

Food for Thought: Pondering Plov --- Perfect Pilaf? Everyone Has an Opinion on The Central Asian Dish

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Almost all the myriad ethnic and religious groups -- from Kyrgyz to Georgians, to Iranians to Turkmen to Sephardic Jews -- hold their own views on the origins of this dish and on which is the superior, more authentic version. The first documented mention of plov comes from books published in Baghdad and Damascus in the 13th century. Uzbeks claim it was invented by the Mongol warrior Tamarlane (or Timur) in the 14th century as a handy, one-pot dish to feed his armies as they invaded India and Iran. (Tamarlane has something of a reputation as a picky gourmet -- he is said to have executed bakers who were unable to replicate the exact taste of the bread he ate at home. He only relented when he decided that the missing ingredient was the air.)

I asked a friend about the differences between versions of the dish. He was born in Osh but then, like many ethnic Uzbeks, moved to Tashkent. We were sitting in a platform in his garden, eating plov as part of an enormous meal typical of the lavish hospitality customary in Uzbekistan. He looked around cautiously to check whether his Tashkent-born wife could hear, and then whispered conspiratorially: "Plov from Osh is better than plov from Tashkent."

Osh plov had more meat, in larger chunks and normally on the bone, he insisted. In Tashkent, the preference was for smaller amounts of meat in a plov colored a deeper red with spices. The differences are mostly subtle given that plov -- also known as pilau, pilaf, pilav, palaw and ruz mufalfal (in Arabic) -- is a dish eaten in a vast arc stretching from Albania through to India. In the perfect plov, each grain of rice must be wrapped in a flavor that comes from meat, vegetables and spices.

FULL TEXT

OSH, Kyrgyzstan -- This city at the eastern end of Central Asia's Ferghana Valley may be as old as Rome but its heritage hasn't survived as well. Its bazaar, one of the largest in the region, harks back to the peak of the Silk Road. Now, it sells mostly Chinese thermos flasks and panda-motif towels. Little of the Islamic architecture that once characterized the region survived seven decades of Soviet rule. Even the traces of nomadic Kyrgyz culture seem a little flat: In the center of town is a somewhat moth-eaten yurt, the traditional Central Asian round tent, where fermented mare's milk is served.

But enter one of the chaikhanas, or tea houses, and the past wafts over your senses. These range from tiny stalls to elaborate gardens of fragrant roses and pomegranate trees where you can rest on platforms under arbors of grapes. These gardens are the perfect somnolent refuge from an arid landscape that in many areas is blighted by the remains of now-defunct heavy industry and Soviet architecture.

Chaikhanas are also the place to eat plov, the dish of rice, lamb and vegetables that most captures the history of Central Asia. The variations in the dish say much about the diversity of this region, which embraces several ethnic groups and the states of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as about the links created along one of the

world's most ancient trading routes. It is also a synthesis of the two divergent strands of life here -- rice and vegetables from settled farmers and lamb from nomadic herders.

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Of course, any dish that is going to be cooked out of doors and served with a considerable fanfare to an admiring audience has to be cooked by a man. Making plov is the Uzbek male's answer to barbecuing -- although they do that as well, producing the best kebabs I have ever tasted.

At the tea houses, plov is made in vast metal dishes called qazan which look like deep woks. The largest of these -- used for wedding parties that traditionally are supposed to include seven neighborhoods of guests -- can be up to a meter and a half wide. First a stew of lamb, carrots and onions flavored with cumin (and, for those who can afford it, saffron) is made using equal amounts of the three main ingredients. Rice is then sprinkled over this and whole bulbs of garlic pressed into the mix. The dish is then cooked over a low heat for about half an hour to steam the rice and make each grain slightly fluffy. Different areas use different types of rice -- in Central Asia the best rice is a local short-grain variety that is washed thoroughly to remove all surface starch that would cause the grains to stick together. In the Middle East and India, long-grain rices are used.

In Osh, the dish has a sweetness and pungency that come from ingredients that haven't been subjected to the manipulations of modern agriculture. Each grain of rice is coated with an oil infused with lamb flavor that's gamier, stronger and more feral than almost any meat found in the West. Here, it's often made with the dried fruits that are common across the region: The bazaar in Osh is a cornucopia of fruits and nuts and vivid spices.

Served on communal plates and eaten with the fingers, plov is usually accompanied by flat rounds of unleavened bread, salads and sweet, tender-cooked cloves of garlic. Accompanying drinks might include Georgian wines (dark, tannic sweet reds that are something of an acquired taste), the Kyrgyz favorite of fermented mare's milk (which is even more of an acquired taste) or, more commonly, green tea.

Iran probably serves the most sophisticated plov: Recipe books dating back to the 16th century feature versions

flavored with quince, sour red barberries, sour cherries, pomegranates and mulberries. Iranian and Caucasian plov are often made in a way that produces a thick, crunchy crust called tah dig (which means bottom of the pot). In some places, the pot is lined with potatoes, resulting in an even thicker, crunchier crust.

As people from the former Soviet Union have spread more widely around the world, plov has become more widespread. A good place to eat it nowadays is New York, home to 50,000 Jews from the Central Asian cities of Tashkent, Bukhara and Samarkand. Uzbek restaurants have started appearing in Israel and across Europe as people emigrate from an increasingly troubled region.

Just over a decade ago, Central Asia seemed hidden away in the depths of the Soviet Union. It has opened up considerably, but also fractured into a number of uncertain states whose increasingly hardened borders slice through different ethnic groups. Food may increasingly be the only thing left they have in common.

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