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Food as Culture: The Kazakh Experience

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The Kazakhs have an amusing anecdote often told at the table:

Once a Kazakh came to town to buy food for an upcoming *toi* (feast) celebrating the expected birth of a child. He met there his Uzbek friend. The Uzbek was delighted at the chance to display his hospitality and invited the Kazakh home as a guest. It was impossible to refuse, and the Kazakh, even though he was in a hurry to return home, agreed. The Uzbek brought him home and began to entertain him generously. There was flat bread, grapes, honey, dried fruits, unusual sweets and a great deal of green tea. ("Thank God, it's hot," the Kazakh thought, "but it's so...pale, it hasn't steeped very long.") At the end of the day they brought in a plate of greasy pilaf. ("Why on earth is it made with raisins and nuts — maybe they don't have enough food?" the Kazakh said to himself.) After the meal the Kazakh, to the surprise of his Uzbek hosts, stayed for the night. The wish of the guest is law. In the morning, they had tea, and again at the midday meal; in the evening they served soup. ("Fairly tasty, but too full of potatoes.") And again the Kazakh stayed for the night, although for some reason he began to worry. The host was already unhappy that he had invited him home. Groaning, he went off to the market to buy something for the table and in his heart lamented that he simply couldn't get rid of the Kazakh. But a wise man said, "Did you feed him?" "Fed him." "With

what?" "Everything!" "Did you give him *bashbarmak*?" "What on earth is that?" "Go buy a sheep, boil it whole in water, dump it in front of him, and he'll leave." The Uzbek had no choice; so he did it. And he had no sooner served the meat, when the Kazakh began to hurry, washed his hands, thanked everyone, tasted the meat, drank the broth and immediately began to say his goodbyes. "I apologize, friend, but I'm in a rush — it's possible that my wife has already given birth. I simply didn't realize that your pasture is so far from the city. Well, so be it. Farewell."

When publishing this tale, one ought to give it a title — for example, "The Dumb Kazakh," or the "Dumb Uzbek," or even "Two worlds — Two Civilizations"...² A more academic title would be appropriate: "The Role of Stewed Meat in the Hospitality Ritual of the Kazakhs," "On the Question of the Semiotics of Food," etc., etc.

All of the well-known literature on the ethnography of nomads starts with the premise about their being deprived of any agricultural products, and, in connection with that, the impoverished nature of the nomadic diet. It is normal to state laconically that the basis of the nomad's diet is meat and milk — that is, those things which can be obtained directly from their animals. Meat and milk products are distinguished for their high protein content and indeed maintain the energy of individuals engaged in heavy physical labor. However, the diet of the nomad in fact never was limited to them. One need but recall the numerous

observations of travelers concerning the abundance of festive entertainment at weddings and memorial feasts of the nomads, and also the rich materials of folklore. The portrayal of elaborate feasts is infinitely varied and evocative, for example, in the Kazakh epic "Koblandy-batyr", the Kyrgyz epic "Manas", and in any other epic tales of the Central Asian nomads.

One of the basic reasons for such misunderstanding regarding the diet of the nomads is, if you wish, historical and ecological. Let me explain. The fact is that the food values of the traditional (steppe) and contemporary (farmed) products of animal husbandry hardly bear comparison. Above all this is connected with the nature of the vegetation cover of the pastures and the grazing pattern of the animals. Even today, the quality of the sheep in Kazakhstan and the USA, for example, cannot be compared. Here is an example.

In 2002 in Washington a Kazakh delegation of 18 people, invited to participate in an international celebration of the countries of the historic Silk Road (The Silk Road: Connecting Cultures, Creating Trust. The 36th Annual Smithsonian Folklife Festival On the National Mall, Washington, D.C.), despite the perfectly satisfactory food both in the hotel and at the festival grounds, decided to find a way to eat "normal" (that is, traditional) *bashbarmak*³ — the Kazakhs' favorite meat dish. Our hospitable American friends straight away found a farm located not far from the capital, took us there, allowed our experts to select the best sheep, slaughter it on the spot and themselves begin to prepare it. The entire procedure was videotaped. Everyone was bursting with enthusiasm and taking pains to ensure the best possible outcome, but in the end they were disappointed. The meat was different. The connoisseurs quickly discovered the chief reason: the

grass in that area was too watery, resulting in meat that was “watery,” lacking in flavor, and “porous.” In addition, the sheep, which for the most part were penned up, had not developed enough muscle mass. Our Kazakhs carefully considered all the factors. Thus it became clear that even today people can tell a lot from the taste of meat: the sex of the animal, whether it was free-range or penned up, whether it was a lamb or a mature sheep, and how exactly it had been cooked.

