

KASHMIR

INTRODUCTION

The history of modern Kashmiri cuisine can be traced back to the **fifteenth century invasion of India by Timur**, and the migration of 1700 skilled woodcarvers, weavers, architects, calligraphers and cooks from Samarkand to the valley of Kashmir. The descendants of these cooks, the **Wazas**, are the master chefs of Kashmir. The *ancient epic of Kashmir*, namely the **Nilmatapurana** informs us that Kashmiris were heavy meat eaters. This habit persists in today's Kashmir.

Kashmiri cuisine has evolved over hundreds of years. The first major influence was the food of the **Kashmiri Buddhists and Pandits, the Hindus of the valley**. The cuisine was then influenced by the cultures which arrived with the invasion of Kashmir by Timur from the region of modern Uzbekistan. Subsequently, it has been strongly influenced by the cuisines of **Central Asian, Persia, and the North Indian plains**.

Kashmiris are hospitable by nature. They enjoy social life and mutual entertainment. This has been one main cause of the development of their culinary art. Different types of menus were also inspired by the cuisines of different rulers and visitors, who came in the past from **Persia, Afghanistan and other places**. **Mughals especially had a great influence on the cooking of Meat Dishes and different Puloas**. **Emperors Jahangir and Shahjahan, with their lovely queens, their courtiers and kith and kin, made Kashmir their health resort and a place of sport, enjoyment, eating and drinking**. Shahjahan used to visit Kashmir every summer and called it a Paradise on Earth. Jahangir's last wish, at his death, was 'Kashmir and Nothing else'.

Its salubrious climate, unrivalled and picturesque natural scenery, its invigorating, digestive, sweet and crystal-clear waters of springs and abounding streams, its beautiful lakes, majestic Pine and Deodar forests, and snow capped mountains, its breezy summers, flaming and blazing colourful and breathtaking autumns, the cool and calm grandeur of its winter snows, followed by charming flower-laden fragrant springs, all have made Kashmir a gourmet's heaven. Here amongst these blessing of Mother Nature, enjoying good and delicious spicy food, is a delighting desire of men, women and children alike.

CULINARY VARIATION IN KASHMIR:

The food of Jammu and Kashmir differs from region to region with the **Hindus Dogras of Jammu** being predominantly vegetarian; eat a staple diet of rice, wheat and beans. The **Ladakhis eat rice, wheat, millet, locally produced vegetables and fruits, goat meat and dairy products made from yak milk**. Kashmiri food is characterised by its vast array of dishes cooked over a long period of time in exotic spices. The seasons and availability of fresh produce dictates the ingredients, some of which are dried and used in the winter months. **The Kashmiri cuisine is essentially meat-based while the eating habits of the Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris differ in its use of certain spices and the prohibition of beef for the Hindus**.

There is another aspect to the food habits of the Kashmiri Hindus referred to as **pandits**. The Kashmiri pandits though Brahmans have been meat eaters since the Vedic times, more so because the snowbound areas of the valley make it very difficult to cultivate the food. **Pandits eat only lamb meat, usually cut into large pieces or chunks. Beef, pork, chicken are prohibited for them**. The two most important saints of Kashmir, Lalleshwari and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali were vegetarians for spiritual reasons. Nevertheless, meat is often cooked in many Kashmiri Pandit festivals.

Some sample Kashmiri Pandit dishes include:

- Rogan Josh (lamb cooked in red sauce)
- Yakhni (lamb cooked in curd based sauce)
- Matschgand (minced lamb)
- Goshtaba (extra-minced meat balls cooked in creamy sauce)
- Qabargaah (Kashmiri Muslims refer to this as Tabakhmaaz; It is similar to Roasted Lamb)
- Syoon Pulaav (Meat Pulao)
- Modur Pulaav (Sweet Pulao, usually as a dessert)

- Lyodoor Tschaman (Cottage Cheese cooked in turmeric based sauce)
- Dum Oluv (Whole Potatoes cooked in Red Sauce)
- Muj Gaad (Fish with Radish)
- Nadir-Waangan (lotus stems with Brinjal)
- Nadir-Haaq/Gogji/Monji (lotus stems cooked with Spinach or Radish)
- Raazma-Gogji (Kidney Beans with Radish)

