



feast

tales of adventurous gastronomy

: Mongolia

by Sloan Schang

My first real meal in Mongolia was served in a windowless cinderblock diner situated about 10 miles from where the pavement ends. Nearly a day's drive from the capital of Ulaanbaatar, the rutty asphalt gives way to a casual network of dirt roads that meander across the steppes to Siberia, the Gobi Desert or any number of the world's most breathtakingly uninhabitable environments. That's where we stop for dinner.

I've hired a sweet giant named Bayaraa, a driver with an old Russian van, to take me two weeks into the countryside, and this first meal is a fast tutorial of what lies ahead. Bayaraa chats at the counter with a stern-looking grandmother and turns to me to inquire simply, "Meat?" Meat, I agree. Minutes later, I'm staring down at an alien stew—unidentifiable root vegetables, translucent ribbons of cabbage and intimidating

chunks of gristly bone-in mutton, all swimming in an oily brown broth. Before I can grope for absent utensils, my hand disappears in Bayaraa's bear paw. He turns my palm up and closes my fingers around a 10-inch fillet knife with a carved wood handle, because soup in Mongolia is eaten with a knife.

The earthy flavor and gamey texture of the mutton are repellent to my Western senses; I am unprepared for this meat. It tastes just like a living sheep smells. I also can't help that this soon-to-be-familiar sensation of lifting a fatty, greasy slab of mutton to my mouth will forever bind my palate to the harsh realities of living in Mongolia. Here, nomadic families subsist in an extreme climate on the scarcest resources imaginable: mineral-rich vegetables grown in the ground, flour from Russia and the golden fields of the north, and the protein-packed milk and meat of sheep, cattle, yaks, goats and horses. The simplicity and severity of the cuisine that emerges from a shallow Mongolian pantry are jarring.

In the unfiltered daylight, we stop frequently at frontier outposts perched on mountain passes

and lush riverbanks to eat salty mutton and flour dumplings, alternately steamed (*buuz*), boiled in water (*bansh*) or fried in mutton fat (*khuushuur*), seasoned with onions and garlic and always punctuated with the pungent aroma of sheep or goat's meat. I learn quickly to ask for these whenever possible, because the flour casing and sparse seasoning make the meat more tolerable to my palate. When there are no people around at the end of a day's driving, we simply camp in the road and eat from the dwindling supplies of canned fruit, biscuits and pasta packed in from Ulaanbaatar. But when there are people, we participate in the tender tradition of reciprocal hospitality at the center of Mongolian culture—arrival at a family's *ger* (a squat round tent that Russians call a "yurta") is immediately marked by the





A more prosperous family will always offer meat, and in these homes, the smell of cooked mutton hangs thick in the air of the *ger*. In one of them, Bayaraa passes me a charred, diminished goat's leg and his knife. I slice off just enough to be polite, and even though I know this is a flavor that will never agree with me, it hardly matters. There is animated storytelling of trials on the roads and the plains. On one side of the *ger*, a small black-and-white television flickers with power from a corroded car battery. On the other side, a father and son wrapped in the thick blue and gold robes of herders are troubleshooting a single-shot bolt-action rifle. My cup is refilled with tea, and I'm handed a wedge of pleasant white cheese that goes down like velvety Havarti and that surely originated from the shaggy brown yak milling around outside.

I'm here at the end of the warm season, possibly the last two weeks before the snow begins to fall and the country's nomadic majority load their *gers* onto ancient flatbed trucks or camel backs and move their livestock to sheltered valleys for the winter. Food stores are at their largest in anticipation of the brutal months

ahead, which means the family we bunk with on our final night also has a full steel drum of fermented mare's milk. It's a gut-twisting liquor that Bayaraa describes in English as "horse vodka" but that actually tastes like beer mixed with raw skim milk and smells like a horse. My first, acidic glass is nearly impossible to finish, but the alcohol content is high and I'm buzzed in moments. I readily accept seconds. The drink, called *airag*, may be losing ground to locally made vodkas (a taste Mongolians acquired after years of Russian communist occupation), but tonight in this *ger* it's bringing me closer to old Mongolia. Bayaraa warns me to go easy on the *airag*, and we temper its punch with thick, doughy dumplings, boiled atop a woodstove and served as a nourishing escape from the bitterly cold night outside. There is laughter and storytelling again, and with each bite, I'm less able to see where this food ends and life begins. In an industrialized society, the Mongolian diet of meat, salt and dairy would be a cardiac death sentence. But here on the high plains with a sub-zero winter approaching and simple survival on everyone's mind, this food is life. ☺

sharing of whatever food is available.

In a struggling home, this may be no more than a bottomless mug of *süütei tsai*, a salted milk tea that I have come to adore for its friendly symbolism and comforting warmth at the end of a long day traveling. In other homes, there may also be a bowl of crumbly dry and sour cheese curd that shocks my tongue like the prongs of a 9-volt battery before it dissolves into paste.

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