Bhutanese Food: 14 Dishes to Try in the Land of Chili & Cheese

Food 11 min read

> What is Bhutanese food? Imagine a cuisine where chilies are the vegetable, cheese is the sauce, and red rice is the centre of every plate. From ema datshi — the fiery national dish — to Haa's buckwheat hoentay dumplings and butter tea by the wood stove, eating in Bhutan is half the adventure. This guide covers the 14 dishes worth seeking out, how to manage the spice, what vegetarians can expect, and where to eat from Thimphu cafes to farmhouse kitchens.

What Is Bhutanese Food Like?

Bhutanese food is built on two things no other cuisine treats quite the same way: **chilies eaten as a vegetable** — not a seasoning — and **datshi**, a soft farmhouse cheese melted into everything from the national dish downward. Meals revolve around mountains of nutty **red rice**, hearty stews of pork, beef, and yak, and buckwheat in the higher valleys. It is honest farm food shaped by altitude and Buddhism: warming, filling, fiercely spicy by default — and easily made mild on request.

Every Byways tour includes meals, and hotel and farmhouse kitchens happily calibrate the heat. Here is what to order, dish by dish.

14 Bhutanese Dishes You Must Try

1. Ema Datshi — the national dish
Green or red chilies stewed whole in melted datshi cheese. It arrives at every Bhutanese table, and every family makes it differently. Start with a spoonful over red rice; the heat builds honestly. Locals judge a kitchen by it.

2. Kewa Datshi
The gentle cousin: sliced potatoes in the same cheese sauce, sometimes with a token chili on top. The dish to order when you want comfort rather than combat.

3. Shamu Datshi
Mushrooms — often foraged from Bhutan's forests — melted into cheese. In late summer, matsutake season around Ura and Genekha makes this a delicacy.

4. Phaksha Paa
Pork stir-fried with dried red chilies, radish, and mountain greens — the standard-bearer of Bhutanese meat dishes and a farmhouse staple.

5. Sikam Paa
Sun-dried pork belly, chewy-crisp and rich, fried with chilies. Bhutanese comfort food at its most unapologetic.

6. Shakam Paa

Dried beef simmered back to tenderness with chilies and radish. The drying concentrates the flavour — beef jerky reimagined as a stew.

7. Jasha Maru

Minced chicken stewed with ginger, garlic, tomato, and green chili — one of the lighter, most internationally friendly Bhutanese dishes, always served with its broth.

8. Momos

Steamed or fried dumplings filled with beef, cabbage, or cheese, dipped in **ezay** (see below). Ubiquitous, cheap, and the favourite snack of every Bhutanese teenager.

9. Bhutanese Red Rice

The kingdom's nutty, faintly sweet staple, grown in the Paro valley's mineral-rich soil. It cooks soft with a pale russet colour and pairs with everything above.

10. Hoentay

Buckwheat dumplings from the Haa valley stuffed with turnip greens, datshi, and walnut — traditionally made for **Lomba**, the Haa and Paro new year, and found in farmhouse kitchens across the two valleys.

11. Puta

Hand-pressed buckwheat noodles from Bumthang, tossed with mustard oil, Sichuan pepper, and egg — the signature dish of the central valleys.

12. Khule

Bumthang's buckwheat pancakes, earthy and slightly sour, eaten with honey, butter, or ema datshi at farmhouse breakfasts.

13. Jaju

A mild milk-and-greens soup that rescues chili-weary palates — the dish your guide orders for you on day three.

14. Ezay

Not a dish but the soul of the table: the chili condiment — fresh or dried chilies pounded with datshi, tomato, Sichuan pepper. Every kitchen's version is a signature. Jars travel home well.

And to drink or nibble: Suja (butter tea — salty, savoury, better with a khule pancake), **Ngaja** (sweet milk tea), **Ara** (the home-distilled rice or grain spirit of farmhouse hospitality, sometimes served warm with egg and butter), **Khapse** (fried Losar pastries), and **Chugo** (rock-hard dried yak cheese — a chew measured in hours, beloved on long drives).

Pro Tips

- Matsutake mushroom season (August-September) is worth planning around - the Ura valley even holds a Matsutake Festival.
- Ask for dishes "ema mebe" (without chili) or "khatsi khatsi" (medium) - kitchens adjust happily.

