

Mongol Life and Cuisine: A Glimpse into the Rich Culture of the Nomadic People

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Abstract

The lifestyle and cuisine of the people of Mongolia are unique, and heavily dependent on nature, their livestock, and their nomadic habits, as they wander and relocate from place to place, in search of food for themselves and pastures for their animals. The terrain is harsh, the atmosphere extreme, and hence their life is hard. But they have adapted to it, and their close relationship and reliance on nature provide for them. It also fosters an almost spiritual mindset that has been lost by civilization at large, under the impact of technology and industrialization. Their cuisine is heavily dependent on meat, and their unique methods of preparation, which results in rich and aromatic dishes, have won critical acclaim around the world in recent years. The vast plains and mountains of Central Asia are their habitat, and they have, till now, successfully shielded themselves from the onslaught of, so-called 'technological progress'. But even under such extreme conditions, they live happy and contented lives, carrying on their rich cultural traditions.

Keywords

Mongolia, cuisine, nomadic

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After a hard day at work, there is nothing like getting back home to some comfort food. Camel heart anyone? How about mutton fermented in a milk can? What's a nightmare for vegans and terrifies ever-hardcore carnivores, is a routine diet for the nomadic tribes living in the vast, mostly barren terrains of Mongolia.

Far removed from the greater civilization, in a landscape as rustic as possible, live the hut dwellers of Mongolia. Isolated, with limited resources, their way of life is a philosophy in

itself. And although they are peaceful and welcoming people, their cuisine is definitely not for the faint of heart.

With limited access to technology and fuel, they rely heavily on pack animals, such as horses, camels, and donkeys, for transportation and hunting. But when resources are this scarce, the animals, at the end of their productive lives, have to end up as dinner on the table.

Depending on the weather and the availability of food for themselves and their grazing herd, many tribes and families can move and relocate anywhere from 4 to 8 times a year. Here, life is hard, even brutal, for those habituated to the comforts of modern life and technology. But, in spite of their hardships, they are peace-loving folks, always with a smile on their face, and the elderly are calm, wise, and spiritual, and they would choose this life any day over that of a modern, claustrophobic, rat race in the concrete jungle of a metropolis. They are truly free, in mind, body, and spirit. They are one with nature, and nature provides. In fact, their deep affinity and reverence for nature are ingrained in their minds and culture. The vast grasslands, mountains, and rivers are sacred to them, fostering a spiritual connection.

Amidst these vast landscapes of unspoiled beauty that seem to stretch on forever, one might be tempted to think of them as simple people. And although this simplicity is woven into the very fabric of their lives and existence, they have a captivating history and a diverse cultural heritage.

Mongols are skilled horsemen, hunters, and animal breeders who help them navigate the vast steppes of Central Asia. These animals provide them sustenance as well as wealth, and nothing is wasted from whatever they can salvage from these animals and nature at large. From horse hair, sheep wool, and leather that are used in their colourful apparel, to even the animal bones that are carved to make intricate trinkets and jewellery, and even flutes and other musical instruments.

They live in portable tents, known as yurts. These are versatile structures made from felt and wood, and although they are sturdy enough to provide them shelter, they are light and easy to dismantle and set up again as they migrate with their herd in search of fresh pastures.

Even with this nomadic lifestyle, they always pay heed to their culture and never forgo the celebration of their festivities, especially Nadaam, the largest traditional Mongolian festival, with great vigor and excitement, and these traditions have been passed down through generations.



Image: Yurt

When it comes solely to cuisine, the variety that they can come up with, using the same limited ingredients, is both indigenous and ingenious. From preparations that are simple to mind-boggling, Mongol cuisine has now gained international recognition for its rich flavors and unique gastronomical experiences.

Meat and dairy form the backbone of the Mongol cuisine. The harsh climate and energetic lifestyle mean that they need a lot of calories, resulting in dishes that are hearty and filling. Meat from their livestock is often prepared through traditional methods like roasting, boiling, and drying. Dumplings, called "buuz," are a popular Mongolian staple, typically filled with ground meat, onions, and sometimes vegetables. They are often steamed or boiled.

But meat is also prepared in ways that are fantastic and unbelievable to those unaccustomed to it. Imagine this delicacy. The meat is slathered in whole and ground spices and put inside

leather bags. Then it is slung over horses, a bag on either side, so that it's compressed in between the horses and the riders' thighs. The meat is then put into pits dug into the ground in multiple layers with spices in between, covered, and smoked for a full day, resulting in mutton that's as succulent, tender, and aromatic as can be!

When it comes to dairy, they don't hold back either. Aaruul, dried curds made from yogurt or milk, is a snack often enjoyed during long journeys. It is not only delicious but also provides vital nutrients. Tarag, or sour cream, is used in cooking, as a spread, and even as a dipping sauce. Airag, a fermented mare's milk, is a traditional drink with great cultural importance that's enjoyed during festivities. Airag is prepared by cleaning the animal sac, adding in fermented milk and fresh horse milk, and churning it for at least three hours.

And now we enter truly bizarre territory. First, we have White Sausage from horses. It's made by taking fresh blood from horses and immediately stirred until the blood congeals. Then the congealed blood is removed, and the rest is still stirred continuously. The white liquid layer formed on top is separated. Seasoning salt, onions, and garlic is added in. The mixture is stuffed in horse intestines and boiled together with horse meat and other organs.

Next on the menu is Curd Soup. The stock soup from white sausages is used, along with the horse meat and organ mixture. It's finished off by adding in milk curd.

Finally, how about some Cow Meat Jelly? Cow feet are cut into pieces and boiled for a couple of hours. It's then seasoned with black peppers, cumin, salt, and bay leaves. Garlic, onions, carrots, and peppers are cooked separately. Then the carrots are added in first followed by the other ingredients. After another two hours, the cow feet are removed and added to a bowl. The meat & bones are separated. The meat is then chopped into small pieces and placed back into the stock. More vegetables are added in. The entire mixture is placed into a square tray and dressed up with spring onions. It is then left to rest for eight hours. Finally, it is ready to be served with sliced bread.

The Mongol Empire, under leaders like Genghis Khan, has had a profound impact on world history, and its legacy is still a source of pride for Mongols. During Genghis Khan's reign, he had the largest territory and the biggest and most fiercest army under his control and had

amassed a fabulous fortune, most of it in gold, precious gems, and jewellery. Legend has it that after his death, his innermost circle of bodyguards were dispatched to hide his treasure in a secret location. On their return, they were slaughtered by his other generals, who in turn were murdered by their own army, all to keep the location a secret. Even to this day, bounty hunters roam the plains of Mongolia, from Ulaanbaatar, to the arid Gobi desert, in search of the largest treasure the world has ever known.

Conclusion

Mongol culture is a rich tapestry of traditions, customs, and history, shaped by the unique environment and nomadic way of life in the heart of Central Asia, still continuing their age-old traditions, almost unassailed by technology or industrialization.

References

- Image from Pixabay



About the Author

Ms. Jayashree Bhattacharjee is a writer, lecturer, blogger and has worked as visiting faculty in the Regional Engineering College (REC), Durgapur, (presently NIT).