In traditional society, the sheep to be slaughtered was first shown to the guest, then laid on its left side, its legs tied in pairs, its throat cut without injuring the spine, and the blood drained. Then an incision was made in the skin and the carcass “undressed” — the skin was peeled off by hand, starting with the abdominal cavity, then the legs and finally the spine. The abdomen was cut up, the stomach and innards carefully removed and cleaned off to the side. The stomach was emptied of its contents, turned inside out, washed and then the lining scraped off, care being taken not to harm the walls. The intestines were washed, thrice stretched on the spout of a tea kettle with cold water and then turned inside out. The small intestine (*ashy ishek* — “sour tasting intestine”) was crushed and boiled together with the meat, as were the kidneys (a treat for children). The animal’s lungs were not highly valued as food, but were important in the healing practice of the shaman or *baqsu*. Held by the windpipe, they would be used to flagellate the ill person in order that the disease be transferred to the sheep’s lungs. Then the lungs would either be given to the dogs or buried. There was one other way of using the lungs, in what we might call silent speech, a traditional way of expressing an unspoken reproach. In such a case, a piece of boiled lung would be served to a guest as though by oversight, acci-

dentally, “the mistake of someone who was helping,” and thus express a sense of insult. (Here is a case of a play on words using absolute homonyms—lung, *okpe*, and insult, *okpe*). The guest was then expected to explain how his action in the past or unfortunate conduct had insulted the hosts and insofar as possible correct his mistake.

The slaughter of animals, carried out according to Kazakh custom (in contrast, for example, to the Mongolian), requires maximum removal of blood: the blood should be carefully collected and buried in a safe place. It is thought that blood, if it remains in the tissue, is the first thing to spoil. The division of the flesh requires a knowledge of animal anatomy, since all bones need to remain unharmed. In the case of a ritual meal, the bones would be carefully collected and buried, in order that the numbers of the herds be restored. Meat which remained on the bones is sliced and salted, whereby, according to Kazakh belief, the curing, the ripening of the meat supposedly continues. It would then be dried for at least one night, with the aim of removing any moisture, firming it up and concentrating its flesh. The head and extremities are seared on an open fire, the innards washed and used to make *kuyrdak* (boiled innards with onion), a dish that can be quickly prepared. The remaining meat is divided into 12 muscle groups, parts which correspond to the 12 parts of the human body or the 12-year calendrical cycle. Each part has its own social status and significance in the subsequent sitting. Each guest, depending on his place in the social order, is obliged to receive his share. To the son-in-law, for example, always goes the breast (*tyos*), and to the young bride the *kuiymshak* (the last vertebrae).

The head of the sheep, which has been cooked separately, occupies a special place in the meal and is given to the oldest or

most honored guest. Before serving it, the lower jaw is cut off and the host makes a cross-shaped cut on its forehead. The person who receives the head must share with all those present, accompanying his action with formulae of good wishes. Thus, they give out the ears and eyes to the young (so that they learn to listen and be observant), the tongue and palate to the poets (as a symbol of eloquence) and to the singers (as the emblem of a silvery, virtuosic, and ringing throat), and pieces of the singed skin (*kuika*) to the others. Brains are not given to the young, since it is considered that only the wise are worthy of that honor. A dish prepared from finely chopped brains mixed with meat and dough (*mipalau* – pilaf of brain) is given to toothless seniors, in the belief that this mixture is especially nutritious.

It is clear that the ritual has a magic function, in the course of which, by partaking together, a single social group is created and its structure made apparent.

A special place in wedding ritual is occupied by a dish around which is distributed boiled and thinly sliced tail fat and liver (*kuiiryk-bauyr*), where the alternation of the dense and dark with the tender and light symbolizes the paired opposites of male and female, and the liver, as the organ which generates blood, symbolizes kinship and birthing. If, at the time of the betrothal, both parties to the union receive this dish, then the betrothal is considered to be legally binding and a subsequent refusal by one of the sides to marry will create great unpleasantness.

During the wedding, when the movement of the young couple is accompanied by showering them with grain and sweets, at the entrance to the yurt or house of the groom the bride feeds the fire — that is, throws on fat or pours on it melted butter. While doing this she invoked the goddess

Umai, the protector of women in childbirth, whose name has the sound of the word *mai* (fat), and asks a blessing on her married life. In this way the bride joins the kin of her husband, since the burning of the butter also symbolizes the feeding of the ancestors of the given clan.

Having crossed the threshold, the bride meets her in-laws, who, holding hot, freshly-baked flat bread in the bosom, embrace the bride. In this ritual the bread symbolizes the placenta, and the whole procedure the making of the bride into a daughter.⁴ The Kazakhs say that a bride selected by god is created at birth from the remains of her future mother-in-law, who then discovers as a result a closer relationship with her.

A no less magical substance is the dish *zharys kazan* (literally, a "cauldron-contest"), in which meat is heaped up and put to boil at the moment when labor in childbirth begins. The readiness of the dish, the completion of its cooking, is supposed to influence the readiness of the fetus to be born and facilitate a natural and safe birth.

