

# KASHMIRI CUISINE

Kashmiris are hospitable by nature. They enjoy social life and mutual entertainment. This has been one main cause of the development of their culinary art. Different types of menus were also inspired by the cuisines of different rulers and visitors, who came in the past from Persia, Afghanistan and other places. Mughals especially had a great influence on the cooking of Meat Dishes and different **Pulavs**. Emperors Jehangir and Shahjehan, with their lovely queens, their courtiers and kith and kin, made Kashmir their health resort and a place of sport, enjoyment, eating and drinking. Shahjehan used to visit Kashmir every summer and called it a **Paradise on Earth**. Jehangir's last wish, at his death, was 'Kashmir and Nothing else'.

Its salubrious climate, unrivalled and picturesque natural scenery, its invigorating, digestive, sweet and crystal-clear waters of springs and abounding streams, its beautiful lakes, majestic Pine and Deodar forests, and snow capped mountains, its breezy summers, flaming and blazing colourful and breathtaking autumns, the cool and calm grandeur of its winter snows, followed by charming flower-laden fragrant springs, all have made Kashmir a gourmet's heaven. Here amongst these blessing of Mother Nature, enjoying good and delicious spicy food, is a delighting desire of men, women and children alike.

Outdoor picnics, luncheons and dinners, in big and small comfortable boats, (House Boats, **Dungas** and **Shikara**), plying on the famous Dal lake, are common. Parties of people of every class are seen enjoying hearty meals, **Qehva**, **Shier Chay**, cookies and sweets, according to their means. The spicy aroma of food, being cooked in the small kitchens, provided in the bigger boats, permeates the air. Strains of soothing **Sufiyana** music to the accompaniment of **Sitar**, **Saz**, and **Dukra** (Tabla), or sound of exciting choral **Chhakri**-lyrical songs, with **Nuot**, **Tumbaknar** and **Roani** beating time and **Sarangi** playing to the tune, come from some of the boats, all heading slowly towards the 'Mughal' and other gardens, 'Chinar' groves, Shrines and springs situated here and there, on or near the shores of the lake. Fields of lotuses and water-lilies bloom on the outskirts of the lake, and the surrounding hills are mirrored in its clear water.

The eyes feast on similar cheerful boating scenes on the 'Manasbal', 'Anchar' and 'Wullar' lakes. Wullar is perhaps the largest fresh-water lake of Asia. Sweet damsels steering at one end of tiny and light boats, with fishermen holding aiming spears in their right hands, and standing with eyes fixed on the water, at the other end of the boats, ready to strike at an underwater swimming fish, are lovely sights seen here and there. The alert and almost naked bodies of these fishermen, along with the boats, and the paddling damsels, are clearly reflected on the calm surface of the lake. These constitute picturesque scenes for a Camera-man especially. The fishermen, now and then, bring their boats close to the boats of the excursionists to sell their fresh catch, which forms a welcome addition to the menus of these holidaying people. Fresh Fruits, Vegetables, Lotus Roots (**Nadier**) and Lotus-seed tori (**Pambalokhar**), or even groceries, are vended by mobile shops in boats (Shikaras).

Outings are usual to hundreds of other scenic places, spread all over the valley. These places are mostly maintained by Government and Public Bodies. These well-kept places include Public gardens, with blooming colourful beds of flowers of the season, lush green lawns and beautiful cascades. Some have fountains playing therein and also have sheltered picnic spots. Between mountains or hills there are small beautiful valleys, meadows and glens, through which clearice-cold rivers and streams rush, playing music on boulder laden beds. Fishing of Brown and Rainbow Trout and also **Mahasol**, is an additional attraction for excursion to these places.

Almond orchards burst out into ravishing profusion of pink blooms early in the spring, even before the foliage reappears on their branches, denuded in the previous winter. These turn into eagerly-awaited picnic spots. In autumn the late- night full-moon dinner-parties are held by many people around the blooming, fragrant 'Saffron' fields of Pampor. Even in very cold winter, dinners, with **Sufiyana** and other musical entertainments are held in **Hammam** halls.

The 'common factor' of all these pleasure trips, is to enjoy good and special food, off the routine, in the sweet company of family members, friends, kith and kin in these beautiful surroundings. In fact food is an integral part of every Kashmiri conversation.

