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Recipes from Bhutan

Posted by [Becki Robins](#) | [South Asia](#)

You probably already knew this, but food and happiness are intimately connected. Bhutan, as it turns out, is the happiest nation in Asia and the eighth happiest nation in the world. So I'm pretty sure I know the reason why.



Sadly, this map is the best Wikipedia could do. I guess you can probably pick out that tiny green spot.

Located in South Asia at the eastern end of the Himalayas, Bhutan is a landlocked country of about 15,000 square miles and 700,000 people. It is bordered by India and China and its climate ranges from sub-tropical to sub-alpine. Almost everyone who lives in Bhutan (about 80 percent) is supported at least in part by the agricultural industry, which produces various grains, chilies, dairy and root crops, among other things. Bhutan has the great distinction of being the first nation in the world to ban the sale of tobacco, as well as one of the last nations in the world to introduce the television (its nationwide ban on TV and the Internet wasn't lifted until 1999). How much this has to do with the Gross National Happiness Index (and Bhutan is the only nation in the world to measure such a thing) is anyone's guess, but I personally would be pretty unhappy without Facebook and True Blood, so I'm guessing it at least helped. Mostly, though, I think it's the food. Because Bhutanese food is yummy.



Momo dumplings with ema datshi, served over Bhutanese red rice. Yum!

Recipes from Bhutan were actually not that easy to find, though, which is a shame because I would love

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World Cuisine at Travel by Stove

Discover food from around the world with Travel by Stove! I'm cooking one meal from every nation on Earth, from Abkhazia to Zimbabwe.

Visit me every Thursday for a new set of international recipes and a brief overview of the traditional foods in this week's country or region.

It's always a challenge to find recipes from around the world, so if you live or once lived outside the US and have a love for your nation's traditional foods, please send a few of your favorite recipes my way.

I love international foods and am fascinated by world cuisine and cooking traditions. (Now I just need to get my kids interested, too.)

About Me



Becki Robins
I'm a mother of four living in the little town of Rough and Ready in California's Gold Country. Yes, it's true, there really is a town called "Rough and Ready."

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to have a whole cookbook full of them. I was lucky enough to find a couple of recipes that looked really good, for the following reasons:

- 1. Cheese
- 2. Chillies
- 3. Yak

OK you were probably with me up until I said "yak." But after my very positive experience eating kangaroo burgers back in Australia, I really wanted to try some yak. So I set out on a yak hunt that actually lasted several weeks.

Surprisingly, yak is not that easy to find in my area, even though it is farmed here in the US. My friends at Corti Brothers in Sacramento couldn't get it, and although I did find one Sacramento restaurant that has it on their menu I decided against calling them up to beg a pound off of them since with the price of gas the drive down there would have actually cost more than just ordering it, even with two day shipping.

The source I eventually settled on was a company called [Exotic Meat Market](#), which (among other things) sells a lot of really weird things like crocodile, beaver, camel and lion. Yes, that's right, lion. Now in case you were thinking that a lion steak sounds like it would really hit the spot, an 8 to 12 ounce cut will actually set you back around 500 dollars. So I didn't order any lion, because I don't have 500 bucks, but also because ew. I did find ground yak meat on their site for \$30 per pound plus \$27 to ship. Pricey, I know, but hey, you can't put a price on new experiences. Unless it's 500 bucks for a lion steak.

Now I did have some minor trepidation about ordering meat over the Internet, since as you know I've ordered cheese online and had it arrive warm. But my order actually came the very next day packed in a Styrofoam container and still frozen solid. So it looks like I've found my new source for weird meats.



Yak patties. I actually have two of these still in my freezer.



In case you didn't believe me ...

