



Silk Road Cooking: A Culinary Journey

by Najmieh Batmanglij

Join me on a voyage of culinary discovery that stretches through the ages and across half the world, from China in the east to Persia and on to the Mediterranean in the west, along the ancient network of trading routes known today as the Silk Road. Each place on the Silk Road itself, be it splendid city, rich trading town, or green oasis, has its own distinctive character and culture and yet is linked across desert and mountain to every other place. The same is true of salads, soups, breads, rice, kabobs, and pastries from Xi'an to Samarkand, from Isfahan to Istanbul and then northwest to Italy. It was along the caravan trails (and later the sea routes) that vegetables, fruits, grains, and seasonings — and the techniques for cooking them — passed from one civilization to another, to be absorbed and transformed into local specialties.

In markets in Uzbekistan, one finds huge melons of surpassing sweetness and vibrant orange carrots unlike any others. In Iran the familiar flat bread — also called *nan* in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, much of Central Asia and Western China and cooked in a *tandoor* (clay oven) or on a *saaj* (a convex cast iron plate placed over fire) — is offered on wooden carts, loaves scented with onion, garlic, and sesame, cumin, or nigella seeds. In Xi'an, stalls groan under bright persimmons, pomegranates, big red jujubes, and figs, peaches, and grapes. Aromatic ginger, onions, and leeks are everywhere to be found as well. I like to call these “Silk Road ingredients” — and the wonderful produce, fresh from the earth, stalk, vine, or branch, has come to the markets of America, too.

The dishes to be made from this rich bounty appear in infinite variety. Consider only that tempting assembly of little dishes found throughout the Middle East (*mezze*) and into Spain (where they are called *tapas*). In China they refer to a similar layout of little dishes as dim sum, while in Italy they are the antipasti.

The noodles of my childhood are present in almost every country along the ancient Silk Road. In northern China a noodle master, in what looks like sleight of hand, can stretch and swing a lump of dough into perfect individual strands in 15 minutes. The sauces and soups that enhance these noodles exist in as rich a variety in China as they do in Italy.

Such mastery would seem to support the old legend that Marco Polo brought noodles from China to Italy in the 13th century. Recent archeological and linguistic scholarship shows, however, that the transfer was much earlier and in both directions. