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Cuisine of Kashmir

INTRODUCTION:

The history of modern Kashmiri cuisine can be traced back to the fifteenth century invasion of India by Timur, and the migration of 1700 skilled woodcarvers, weavers, architects, calligraphers and cooks from Samarkand to the valley of Kashmir. The descendants of these cooks, the Wazas, are the master chefs of Kashmir. The ancient epic of Kashmir, namely the Nilmatapurana informs us that Kashmiri is were heavy meat eaters. This habit persists in today's Kashmir. Kashmiri cuisine has evolved over hundreds of years. The first major influence was the food of the Kashmiri Buddhists and Pandits, the Hindus of the valley. The cuisine was then influenced by the cultures which arrived with the invasion of Kashmir by Timur from the region of modern Uzbekistan. Subsequently, it has been strongly influenced by the cuisines of Central Asian, Persia, and the North Indian plains. 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 Puloas. Emperors Jahangir and Shahjahan, with their lovely queens, their courtiers and kith and kin, made Kashmir their health resort and a place of sport, enjoyment, eating and drinking. Shahjahan used to visit Kashmir every summer and called it a Paradise on Earth. Jahangir's last wish, at his death, was 'Kashmir and Nothing else'.

Brief Historical Background:

Its salubrious climate, unrivalled and picturesque natural scenery, its invigorating, digestive, sweet and crystal-clear waters of springs and abounding streams, it's 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.

Characteristics Salient Features of Cuisine :

Throughout the history like its culture, Kashmir cuisine has stood high and unrivalled by any other state in India.

The food of Jammu and Kashmir differs from region to region with the Hindus Dogras of Jammu being predominantly vegetarian; eat a staple diet of rice, wheat and beans. The Ladakhis eat rice, wheat, millet, locally produced vegetables and fruits, goat meat and dairy products made from yak milk. Kashmiri food is characterised by its vast array of dishes cooked over a long period of time in exotic spices. The seasons and availability of fresh produce dictates the ingredients, some of which are dried and used in the winter months. The Kashmiri cuisine is essentially meat-based while the eating habits of the Hindu and Muslim Kashmiris differ in its use of certain spices and the prohibition of beef for the Hindus. There is another aspect to the food habits of the Kashmiri Hindus referred to as pandits. The Kashmiri pundits though Brahmans have been meat eaters since the Vedic times, more so because the snowbound areas of the valley make it very difficult to cultivate the food. Pandits eat only lamb meat , usually cut into large pieces or chunks. Beef, pork, chicken are prohibited for them. The two most important saints of Kashmir, Lalleshwari and Sheikh Noor-ud-din Wali were vegetarians for spiritual reasons. Nevertheless, meat is often cooked in many Kashmiri Pandit's festivals.

The highlight of Kashmiri cuisine is the formal banquet called "wazawan" that includes a spread of over 36 courses cooked all night long by a team of chefs called 'wazas' under the supervision of a 'Vasta-waza' or master chef, descendants of the cooks from Samarkand. The food is characterised by thick gravies using liberal quantities of yoghurt, spices and dried fruits, and is usually cooked in ghee (clarified butter) or mustard oil. Saffron, the most expensive spice in the world, is grown

locally. It is used extensively to flavour the pulaos (rice dish) and sweets. The popular dishes include the starter yakni, tabaq naat made of fried ribs, dum-aloo (steam cooked potato curry), Rogan josh made with mutton, gushtaba, a meatball curry and haleem made from meat and pounded wheat.