If you don't personally care to try yak or if you just don't want to spend a foolish amount of money in doing so, they do actually eat beef in Bhutan and beef is considered an acceptable substitute in this recipe:

MoMo Dumplings
From [ThingsAsian.com](#)

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For the dumplings:

- 1/2 pound ground yak or beef
- 1/2 onion, finely chopped
- 3 cloves garlic, finely minced
- 1 ounce xiaoshing (Chinese wine, found in most Asian grocers)
- 2 tsp flour
- 2 tsp soy sauce
- 1 jalapeno pepper, seeds removed, finely minced
- 1 package round wonton wrappers
- A few large lettuce or cabbage leaves

For the dipping sauce:

- 1/4 cup soy sauce
- 1/4 cup rice wine vinegar
- 1 tsp chili oil



This is xiaoshing, also called "shaohsing," among other things.

The next recipe I chose is a fairly simple concoction of chilies, tomatoes and cheese called "ema datshi," which is not only the national dish of Bhutan but also the source of great Bhutanese pride. Traditionally, ema datshi is made with—you guessed it—yak's cheese. So I set off on my next quest.

Sadly, though, this time my quest was unsuccessful. I couldn't find yak's cheese online and I couldn't find it in any brick and mortar cheese shop. I finally emailed Eddy Sanders from Grunniens Yak Ranch in Colorado (another source for yak meat, by the way, though they were sold out by the time I was ready to place an order). Eddy told me that there isn't anyone in the US producing yak cheese at this time, mainly because regulatory requirements just don't make it practical to do so.

So I decided to cheat, because I really wanted to make this recipe. It's not like I've never cheated before, after all, and I usually try to do it the way I think a national living outside of his/her country might do it. So I poked around online and found some Bhutanese posters debating the best US substitute for yak's cheese in ema datshi, and finally settled on a 50/50 combo of feta cheese and Danish blue, which at least a few Bhutanese transplants agree is a decent substitute for the real thing.

So here is the **Ema Datshi** recipe, as shared by Kunzang Namgyel on "The Bhutanese Food Site," which has a small collection of authentic recipes. (My interpretations and changes are noted below).

- 9 oz chile peppers, sliced lengthwise into four pieces each (I used jalapenos, which are roughly the same as the peppers used in Bhutan)
- 1 onion, sliced*
- 2 tsp vegetable oil
- 2 tomatoes, chopped*
- 4 1/2 oz feta cheese *
- 4 1/2 oz Danish blue cheese*
- 5 cloves garlic, crushed
- 3 stalks cilantro, chopped *
- 1 cup Bhutanese red rice

(*Recipe notes: Kunzang's recipe called for onions "chopped longitudinally," which I took to mean sliced, since I've never actually seen that word used in a recipe. The recipe also didn't say what to do with the tomatoes or cilantro, so I assumed chopped. And as mentioned above, the combination of cheeses I listed in this recipe is a result of my research on Bhutanese forums. Lastly, Bhutanese red rice is imported from Bhutan and can be found at various online gourmet shops. I got mine from iGourmet.com.)

And finally, I did want to try doing a dessert, though I couldn't find any referenced on any of the Bhutanese websites I found. I did find a few desserts in the Bhutanese section of Recipes Wiki, though I don't necessarily trust that they are authentic since (like all wikis) anyone can post anything on that

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site and call it whatever they like. But I decided to do one of them anyway, so if you are from Bhutan and know for a fact that my choice is Just Wrong, please send me a note to let me know. Here it is:

Sweet Banana Soup with Tapioca

- 2 cups water
- 1/2 cup sugar
- 1 14-ounce can coconut milk
- 1/4 cup quick-cooking tapioca
- 2 large bananas, sliced into 1/2 inch pieces
- 1/2 tsp salt

The dumplings are the most time consuming of these three recipes, so let's start there:

With your hands, thoroughly mix the ground meat with the onion, garlic, xiaoshing, flour, soy sauce and jalapeno.



The base for your momo dumplings.



Mix well with your hands.

Lay out a few of the wonton wrappers and spoon a small amount of the filling into the center of each. Fold the wonton wrapper in two and then pinch the edges to make a tight seal. Alternately, the recipe says you can "pinch the dough into a series of tiny pleats, gathering the edge together into a tightly puckered rosette at the top." Like that's going to happen.



