

## **Bhutan: A Lesson in Self-reliance and Resilience**

**By**

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### **Abstract**

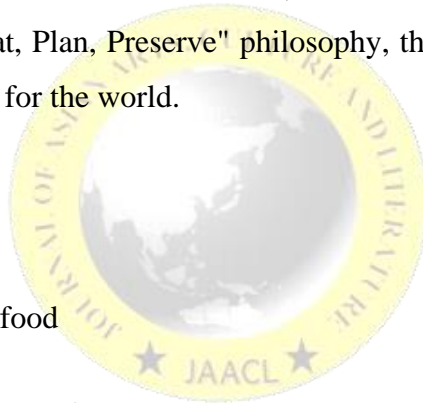
Nestled in the Himalayas, Bhutan faces a unique challenge – the challenge of food production. This article explores how Bhutanese culture has adapted, showcasing their traditional food preservation techniques, like sun-drying and smoking. These methods, alongside resourceful utilization of dairy and meat, ensure a steady food supply throughout the harsh winters. Despite modern advancements, these time-tested practices remain crucial. By examining Bhutan's "Eat, Plan, Preserve" philosophy, the article reveals valuable lessons in sustainable food security for the world.

### **Keyword**

Bhutan, nature, Bhutanese, food

### **A Look at Bhutanese Resourcefulness**

In Bhutan, the earthy houses with green roofs have a story to tell. A story of struggle, resilience and self-reliance. Belonging to the commoners, the colours of these houses blend with nature, making them subtle and attractive. These humble abodes are also decorated with streamers. Streamers of chillies, capsicums, ginger, oranges, garlic and so many more!





**Image 1: Colourful Streamers**

### **Challenges of Food Production in Bhutan**

Bhutan, a mountainous country, experiences winter at its extreme. The temperatures dip way below the minus making survival a skill amongst the Bhutanese. The harsh climate does not allow sufficient crops to be grown, thus leading to non-availability of produce. This has led to the pressure of self-reliance on the Bhutanese.

Also, for years, the country has remained isolated from the world because of its geographical location and the policies of the country. This land-locked country did not open up to International Trade till 1974. Till then there was no scope of any kind of imports. With such restrictions in place, it was imperative upon the people to make themselves sufficient in both quantity and quality.

It is also known to all that only 8% of the land is suitable for farming and only 3% of the land is cultivated. Majority of the rural masses live in remote areas, far away from an accessible roads.

Production happens in the rural areas where a percentage is kept for home consumption and the rest for sale in the local markets. But transportation is often a hassle for these people as they live in far-flung areas.

Bhutanese cuisine is well-known for the spices that are used but water is scarce and growing these crops on the mountainous terrain is a challenge.

Rapidly melting glaciers causing floods, erratic rains, landslides, erosion of soil and damages due to extreme weather like droughts and hailstorms have also dealt a major blow to production.

With climate change, temperatures have also gone up in the agricultural areas bringing in huge infestations of pests.

Covid-19 aggravated the situation further when the borders were closed and heavy restrictions imposed. It also led to rising production costs.

All these factors coupled together ensured that the Bhutanese devise ways and means to remain self-sufficient and maintain a steady supply of their produce throughout the year.

These simple folks have their age-old, tried and tested methods of preservation which always came in handy during the cold months.

### **Traditional Food Preservation Techniques: A Time-Tested Legacy**

A visit to the local markets reveals that the typical food culture of the Bhutanese comprises consumption of dried vegetables and meat. These are found in abundance in the weekend markets in Thimpu, or the local markets in any of the districts. They are available throughout the year.



**Image 2: Bustling market in Thimpu**

Summer season, which lasts only for a few months (mid-April to mid-September) is the ideal season for production of crops. But as production wanes with the end of season, every household gears up to preserve and dry the produce so that they last during the winter. During autumn, the green roofs of most houses are covered in a colourful array of vegetables. Chillies, cucumber, brinjal, capsicums, oranges, apples, ginger and whatever the household needs.

In the villages, every household grows fresh fruits and vegetables. The produce is then dried, thoroughly dehydrated and preserved for harsher days. Even the presence of the slightest moisture can cause decay and decomposition.

Open air sun drying is the most common method. The vegetables are laid out in a single layer on a dry surface. Some of the vegetables are blanched by immersing them for a few minutes in a pot of boiling water and then allowing them to dry in the sun.

Winters are usually very dry and cold except for the early morning frost and the occasional episodes of snow. Vegetables, cheese and meat are strung and then hung from their windows, roofs, doorways and even cloth lines to allow the moisture to escape completely.