- ❖ Kashmiri rice forms an important part of the traditional food of Kashmir, striking a balance with the spicy Kashmiri dishes. Rice is in fact the main staple. It is consumed in many forms such as zarda pulao as dessert to barian for breakfast.
- ❖ Non-veg, consisting of mutton, chicken, fish, etc forms an important part of Kashmiri cuisine. The routine cooking in Kashmir is a combination of non-veg and vegetables in the same dish.
- ❖ A gourmet's delight, Wazwan is the ultimate name in Kashmir banquet. This royal cuisine of Kashmir has been influenced by Iranian, Afghan and Central Asian styles of cooking, despite which it has been able to create an identity of its own.
- ❖ Non-vegetarian dishes consist of an important part of not only the diet of a Kashmiri, rather a banquet (wazwan) also.
- ❖ The breads of Kashmir have an influence of Afghanistan, Central Asia, and the Middle East.
- ❖ Lamb is widely used in the wazwan and the cuisine in general. Specific parts of lamb are used to prepare specific dishes. Example, the neck is used for roganjosh, ribs are used for tabac-maaz and kabargah, the leg is used for dhaniwal and rishta etc.
- ❖ Another method of preparation is to pound the flesh that is carved out of the animal to achieve a very fine texture by breaking the tissues.
- ❖ Curd plays an important role in the cuisine and it is used in almost all meat dishes
- ❖ Mustard oil is used as the cooking media.

- ❖ The use of onion though not used in the Kashmiri Pandit cuisine but very popularly used in the Kashmiri Muslim cuisine.
- ❖ Asafoetida, better known as heing is very popularly used in the cuisine by the Pandits for tempering the food. The other spices commonly used include saunth or dried ginger and saunf powder. Kashmir cuisine is quite famous for the gracious use of spices like cinnamon, cardamom, cloves, etc. Spices used in Kashmiri cuisines give special taste and aroma to the food.
- ❖ Saffron is a very commonly used flavouring agent in this cuisine. Apart from this pollen, Bauhinia flowers (Kachnaar), Cock's comb flower (Mowal) etc is colour and food ingredient.
- ❖ Kashmiris dry most of their vegetables (sheengri) in the summer so as to preserve them from the harsh and cold winters when the fresh vegetables are scarce.
- ❖ Another spice mix commonly used in this cuisine is VER PASTE (Dry roast 1/2 kg dried Kashmiri red chillies, 25 gm black cardamom, 1/2 tbsp. black cumin seeds, 1/2 tbsp. green cardamom seeds, 1/2 tbsp. cinnamon powder, 1/2 tbsp dry ginger powder. This is cooled and ground to a fine powder. About 125 gm shallots - praan and 125 gm garlic is taken and and ground to a coarse paste, add to the above powder and shape into patty cakes with a hole in the middle , to pass a thin rope, dry cakes in the sun till no moisture is left.)
- ❖ Kashmiris eat a lot of green leafy vegetables during summers. The saag, as they call them, include Haaq, Sauchal, Kashmiri Palak, Wastahaaq and many more.
- ❖ Lotus stem or Nadroo is a very popular vegetable in Kashmir, which is grown in the shallow waters of Dal and Wular lakes. It is extensively used by the Kashmiri pundits during festivals and in daily cooking as well.
- ❖ There is no prominence of desserts in the Kashmiri cuisine

Key Ingredients:

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 competed 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.

Special Equipments:

- a) Dul', 'Dulij', 'Var', 'Chod', and 'Tagaer',- Baked clay, milk, curd etc., Containers.
- b) 'Faot' and 'Longun'- Plastered wicker basket for grains etc., and wooden mug.
- c) 'Girs', 'Gedva', 'Nar', 'Lutin', 'Abkhor', 'Jag', 'Baltin', 'Kamandal', 'Gangasagar', and 'Gagaer' Metallic water pots, some with handles.
- d) 'Goshpar' and 'Kaen'- Wooden mallet and flat stone.
- e) 'Greta'- Quern.
- f) 'Kashva', 'Krechh' and 'Chonchi',- Metallic and wooden spoons and ladles.
- g) 'Kangaer',- Fire pot.
- h) 'Kanz' and 'Muhul',- Wooden pole and big stone mortar for husking grains.
- i) 'Khalur' and 'Dula', - Boat shaped stone mortar and oval stone pestle.
- j) 'Krenjul', - Wicker basket for vegetables etc.
- k) 'Lachhul',- Broom.
- l) 'Maet', 'Math' and 'Nuot', - Baked clay big pots for grains and water.
- m) 'Niam' and 'Chhota', - Stone broad mortar and wooden pestle.
- n) 'Pahrat', 'Chilamchi' and 'Dunga', - Shallow and deep basins.

