

Ladakhi Cuisine

Every region on earth has developed food depending on the suitability of the climate as well as food materials available on the local market. The tastes redefined by the culture of that particular region give rise to traditional delicacies or unique dishes of the region.

The Himalayan ecosystem of Ladakh has led to the development of a unique agricultural economy and lifestyle. Many of the local inhabitants practice farming, and the produce of their fields is made into the delicious dishes of Ladakh.

Foodies, vegetarians as well as meat lovers, will find in Ladakh a variety of mouth-watering dishes prepared with fresh vegetables, like spinach, potatoes, carrots, broccoli etc., to just mention a few, cooked in a variety of different ways. They are accompanied by different kind of dishes with pulses, egg, cheese, and meat. Mutton and chicken, additionally yak during the winter months, are the commonly consumed types of meat in Ladakh. Locally produced are also apples, pears, and walnuts. The apricots are especially famous, and a number of products, from squash to juice to jam, are found in Ladakh.

Ladakh was an important stopping point on the Silk Road for traders from Tibet, China, and the Middle East. The neighbouring region of Kashmir brings some culinary influence, too. The Ladakhi cuisine therefore, is a fascinating fusion of Tibetan, Indian, Kashmiri, and Central Asian flavours.

The people of Ladakh also supplement their diet with the use of herbs and plants. While wild garlic or cumin are used to flavour the dishes, the stinging nettle is used to prepare a healthy and nutritious soup mostly consumed in winter. Other popular herbs used in Ladakhi cuisine are coriander/cilantro, parsley, and mint.

The rich cuisine of Ladakh is incomplete without its beverages. From the famous butter tea, locally known as gurgur cha, to the traditional chhang, the beverages are as inviting as the food. They range from locally produced seabuckthorn juice or squash to different teas to alcoholic drinks (chhang).

Once in Ladakh, the tourists, visitors, and guests should try the following dishes or food items at least once:

1. Thukpa: This is probably one of the most popular dishes from Ladakh. This noodle soup is prepared with vegetables or meat, and is consumed throughout the year among the locals and tourists alike.

2. Thenktuk: A lesser known soup but equally tasty. Instead of noodles, you will have rectangular pieces of dough cooked with vegetables or meat.
3. Momos: Probably the most iconic dish from Ladakh that is hugely around the world. The dumplings are stuffed with vegetables, cheese or meat, and then steamed. They are very tasty when fried, too.
4. Skyu: This Ladakhi pasta-like dish is to die for! The dough is divided in countless small pieces which are formed between thumb, index, and middle finger. They are cooked with different vegetables until soft. Meat lovers add mutton pieces, too. This dish will leave you satisfied and content.
5. Timok: The wheat dough is divided and arranged in fist-size pieces, then steamed. It is served hot with a vegetable or meat dish, equally tasty dry or with gravy.
6. Chhutagi: Another, lesser known pasta-like dish. The round pieces of dough are formed over the index finger into a cylindrical form, then cooked in a vegetable or meat gravy.
7. Ngamphe: Wheat, black beans, and local peas are washed, dried, roasted, and then grounded into a nutritious flour that can be used in soups, to prepare kholak or phemar, or added to the consumption of chhang.
8. Kholak: Ngamphe flour is mixed with salted green tea (kunak) until a dough is formed. This is a traditional breakfast item, eaten mostly with leftovers from the dinner of the night before, with a raddish dish or plain curd/yoghurt.
9. Phemar: This is the sweet version of kholak. Ngamphe mixed with butter, sugar, and salted green tea, then mixed until a dough is formed. Phemar is very tasty when eaten together with fresh curd/yoghurt.
10. Paba: The amount of black beans and local peas in relation to the wheat is more elevated in this flour. It is poured into boiled salted water, and mixed thoroughly until a dough-like consistency is reached. It is formed in fist-sized, triangular pieces, and served with a special raita (curd/yogurt mixed with finely chopped coriander, mint, and salt) or a milky soup with onions.
11. Tagi khambir: The wheat dough for this locally produced bread is prepared the night before for proper levitation. It is cooked on a hot stone surface, near hot ash or on the gas stove.
12. Local cookies: These can be found in the shops in Leh's main market in different sizes, and various patterns. There are sweet, and salty variations of them.
13. Apricot jam can be bought in shops in Leh's main market, too.
14. Gurgur cha: Loose green tea leaves are boiled on the stove for a longer period of time. Then, salt, and butter are added. All ingredients are put in an almost waist-high tube-like container where it is mixed thoroughly. The sound of the mixing is what gives the name to the tea. The pink-hued salted tea is transferred back into the pan to be boiled a last time before it is transferred into a thermos. This tea is enjoyed throughout the day.
15. Kunak: Loose green tea leaves are shortly boiled in water, and then salt is added. The salted tea is transferred into a thermos. This tea is equally popular among the local population.

- 16.Chhang: Barley grains are mixed with a fermenting agent, kept covered for several days, and then transferred into a big barrel. This barrel gets filled with water for up to four times. The first extraction is the strongest. Traditionally, chhang was shared pure or mixed with ngamphe among the family members during field work. Now, it is consumed privately at home or at parties.
- 17.Sea buckthorn squash or juice are locally produced from sea buckthorn berries. The slightly sour drink is rich in vitamin C and antioxidants, and quenches your thirst.

The food items or beverages mentioned under the numbers 8 to 11, and 14 to 16 cannot be bought in the market, and therefore can be found only in the local families.