Apart from mutton, Kazakhs use beef, goat, camel and horse meat. The last of these is the most highly valued. Only specially fed and tethered mares are slaughtered, ones which have never been ridden or used in other work. The special regime of feeding such mares is called *zhylki bailau* (the tying of the mare), and the slaughter of the mare in early winter, *sogym*. *Sogym* becomes a holiday for the whole community, each member of which receives a portion. The first meal after the slaughter is one in which all members of the community gather at one table (*dastarkhan*).

In a somewhat analogous fashion to the white and dark meat of a Christmas turkey, horse meat has dozens of parts which differ in taste, texture and use. Thus: *kazy*, whole, salted and cured ribs in a casing of intestine; *shuzhyk*

— a sausage, in which large chunks of meat and fat are sprinkled with salt, pepper and wild (nowadays ordinary) garlic; *karta* — the tenderest part of the large intestine which has been turned inside out; *zhal* — the very juicy part under the mane; *zhaia* — the firm, cured and dried soft part of the haunch.

The techniques of preparation of horse meat include salting, marinating, and also drying and curing with juniper smoke. Depending on the time taken for each procedure and the combination of methods, innumerable taste combinations may be imparted to the end product, horse meat. This product of itself has endless variety, depending on the type of pasture, feed, the age of the animal, etc. etc. From this follows the combination of different kinds of meat into one dish, in a way analogous to how seven notes and three chords provide the basis for all European music of the last three centuries. Thus, Kazakhs perceive a symphony of aromas, tastes, colors and textures in the myriad embodiments of a single dish — *et*, which is known in the literature as *beshbarmak* (literally, "five fingers"). It is served in conjunction with dough which has been rolled out and boiled in broth and on which are placed pieces of stewed meat which has been cut into large chunks. Poured over this combination of dough and meat is an onion sauce, *tuzdyk*, whose quality determines the taste of the entire dish. Rings or half rings of juicy, crisp onion are covered with fat skimmed from the broth, salted, peppered and then simmered on a slow flame. Heaven help the person who overcooks the onion — it will all be spoiled! The onion should retain its crispness and having just begun to secrete onion juice, replaces it with concentrated broth and becomes transparent. Only once have I tasted French onion soup which could be compared with the Kazakh *tuzdyk* sauce.

Tuzdyk can even rescue unsuccessful meat. For example, if the meat had been stored too long in the freezer, it is possible to freshen it after the initial boiling by braising it in *tuzdyk*.

The quality and the texture of the dough also has an infinite number of variations and depends at very least on five basic factors: 1. on the type of flour (finely or coarsely ground, from milled or whole grain, from hard or soft wheat, home-made or commercial); 2. on the nature of the liquid (whether the dough is mixed with icewater, warm or hot water); 3. on the amount of salt (lightly salted or saline solution); 4. on the presence or absence of eggs in the dough; and, 5. on the amount of kneading (soft or firm dough).

In the preparation of the dough, its feel is extremely important. While working it, one pays particular attention to the quantity of liquid ingredients, adding flour as needed and achieving the requisite firmness and springiness by comparison with human skin — for example, they say about dough: it is light and soft like a child's cheek (or a baby's behind), or it is springy and firm like the breast of a nursing mother, etc. The mixing of the dough always alternates with letting it rest — until, as they say, the dough is "sated" and ready to be rolled out. It is rolled out with a long rolling pin of narrow diameter, to the point where the dough forms a circle of the thickness and transparency of a sheet of paper. Such dough when boiled will not fall apart nor will it stick to itself.

Such tender and white dough goes well with tender and light-colored mutton. Camel and horse meat, on the other hand, require a darker and thicker dough, pieces of which are cut up into smaller portions and boiled longer so that they absorb the broth.

Beshbarmak is served on several dishes — in earlier times flat wooden ones, and now enameled or ceramic ones — so

that one dish will serve three to four individuals of the same age group. Each dish has a name depending on which cuts of meat are on it. For example, *bas tabak* is the main dish, *zhambas tabak* has the cuts from the abdomen, *k'iuieu tabak* is the dish with the breast for the son-in-law, etc.

Beshbarmak is normally eaten with the right hand. Eating with the hand allows one not only to sense the temperature of the food (and thus be certain that the mouth never will be burned) but also assemble and combine according to taste the dough, a piece of meat and some onion into an appetizing portion. Moreover, while sitting on the floor, it is difficult to handle a fork with layers of dough and pieces of meat on it taken from the gravy without dripping on the table cloth, the rug and one's own clothing. In using a fork, it is necessary to hold out the left palm and inevitably scorch it with dripping gravy, which can then only be licked off or endlessly cleaned with napkins. Kazakhs are convinced that the right hand is especially suited to eating this dish. There is even a specific joke. They ask: "Why is the thumb shorter than the rest of the fingers and off to one side?" And they answer: "So that it will be easier to shape the food into a portion, lift it to the mouth and then place it in the mouth with a single movement of the thumb." (Kazakhs know that it is especially important to have a thumb when eating pilaf, since rice easily sticks together in a lump.)