The highlight of Kashmiri cuisine is the formal banquet called "**wazawan**" that includes a spread of over 36 courses cooked all night long by a team of chefs called 'wazas' under the supervision of a '**Vasta waza' or master chef, descendants of the cooks from Samarkand**. The food is characterised by thick gravies using liberal quantities of yoghurt, spices and dried fruits, and is usually cooked in ghee (clarified butter) or mustard oil. Saffron, the most expensive spice in the world, is grown locally. It is used extensively to flavour the pulaos (rice dish) and sweets. The popular dishes include the starter yakni, tabaq naat made of fried ribs, dum aloo (steam cooked potato curry), rogan josh made with mutton, gushtaba, a meatball curry and haleem made from meat and pounded wheat.

The essential Wazwan dishes include:

- Safed kokur or zafraan kokur
- Meth maaze
- Ristae
- Rogan josh
- Dhani phul
- Aloo bukhaar: chutney made with fresh plums, onions, sugar, lime juice and spices
- Gaade kufta
- Tabak maaz: Fried lamb ribs
- Daniwal korma: lamb in a yogurt-based gravy
- Aab gosht: Lamb curry cooked in milk
- Marcha-wangan korma
- Sheekh kabab: spicy ground lamb on skewers
- Gushtaab: Chopped lamb with spices cooked in oil, milk and curds
- Kebabs

A KASHMIRI KITCHEN

On normal days, the cooking, in both Hindu and Muslim homes, is mostly done on a **Dan**. A big dinner, called a **Sal, or a Wazawan**, is still cooked in a **Vurabal** which is an open-air kitchen. The fire-place, for this sort of cooking, is called a **Vura**. It is about 10' to 15' in length. In the shape of an above-ground drain, with air holes on both sides, it is built with bricks or stones. Fire-wood is used as fuel. Heat of such fires is very easily regulated for mass cooking. It is very convenient for deep and slow frying in **big iron Cauldrons called 'Kadhais'**, as well as, for slow cooking and simmering, in **earthenware pots** especially. Here also the contents in cooking vessels, are conveniently watched and stirred with **different types of wooden or metallic ladles**. Such low-level **Vura** also facilitates the time to time addition of ingredients. Generally, an hour or so before serving most of the Dishes, the cooking vessels are removed from the **Vura** and are kept on charcoal or dry cowdung slow fires, for maturing of flavours and arriving at the right consistency of gravy, and also the desired 'texture'.

Among Kashmiri Pandits cooking of most Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Dishes, is done mostly in pots made of baked clay. The pot is called **a Deg, a Degul or a Leij** according to its shape and size. Muslims cook generally in **tinned copper pots**.

A brief on the Kashmiri cooking utensils:

- **Dan:** On normal days the cooking in both Hindu and Muslim homes is mostly done on a dan, which is an oblong clay oven about 3ft by 2ft in length and a foot and a half in height. It has a floor level hole, through which firewood is fed, and has usually three holes on the top on which food in different pots is heated or cooked. Nowadays, due to scarcity of wood fuel, LPG and kerosene stoves are commonly used.
- **Trami:** These are large brass plates used for serving food. A trami could be shared between four people in the event of feasts.

- **Leij / Degul / Digcha:** Among the Kashmiri pundits, most vegetarian and non – vegetarian dishes are cooked in pots made up of baked clay. The pot is called **a Deg, a Degul or a Leij** according to its shape and size. Cooking in these pots gives the Meat, Cheese, Vegetable and other Dishes a special aroma. Caking at the bottom of pots, and acidic and alkaline reactions with metals, are also thus eliminated. Pots used in Kashmir are generally round bottomed, to make stirring and turning of the contents easy, while cooking, and also while mixing Spices and Condiments, which are called Masala.
- **Goshpar and kaen:** These are a flat course stone and a wooden mallet made out of walnut wood which are used for pounding meat to affine texture, generally used for making Goshtabas and Rishtas. The wooden mallet is made up of walnut wood so that it does not splinter when it hits the stone.
- **Krech:** These are different kinds of wooden spoons and ladles used for turning the food in clay pots so that the base of the pots does not get scrapped.
- **Khalur and dula:** This is a stone mortar and a wooden pestle used for grinding chutneys and pastes.
- **Samovar:** This is a jug – shaped metallic pitcher used for brewing tea such as ‘kahwah’ and sheer chai. It has a long tube inside that is filled with charcoal, which keeps the tea in the pot brewing.

