

High Altitude Baking & Living



If you think the Aspen airport landing is scary, try Paro, Bhutan. Only 50 pilots are trained to land there and when you approach it, you see why. To begin with, you are flying over the Himalayas, a no-fly zone. Since aircraft may be required to fly lower than 10,000 meters in case of emergency at such levels they would be ramming into the high mountain peaks. At the Himalayan altitude the air is thin and jet engines have trouble producing enough power in such conditions. I'm glad I read about this only after arriving in Bhutan because my flight was undertaken in blissful ignorance, gazing mindlessly at the beautiful landscape. Upon arrival at Paro I was impressed by the sheer verticality of the country. Being from Ohio where the flat cornfields go on forever to the horizon, it was disorienting to see everything going straight up around me.

I arrived here as a teacher with an invitation from the government to be a baking instructor for the Desuung Skilling Program and even without the high-altitude dizziness I was walking on air. Bhutan had been an obsession of mine for decades as I read about its carbon negative scores, its progressive agriculture, His Majesty's aim of Gross National Happiness and perhaps most impressive was the 70% of forested land mandated in the Constitution.



Disembarking the aircraft from a hard-stand on the runway, the impressive wall of mountains surrounding the airport were a dramatic frame for the beautiful Bhutanese architecture of the terminal. My background in the food world was highly inspired by the 7 years I worked at the White House in Washington DC for the Bush and Obama administrations. In particular, the important "Let's Move" program of First Lady, Michelle Obama informed my viewpoint. We encouraged kids and adults to love fresh foods, to enjoy cooking, to celebrate vegetables and grains, she even hosted a "Kids State Dinner" in the East Room of the White House, complete with an appearance by (her husband) the President of the United States.

As I began to teach traditional baking and pastry with European and American themes, I began to understand that desserts are not really to Bhutanese taste. There was muffled appreciation and polite smiles when students tasted tarte tatin, opera cakes,

and eclairs but not a lot of enthusiasm, reactions were somewhat muted to say the least. There were a few highlights though, mainly baked goods that were not overly sweet: beignets, crepe cakes, potato bread, and focaccia, got rave reviews. I began to adjust the curriculum and to steer clear of the more sugar laden recipes. After all, I had written "The Sweet Spot" a cookbook about reducing sugar so I began to feel right at home.

Before coming here, my most recent job was at Blue Hill Restaurant at Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, in New York State, a foundation dedicated to sustainable and regenerative agriculture - a concentration on local foods, less sugar, and more whole grains. I started to investigate the Bhutanese ingredient landscape and was happy to discover that these principles were the cornerstone of the culture here. I think my first clue was at the Folk Heritage Museum in Thimphu. There I saw, in a place of prominence, an old stone mill for grinding whole



grains, water powered, and still operating. Stone grinding whole grains is the only method that really cracks open the germ, bran, and starch to enable these high nutrition elements to be bio-available to us. Here at this beautiful old farmhouse was the very core of the healthy agriculture message in a place of honor. In our bread bakery at Blue Hill, all the whole grains are ground daily and used in the sour dough bread production. As I recognized this old mechanical friend, I felt even more at home 12,000 kilometers away from New York City.

The next experience that fascinated me was at the Start-up Center in Thimphu, an organization which helps young entrepreneurs to get their business chops and assists in building business ventures. It is home-base to such luminaries as; Finn Food, Tara Noodle, and Soyalla. The main conversations at their annual gathering were around healthful food options, regenerative agriculture, best practices in food production and food safety. Wow! This is what

I came for! I learned that bean to bar chocolate was being made in Bhutan by the talented chocolatier Kinley Pelden, her company YiGa Chocolate is of excellent quality with a complex aroma and deeply layered flavors.

Druk Tshongrig Gatoen DTG- Fostering Intelligent Business is a conference to promote young entrepreneurs. On one panel the discussion centered on dairy cows. Several decades ago Fritz Maurer, came to Bhutan from Switzerland and brought the highly prized brown Jersey cows who thrive in the high altitudes of Bumthang and produce the best milk and butter in the world. I should know, as a pastry chef butter is my bread and butter so to speak. I love the French, high quality Bordier butter so trendy now (at \$144-\$200 per kilo! –yes! you read that right) but I find Bumthang butter superior.

