

To Drink a Secret Brewed in Secret

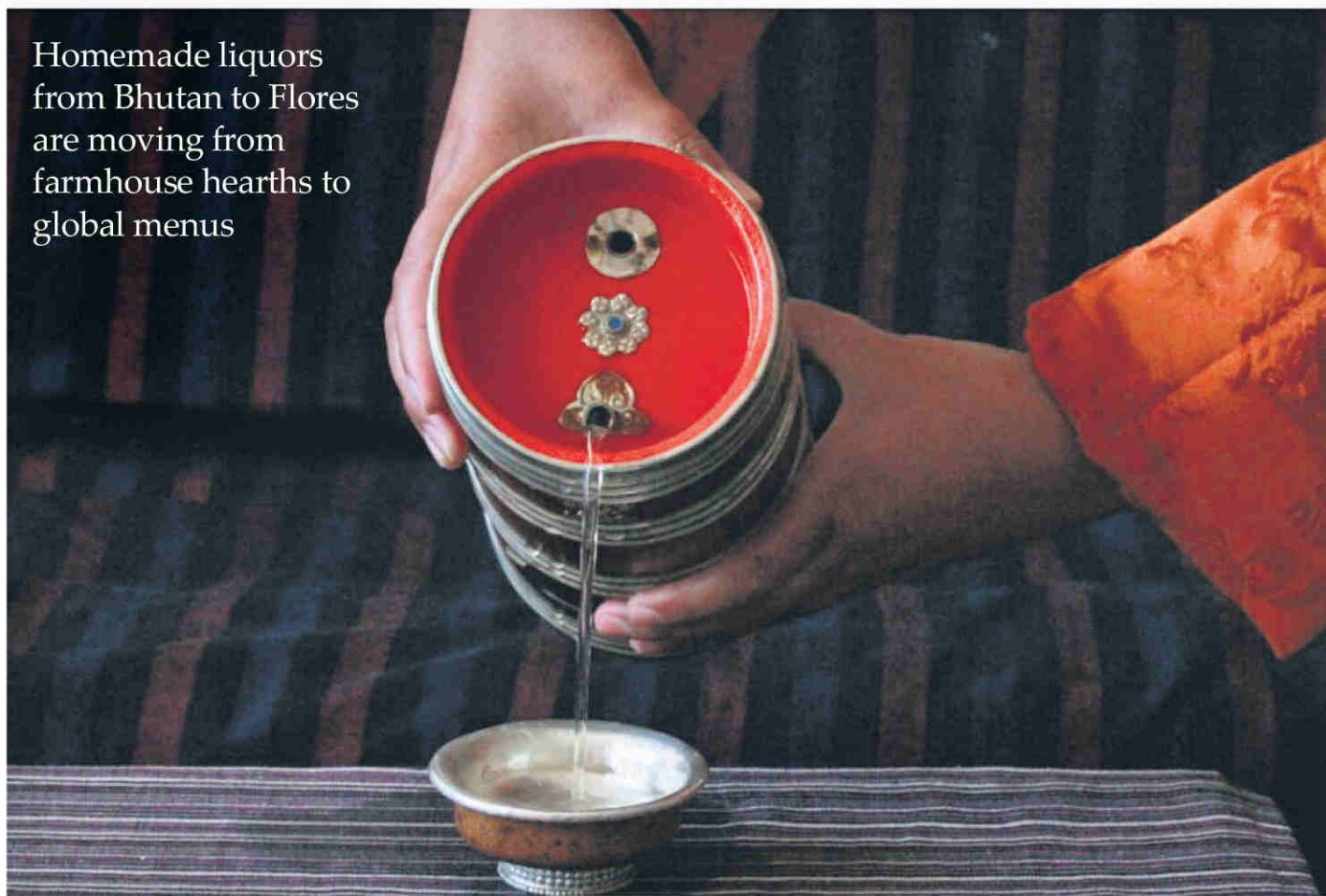
By KUNAL BHATIA AND SHUVAJIT PAYNE

Evening settles over Phobjikha Valley like a silk shawl, its rolling meadows bathed in the quiet glow of the fading sun. Inside her snug homestay kitchen, Kumbu Lhamo tips a shallow wooden bowl, grinning into its cloudy depths. The sip is warm, smoky, faintly chewy; the taste of Bhutan itself. This is *ara*, the country's most guarded home-brew, as beloved and unmistakably Bhutanese as *ema datshi*.