Kashmir is also a valley of fruits. Fruit trees, growing on higher altitudes, and their orchards, are found every where. Hundreds of varieties of delicious, both sweet and tart Apples, juicy Pears, including famous **Nakh** and **Bagogasha** varieties, luscious Apricots, Plums, Peaches and Cherries, are produced in abundance. Many kinds

of Cherries, along with very good varieties of Walnuts and Almonds are a speciality of Kashmir. Apart from being a great tourist attraction, for Kashmir, fruits are a major item of export and a source of income of the State.

Among other fruits, yellow and red Crab-apples, Loquats, Chestnuts, Nectarines, Quinces, Grapes, Mulberries of both 'Alba' and luscious Black-Royal varieties, Strawberries, Cranberries, Raspberries, Black-Berries and many other wild-grown Berries are there. Fruits, naturally, form a good part of Kashmiri diet. Here many fruits are also cooked and turned into delectable dishes. Many fruits are also preserved by canning or by pickling.

Huge quantities of Water-Chestnuts (**Singhade**) are a main produce of Kashmir's 'Wullar' lake. Musk and Water Melons, Cucumbers and almost all varieties of fruit, tuber, root and leafy vegetables are grown abundantly.

Enough Cereals, Legumes and Oil-seeds are produced in the valley, to feed its people and a large number of tourists etc. as well. Plenty of local Fishes, Poultry, Sheep and Goat, Game birds and animals, Ducks and Geese, all cater to the needs of Kashmiris, who are mostly non-vegetarian, and also to those of the visitors and outsiders. Eggs, Milk-products and Honey are freely available. Miss Piarie in her book 'Kashmir', has rightly called it as 'a place where one might live and die content'!

## **A KASHMIRI KITCHEN**

**On** normal days, the cooking, in both Hindu and Muslim homes, is mostly done on a **Dan** which is an oblong clay oven, about 3' x 2' - and a foot and a half in height. It has a floor-level hole, through which firewood is fed and has usually 3 holes on the top, on which the food, in different pots, pans and vessels, etc., is heated or cooked. Nowadays, due to scarcity of wood fuel, LPG and kerosene stoves are commonly used.

A big dinner, called a **Sal**, or a **Vazavan**, is still cooked in a **Vurabal** which is an open-air kitchen. The fire-place, for this sort of cooking, is called a **Vura**. It is about 10' to 15' in length. In the shape of an above-ground drain, with air holes on both sides, it is built with bricks or stones. Fire-wood is used as fuel. Heat of such fires is very easily regulated for mass cooking. It is very convenient for deep and slow frying in big iron Cauldrons called 'Kadahis', as well as, for slow cooking and simmering, in earthenware pots especially. Here also the contents in cooking vessels, are conveniently watched and stirred with different types of wooden or metallic ladles. Such low-level **Vura** also facilitates the time to time addition of ingredients. Generally, an hour or so before serving most of the Dishes, the cooking vessels are removed from the **Vura** and are kept on charcoal or dry cowdung slow fires, for maturing of flavours and arriving at the right consistency of gravy, and also the desired 'texture'.

Among Kashmiri Pandits cooking of most Vegetarian and Non-vegetarian Dishes, is done mostly in pots made of baked clay. The pot is called a **Deg**, a **Degul** or a **Leij** according to its shape and size. Cooking in these pots gives the Meat, Cheese, Vegetable and other Dishes a special aroma. Caking at the bottom of pots, and acidic and alkaline reactions with metals, are also thus eliminated. Rice and some other dishes are cooked in tinned brass vessels. Muslims cook generally in tinned copper pots. Pots used in Kashmir are generally round bottomed, to make stirring and turning of the contents easy, while cooking, and also while mixing Spices and Condiments, which are called **Masala**.

A big round-bottomed, deep brass conking pot, with a somewhat narrow mouth, is called a **Digcha**, by Pandits. It is mainly used to cook Rice, and sometimes **Pulavs** or other Dishes prepared in larger quantities. A similar pot, made of copper or aluminium and usually used by Muslims, is called by them a **Deg** or a **Digchavar** according to its being big or small.