Kashmiri names of other Kitchen Implements

1. 'Athataech' - Cloth for wiyng hands etc.
2. 'Bothlai' and 'Chhegla'- Pots for cooking rice etc.
3. 'Chalan' and 'Raemb' - Broad spatulas.
4. 'Chhan' - Colander or strainer.
5. 'Chhonp' - Churning stick.
6. 'Chonchi' and 'Krechh'- Ladles.
7. 'Chumta' and 'Sanaes'- Tongs for holding hot things and lifting hot pots.
8. 'Dakna'- Lids.
9. 'Damchula' - Iron charcoal stove.
10. 'Dul' and 'Kond' - Metallic and deep wash basins.
11. 'Hahkol' - Clay charcoal stove.
12. 'Kafgir' - Perforated ladle.
13. 'Kray' - Cauldron.
14. 'Krochh' - Fire spoon.
15. 'Taev' - Iron griddle.
16. 'Masala' Vatur' - Box for keeping spices.
17. 'Mujikond'- Grater.
18. 'Sikh' - Skewer.
19. 'Tilavar' and 'Kronid' - Edible oil pot and its ladle.
20. 'Voakhul' and 'Kajivadh' - Stone mortar and pestle.

CUISINE CHARACTERISTICS OF KASHMIR

Throughout the history like its culture, Kashmir cuisine has stood high and unrivalled by any other state in India.

- *Kashmiri rice* forms an important part of the traditional food of Kashmir, striking a balance with the spicy Kashmiri dishes. Rice is in fact the main staple. It is consumed in many forms such as *zarda pulao* as dessert to *barian* for breakfast.
- Non-veg, consisting of mutton, chicken, fish, etc forms an important part of Kashmiri cuisine. The routine cooking in Kashmir is a combination of non-veg and vegetables in the same dish.
- A gourmet's delight, *Wazwan* is the ultimate name in Kashmir banquet. This royal cuisine of Kashmir has been influenced by Iranian, Afghan and Central Asian styles of cooking, despite which it has been able to create an identity of its own.
- Non-vegetarian dishes consist of an important part of not only the diet of a Kashmiri, rather a banquet (*wazwan*) also.
- The breads of Kashmir have an influence of *Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East*.
- Lamb is widely used in the *wazwan* and the cuisine in general. Specific parts of lamb are used to prepare specific dishes. Example, the neck is used for *roganjosh*, ribs are used for *tabac maaz* and *kabargah*, the leg is used for *dhaniwal* and *rishta* etc.

- Another method of preparation is to pound the flesh that is carved out of the animal to achieve a very fine texture by breaking the tissues.
- Curd plays an important role in the cuisine and it is used in almost all meat dishes
- Mustard oil is used as the cooking media.
- The use of onion though not used in the Kashmiri Pandit cuisine but very popularly used in the Kashmiri Muslim cuisine.
- *Asafoetida*, better known as heing is very popularly used in the cuisine by the Pandits for tempering the food. The other spices commonly used include *saunth or dried ginger* and *saunf powder*. Kashmir cuisine is quite famous for the gracious use of spices like *cinnamon, cardamom, cloves*, etc. Spices used in Kashmiri cuisines give special taste and aroma to the food.
- *Saffron* is a very commonly used flavouring agent in this cuisine. Apart from this pollen, *Bauhinia flowers (Kachnaar)*, *Cock's comb flower (Mowal)* etc is colour and food ingredient.
- Kashmiris dry most of their vegetables (*sheengri*) in the summer so as to preserve them from the harsh and cold winters when the fresh vegetables are scarce.
- Another spice mix commonly used in this cuisine is *VER PASTE* (Dry roast 1/2 kg dried Kashmiri red chillies, 25 gm black cardamom, 1/2 tbsp. black cumin seeds, 1/2 tbsp. green cardamom seeds, 1/2 tbsp. cinnamon powder, 1/2 tbsp dry ginger powder. This is cooled and ground to a fine powder. About 125 gm shallots - *praan* and 125 gm garlic is taken and ground to a coarse paste, add to the above powder and shape into patty cakes with a hole in the middle, to pass a thin rope, dry cakes in the sun till no moisture is left.)
- Kashmiris eat a lot of green leafy vegetables during summers. The saag, as they call them, include *Haaq, Sauchal, Kashmiri Palak, Wastahaaq* and many more.
- *Lotus stem or Nadroo* is a very popular vegetable in Kashmir, which is grown in the shallow waters of Dal and Wular lakes. It is extensively used by the Kashmiri pundits during festivals and in daily cooking as well.
- There is no prominence of desserts in the Kashmiri cuisine.

