

CULINARY ART OF KASHMIR

INTRODUCTION

There is no life without Food. Out of the greatest urges of life, 'Hunger' constitutes the main urge. Hindūs give a place of Divinity to 'Hunger'. 'Yā Devī Sarvbhūteshu Kshuaḍhā Rūpenā Sams-thetā Namastasyai Namastasyai Namastasyai Namōnamāh,' - Salutations to Divine Mother Who resideth in all beings as 'Hunger'.

In Islām 'Razāq' - the Provider of Food, is one of the qualifying names of Almighty God.

In almost all religions, before partaking of food or drink, its consecration, by offering it to God, Deities, etc., is done in the form of 'Āhuṭi', 'Qurbān', 'Saḍaqā', 'Nazar', Feeding of Poor, Invalids and Lepers etc., and thus emphasizing the sanctity and essentiality of these practices. Even feeding of animals, birds and insects etc. - 'Bhūṭā Yagnā' - is a daily routine for some, or is performed on auspicious occasions.

The 'Sense of Taste', by means of 'Taste Buds', discriminates the six tastes ('Shathras') - Sweet ('Maḍhurā'), Saltish, ('Lavanā'), Sour ('Āmlā'), Astringent ('Kāshayā'), Bitter ('Tiktā'), and Hot ('Katu'), - while the 'Sense of Smell', actually 'relishes' the innumerable flavours of food products etc., through the agency of 'Smell Buds'. Of all the senses these two are the great 'Weaknesses' of living beings. From these 'Pleasant weaknesses', has emerged the 'Art of Culinary Preparations', in order to make food appetizing and also tickle and gratify our palates, and thus satisfy the "Great Urge".

Thus feeding forms the main instrument of social entertainment and the best form of expression of love and regard. To win the love and favour of her to-be-husband, the mother of the to-be-bridle, instructs her to pay the greatest attention to the proper preparation and presentation of his meals. Even the 'Shāstrās' emphasize this 'sacred act'.

Kashmīrīs 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 'Pulāvs'. Emperors Jehāngīr and Shāhjihān, with their lovely queens, their courtiers and kith and kin, made Kashmir their health resort and a place of sport, enjoyment, eating and drinking. Shāhjihān used to visit Kashmir every summer and called it a 'Paradise on Earth'. Jehāngīr's last wish, at his death, was 'Kashmīr and Nothing else'.

Its salubrious climate, unrivalled and picturesque natural scenery, its invigorating, digestive, sweet and crystal-clear waters of springs and abundant streams, its beautiful lakes, majestic Pine and Deoḍār 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.

Outdoor picnics, luncheons and dinners, in big and small comfortable boats, (House Boats, 'Dūngās' & 'Shikārās'), plying on the famous Dal lake, are common. Parties of people of every class are seen enjoying hearty meals, 'Qehvā', 'Shier Chāy', cookies and sweets, according to their means. The spicy aroma of food, being cooked in the small kitchens, provided in the bigger boats, permeates the air. Strains of soothing 'Sūfiyānā' music to the, accompaniment of 'Sitar', 'Sāz', and 'Ḍukra' ('Ṭablā'), or sound of exciting choral 'Chhakri' -lyrical songs, with 'Nuot', 'Ṭambaknār' & 'Roāni' beating time and 'Sārangi' playing to the tune, come from some of the boats, all heading slowly towards the 'Mugal' and other gardens, 'Chinār' groves, Shrines and springs situated here and there, on or near the shores of the lake. Fields of lotuses and water-

lilies bloom on the outskirts of the lake, and the surrounding hills are mirrored in its clear water.