Round-bottomed, deep wide-mouthed metallic cooking pots, big and small, are called **Patila** usually. Pandits call these generally **Bahugan**, which is plural of **Bahugun**. It is a Sanskrit word meaning 'a thing having many good qualities.' Perhaps this name was given to this metallic pot, when introduced in place of the easily breakable earthenware pots (**Handi**) used earlier. These of course, are utilized for many kitchen jobs, such as boiling, frying, cooking etc. of foods, and are almost unbreakable.

## Kashmiri names of other Kitchen Implements

1. 'Athataech', - Cloth for wiyng hands etc.
2. 'Bothlai' and 'Chhegla', - Pots for cooking rice etc.
3. 'Chalan' and 'Raemb', - Broad spatulas.
4. 'Chhan', - Colander or strainer.
5. 'Chhonp', - Churning stick.
6. 'Chonchi' and 'Krechh', - Ladles.
7. 'Chumta' and 'Sanaes', - Tongs for holding hot things and lifting hot pots.
8. 'Dakna', - Lids.
9. 'Damchula', - Iron charcoal stove.
10. 'Dul' and 'Kond', - Metallic and deep wash basins.
11. 'Hahkol', - Clay charcoal stove.
12. 'Kafgir', - Perforated ladle.
13. 'Kray', - Cauldron.
14. 'Krochh', - Fire spoon.
15. 'Taev', - Iron griddle.
16. 'Masala' Vatur', - Box for keeping spices.
17. 'Mujikond', - Grater.
18. 'Sikh', - Skewer.
19. 'Tilavar' and 'Kronnd', - Edible oil pot and its ladle.
20. 'Voakhul' and 'Kajivadh', - Stone mortar and pestle.

## **SERVICE AND MODE OF EATING**

In Kashmir it is said that the food should both taste and look good. Its aroma must be appetizing. Success of a meal lies in its appeal to the eyes, nose and then the tongue.

In big Kashmiri dinners, where a hundred to five hundred people are usually invited, on the occasion of weddings and festivals etc., the food is served to the guests who are seated on carpeted floors, which are sometimes covered with **Chandanis** (White Sheets). These dinners are served in big halls, or under decorated **Shamiyane** (Canopies), which are well illuminated, and air conditioned, if necessary, by means of fans or stoves or electric heaters, according to the needs of the season.

Big metallic plates, generally made of stainless steel nowadays, are used for eating. Eating with right hand fingers and thumb is common. Service is usually done by cooks, friends and family members. To relish the Dishes individually, and make the cuisine an enjoyable one, different preparations are not mixed while eating, and service is done in a somewhat course-wise style. Thereby each Dish, with its particular flavour and delicacy, is relished and appreciated separately at a time.

Wines and liqueurs are rarely served in Dinners. Instead, Green Condimented Tea without milk, is served generally after and even before a Dinner.

**Modur Polav**, a sweet 'Basmati' rice **Pulav** cooked in clarified butter (**Ghi**), milk and water, along with dry fruits, saffron, spices and other condiments, is a favourite dessert of Kashmiri Pandits. **Khbir**, **Halwa**, **Firni**, Fruit stews and Custards etc., are also served as desserts. In hot weather, **Kulfi**, Ice-creams or some other sweets are also prevelant nowadays.

To round off, a dinner or a feast, a condimented and scented Betel leaf (**Pan**) is always welcome **Tambul**, as it is called in Sanskrit, is always offered even to Deities in **Puja** etc. Of course it is the relisher and the appreciator of good food preparations, who, as a guest, lends colour to a good feast. Usually, once a person joins a good Kashmiri feast, he or she never forgets it.

