



A Mongolian ger (above); barbecue Mongolian style (below); goat cooked inside a milk churn is known as *khorkhog* (bottom). Photos: Tom O'Malley

STORY ON A PLATE MONGOLIA

Steppe up and get your goat

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True, you can pick up a slice of pizza or an espresso in Ulan Bator, but outside the capital, the flesh and milk of the sheep, goat and cow remains the staple of all but the most upwardly mobile Mongolian. Unlike agrarian settlers with our diversified food chains, Mongolia's food culture is born from – and constrained by – its natural surroundings. Half the population still live in white *ger* tents scattered like seeds across this country of endless pasture.

The cuisine divides seasonally between red and white: that is, meat in winter and dairy in summer. The division of labour is also still traditional. Men kill and butcher the meat; women process milk into a variety of products. *Uruum*, a richly fortifying clotted cream, is spread thick and yellow over pieces of unleavened bread for breakfast. Tiny wild strawberries and tart blueberries can be mixed with yoghurt called *tarag*. Dried cheese curds known as *aaruul* are popped in the mouth like rock-hard, lemony gobstoppers. And of course, there's the beloved tippie of many a nomadic knees-up: *airag*, or fermented horse milk.

Admittedly, spices are scant, recipes are crude, and what few vegetables and grains exist are mostly imported from China, but don't be too quick to malign Mongolian cuisine.

You might say what Mongolian barbecue lacks in culinary complexity it makes up for in heart and soul. But more than that, it's living archaeology. "*Boodog* was probably practised across great swathes of central Asia thousands of years ago," says Jan Wigstein, the

founder of a Mongolian eco-travel company. In today's Mongolia, you can be sure that, flickering television notwithstanding, Genghis Khan himself would be right at home sitting down to a *boodog* or *khorkhog* after a hard day's ride.

"Dish" is probably a misnomer for a *boodog*, since it requires no kitchen accoutrements to roast a marmot or goat steppe-style by stuffing it with scorching hot stones and tossing the body directly on to the fire. Or, in our case, by blow-torching the outsides to oblivion.

It's the sole premise of men, which is not surprising, really, since there's no washing up.

For all its boil-in-the-bag simplicity, a *boodog* does require certain cooking expertise. The trussed-up beast is essentially an ancient pressure cooker. They've been known to explode on occasion.

A young herdsman and our culinary guide, Bold, carved our rodent into a heap of blubbery meat, a few stones, a tin bowl of dark gravy and four little clawed hands. The ribs were gamey and tender; the gravy deep, rich and tinged with petrol. Biting into the fatty hide was like trying to gnaw through a bicycle tyre, which is understandable when you consider this animal was soon to be hibernating through Mongolia's merciless winter.



[Khorkhog is] essentially steamed mutton with a hint of river rock

MICHAEL KOHN,
LONELY PLANET MONGOLIA



"In the winter the appetite for flesh comes southward from the Arctic regions with the cold," wrote American writer Jacob Abbot in his 19th-century book, *Genghis Khan*. After a long white season, the herdsman look forward to quenching their "meat hunger" with mutton either boiled, fried or cooked in dumplings called *buuz*, just as much as they dread the difficult times ahead. Ulan Bator is the coldest capital city on earth, and winter on the steppe is even more severe. With just a few layers of *ger* felt keeping the biting winds at bay, the herdsman's own animals – the literal fat of the land – sustain them until the first signs of spring.

The more civilised cousin of the *boodog* is the *khorkhog*. Essentially the same dish, this nose-to-tail goat

barbecue is cooked inside a metal milk churn. Smooth-sided stones collected from riverbanks and gullies are heated until red hot and layered together in the churn with butchered goat meat on the bone (including organs like the heart, kidney and liver, and little blood sausages made from the intestines) plus whatever vegetables are available – carrots, potatoes or beets if you're lucky, along with water, salt and pepper and garlic. The urn is sealed and placed in the embers of a fire, resulting in a warming, protein-heavy meat stew.

The taste? Unadorned, primal; of muddy meadows and the wide-open sky.

"Essentially steamed mutton with a hint of river rock", according to Michael Kohn, a journalist and author of the *Lonely Planet Mongolia* guide. Herdsman and their families gnaw it all – fat and sinew, muscle and offal. Meat is always cooked well done, and cut directly off the bone by each diner.

The spine is the most prized, given to the highest ranking or oldest male present. Any herdsman worth his horse will tell you the most delicious meat comes not from the well-watered Siberian frontier but from the dusty Gobi, because the grass that does manage to struggle up through the dry, sandy steppe is hardier and richer in nutrients.

To share in a *khorkhog* is to honour the work of the herding family that has reared and cared for the animal, day and night, since its birth. Wigstein recounts his own experience with *khorkhog*. "I had two goats slaughtered on my tarpaulin leaving just two drops of blood. Even the children took part. Absolutely nothing was wasted – the leftover meat was reheated in milk tea the next day."

LEGENDS SQUIRRELFISH

With no food for emperor, a dish is born

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China's Jiangsu and Zhejiang provinces are known for their freshwater fish, thanks to the many lakes and rivers that weave through the region, including Suzhou, known as "the Venice of the East". One of the area's most well-known dishes is the curiously named squirrelfish.

It is said that Emperor Qianlong once visited Suzhou during his reign (1735-96). He arrived in the city at an odd hour but was hungry and stepped into a restaurant. The chef was unfortunately out of food, but he feared that telling the emperor that would anger him and lead to serious consequences (such as a beheading). Looking around in desperation, the chef noticed a carp on the restaurant's altar that was being used as an offering to the gods. He took it and cooked it for the emperor.

Afraid that he would infuriate the gods, however, the chef endeavoured to make the fish look as alive as possible, and hence deep-fried it into an arched shape to emulate a live, flipping fish. He also sliced the flesh into strips to enhance the effect.

When the fish was presented to the emperor, he was greatly amused and remarked that it looked like a squirrel with its fur standing on end. When the sauce was poured over it, the fried batter even gave off slight squealing sounds, giving the dish its name.

In one of the Qing dynasty's foremost culinary tomes, *Tiaodingji*, the recipe for squirrelfish calls not for carp but for a Chinese perch (also known as a Mandarin fish, though not to be confused with the brightly coloured saltwater Mandarin fish from the Pacific) to be fried in an egg yolk batter, finished off in a sauce of soy sauce and oil.

However, the modern-day interpretation involves ingredients that aren't native to Jiangsu province – a flour-based batter and a sweet and sour sauce that includes tomatoes, or even ketchup. The version from Shanghai Garden even incorporates pine nuts for extra crunch.

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Squirrelfish with pine nuts from Shanghai Garden restaurant