SERVICE AND MODE OF EATING:

In Kashmir it is said that the food should both taste and look good. Its aroma must be appetizing. Success of a meal lies in its appeal to the eyes, nose and then the tongue.

In big Kashmiri dinners, where a hundred to five hundred people are usually invited, on the occasion of weddings and festivals etc., the food is served to the guests who are seated on carpeted floors, which are sometimes covered with *Chandanis* (White Sheets). These dinners are served in big halls, or under decorated *Shamiyane* (Canopies), which are well illuminated, and air conditioned, if necessary, by means of fans or stoves or electric heaters, according to the needs of the season.

The meal begins with a ritual washing of hands at a basin called the *tash-t-nari* (These are a portable hand washbasin and a pitcher that are passed around to wash hands during big banquets) which is taken around by attendants. Then the *tramis* arrive, heaped with rice, quartered by four seekh kababs and contains four pieces of methi korma, one tabak maaz, one safed murg, one zafrani murg, and the first few courses. Curd and chutney are served separately in small earthen pots. As each trami is completed, it is removed, and a new one brought in, until the dinner has run its course. Seven dishes are a must for these occasions-- *Rista, Rogan Josh, Tabak Maaz, Daniwal Korma, Aab Gosht, Marchwangan Korma and Gushtaba*. The meal ends with the *Gushtaba*.

Eating with right hand fingers and thumb is common. Service is usually done by cooks, friends and family members. To relish the Dishes individually, and make the cuisine an enjoyable one, different preparations are not mixed while eating, and *service is done in a somewhat course-wise style. Thereby each Dish, with its particular flavour and delicacy, is relished and appreciated separately at a time.*

Wines and liqueurs are rarely served in dinners. Instead, Green condimented Tea without milk, is served generally after and even before a dinner.

Modur Pulow, a sweet 'Basmati' rice Pulow cooked in clarified butter (Ghee), milk and water, along with dry fruits, saffron, spices and other condiments, is a favourite dessert of Kashmiri Pandits. Khir, Halwa, Firni, Fruit stews and Custards etc., are also served as desserts. In hot weather, Kulfi, Ice-creams or some other sweets are also prevalent nowadays.

To round off, a dinner or a feast, a condimented and scented Betel leaf (Pan) is always welcome *Tambul*, as it is called in Sanskrit, is always offered even to Deities in Puja etc. Of course it is the relisher and the appreciator of good food preparations, who, as a guest, lends colour to a good feast. Usually, once a person joins a good Kashmiri feast, he or she never forgets it.

A SPECIAL NOTE: KASHMIRI WAZWAN

Kashmir, the land of fruits and nuts is also famous for its well known for flavoursome Kashmiri Cuisines, more for the non-vegetarian dishes. Traditional Kashmiri form of cooking is known as 'Wazwan' and consists of mostly non-vegetarian dishes. Kashmir serves the choicest selection of vegetarian and non vegetarian food in multiple flavours to suit every pocket.