## Utensils For Serving Meals and Processing of Foods

1. 'Dul', 'Dulij', 'Var', 'Chod', and 'Tagaer', - Baked clay, milk, curd etc., Containers.
2. 'Faot' and 'Longun'- Plastered wicker basket for grains etc., and wooden mug.
3. 'Girs', 'Gedva', 'Nar', 'Lutin', 'Abkhor', 'Jag', 'Baltin', 'Kamandal', 'Gangasagar', and 'Gagaer' Metallic water pots, some with handles.
4. 'Goshpar' and 'Kaen'- Wooden mallet and flat stone.
5. 'Greta'- Quern.
6. 'Kashva', 'Krechh' and 'Chonchi', - Metallic and wooden spoons and ladles.
7. 'Kangaer', - Fire pot.
8. 'Kanz' and 'Muhul', - Wooden pole and big stone mortar for husking grains.
9. 'Khalur' and 'Dula', - Boat shaped stone mortar and oval stone pestle.
10. 'Krenjul', - Wicker basket for vegetables etc.
11. 'Lachhul', - Broom.
12. 'Maet', 'Math' and 'Nuot', - Baked clay big pots for grains and water.
13. 'Niam' and 'Chhota', - Stone broad mortar and wooden pestle.
14. 'Pahrat', 'Chilamchi' and 'Dunga', - Shallow and deep basins.
15. 'ShrakaPuch', - Folding knife.
16. 'Shrakh', 'Moand' and 'FashaKan', - Chopping knife, wooden block and hone.
17. 'Shup' and 'Pariun', - Hand winnow and sieve.
18. 'Tabach', 'Tok', 'Parva', 'Nar' and 'Machavar', - Baked clay plates and pots used for eating meals and drinking etc.
19. 'Tasht' and 'Nar', - Deep metallic basin and spouted water jug with handles for washing hands etc.

## TRADITIONS IN THE EATING HABITS OF KASHMIRI PANDITS

**For** centuries the directives of **Shastras** have been followed, to a great extent, by Pandits of Kashmir, the sacred land of **Kashyap Rishi**, from whom the valley got its name, originally **Kashyap Mar**. Pandit means a highly learned Brahmin. Kashmiri Pandits are **Saraswat** Brahmins, descendants of Rishis and Munis, such as Dattatrya, Bhardwaj and Kashyap, and had their own script (**Sharda**). Almost all are literate. Kashmir, a Seat of Learning, was also called **Sharda Pith**.

During the reign of Muslim Rulers and after the conversion of most of the Brahmins to Islam, many changes took place in the Brahmin traditions and habits, which were inherited from earlier ascetic people of the Valley, but, to a good extent, these traditions do exist among Kashmiri Pandits even now, in spite of modernization. The main object, of following the directives in regards to cooking, serving and eating of foods is hygiene. Total or partial fasting, **Brat** as it is called, on certain days, in the form of a single meal for the day, or even a saltless single meal, or taking of limited quantity of fruits, some vegetables and milk only on that day, or having only one cereal meal in twenty-four hours, was a common practice before three or four decades. This is done even now by many Hindus.

### **Main traditional 'Do's and Do-Nots', are as under:**

1. Each person eats in a separate plate.
2. Eating of stale food is prohibited, and is to be avoided.
3. Putting **Katoris** of vegetables etc. inside the eating plate (**Thali**) is prohibited.
4. Water for drinking is always kept near the diner. In fact, before every main meal a little water is taken in the form of an **Achman** with a prayer. Without the tumbler touching the lips, water is poured into the mouth from a little distance while drinking.
5. One cannot touch the unused food articles, or bowls containing the food, with the hand with which one is eating.
6. Fruits and green vegetables have to be thoroughly washed before being eaten. Even the knives etc. have to be scrubbed before using these for dressing etc.
7. Food is eaten while sitting on floor, while eating plates etc. are placed on clay washed wet floor or on a clean sheet, preferably woolen.
8. Washing of hands and mouth, before and after eating any food, is a must.
9. One cannot leave the eating place before the plates (**Thalis**) etc. are removed and the place is cleaned.

10. Eating meals in good light, preferably after sunrise and before sunset, is a directive.
11. 'Fasts' (**Brat**) on certain days of every week and every month and on certain days of a year, are recommended, for spiritual and physical welfare.
12. Talking during eating is thought unwise.
13. Short prayers, before and after taking main meals, are to be offered.
14. Before eating always some food is set apart, as a 'Vishnu Arpari', portion, to be used for serving an **Atithi** i.e., an unannounced guest or a hungry person or an animal.
15. Use of aluminium utensils is not recommended. Brass or bronze or terracotta utensils are used for cooking. Bronze **Thalis** for eating food, and bronze cups for drinking tea, were common. To clean bronze it is scrubbed with ashes. For brassware wet clay is used for scrubbing and cleaning. Copper utensils are mainly used for **Puja**. Silver tea-cups and tumblers etc. are used by aristocracy.
16. One can serve food only after he or she washes his or her hands. Any food touched by unclean hands cannot be served or eaten. Even food touched with the hand with which one has been eating cannot be served to other people.
17. One cannot transfer any portion of his food, which the person has been eating, to another person's plate.
18. Meat eating, and use of intoxicants, are **Tamsik** and are considered to retard spiritual growth and physical welfare.