Dining Etiquette & Customs

Understanding Bhutanese dining customs enhances your cultural experience and shows respect for local traditions.

- **Receiving Food:** Always accept food and drinks with both hands as a sign of respect. When butter tea is offered, it's polite to take at least a sip.
- **Meal Structure:** Traditional meals are served buffet-style with rice as the centerpiece. Take small portions initially as hosts will encourage second helpings.
- **Eating Style:** Bhutanese traditionally eat with their hands, though utensils are always available for visitors. It's perfectly acceptable to use a spoon and fork.
- **Finishing Your Plate:** Leaving food on your plate may be seen as wasteful. Take modest portions and ask for more if hungry.

Cultural Note: Saying "Meshu meshu" (I've had enough) while covering your bowl prevents endless refills!

Spice Levels & Adjustments

Bhutanese food is genuinely spicy - chili is treated as a vegetable, not a condiment. Here's how to navigate the heat.

- **Hotel Restaurants:** Most tourist hotels prepare milder versions of traditional dishes. Simply inform your guide or server of your spice preference.
- **Local Restaurants:** Authentic eateries cook for Bhutanese palates. Ask for "kam chili" (less chili) when ordering. Start with Kewa Datshi (potato) before trying Ema Datshi (pure chili).
- **Cooling Agents:** Red rice, butter tea, and cheese help neutralize spice. Drink plenty of water but avoid gulping - it spreads the burn.
- **Building Tolerance:** If you're staying longer, gradually increase spice levels. Your palate will adjust within days.

Warning: Bhutanese "mild" is still spicy by international standards. When in doubt, err on the side of caution!

Vegetarian & Dietary Restrictions

While traditional cuisine centers on meat, Bhutan offers excellent options for vegetarians and those with dietary restrictions.

- **Vegetarian Dishes:** Ema Datshi, Kewa Datshi, Shamu Datshi, vegetable momos, and various curries are naturally vegetarian. Buddhist influences mean many locals eat vegetarian on specific days.

- **Vegan Options:** More challenging as cheese and butter are staples. Inform your operator well in advance. Red rice with vegetable curries and stir-fried greens are reliable options.
- **Gluten-Free:** Rice-based dishes are naturally gluten-free. Avoid momos (wheat wrappers) and some noodle dishes. Buckwheat (gluten-free) is common in Bumthang.
- **Allergies:** Communicate allergies clearly to your guide who will relay to restaurants. Peanuts, dairy, and MSG are common in cooking.

Tip: Write your dietary restrictions on a card in Dzongkha - your guide can help prepare this.

Regional Cuisine Variations

Bhutan's cuisine varies significantly by region, reflecting local ingredients and cultural influences.

- **Western Bhutan (Paro, Thimphu):** Most tourist-friendly with diverse options. Ema Datshi is king. Phaksha Paa (pork with dried chilies) is a regional favorite.
- **Central Bhutan (Bumthang):** Famous for buckwheat dishes including Khuli (pancakes) and Puta (noodles). Try locally produced cheese, honey, and the distinctive Bumthang beer.
- **Eastern Bhutan:** Influenced by neighboring cultures. Zaow (puffed rice) is a common snack. Dried meat and fish are more prevalent. Expect spicier preparations.
- **Haa Valley:** Known for Hoentay - special buckwheat dumplings filled with local cheese and spinach. A must-try if visiting the region.

Foodie Tip: Ask your guide about regional specialties as you travel - some dishes are only found in specific valleys.

Beverages: Traditional & Modern

Beyond butter tea, Bhutan offers a range of traditional and modern beverages to complement your meals.

- **Ara:** Traditional rice wine distilled in homes across Bhutan. Clear or sometimes mixed with eggs and butter, it ranges from smooth to quite potent. Often offered in farmstays.
- **Bangchang:** A milder fermented rice beverage, similar to sake. More common in eastern regions and less alcoholic than Ara.
- **Local Beer:** Druk 11000 and Red Panda are popular Bhutanese beers. Bumthang's craft brewery produces excellent wheat beer and apple cider.
- **Tea Varieties:** Beyond Suja (butter tea), Ngaja (sweet milk tea) is widely enjoyed. Herbal teas made from local plants are available at hotels.