As a baker the most important ingredient I use is flour and I was extremely pleased to meet Pema Lhadon, of Shaoulee Food Products, who is buying from local farmers and milling all kinds of “alternate grains”. I don’t know why we call them alternate because they are the ones we should be using most. These flavorful and nutritious grains are; Sweet Buckwheat, Bitter Buckwheat, Soy beans, Whole wheat, roasted and plain and millet. They are not yet mainstream but if we value our health they will be. As I learn more about the incredible products “made in Bhutan” I am thrilled to use these ingredients in baking and cooking. Equally delicious are the local hazelnuts grown by Mountain Hazelnuts, this sustainable company profit shares with its farmers.

There is no effort anywhere that rivals his Majesty’s Desuung Skilling Program. Almost everywhere in the world you read about youth unemployment. Finally, here is a country that is doing something about it. It is one of the many parts of culture in Bhutan that the west needs to study and emulate. More than 1000 “De-suups”, as they are known, are taking high level training classes to prepare for professions that range from carpentry, auto repair, dance, painting, ceramics, STEM, and of course culinary and baking. Their motto is “Building Skillset, and Transforming Mindset”. Don’t we all need that!?



I recently visited the DeSuung ceramics course taught by Debbie Ng of Singapore and the quality and aesthetics were stunning. The simplicity of form, and harmonious palette of colors were at the level you expect to find in a museum collection. I was not surprised to learn that she supplies the excellent Michelin starred restaurant Odette, in Singapore, the Desuung Skilling program truly seeks out the best artisans.

As Sophia Wang, a student of MIT, the foremost engineering school in America, working at FabLab in Babesa told me, “His Majesty is committed to giving young people a real opportunity to establish a future grounded in craftsmanship.”

“Guardians of Peace”, the translation of De-Suung, builds the spirit of volunteerism, ethics, community service, integrity, and civic responsibility. All of which are already hallmarks of the Bhutanese people, and in this program, they are celebrated, enlivened, and given depth. In the Advanced Baking and Pastry Course that we recently completed, over 100 recipes and finished items of modern baking were realized. Our goal was to use the ingredients and sources of local growers and artisanal producers to create baked goods at an international level of quality. It is with pride in the students that I can say we achieved those goals and beyond. The creativity and love of craft is evidenced by the students’ diligence and effort to make delicious products that were also

beautiful to look at. One of the first things a tourist will notice in Bhutan is the appreciation of visual beauty and images. Every building has the traditional iconography of its history and religious background. It is not a superficial decoration -as the symbols so carefully painted on the buildings are the symbols of deep spirituality and belief systems which are the underpinnings of society here. One only need visit one of the many Dzongs to see a concentration of artistic talent that is unforgettable, the effort of artists over many centuries to translate their devotion into a visible image that inspires and uplifts the viewer. On the streets of Thimphu there are many handicraft shops that display an astonishing array of shapes and figures in bronze, silver, gold, fabrics, wood, and every imaginable noble material to express the love of craft but more importantly the very core of Bhutan's values, built upon centuries of bedrock Buddhist faith. It is one of the most enjoyable parts of any stay here is that people are well informed about Buddhism and its sacred texts and rituals. They are eager and generous in sharing this inspiring wisdom and the many narratives that illustrate it.

Perhaps one of the best ways to learn about the generous nature of people here is to look at the foundations that support students and new entrepreneurs. The government's Start-Up Center in Changzamtok gives creative and ambitious young people a leg up.

The Ministry of Industry, Commerce, and Employment has numerous programs and opportunities for learning the basic steps of entrepreneurship. The private Loden Foundation started by the wonderful Gérard and Anne Tardy, among others, is an example of devotion to improving the human condition. The foundation branches into three main areas of endeavor; Education, Entrepreneurship, and Culture, their sponsorship and scholarships are numerous. One of their co-founders, Dr Karma Phuntsho just received the Ramon Magsaysay Award (the "Asian Nobel Prize"). You may hear his inspiring acceptance speech on the Loden Foundation FB page in which he states, "As Bhutan's fledgling private sector grows, we hope to foster a culture of intelligent business, which is socially responsible, culturally sensitive, and environment friendly and contribute to building

a caring, wholesome, and sustainable economy – a GNH economy." All of these distinguished individuals and organizations have been a source of guidance and advice during my time here.

In short, I feel renewed and inspired by the experience of teaching here, and I am sure that I have learned more than I have taught. From the first moment of feeling overwhelmed by the enormous walls of mountain that surround Paro airport I have come to feel protected within those walls by a comforting and supportive society of citizens who value each other's unique personalities and celebrate their differences. If there is a thought, I cherish during the celebration of National Day it is how Bhutan wisely chooses its course of action and through experience, empathy, and the good judgement of its leaders it steers a path toward National Happiness, prosperity, personal and environmental health, and sustainable growth for its people.

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