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TASTE OF NEPAL

Jyoti Pathak

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The cuisines of the roof of the world — eastern Afghanistan, eastern Pakistan, the Punjab, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan — are as distinct from each other as the great cuisines of Europe, and they're all terrific. But dishes from these countries aren't easy to find in most restaurants, and recipes on the net are sparse. This is a pity, because good Afghani, Tibetan or Nepali food will truly expand your culinary horizons.

I was introduced to Nepali food when [Adri](#), fresh from a trip to Kathmandu, sat down with me in my kitchen and we tried to figure out how to make *dal bhaat* that tasted real. At that time, I had never been able to find a Nepali cookbook in English, still less a comprehensive one. Today, happily, that lack is remedied with Jyoti Pathak's *Taste of Nepal*, which is a pleasure to read, a joy to cook from, and as authentic as could be.

The book begins with a section on snacks and appetizers, which are a national tradition in Nepal — partly because Nepalis eat two meals a day and fill the interim with enthusiastic snacking, and partly because local hospitality demands that any visitor, even a surprise visitor, be welcomed with food ready on the spot. Nepali snacks (*khaajaa*) somewhat resemble Indian *chaat*, except that they're tastier, more adventurous, and often more complicated; many of them involve *cheura*, or pressed rice flakes, a Nepali nibbling staple.

Nepali cooking offers a wide variety of carbs, and meticulous attention is paid to rice, to *dal* (beans, lentils, and peas), and to bread (*roti*); there are over a dozen bread recipes in this book, some quite exotic. Vegetable recipes, meanwhile, draw from far-flung sources, so that some here seem almost Chinese, some Indian, and some Pacific.

In Nepal, as the author says, “meat is a high status food and does not feature frequently in the regular diet of most people,” so the majority of meat recipes here are for banquet dishes, with long lists of ingredients and complex preparations. Many call for goat, the staple meat of Nepal. There are also recipes for lamb, pork, and venison, but not for beef, since most Nepalis are of the Hindu faith and avoid beef for religious reasons.

Many of the poultry dishes here, including tandoori chicken, seem very Indian, but the recipes for Cornish hen, turkey, quail, and pheasant are far off that beaten path. Again, many of these dishes are meant for holidays and festivals, but for the right occasions, elaborate preparation would be worth it.

Fish is popular in Nepal because it signifies good luck, prosperity, and happiness. Ocean fish is not available; fish is line-caught from Himalayan rivers and either prepared as fresh as possible, or smoked or dried for storage. Preparations here are simple and are mostly fish fries or curries.

Momo (dumplings) may have originated in Tibet but are wildly popular in all Himalayan countries, and a real delicacy. Filled with chicken, lamb, pork, or mixed vegetables, these are bigger, juicier, and more substantial than either Chinese wonton or Korean-Japanese *gyoza*. Usually they are steamed, but they can also be sautéed like potstickers.

The section on salads, chutneys, and pickles is worth the price of the book, and rather than go into tedious detail, I'll give one recipe here:

NO-COOK TOMATO CHUTNEY (Na Pakaayeko Golbheda ko Chutney)

This recipe is my daughter Sapan's favorite way of preparing a quick chutney. The amount of chili may be adjusted to suit your taste.

6 medium tomatoes, roughly chopped (about 6 cups)
8 to 10 fresh hot green chilies, roughly chopped
1/2 cup finely chopped cilantro
2 medium cloves garlic, peeled
2 teaspoons peeled and roughly chopped fresh ginger
1/2 teaspoon salt
1/8 teaspoon Szechuan pepper (*timmur*), finely ground with a mortar and pestle
1 teaspoon mustard oil
1 tablespoon fresh lemon or lime juice

Place the tomatoes, green chilies, cilantro, garlic, ginger, salt and *timmur* in a food processor or blender and process until smooth. Transfer to a bowl, and mix it with the mustard oil and lemon juice. Taste, adjust the seasonings, and serve immediately or cover and refrigerate until ready to serve. The chutney keeps refrigerated for 2 to 3 days.

Makes 4 to 6 servings.

The book is rounded out with a nice section on desserts — most of which, unsurprisingly, are milk-based — one on drinks, mostly teas, and one on “after-meal refreshers,” which are highly spiced or intensely fruit-flavored savory snacks. In short, Nepali cuisine and its materials and methods are covered here from end to end, and you could rely on this book when you prepared a banquet, working from the banquet menus in the book's last section, “Planning and Serving Nepali Meals.”

If you find some ingredients unfamiliar — and I certainly did — you'll find comfort in the extensive glossaries of ingredients and of Nepali-English culinary terms. Finally, this book proudly includes an index detailed enough to be usable, which is a great asset especially to a cookbook.

I can't say enough good things about *Taste of Nepal*, although I've tried. You could try a recipe from this book every day for a year, and you wouldn't run out. Recipes were obviously developed in collaboration and extensively tested; nothing here is faddish, flippant, or obvious. Finally, as a matter of meticulous production, each recipe is complete on one page or on two facing pages so you can put the book in your cookbook holder and get going. It's a small thing, but the whole book shows that kind of care.

If you're at all interested in expanding your culinary repertory, you deserve to have *Taste of Nepal* on your kitchen bookshelf.

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