Ara is not found on supermarket shelves or glossy menus; it is born in kitchens and courtyards. Lhamo, like most Bhutanese women, distils hers in copper stills behind her farmhouse. Rice, barley, maize, or millet transform with time, instinct, yeast discs and inherited wisdom. Each household swears theirs is best: honeyed here, peppery there, always unique. A recipe carried through generations, like a secret handshake between the past and the present.

To drink *ara* is not just to taste Bhutan, but also to belong, if only for a moment, to its living story. Bhutan is not alone. Across Asia, once-obscurer brews are slipping out of their clay jars and

Homemade liquors from Bhutan to Flores are moving from farmhouse hearths to global menus



(Closewise from above) *Ara* being served; Cordyceps added *ara*; creative *ara* infusions; a platter of traditional Bhutanese dishes with *ara*



Photographs by BHUTAN DEPT OF TOURISM



Across Asia, once-obscurer brews are slipping out of their clay jars and bamboo flasks, demanding global attention

bamboo flasks, demanding global attention. In Nagaland, *zutho*, a rice beer with a tart, cider-like kick, turns festivals into song. In the hill tracts of Myanmar, *khaung yay*, brewed from sticky rice and passed around in bamboo tubes, carries the warmth of community itself. From the Indonesian island of Flores, the potent palm spirit *sopi* fuels ceremonies with both fire and camaraderie. And in China's Guizhou province, the hauntingly fragrant *mijiu* of the Miao people—a sweet-sour rice wine steeped in wild herbs—remains a drink of ritual and rebellion.

To call *ara* a drink is to miss the point. *Ara* is both myth and magic. During *Lha-Soel*, a religious ritual, priests flick a few drops towards the sky and

earth to honour protective deities and bless the household. Folklore attributes it with the power to ward off snakes, with children in some regions carrying it around for protection. The most poignant account comes from Lhuentse district, where a woman accused of being a 'poison-giver' was exonerated in 2016, when Bhutan's reigning king drank *ara* from her hands, shattering superstition and restoring her dignity.

Festivities turn *ara* into drama. Guests are welcomed with *palang*; ornate wooden containers that pour the best batches. Sometimes butter and

eggs are whisked in; sometimes flames dance on its surface. But for all its symbolism, *ara* was, until recently, elusive to outsiders. A drink you stumbled upon only if a farmer's grandmother invited you into her kitchen. Now, slowly, Bhutan is pouring it out for the world.

In Punakha's Pemako resort, the Five Nectars Bar is rewriting *ara*'s story in cocktails as bright as the seasons. Spring infuses rhododendron petals and ginger; summer glitters with mint, forest berries, and elderflower. Autumn leans ripe with wild pear and persimmon, while winter curls into cardamom and dried citrus. "*Ara* has strong character," says bartender Dawa Tshering. "Too strong, sometimes. But give it flowers, fruits, a touch of nature and it softens, without losing its soul." The drinks arrive jewel-toned, Insta-ready, as rooted in Bhutan's soil as they are in its new cosmopolitan flair.

Elsewhere, *ara* is being reimagined as a wellness elixir. *Cordyceps*, the prized caterpillar fungus plucked from Bhutan's high meadows is now infused in bottles sold under the government's One Gewog One Product scheme. At village workshops, visitors can roll up their sleeves, stir grains into copper stills, and carry home not just a bottle but a memory, of smoke rising in cold mountain air, laughter spilling from farmhouse windows.

Truthfully, *ara* is never more authentic than when it is homemade, passed across a table. Clouded with butter, maybe sprinkled with herbs. A sip that toasts farmers who grow the grain, grandmothers who guard the recipes, deities who bless the harvest, and the new Bhutanese generation reimagining their heritage for the world.

Each brew is a reminder: Asia's hidden spirits are no longer content to stay hidden. They are stepping onto menus, into cocktail glasses, onto the world stage flamboyantly, and always with a story worth drinking to.