The history of Kashmir's traditional cuisine, Wazwan, dates back to the last years of the 14th century when the Mongol ruler Timur invaded India in 1348 during the reign of Nasiruddin Muhammad of the Tughlaq dynasty. As a result, there took place a migration of trained weavers, woodcarvers, architects, calligraphers and cooks from Samarkand to the Kashmir valley. The descendants of these cooks came to be known as "Wazas", who are the master chefs of Kashmir.

Wazwan, a multi-course meal in the Kashmiri Muslim tradition, is treated with great respect. Its preparation is considered an art. Almost all the dishes are meat-based (lamb, chicken, fish). Beef is generally not prepared in the Srinagar region, but is popular among the other districts. It is considered a sacrilege to serve any dishes based around pulses or lentils during this feast. The traditional number of courses for the *wazwan is thirty-six*, though there can be fewer. The preparation is traditionally done by a *vasta waza, or head chef*, with the assistance of a court of wazas, or chefs.

Wazwan is regarded by the Kashmiri Muslims as a core element of their culture and identity. The Kashmiris usually eat on the floor. A white cloth called *dastarkhwan* is spread on the floor. Guests are grouped into fours for the serving of the wazwan. The meal begins with a ritual washing of hands, as a jug and basin called the tash-t-nari are passed among the guests. A large serving dish (*Tamri*) piled high with heaps of rice, decorated and quartered by four seekh kababs, four pieces of meth maaz, two tabak maaz, sides of barbecued ribs, and one safed kokur, one zafrani kokur, along with other dishes. The meal is accompanied by yoghurt garnished with Kashmiri saffron, salads, Kashmiri pickles and dips. Kashmiri Wazwan is generally prepared in marriages and other special functions. The culinary art is learnt through heredity and is rarely passed to outside blood relations. That has made certain waza/cook families very prominent. The wazas remain in great demand during the marriage season (May - October).

Considered a sign of extravagant hospitality, non-vegetarian dishes dominate in a wazwan. A typical wazwan meal consists of not more than one or two vegetarian dishes. Kashmir cuisine does not pay much attention to sweets. Instead, an important part of the meal is Kahwah or green tea, used to wash down a meal. Traditionally, food in Kashmir was eaten by hands, without any spoons, forks or knives. All this makes 'wazwan' a spectacular and royal repast. Seven dishes typically form an inseparable part of the feast - *tabakh maaz, rogan josh, rista, aab gosh, dhaniwal korma, marchwagan korma and ghustaba. Firin and kahwah (green tea)* conjure delicacies that are rich in taste and texture with mouth-watering aromas.

DESCRIPTION OF SOME POPULAR KASHMIRI ITEMS:

- **Rishta:** this is a very famous dish from Kashmir served traditionally as a course in the wazwan. This is prepared by poaching the lamb dumplings in a rich red gravy, flavoured with saffron and an extract of *mowal*. For preparing the dumplings, the meat is taken only from the leg of lamb. Traditionally in Kashmir, the animal is slaughtered and the meat is carved out fresh from the carcass and then minced. The lamb fat is mixed with this lamb mince. The red gravy is flavoured with different spices such as red chilli powder, fennel powder, cloves, ginger powder, cinnamon, asafoetida.
- **Gushtaba:** This dish is made with lamb, freshly pounded to a paste. The boneless cubes of mutton are beaten along with lamb fat with a wooden mallet on a coarse stone so that the fibres break down, yielding a paste of meat. This meat gives the texture of a sausage on cooking. It is then flavoured with the black cardamom seeds (*big elichi*), fennel and black pepper corns, ginger powder etc. The gravy is made by combining yoghurt, ghee, salt and other Kashmiri spices. The gushtabas are poached in the gravy until they are spongy and tender.