Note: Bhutan has strict alcohol regulations. Don't buy alcohol on "dry days" (religious holidays) and respect local customs around drinking.

What is butter tea and should I try it?
Suja (butter tea) is made with tea leaves, yak butter, and salt - savory rather than sweet. It's an acquired taste but provides energy at altitude. Accept a sip when offered by locals as it's polite; try Ngaja (sweet milk tea) if you prefer.

Street Food & Markets

Experience authentic flavors and local life at Bhutan's markets and street food spots.

- **Centenary Farmers Market (Thimphu):** The country's largest weekend market. Sample fresh produce, dried meats, local cheese, and prepared snacks. Best visited Saturday-Sunday mornings.
- **Street Momos:** Small vendors near markets and bus stations serve freshly steamed momos with fiery ezay sauce. Affordable and delicious.
- **Doma (Betel Nut):** You'll see locals chewing this mild stimulant wrapped in betel leaf with lime. While cultural, most visitors find it too harsh to enjoy.
- **Seasonal Delights:** Look for fresh mushrooms in monsoon, dried meat in winter, and orchard fruits in autumn. Markets reflect the seasons.

Tip: Your guide can help navigate markets and translate. Try to visit early morning for the freshest produce and best photo opportunities.

Food Experiences & Activities

Go beyond restaurant dining with immersive culinary experiences that connect you to Bhutanese culture.

- **Cooking Classes:** Learn to make Ema Datshi, momos, or traditional snacks. Many hotels in Paro and Thimphu offer half-day cooking experiences with market visits.
- **Farmstay Meals:** Dine with a local family in their traditional home. Watch cooking on wood-fired stoves and share stories over homemade Ara. Highly recommended.
- **Cheese & Dairy Visits:** Visit the Swiss-established cheese factory in Bumthang to see how European-style cheese is produced at altitude.
- **Hot Stone Bath Picnic:** Combine a traditional Dotsho bath with a picnic lunch by the riverside - many operators can arrange this unique experience.

Foodie Must-Do: Request a picnic lunch at a scenic location - your guide can arrange fresh momos and local dishes with mountain views.

Food Safety & Hygiene

Bhutan has good food safety standards, but travelers should still take basic precautions.

- **Water:** Drink only bottled or purified water. Hotels provide safe drinking water. Avoid ice unless at reputable establishments.
- **Restaurant Standards:** Tourist restaurants maintain good hygiene. Street food is generally safe, but observe cleanliness before ordering.
- **Altitude Effects:** High altitude can affect digestion. Eat lighter meals on arrival days and avoid overly rich foods while acclimatizing.
- **"Himalayan Belly":** Spicy food can upset sensitive stomachs. Carry antacids and digestive aids. Start with milder dishes and gradually increase spice exposure.

Tip: Pack probiotics to maintain gut health. If you experience issues, plain rice and boiled vegetables are readily available.

Is the tap water safe to drink?
No, visitors should only drink bottled or purified water. Hotels provide safe drinking water. Avoid ice in drinks unless at reputable establishments. Carry a reusable bottle and refill at hotels.

Where to Eat: Restaurant Guide

From fine dining to local eateries, here's where to find the best meals across Bhutan.

- **Hotel Restaurants:** Most visitors eat at their hotel as meals are included. Quality varies from basic to excellent. Five-star properties offer both Bhutanese and international cuisine.
- **Thimphu Dining:** The capital has the most variety - from upscale restaurants like Bukhari to local favorites like the Ambient Café. Your guide can recommend options based on your preferences.
- **Paro Options:** Restaurants near Tiger's Nest serve good lunches. The Zhiwa Ling and Uma hotels have excellent restaurants open to non-guests.
- **Off the Beaten Path:** In remote areas, meals are often prepared by your guide/cook or at basic guesthouses. Expect simpler but authentic fare.

Budget Note: Meals are typically included in tour packages. Extra dining and beverages are usually paid separately.

Frequently Asked Questions

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Need More Information?

Contact our Bhutan travel experts for personalized advice.

bywaysinquiry@gmail.com | +975 77973131 | www.byways.bt