

Stories of shared plates from a Bhutanese kitchen

At a hillside farmhouse, a grandmother's dishes uncover parallels between the cuisines of Bhutan and India

Shuvajit Payne
feedback@livemint.com

Our food is hot but not spiced," Dechen Wangmo tells us gently, as we sit cross-legged on the wooden floor of her ancestral home. "It just uses chillies."

We are at a traditional Bhutanese farmhouse about half an hour from central Thimphu, along a winding mountain highway. The building, a manor of sorts, stands on a hillside overlooking the Thimphu Chu (river), opposite a steep escarpment. According to oral tradition, it was built in the 18th century and has been home to three Druk Desis—the secular administrative rulers of Bhutan—giving it a rare political lineage. For more than two centuries, it has sheltered generations of the same family. Today, Wangmo, the current matriarch, warmly hosts travellers like us for a stay, a meal, or both.

Earlier, we had curiously peeped into

all five levels of the house. Its traditional design, shaped by the agrarian legacy of the region, seems to trace the journey of food—from field to storage to table. Much as they previously did, the ground level still retains space for farm animals and the first floor stores cereals and grains. We are seated in the kitchen on the second floor, beside the family's living quarters and a quiet altar room. Above us, in the well-ventilated attic, strips of meat and vegetables are left to dry in the mountain air.

Wangmo, a natural conversationalist, quickly picks up on our interest in culinary styles. In her kitchen, there is no stockpile of masalas or spice blends. Bhutanese cooking, she explains, is a play of chilli, fat, fermentation, and seasonal greens, as she stirs long red chillies into a pot of local gouda-like cheese for her version of *ema datshi*. We mention the viral popularity of the dish, and Wangmo smiles gently, laying out dinner with a spread that is far more diverse.

The sense of familiarity is immediate: a portion of rice, a bowl of lentils, steamed greens, and a pot of *shakam paa*—sundried beef, rehydrated and cooked until



A spread of Bhutanese dishes; and (left) Dechen Wangmo.

smoky and chewy. As we take a bite, our minds drift to beef *sukka* from India's

Konkan coast, another preparation involving dried meat, slow cooking, and similar flavours. Wangmo explains the names: *datshi* refers to dishes prepared with cheese, while *paa* denotes a savoury

stew or curry, like *phaksha paa* with pork, or *sikan paa* made from dried pork belly.

To add a punch to the meal, there is Wangmo's chilli paste, *ezay*, pounded with garlic and salt. We immediately think of the unapologetic heat of Maharashtra's *thecha*, or similar fiery pastes that are sharpened with Sichuan pepper

from India's North-east. The recipe for *ezay* varies from family to family. Fresh crumbled cheese, minced meat, onions, or even peppercorns may be added to accentuate the taste. It is interesting that chillies, so central to both Bhutanese and Indian cuisines, originated in neither country. They are said to have arrived with Portuguese traders in the 16th century and soon became a staple across the Himalayan belt, where their heat suited the cold climate. Until then, the food in the kingdom relied largely on local herbs and wild plants.

Our conversation soon turns to other culinary comparisons. Momos are the most recognizable link, but Wangmo encourages us to look further. She promises a bowl of her *jasha maru*—a rustic, lightly spiced chicken dish that feels closely related to the everyday curries of India's Northeast, especially in its prominent ginger notes. She also speaks of stinging nettles cooked with lentils, known locally as *sismu dal*, a preparation that echoes through the Himalayas, from Nepali kitchens to *zathuk* in Ladakh and *bichhu booti* saag in Uttarakhand.

These similarities extend into the plains as well. In Bhutanese homes, bittergourd is often sliced into thin, chip-like pieces and fried with butter and light seasoning, making them remarkably similar to the

Bengalis enjoy puffed rice as an evening snack with their cha, the Bhutanese sprinkle these crisp grains directly into their butter tea. *Suja*, as it is called, is made by churning tea leaves with butter and salt into a warm, savoury drink with a faintly smoky taste. Its pinkish hue and rich, creamy profile feel surprisingly close to Kashmiri noon chai.

Suja becomes our go-to drink within a day. The next morning, we lounge in the sun-drenched balcony of the farmhouse, looking out at the valley, with a cup of *suja* warming our hands in the cool air. Wangmo serves a simple but hearty breakfast: a portion of *kharang*—coarsely ground dried maize stirred into leftover curry to make a thick, porridge-like meal. The taste instantly takes us to the comfort of *dalia* back home.

Bhutan offers plenty for the adventurous palate — from hardened yak cheese called *chugo*, or dishes made from animal tripe known as *goep*. But with Wangmo's motherly servings, one meal at a time, we begin to recognize a shared sensibility on our plates. To truly understand its food, one must seek it where it lives most honestly—in domestic kitchens, family recipes, and unhurried conversations around the hearth.

Shuvajit Payne writes about travel, food, and the outdoors.