## SPICES AND CONDIMENTS

**Spices** and Condiments play a very important role in the Kashmiri Culinary Art and their Cuisine, especially in the Dishes of Kashmiri Pandits.

Kashmir, being on the ancient **Silk Route**, the traders in Indian Spices, from all over the world, passed through this valley and generally stayed here as visitors, to enjoy the salubrious summer climate and also to sell non-local spices and buy locally produced saffron, spices, medicinal herbs and roots, dry fruits and **Shawls** etc.

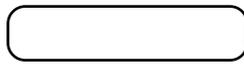
Kashmiri Pandits inherited the knowledge of medicinal values and aromatic qualities of different spices and condiments, from ancient Sanskrit Texts of **Ayurveda**. The use of these and their availability, in almost all Kashmiri houses, was and is common. Hardly there is any spice or condiment which is not available from a Kashmiri Grocer or a **Pansar**. In fact, a class of traders called **Buhuer** sprang up in due course to deal especially in spices and medicinal herbs, roots, seeds and minerals.

Learning the special use of local spices, herbs and condiments, and of those introduced by the outsiders, hundreds of exquisite dishes were developed by Kashmiris. These include both vegetarian and non-vegetarian preparations. Some are hot, sweet or sour, some fragrant and spicy and others soft or crunchy and so on. Here, thus, matured the art of blending of different spices, in right proportions, in order to prepare foods with variable flavours and aromas. These were developed to a sort of perfection, to suit different seasons and occasions, and also the tastes of both Indians and Foreigners.

To cater to the ever growing demands, a class of professional expert cooks and chefs grew up, who completed with one another for producing exquisite dishes. Culinary art of Kashmir also got impetus through the patronage of affluent people who permanently engaged expert cooks. The 'patrons' vied with one another, by throwing dinner parties, in which their special dishes were served and these were talked about by guests afterwards for days together. Even now some have become reminiscences for some people of older generation, who give graphic description of such feasts.

Spices and condiments are used freely, and in good quantities, by Kashmiri Pandits. Kashmiri Muslims use these commonly called 'Masale' sparingly, but there is predominance of Onion, Garlic and Shallot in both their Meat and Vegetarian preparations. Shallot is called **Pran** in Kashmir. It is not used in Pandit kitchens. Now, in recent years Onions and Garlic are used in a few of their Vegetable and Meat Curries. Pandits use Asafoetida (**Hing**) instead of Onions, Garlic or Shallots.

Therefore, for those who are eager to learn the Kashmiri Culinary Art, the knowledge of different Spices, Condiments and ingredients used by Kashmiris, is primarily necessary. Knowing proper methods of processing and presentation of these, before their use, is also essential. A comprehensive note follows regarding this and also a list of all these Spices, Condiments, and previously prepared Mixtures and 'Cakes' of Spices, for ready use is given.



## WAZWAN

**The Wazwan** is Kashmir's most formal meal: a ritual serving before the guest of all the food there is in the house. This taste of hospitality must in turn be fully appreciated by the guest, for the wazwan is not a simple meal but a ceremony. Hours of cooking and days of planning go into the making and serving of a wazwan. Normally restricted to occasions of celebration at homes, the wazwan experience includes table settings for groups of four on the floor where choice dish after dish is served, each aromatic with herbs and the fresh produce of the region.

First the **Tash-t-Nari** is passed around, and diners wash their hands from warm water in a **samovar**. The waza (chief cook) personally supervises each dish which comes out of his kitchen. even the ingredients for the meal have been hand-picked, and effort has ensured that each dish in this rich cuisine is one-of-a-kind. Choice delicacies such as **Methi** and **Tabakmaaz**, **Roganjosh** and **Rista**, and a variety of **Kababs** and vegetable preparations are served.

The meal concludes with the **Gushtaba**, a very exclusive dish, and one that is never refused, **Phirni** for dessert and a cup of **Kahwah**, the green tea flavored with saffron, cardamom and almonds, and the wazwan is over - a meal that is an experience in Kashmiri hospitality.