is called *abi* which is crushed into powder and coated on the *bae*. The *bae* are then spread on a sheet and covered with cloth in a house and kept for 2 to 3 days depending on the temperature. The maturity of yeast will be indicated by the growth of white fungus on the *bae*. The cover is then removed and the *bae* is left to dry in the sun. When the yeast *bae* is thoroughly dried, it is then used for fermentation.