The traditional concluding ritual of the meal is now becoming but a memory — *asatu*, when the elder feeds with his own hands and from his own dish all the young unmarried participants in the meal, thus bestowing on them a blessing and wish for long life and sharing his social status. Children, who compete for the right before the meal to pour water on the hands of guests for washing and then offer a towel,

await *asatu* as a reward and promise of good fortune in life.

At the end of the meal they serve hot broth (*sorpa*) which, according to the elders, contributes to easier digestion of the meat.

The meal, which begins with an invocation, concludes with the ritual *bata beru* (the bestowing of blessings) and *dastarkhan kaiyru* (closure, literally the "return" of the dastarkhan), after which people engage in relaxed conversation and music making.

Any leftover food is taken away and sorted, the onion removed, the dough and meat stored separately. The broth is poured off, the bones cleaned and everything left for the next day. Some people even prefer day-old beshbarmak, when it tastes so good to eat the cold meat with traces of aspic from the broth in its folds along with hot bread. Alternatively, one can cut the cooled and hardened dough into narrow strips, fill it with small pieces of meat, and heat it in a little broth to prepare a special dish, *naryn*, or fry the dough in butter and eat it separately. When diluted with water, the concentrated broth serves as the base for soups called *kespe*, containing freshly rolled out dough which is then wrapped into a roll and cut into narrow strips.

I have always been struck by this endless transformation and reworking of one dish into others. The basic principle is completely waste-free production. Literally everything went into the food. Even the congealed fat removed from the broth was melted and used for frying or in making dough for bread. This fat, like butter, may be stored for a long time in a dried sheep's stomach, from whose walls it is believed some beneficial substances are absorbed which impart medicinal qualities. Then the fat may be used to treat illnesses of the skin and joints.

Just remembering the quantity of cholesterol I consumed in the

past now makes me shudder. But nowhere and never have I seen such strong, healthy and hardy people as I did in my childhood. Anyway, that already is another lifetime...

I have heard tell of special dishes which were prepared only by men when hunting. Along with ordinary meat cooked on a spit over an open fire, my imagination is stirred by so-called *esip*. Elders insist that the size of the stomach of any being equals the volume of its soft tissues. Thus the stomach of captured game would be stuffed with its meat (with salt and wild edible herbs), sewn up, buried in sand and a fire lighted over it. The meat slowly braised literally for hours. The walls of the stomach turned into a solid container, inside of which the aromatic and soft meat stewed in its own gravy. Each time I heard these tales I regretted that I had not been born a boy and thus could not go hunting.

Among the mythological hunting tales connected with food is the story about the great hunts of the past when a giant wild bull was cooked on a spit. It supposedly happened in this way. The various kinds of game were dressed, the heads and extremities removed. Then they began to place one animal inside the other in a specific sequence. First they sewed a pigeon (*kogershin*) into a steppe grouse (*ular*), then the grouse was sewn into a goat (*eshki*) the goat into a wild sheep (*teke*), and the sheep into a bull (*buka*), which had not been skinned. And all this together was roasted slowly all night over the fire, having been hoisted on a truly gargantuan spit. Toward morning, the bull practically was burned to a crisp and came apart like a ceramic dish, its contents being cooked to perfection and ready to eat.

The confused details of this typically male dish — details whose symbolism already has been half forgotten — such as the

selection of animals, their number, the cutting apart of the joints of the animals and birds before the start of the preparation process, and in an even greater degree — the lighting of the fire and the all night vigil until dawn — connect in certain ways with an analogous ritual of preparation of *nauruz kozhe* (a new year's soup) by women in the night of the spring equinox (March 21-22, the Nauruz holiday). Women cook soup all night in a huge hemispherical kettle, rhythmically and without pause tracing the path of the sun in the way they stir it with a paddle (*pispek*) (from the verb *pis* — cook, to be cooked, to stick into, to stir up with a paddle). The paddle is a stick with a cross-piece at the bottom (analogous to the stirring stick used for agitating kumiss). In addition to the heaped up meat, generally they put into this soup five different grains — millet, oats, wheat, rice and corn. However, the selection of ingredients may vary depending on what is available (for example, beans may substitute for corn), and even the inclusion of water and meat in the number of countable ingredients may be optional. Only women of child-bearing age may participate in this ritual. At dawn, they give to the elders the separately cooked head of an ox (who cooks it, where, and how are not clear from the stories), and then all eat *nauruz kozhe*. There is an obvious correlation in the symbolism of these two somewhat parallel ritual dishes, the hunters' and that for nauruz. They both are prepared at night, in both there must be five ingredients. However, the one, for men, is distinguished by the fixed nature of its components, even as the second is marked by their fluidity. Whereas the first is entirely restricted to the closed male society of the hunt, the second involves exclusively women, although in the final reckoning it is in principle open to the whole community.

To tell about meat products may

create the impression that the Kazakhs eat only meat, literally from morning to late at night. Meat is indeed consumed by all members of a Kazakh family, the only exceptions being for pregnant women, who should not eat camel meat or certain parts of a sheep. But in general to characterize the Kazakhs as exclusively meat eaters would be a mistake. Fresh meat is prepared primarily on the occasion of receiving guests; in the daily diet, they rely on grain and milk products.