**Image 3: Mounds of Cheese**

Smoking is another method of drying which not only wards insects away but also impart a distinct flavour. Meat items are usually smoked.

The old-fashioned process of food preservation is time-consuming and requires great deal of efforts.

### **Modernization and Preservation**

These days, other methods of preservation are also followed.

- Freezing the vegetables preserves the vitamins and nutrients that are usually lost during transportation.
- Fermentation of some vegetables creates lactic acid and makes it a probiotic which is good for health.
- Ventilation is very important to prolong the life of the vegetables.
- The Government has also built Cold Storage Facilities in different parts of the country to facilitate storage. But farmers haven't utilised them. Lack of awareness and experience in storing, distance of the facility from the local market, transportation costs to and from the facility and the fees payable for the usage of the facility are some of the reasons why these storage units are lying unutilised.

## Some Examples of Preservation

Dairy forms a significant portion of the Bhutanese diet as the elevation is conducive to the rearing of cows, yaks, sheep, and goats. As its very cold, consumption of dairy provides them with much-needed warmth and energy.

The locals can be seen chewing on something as they go about their day. That's a hard variety of cheese, known as 'chugo.' Popular in Bhutan, these are square, white pieces made from yak milk. They have the scent of milk. Its rubbery and hard. One can take almost thirty minutes to soften it. Every roadside shop has strings of Chugo hanging around.



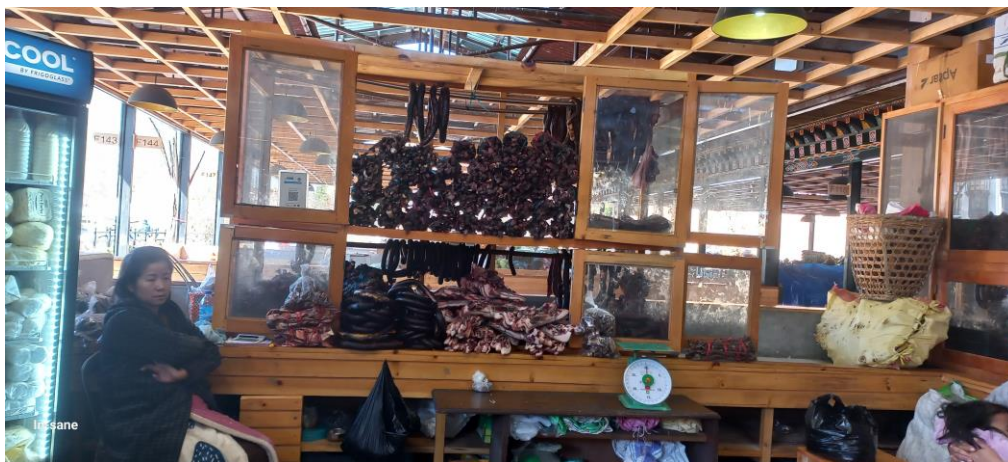
**Image 4: Chugo in the Roadside Stalls**

The other common vegetables that are dried are Chillies, Eggplant, Fiddlehead Fern, Turnip. Lom or dried turnip leaves which are used abundantly throughout the year.

Meat is also a part of the cuisine and needs to be cut into strips and dried effectively so that it can last for a while when the supply is low.



**Image 5: Dried Ginger**



**Image 6: Dried Meat Market**



**Image 7: Dried vegetables hanging from the windows**

Hence, the Bhutanese have shown to all that preservation of vegetables is also an art.

## **Conclusion**

The Bhutanese Food Culture is simple! The guiding principle for their cuisine is EAT. PLAN. PRESERVE. They eat what is ruling the season. They eat what they preserved last season. They plan what to eat next season.

Simple and minimalistic, this is a lesson for the other cultures to pick up.

## **About the Author**

Sreemati Sen holds a Masters in Social Work from Shantiniketan. A Development Professional, she has specialized in Psychiatric Care of Differently-abled children. Years of experience in Social and Consumer Research are also a part of her portfolio. Her stories have been featured in various anthologies. She made it to the Top Fifty Indian Horror Writers Contest organized by Half-Baked Beans. She was the second runner up for the Asian Literary Society's Wordsmith Award, 2020, 2021 and 2022 for the Short Stories segment and a winner in 2023. She has also won the Orange Flower Award, organized by Women's Web for her blogs in 2021, 2022 and 2023. She also won Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity in 2023 for her blog.

Writing for her, is Catharsis. It is the magic pill that has helped her cope with the various challenges that life has thrown her way.