First drop a small amount of filling onto the center of the wonton wrapper.

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Now fold in half ...



... and pinch the edges. Done! With one of them, anyway.

After you've made about four million of these things, you may take note of the fact that your bowl of filling does not appear to have diminished in the slightest. I attribute this to some strange rift in the momo dumpling space-time continuum, which you may want to ask Steven Hawking about because I do not personally have any interest in understanding it.

So anyway, just ignore that sinking "this is never going to end" feeling and keep making dumplings. Eventually, you will reach the bottom of the bowl (I promise). In the meantime, avoid stacking your dumplings (as I did in the following picture) because they do tend to stick to each other (the wonton wrappers are tough enough that you can get them apart, but it's a little challenging). If you are making them in advance, you might want to dust your plate with a little bit of flour and just lay them down in a single layer.



My plate of dumplings. If you stack them this way, you will regret it.

When you're ready to cook the dumplings, line your steamer basket with the cabbage or lettuce leaves (the recipe says to use a bamboo steamer, but I used my electric one and it worked just fine). I'm still not sure what the exact purpose of this step is, but I suspect it's to keep the dumplings from sticking, although I think the cabbage leaves also lent a little flavor to the finished dumplings.

Put the dumplings on top of the leaves (don't let them overlap) and steam for 30 minutes.



Steam the dumplings for 30 minutes.

Meanwhile, mix the dipping sauce ingredients. Serve the dumplings hot with the dipping sauce.

The ema datshi comes together quickly, so you don't really need to start making it until the dumplings are underway. Here's how:

First make the red rice, which takes about 20 minutes to cook.



This Bhutanese red rice came from iGourmet.com.



It doesn't actually look a whole lot like rice.

Add the rice and 1 1/2 cups of water to a medium sized pot and bring to a boil. Reduce heat and cover. Simmer for 20 minutes or until all the liquid is absorbed.



It still doesn't look that much like rice.

Meanwhile, put the chiles and onions into a pot with the water. Add the vegetable oil. Bring to a boil and reduce heat to medium.



These vegetables just need to be boiled in a little water with some vegetable oil.

Boil uncovered for 10 minutes, then add the tomato and garlic.



Add the tomatoes and garlic ...

Continue to boil for 2 more minutes, then add the cheese and cook an additional 2 to 3 minutes. Add the cilantro and remove from the heat.

Stir and cover. Let stand for two minutes before serving over the red rice.



It's not the prettiest dish, but it is oh-so-good.

And finally the dessert, also simple:

Put the water and coconut milk into a medium saucepan and bring to a boil. Then add the sugar, salt and tapioca.



Bring the water and coconut milk to a boil.

Reduce heat to medium low and simmer for 30 minutes, stirring often. Add the bananas, then remove from the heat and let stand for 15 minutes.



Tasty, and light compared to most American desserts.

You can serve this hot (as I did) or you can let it chill it for a few hours.

So I know you are dying to hear what I thought of this meal, because I didn't make it obvious enough early in the post with all that talk about food being one of the keys to happiness. So I'll say it again: we loved this meal. At least, Martin and I did. The kids really didn't care one way or another. Dylan and Natalie ate their dumplings but couldn't be convinced to go back for seconds, though they remained blissfully unaware that they were eating yak (though I really don't know the word "yak" would have actually meant anything to them anyway). They also ate the rice, though I just topped it with a little feta cheese since I thought the ema datshi would probably be too spicy for them. Henry wasn't interested in any of it, which is pretty out of character for him, and Hailey was also not interested in any of it, which

is completely in character for her.

I thought everything was delicious. The yak was sweet and mild, and although I thought I could detect a little gaminess I now think it was probably just the differentness of it, since almost no one else says yak tastes gamey. The ema datshi was oh-my-god good, and the red rice was slightly nutty with a little bit of a chewy texture that was not at all unpleasant (reminiscent of brown rice, which I usually don't like). The banana soup was good, too; it was light and fruity and made a nice change from all those heavy Easter desserts we've been eating over the past week.