- ***Dhaniwal korma***: This is a rich preparation of lamb in a yoghurt based gravy. The meat is taken from the leg of lamb. The preparation of the gravy is started from pure ghee to which garlic paste, cloves and green cardamom etc are added. The gravy is finished by adding yoghurt, little turmeric and coriander powder and served garnished with coriander leaves.
- ***Tabac Maaz***: This is a lamb preparation in which the meat is taken from the ribs of lamb. The lamb ribs are boiled in a mixture of milk and water with aniseed powder, ginger, turmeric, asafoetida and cinnamon powder till the meat absorbs all the water. After that, the meat is taken out, cut into pieces, and then pan – fried in hot ghee flavoured with cardamom, fennel and cinnamon. The pieces of meat are fried till they are crisp and golden brown in colour.
- ***Aab gosht***: for preparing this dish, the lamb is cut in serving portions and boiled in water along with aniseed powder, ginger, garlic and salt till tender. Then the gravy is separately made by cooking fried onion paste in ghee with the addition of black pepper powder and reduced milk. The milk has to be reduced with green cardamom so that the cardamom flavour is completely infused in the milk. Later the dish has to be finished with the addition of lamb stock.
- ***Kabargah***:
- ***Yakhni***: Boneless pieces of lamb (boti) along with boned pieces of lamb are stewed in yoghurt based gravy flavoured with fennel, cardamom and dried ginger powder to make yakhni. It is basically a thin gravy which is normally relished with rice. A vegetable variation can also be made with this and a common one is *nadroo yakhni*.
- ***Roganjosh***: (*rogan*: oil; *josh*: hot) Lamb culled out from the shoulder is simmered in a gravy made from mustard oil, yoghurt, red coloured water from cock's comb flowers, brown onion paste, and spices such as kanel and cardamom. Ratanjog, the bark of a tree is utilized to bring the fiery red colour. Kashmiri spice mix called *ver* is also added to the dish for flavouring.
- ***Rwangan tsaman***: Cottage cheese known as *tsaman* is commonly eaten in Kashmir in many variations. It is sometimes cooked with fresh fenugreek leaves and is called *methi tsaman*. *Rwangan* refers to tomatoes and this preparation calls for stewing cottage cheese in tomato gravy flavoured with *ver* and other spices.
- ***Kashmiri aloo dum***: in this preparation medium sized potatoes are first lightly boiled in salt water followed by frying in mustard oil till crisp on the outer side. It is customary to sprinkle asafoetida water on top of the potatoes while frying. These are then cooked in a yoghurt based gravy flavoured with the Kashmiri red chilli paste, brown onion etc. This is then put on *dum* until the oil starts to float on the top.
- ***Tsaman pulao / Kashmiri pulao***: It is a rice preparation in which the rice is cooked to three – fourth doneness with whole hot spices. The rice is cooked completely in milk and finished on *dum* with raisins, almonds, cumin tempered with ghee, fried paneer and peas. It is then flavoured with saffron and kewra. This can also be enriched with more nuts and glace cherries, when it is also referred to as Kashmiri pulao.

KASHMIRI BEVERAGES

- ***Noon Chai***: Kashmiris are heavy tea drinkers. The most popular drink is a pinkish colored salted tea called "noon chai." It is made with green tea, milk, salt and bicarbonate of soda. The particular color of the tea is a result of its unique method of preparation and the addition of soda. This salted tea is very much like the salted tea prevalent in various parts of India. Noon chai is a common breakfast tea in Kashmiri households and is taken with breads like baqerkhani brought fresh from the *Sufi*, or bakers. Often, this tea is served in a large Samovars.
- ***Kahwah / Kehwa***: At marriage feasts, festivals, and religious places, it is customary to serve Kahwah, or Qahwah (originates from a 14th century Arab coffee, which, in turn, was named after an ancient beverage of the Sufis) - a ***green tea*** made with saffron, spices, and almonds or walnuts. Over 20 varieties of Kahwah are prepared in different households. Some people also put milk in kahwah (half milk + half kahwah).
- Traditionally, Kahwah or Kehwa is prepared in a brass kettle known as a samovar. A samovar consists of a "fire-container" running as a central cavity, in which live coals are placed keeping the tea perpetually hot. Around the fire-container there is a space for water to boil and the tea leaves and other ingredients are mixed with the water for a perfect blend. Kehwa may also be made in normal pans and vessels, as modern day urban living may not always permit the use of elaborate samovars (or samovars, as they are popularly called in Kashmir)