- o) 'ShrakaPuch', - Folding knife.
- p) 'Shrakh', 'Moand' and 'FashaKan',- Chopping knife, wooden block and hone.
- q) 'Shup' and 'Pariun', - Hand winnow and sieve.
- r) 'Tabach', 'Tok', 'Parva', 'Nar' and 'Machavar',- Baked clay plates and pots used for eating meals and drinking etc.
- s) 'Tasht' and 'Nar', - Deep metallic basin and spouted water jug with handles for washing hands etc.

Popular Foods & Seasonal Foods:

- Rogan Josh (lamb cooked in red sauce)
- Yakhni (lamb cooked in curd based sauce)
- Matschgand (minced lamb)
- Goshtaba (extra-minced meat balls cooked in creamy sauce)
- Qabargaah (Kashmiri Muslims refer to this as Tabakhmaaz; It is similar to Roasted Lamb) Syoon Pulaav (Meat Pulao)
- Modur Pulaav (Sweet Pulao, usually as a dessert)
- Lyodoor Tschaman (Cottage Cheese cooked in turmeric based sauce)
- Dum Oluv (Whole Potatoes cooked in Red Sauce)
- Muj Gaad (Fish with Radish)
- Nadir-Waangan (lotus stems with Brinjal)
- Nadir-Haaq/Gogji/Monji (lotus stems cooked with Spinach or Radish)
- Raazma-Gogji (Kidney Beans with Radish)

Specialties during Festivals and Other Occasions:

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.

Rishta: this is a very famous dish from Kashmir served traditionally as a course in the wazwan. This is prepared by poaching the lamb dumplings in a rich red gravy, flavoured with saffron and an extract of mowal. For preparing the dumplings, the meat is taken only from the leg of lamb. Traditionally in Kashmir, the animal is slaughtered and the meat is carved out fresh from the carcass and then minced. The lamb fat is mixed with this lamb mince. The red gravy is flavoured with different spices such as red chilli powder, fennel powder, cloves, ginger powder, cinnamon, asafoetida. this is a very famous dish from Kashmir served traditionally as a course in the wazwan. This is prepared by poaching the lamb dumplings in a rich red gravy, flavoured with saffron and an extract of mowal. For preparing the dumplings, the meat is taken only from the leg of lamb. Traditionally in Kashmir, the animal is slaughtered and the meat is carved out fresh from the carcass and then minced. The lamb fat is mixed with this lamb mince. The red gravy is flavoured with different spices such as red chilli powder, fennel powder, cloves, ginger powder, and cinnamon. 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,

servicing 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 salt less 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

- **Gushtaba:** This dish is made with lamb, freshly pounded to a paste. The boneless cubes of mutton are beaten along with lamb fat with a wooden mallet on a coarse stone so that the fibres break down, yielding a paste of meat. This meat gives the texture of a sausage on cooking. It is then flavoured with the black cardamom seeds (big elichi), fennel and black pepper corns, ginger powder etc. The gravy is made by combining yoghurt, ghee, salt and other Kashmiri spices. The gushtabas are poached in the gravy until they are spongy and tender.
- **Dhaniwal korma:** This is a rich preparation of lamb in a yoghurt based gravy. The meat is taken from the leg of lamb. The preparation of the gravy is started from pure ghee to which garlic paste, cloves and green cardamom etc are added. The gravy is finished by adding yoghurt, little turmeric and coriander powder and served garnished with coriander leaves.
- **Tabac Maaz:** This is a lamb preparation in which the meat is taken from the ribs of lamb. The lamb ribs are boiled in a mixture of milk and water with aniseed powder, ginger, turmeric, asafoetida and cinnamon powder till the meat absorbs all the water. After that, the meat is taken out, cut into pieces, and then pan – fried in hot ghee flavoured with cardamom, fennel and cinnamon. The pieces of meat are fried till they are crisp and golden brown in colour.
- **Aab gosht:** for preparing this dish, the lamb is cut in serving portions and boiled in water along with aniseed powder, ginger, garlic and salt till tender. Then the gravy is separately made by cooking fried onion paste in ghee with the addition of black pepper powder and reduced milk. The milk has to be reduced with green cardamom