So yes, I have to say that overall my personal Gross Happiness Index went up a bit this week. These recipes are going into my family cookbook, which is good because I actually still have about 3.9 million momo dumplings left in my freezer.

Next week: Bolivia

For printable versions of this week's recipes:

- [MoMo Dumplings](#)
- [Ema Datshi](#)
- [Sweet Banana Soup with Tapioca](#)

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3 comments:



known

said...

Loved this post, and just retweeted it - I lead tours to Bhutan and it is a great introduction to the basic chilies and cheese. I hope some day you will start tweeting your posts - bet you would be rapidly popular with the travel bloggers. Cheers!
@BhutanChampaca

September 3, 2012 at 7:34 PM



Andrea

said...

Hi, I just commented on your most recent post and thought I'd come back to revisit your Bhutan post now I've been living here for 9 months. It looks like you strive really hard to be authentic, so I hope you don't mind my offering some comments on this post. I am not Bhutanese, but have eaten a lot of Bhutanese food this year, so that is my only qualification!

In my area (Bumthang, central Bhutan) all the cheese is made from local cows (yaks live in the highlands) and we buy it from the milk processing factory behind our house. It is mild, slightly sour in flavour and not at all salty, so quite similar to ricotta, but drier. I use a hand sized ball of this and most Bhutanese use processed cheese as well in their ema-datse and it gives it a characteristic flavour and texture - smooth.

The red rice you have looks really different to the red rice here! The rice we eat is tinted red and has a lovely flavour and texture but is fairly similar to brown rice we have in Australia. It is not the deep colour like in your photo which is surprising.

And as for your dessert, it is nothing like I have seen here, in fact those ingredients are not available here (except in the import shop in Thimphu). I love coconut milk but it is not a Bhutanese product and can only be purchased in the capital imported from Thailand. I know why you had trouble finding a Bhutanese dessert - I am trying to think when one was served this year - and can't think of a single one. Eating at a family home here is interesting. When you arrive, you are greeted with either sweet milky tea (naja) or butter tea (suja) and snacks - salty crackers, sweet biscuits and puffed rice and cornflakes. Then you have alcohol and dinner and more or less leave as soon as the food is finished - you don't linger as we do at home and don't have a dessert. In a way, the sweets are served first! I hope you don't mind my comments on your blog, but thought you would be interested.

October 4, 2013 at 9:46 PM



ki Robins

said...

Hi Andrea, of course I don't mind and in fact I love it when people from the countries I write about leave comments because it's so hard to find good information on the internet. Living in Bhutan makes you infinitely more qualified than I am. :)

I wish I'd known about the other cheese options when I made the ema datse, because all the sources I found led me to believe that it was always made with yak's cheese, which you can't get anywhere in the US. I did get the suggestion to combine a strong blue and feta from a message board for Bhutanese people living in the US, so I felt like it was at least a sort-of authentic choice, and I liked the results a lot (I've made ema datse a few times since then because we liked it so much).

The red rice I used is the only Bhutanese red rice I've ever seen here in the US, and the package said it was actually imported from Bhutan, but who knows what happens to it between here and there. Maybe they grow a different variety for export. That said I really, really loved that red rice and I keep buying it because it's got so much flavor. It is a bit like brown rice but I think it tastes nuttier.

Now the dessert, I'm not at all surprised to hear it's not Bhutanese. I got the recipe from a Wiki site which I now avoid unless there really is nothing, nothing, nothing out there because you just can't trust the accuracy/authenticity of those sites. I love to find recipes from bloggers who live in the countries I write about but sometimes it's really just impossible. I seem to recall that Bhutan was that sort of place--really not a lot of info online.

Do you have any Bhutanese recipes you could share? I'm collecting "corrected" recipes and suggestions from people like you and I like to post updates/additions when I can. That way these stab-in-the-dark type entries can be improved. Also I love what I've had of Bhutanese food so far and would really enjoy trying more. :)

Thank you for posting! I really appreciate the comments and corrections.

October 13, 2013 at 9:59 AM

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