The eyes feast on similar cheerful boating scenes on the 'Mānasbal', 'Āṅchār' and 'Wullar' lakes. Wullar is perhaps the largest fresh-water lake of Asia. Sweet damsels steering at one end of tiny and light boats, with fishermen holding aiming spears in their right hands, and standing with eyes fixed on the water, at the other end of the boats, ready to strike at an underwater swimming fish, are lovely sights seen here and there. The alert and almost naked bodies of these fishermen, along with the boats, and the paddling damsels, are clearly reflected on the calm surface of the lake. These constitute picturesque scenes for a Camera-man especially. The fishermen, now and then, bring their boats close to the boats of the excursionists to sell their fresh catch, which forms a welcome addition to the menus of these holidaying people. Fresh Fruits, Vegetables, Lotus Roots ('Naḍier') and Lotus-seed tori ('Pambálokhar'), or even groceries, are vended by mobile shops in boats ('Shikārās').

Outings are usual to hundreds of other scenic places, spread all over the valley. These places are mostly maintained by Government and Public Bodies. These well-kept places include Public gardens, with blooming colourful beds of flowers of the season, lush green lawns and beautiful cascades. Some have fountains playing therein and also have sheltered picnic spots. Between mountains or hills there are small beautiful valleys, meadows and glens, through which clear ice-cold rivers and streams rush, playing music on boulder laden beds. Fishing of Brown and Rainbow Trout and also 'Mahásōl', is an additional attraction for excursion to these places.

Almond orchards burst out into ravishing profusion of pink blooms early in the spring, even before the foliage reappears on their branches, denuded in the previous winter. These turn into eagerly-awaited picnic spots. In autumn the late-night full-moon dinner-parties are held by many people around the blooming, fragrant 'Saffron' fields of 'Pāmpōr'. Even in very cold winter, dinners, with

'Sūfiyānā' and other musical entertainments are held in 'Hammām' halls.

The 'common factor' of all these pleasure trips, is to enjoy good and special food, off the routine, in the sweet company of family members, friends, kith and kin in these beautiful surroundings. In fact food is an integral part of every Kashmīrī conversation.

Kashmīr is also a valley of fruits. Fruit trees, growing on higher altitudes, and their orchards, are found every where. Hundreds of varieties of delicious, both sweet and tart Apples, juicy Pears, including famous 'Nākh' and 'Bagogāshā' varieties, luscious Apricots, Plums, Peaches and Cherries, are produced in abundance. Many kinds of Cherries, along with very good varieties of Walnuts and Almonds are a speciality of Kashmīr. Apart from being a great tourist attraction, for Kashmīr, fruits are a major item of export and a source of income of the State.

Among other fruits, yellow and red Crab-apples, Loquats, Chestnuts, Nectarines, Quinces, Grapes, Mulberries of both 'Alba' and luscious Black-Royal varieties, Strawberries, Cranberries, Raspberries, Black-Berries and many other wild-grown Berries are there. Fruits, naturally, form a good part of Kashmīrī diet. Here many fruits are also cooked and turned into delectable dishes. Many fruits are also preserved by canning or by pickling.

Huge quantities of Water-Chestnuts (H-'Singhādē') are a main produce of Kashmīr's 'Wullar' lake. Musk and Water Melons, Cucumbers and almost all varieties of fruit, tuber, root and leafy vegetables are grown abundantly.

Enough Cereals, Legumes and Oil-seeds are produced in the valley, to feed its people and a large number of tourists etc. as well. Plenty of local Fishes, Poultry, Sheep and Goat, Game birds and animals, Ducks and Geese, all cater to the needs of Kashmīrīs, who are mostly non-vegetarian, and also to those of the visitors and outsiders. Eggs, Milk-products and Honey are freely available. Miss Pirie in her book 'Kashmir', has rightly called it as 'a place where one might live and die content'!

NOTE: 'Nuot', 'Roāū', 'Ṭambaknār', 'Sāz', 'Seṭār' ('Siṭār'), 'Sārang' and 'Ḍukra' ('Ṭablā') are Kashmīrī musical instruments. 'Rabāb', 'Sanjūr', 'Soamai', 'Dumdumá', 'Dhōlak', 'Ṭambūrā', 'Chumta' and 'Harmonium' are other instruments played usually.