so that the cardamom flavour is completely infused in the milk. Later the dish has to be finished with the addition of lamb stock.

- **Kabargah:**

- **Yakhni:** Boneless pieces of lamb (boti) along with boned pieces of lamb are stewed in yoghurt based gravy flavoured with fennel, cardamom and dried ginger powder to make yakhni. It is basically a thin gravy which is normally relished with rice. A vegetable variation can also be made with this and a common one is nadroo yakhni.

- **Roganjosh:** (rogan: oil; josh: hot) Lamb culled out from the shoulder is simmered in a gravy made from mustard oil, yoghurt, red coloured water from cock's comb flowers, brown onion paste, and spices such as kanel and cardamom. Ratanjog, the bark of a tree is utilized to bring the fiery red colour. Kashmiri spice mix called ver is also added to the dish for flavouring.

- **Rwangan tsaman:** Cottage cheese known as tsaman is commonly eaten in Kashmir in many variations. It is sometimes cooked with fresh fenugreek leaves and is called methi tsaman. Rwangan refers to tomatoes and this preparation calls for stewing cottage cheese in tomato gravy flavoured with ver and other spices.

- **Kashmiri aloo dum:** in this preparation medium sized potatoes are first lightly boiled in salt water followed by frying in mustard oil till crisp on the outer side. It is customary to sprinkle asafoetida water on top of the potatoes while frying. These are then cooked in a yoghurt based gravy flavoured with the Kashmiri red chilli paste, brown onion etc. This is then put on dum until the oil starts to float on the top.

- **Tsaman pulao / Kashmiri pulao:** It is a rice preparation in which the rice is cooked to three – fourth doneness with whole hot spices. The rice is cooked completely in milk and finished on dum with raisins, almonds, cumin tempered with ghee, fried paneer and peas. It is then flavoured with saffron and kewra. This can also be enriched with more nuts and glace cherries, when it is also referred to as Kashmiri pulao.

KASHMIRI BEVERAGES

- **Noon Chai:** Kashmiris are heavy tea drinkers. The most popular drink is a pinkish colored salted tea called "noon chai." It is made with green tea, milk, salt and bicarbonate of soda. The particular color of the tea is a result of its unique method of preparation and the addition of soda. This salted tea is very much like the salted tea prevalent in various parts of India. Noon chai is a common breakfast tea in Kashmiri households and is taken with breads like baqerkhani brought fresh from the Sufi, or bakers. Often, this tea is served in a large Samovars.
- **Kahwah / Kehwa:** At marriage feasts, festivals, and religious places, it is customary to serve Kahwah, or Qahwah (originates from a 14th century Arab coffee, which, in turn, was named after an ancient beverage of the Sufis) - a **green tea** made with saffron, spices, and almonds or walnuts. Over 20 varieties of Kahwah are prepared in different households. Some people also put milk in kahwah (half milk + half kahwah).
- Traditionally, Kahwah or Kehwa is prepared in a brass kettle known as a samovar. A samovar consists of a "fire-container" running as a central cavity, in which live coals are placed keeping the tea perpetually hot. Around the fire-container there is a space for water to boil and the tealeaves and other ingredients are mixed with the water for a perfect blend. Kehwa may also be made in normal pans and vessels, as modern day urban living may not always permit the use of elaborate samovars (or samovars, as they are popularly called in Kashmir)

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