Unlike with meat, whose basic qualities to a considerable degree are predetermined by natural and seasonal conditions, products made from flour are the main stage on which the cook may demonstrate her talents. There is a wide spectrum of breads and other dishes made from flour, ranging from *kuimak* (a thin *blin*, rather like a French crêpe), cooked on a flat frypan and made of liquid batter mixed from whey and intended for immediate consumption, to flat breads baked on coals in two frypans, which hold between them the sourdough.

Even today the most popular food made with flour is balls of dough fried in boiling oil (to a degree similar to small donuts). The so-called *boursak* or *kyiksha* are not round but cut from rolled out sourdough. Leavening dough with commercial yeast is a rather late invention. Instead, people used as a leavening *ashytky*, the remains of the previously prepared bread. The art of making the initial *ashytky* was kept secret, although it is possible to develop a certain general understanding about the stepwise process of creating such a sourdough starter at home. The first stage is the liquid leavening (*ashytky kamyry*) with salt in sour milk; the second stage is the fermentation of this leavening in a warm place; the third, the feeding of the leavening with sugar or honey; the fourth stage is an inelastic dough, mixed with flour until it is about half prepared (but still sticky); the fifth

stage is the addition of flour and the mixing of a soft, non-sticking dough. At that point part of the dough is set aside in a covered container (best of all one made of clay or ceramic) as a reserve, and fat is added to the remainder, after which the dough is formed into loaves. The leavening remains alive for 7-10 days. Generally it is about then that it is time to bake more bread for the family.

The attitude of Kazakh women to the ripening dough is indeed maternal: it is protected from drafts, from sharp drops in temperature, even from unnecessary agitation. It is common to cover the dough with a specially sewn blanket. It is even forbidden to praise the rising dough, so as not to jinx it, etc.

The cult of ancestors, which is strictly observed by Kazakhs, requires regular preparation of *shelpek* or *zheti nan* (seven breads), round, sourdough flat bread fried in fat. (The number of these breads should be a multiple of the magic number seven.) This is to be done on Thursdays, or when one has dreamed about deceased relatives, or in connection with a visit by guests who knew and loved the deceased. It is believed that the spirit of the ancestors (*aruakh*) is fed by the aroma or smoke from the frying of *shelpek*.

The best recipe for *shelpek* is to mix into soft dough one cup of over-ripe, even bubbling, sour cream, which had been left overnight in a warm place, along with a pinch of salt, a sprinkling of sugar and two pinches of soda. The dough made in that way is covered and left in a warm place for an entire day. Then in the evening one must carefully and tenderly knead it and divide it into seven portions, roll out the balls with a large rolling pin and let them rest, then fry them on both sides in a deep frypan filled half way with vegetable oil. It is important to have the fat at the right temperature, which can be

determined by tossing into the oil a bit of flour, which should sizzle but not burn. Fat that is too hot chars the bread and does not allow it time to breathe; insufficiently hot oil begins to absorb into the dough and makes the bread too greasy and heavy. The bread should be enjoyable and light—it is eaten hot, while declaring “*Kabyl bolsyn*” (“May it be accepted!”).

The process of the stepwise transformation of the end product can be seen especially clearly in dairy dishes.

The Kazakhs use milk from all types of animals in varying combinations. Nowadays the majority of milk products derive from cow’s milk, since it is the most readily obtainable. Kazakhs observe a single rule for all types of milk: before beginning any preparation, the milk has to be scalded. Otherwise it is considered raw, unripe, and not brought to life by heat. Of course this reflects popular experience, since raw milk may contain harmful bacteria.

The cream is removed from the boiled milk and butter made from it in wooden churns.⁵ At one time the butter was preserved in the stomachs of sheep, in which it not only did not become rancid, but even breathed through the pores of the skin, absorbing healing enzymes from the tissue of the stomach. Over time such butter became as well a healing ointment, which helped in skin diseases and in healing wounds.

In working with milk, the primary task is the gradual elimination of superfluous liquid. Here again we have an obvious process of thickening, concentration, and condensation — the change in the consistency of the end product, achieved by means of fermentation. Sour cream is added to warm milk (the temperature level is easily checked — the hand should feel neither heat nor cold), mixed, and then wrapped in a specially sewn felt cover or woolen scarves and

blankets and left to ferment overnight. It is essential not to let it cool or to shake it. By morning there forms in the pan a product which compares with thick yogurt, which Kazakhs call *katyk*. Its consistency is such that when a spoonful is removed, whey quickly collects in its place. If the *katyk* is passed right away through cheesecloth, the remaining coagulate forms so-called *suzbe*, from which all the acidity has been removed with the whey. This delicacy is a special favorite of children and elders. In order to store *suzbe*, one must suspend it and allow the remaining liquid to drain, then mix it with flour and salt which have been roasted, form it into balls and dry it on the roof of a porch in the sun. The result is *tushy-kurt* — mild cheese, usually rather high in fat content and easily chewable. If *katyk* is stirred, so as to activate the process of fermentation by introducing air, and over the next 10-15 days new *katyk* is added, the result is a different product — so-called *airan*, which one can drink as it is or, if diluted by half with water, make into a drink called *shalap*. When *airan* has been drained, salted, rolled into small balls and dried in the sun, one gets *ashy kurt* — salty sour cheese, which then is broken into pieces and will keep as long as one wishes. *Kurt* which has been broken up may be added to broth, which, in addition to sourness, acquires healing qualities and thus is used to treat head colds. (Since it makes one sweat, the broth made from *kurt* eliminates coughing and fever.) *Airan* also is diluted with sheep’s milk, which thickens in this mixture (two kinds of milk) and adds lightness as if of beaten eggwhites, the resulting dish known as *akta*.

Even the whey which remains after straining, rich in proteins and minerals, is not thrown away. When boiled down to dryness in a cauldron, it forms an orange-colored grainy mass, *irimshik*, which when mixed with melted

butter creates a new delicacy — *kospa*. (The more delicate *irimshik* is obtained from fermenting of steamed milk in a calve’s stomach and by subsequently boiling it down, although this technique is already becoming a thing of the past.)

Yet one more dairy dish, which is especially appreciated in the hot summer, is a broth called *kozhe* — a drink fermented from *airan* and boiled grain. There several varieties of summer broths, which differ depending on the kind of grain: *tary kozhe* — millet; *bidai kozhe* — wheat; *zhugeri kozhe* — corn; *arpa kozhe* — oat. These cold soups even compete with what the Kazakhs consider to be the royal drinks — *kymys* (mare’s milk) and *shubat* (camel milk). Well, maybe not quite...they are so highly rated only if kumiss and shubat should not be available.

Starting even as long ago as Herodotus, much has been written about fermented mare’s milk being an inseparable part of nomadic culture. Here I would note though two characteristics of kumiss which are not generally known. First of all, it is a tried and true means of treating tuberculosis. Even today there are special kumiss treatment clinics, like sanatoria, in the Kazakh city of Borovoe (Burabai) in Kokchetau district and also in Bashkiria. A second quality of kumiss is that it is an aphrodisiac and remedy for impotence and nervous disorders. Such giants of Russian culture as Lev Tolstoi and Sergei Rachmaninov in their day underwent successful treatment with Bashkir kumiss.

There are certain misunderstandings generally connected with the neophyte’s first attempt to join the clan of kumiss enthusiasts. Its taste is unusual and unexpected for the taste buds, which anticipate the somewhat sweet delicacy of something like milk. It would be a better approach to expect a taste which is reminiscent of beer,

whose varieties are indeed infinite. So it is with kumiss, which varies, for example, with the season — summer, autumn and winter — and with the length of fermentation — young, one-day (*saumal*), two day, i.e., already ripe and somewhat intoxicating (*tunemel*), and finally, aged — truly intoxicating (*ushkundik*). When first trying kumiss — this is advice for kumiss neophytes — one should start with small portions and not on an empty stomach, in order not to upset the digestion.

One of the secrets of good kumiss is careful stirring. In the days when kumiss had a special place in a traditional yurt, a high leather bag of kumiss with a paddle (*pispek*) in it usually stood to the right of the entrance on a wooden platform. Each person entering the yurt and passing by it was expected to stir the kumiss with this paddle. When kumiss was poured, it was done in a steady stream using a special ladle and raising it high to allow the stream of kumiss to fall freely, absorb oxygen and foam.

Shubat (fermented camel milk) is lighter, softer and has a higher fat content than kumiss. This drink is not so alcoholic and is very nutritious. *Shubat* is especially valuable for exhaustion and stomach or intestinal problems as well as for diabetes. When fermenting, camel milk does not become more concentrated or solidify, but retains a naturally thick, almost velvety uniformity. If one boils this milk, it begins to curdle and the resulting mass, which is sweet and light, becomes a special dish, *balkaimak* ("honey cream").

Natural kumiss and *shubat* are practically unobtainable outside the areas where they traditionally were produced, just as the majority of Kazakh dairy dishes cannot be prepared other than on the Kazakh steppe. The apparent explanation is the odd fact that the whole milk with which one begins

contains from its inception substances which allow it to remain unaltered — according to the Kazakh culinary understanding, it does not age quickly — despite the fact that in fresh milk quite naturally every day and hour there are living processes at work. I remember well how Kazakh elders greeted with skepticism the first refrigerators and freezers. Although they had such great economic benefits, at the same time, as was believed in the villages, they forced food products in a somewhat bewildered fashion to freeze in strange, uncomfortable and unnatural poses. It was as though they were seized suddenly and unexpectedly by freezing and forcibly detained...

In considering the current stage of the development of Kazakh food, I can appreciate more clearly how far the cuisine of the nomads has departed from its traditional sources. Possibly just as far as the nomads themselves have moved... Instead of *interaction* with food — interaction which is very like basic human stages of development such as recognition, attachment, touching, conception, birth, growth, transformation, disappearance and resurrection — there is the consumption of pre-prepared foods, prepared by strangers. That is, it is consumption of products which a person obtains without observing and even knowing the processes of their preparation. Modern cuisine has become impersonal and part of the inexorable stream of mass industry and culture. Food (*tamak, as*) for oneself, one's family and one's guests has been transformed into a product (*azyktulik, produktylary!*), identical for each and every person.

There are, however, housewives who try to preserve, if not traditional food in all its richness and original form, in practice impossible, then at least some components of it along with the procedures for their preparation at home. Among these still popular

homemade dishes are, for example, *pilaf*, *beshbarmak*, *shelpek* and *boursak*.

One of the dishes which has been part of the required repertoire of my family cuisine and which accompanies me from city to city, from country to country and from continent to continent is dairy *suzbe*, analogous to the American farmers' cheese "Friendship." The variant of the recipe adapted to American ingredients is remarkably simple. Pour into a heavy saucepan⁶ three one-liter cartons (three quarts) of Bulgarian cultured buttermilk, place it in the evening in a cold oven, turn on the heat set at 350 degrees (F), and cook for exactly one hour. Then remove and cool; let it rest and settle until morning. In the morning, holding the mass which has formed with the hand, carefully pour off the whey (which can be used for preparing bread or bliny or for cosmetic purposes) and serve — the *suzbe* is ready! Lovers of more solid *suzbe* can drain the mass using cheesecloth. At this stage of preparation, *suzbe* is an ideal breakfast. One can add to it, according to taste, sour cream or yogurt, jam or dried fruit (fresh raisins are especially good), an apple or a banana. If one strains it further, one obtains a new and quickly prepared dish. For this one needs half a pound of *suzbe*, one egg, one tablespoon of sugar and one tablespoon of flour. Mix it all together, and make seven balls from the mixture, dredge them in flour, gently pat them with the hand and fry in vegetable oil on both sides until a golden crust forms — thus one gets *syryniki* (*irimshik salyp pisirgen nan*) or cheese fritters. They are very good served with sour cream, preserves or honey. From the same *suzbe*, yet further squeezed and drained, one can even prepare homemade *kurt*. For this one needs to mix with the *suzbe*, which has been squeezed dry, two tablespoons of dry roasted flour, two tablespoons of melted butter, half a teaspoon of

salt. Shape the resulting mass into elongated "sausages" (as always, making seven of them), and let them dry in the sun while covered with cheesecloth. That's all there is to making *kurt*. (Incidentally, Kazakh children like *kurt* just as much as modern city kids like chewing gum.)

Probably the most productive time for traditional Kazakh cuisine, as I recall, was the period of the 1970s and beginning of the 1980s, when new dishes appeared, along with the relative abundance of ingredients and access to new technology such as gas stoves, ovens and refrigerators. In the process of enriching and varying the Kazakh table, of course a role was played by the interaction of Kazakhs with the foods of a good many other peoples of Central Asia. It was then that *manty* (Chinese dumplings) became a regular feature of Kazakh food, as did (Dungan noodles from stretched dough), Siberian *pelmeni*, Russo-Ukrainian *borshch* with beets, and also a variety of canned preserves (marinated and salted tomatoes, cucumbers, apples, cabbage, mushrooms), and piquant Korean marinades which still fill several aisles in the city market of Almaty. The abundance of rice grown in the Kazakh south, especially in Kyzylorda, has made pilaf, especially, almost daily fare for the Kazakh family.

Kazakh pilaf is very simple to prepare. It contains five basic ingredients: rendered fat, mutton, onion, carrots and well washed rice, over which is poured boiling water. Salt and pepper to taste. Preparation time is an hour and a half: 20 minutes to clean and slice the vegetables, 30 minutes to braise the meat (the meat is braised separately for 10 minutes, with the onion for another 10 minutes, and then another 10 minutes with the carrots). After adding the rice and water (to a level of one finger's width above the rice), cook for another 40 minutes. All in all, just 90

minutes. Pilaf is cooked tightly covered. All other details are left to creativity and experience.

Let me share a few little secrets: 1. Pilaf will be tastier if one adds apart from the meat itself a few lamb ribs (the bones intensify the flavor); 2. one should braise the meat before boiling off the excess moisture; 3. it is better to salt the meat the night before using it; 4. twenty minutes after adding the boiling water to the rice, use a flat spoon to shape the rice into the center of the pot like the dome of a yurt and with the handle create an opening in the center going right down to the bottom — rather like the smoke hole in a yurt — in order that the rice can breathe; 5. when the plates have been laid and the family called to the table, with the burner turned off, cover the pilaf with a clean towel and then once again the pot lid in order to allow the pilaf to rest. The towel absorbs excess moisture. In five to ten minutes remove the lid and the towel, carefully mix the lower layers of meat with the rice, and serve.

Yet one more opportunity for creativity is to add herbs (barberry, cumin, peas, nuts, raisins), but here we already are returning to the more refined pilaf of the Uzbek neighbor, who so generously received that apocryphal Kazakh of the anecdote with which we began our journey into the world of Kazakh cuisine...

It goes without saying, that in contemporary conditions, especially abroad — for example, in the U.S. — the demanding traditional cook will complain that the mutton is not the same, the rice is not the same, the water is chlorinated, etc. However, these excuses are not important for the true master of traditional pilaf; rather, what is important is the pot in which pilaf should be prepared. We are talking here of the *kazan*, the heavy metal cauldron with a hemispherical bottom. That

shape, as is the case with the Chinese wok, allows the flame of the campfire (or gas burner) to heat the cauldron equally, and the thickness of the wall retains the temperature well. The closest result can be obtained by the use of a Dutch oven. However, we admit that Kazakh students in their dormitories today prepare pilaf in pots and in deep frypans.

Kazakh pilaf varies, and only when all are taken into account can one form a kind of idealized image of what it should be. To a greater or lesser degree then any given version is a reasonable approximation. The same can be said about any kind of popular creation: for example, the ideal form of a song is composed of the totality of all its variants, and it is precisely this fact which makes one want to listen to it again and again...

The *kazan* is the ideal vessel for preparing yet another popular dish today, *dymlama*. In conclusion, let me share the recipe.

Dymlama is meat braised with root vegetables. Cut the meat (lamb or beef) into large chunks, quickly sear it in fat, add onion, salt, pepper (or other herbs) and then add layers of various root vegetables (lightly salted), sliced to the size of a hen's egg. This is best done in the following sequence, from the heavier and firmer to the lighter and softer: carrot, potato, rutabaga (or turnip), beets, eggplant (in its skin), green cabbage cut into wedges including the core, and then at the top tomatoes, split in half, and bunches of parsley and dill (which will be discarded when the dish is done). Do not add even a drop of water! Cover tightly with a lid and braise one and a half to two or even two and a half hours over low heat. Do not open the lid, and do not stir the contents. When the dish is done, the meat is completely tender and has absorbed all the juices, and each vegetable retains its shape, color and taste. There is not much

gravy, but it is exceptionally tasty. As far as quantities go, one should use approximately the same weight of each ingredient. The choice of vegetables may vary with the season. The best time is autumn when the vegetables have just been dug out.

Of course it is good to have recipes already at hand, and the more the better, since that way there is a choice. Yet I believe that if the marvellous recipes of the cuisine of our sedentarized Central Asian relatives should with time become part of world cuisine, that in no way would diminish the culinary creativity rooted in the centuries old life experience of the nomads. At very least I would hope that not only the perfect final product, but the very process of the interaction amongst food, people, and society at large will not be ignored by those who today take an interest in our experience. Then it will become clear that along with the effort to have an always perfect, easily repeated and reliably guaranteed dish which will be completely satisfying, there is another pleasure, that of unpredictability and experimentation. There is an impressionistic subtlety of detail and a minimal amount of reflection in the infinite variations of one and almost the same dish created without a recipe. Its essence is to create human warmth and even the soul. Thus the culinary arts become elevated to mythological stature

as the creation of the world. That is, we are talking here about food as the embodiment of the organizing principle of the world, like the above-mentioned kumiss paddle, which turkic cultures consider to be in the category of the world tree. It is no accident that the process of preparing kumiss is sometimes compared metaphorically with a shamanistic act.

Underlying traditional food culture is the entire traditional culture of a people. It is not only a culture of food, but food itself is culture.

About the author

Educated in Almaty, Moscow and St. Petersburg, **Alma Kunanbaeva** is a Visiting Professor at Stanford University's Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, where she teaches courses on the culture of Central Asian nomads. She has written the principal entries on Kazakh traditional music for the *New Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and the *Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*, published a book, *The Soul of Kazakhstan*, and been involved in a broad range of educational programs, among them ones sponsored by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture. She is also President of Silk Road House in Berkeley, a pioneering non-profit cultural and educational center supported by the Silkroad Foundation.

Notes

1. This article was translated from Russian by Daniel C. Waugh.
2. Incidentally, I never once heard this story from Uzbeks, and when I told it I sensed their bewilderment and embarrassment.
3. The Kazakhs themselves call this dish *et* (meat), and *beshbarmak* (five fingers) is a later Russian borrowing, derived from the fact that a dish should have a name which distinguishes it from the ingredients.
4. In a similar fashion childless parents adopt orphans as their sons or daughters.
5. The second half of the 20th century saw the introduction of its innovations in the churning of butter at home. Hence the unique Kazakh popular method of churning butter in first-generation vertical washing machines with an agitator on the bottom. This has no effect on the quality of the butter, which, when collected, is well rinsed and then, as a rule, lightly salted.
6. I bought mine for 25 cents at a flea market in Berkeley. It is an aluminum pressure cooker without a lid and missing its handle.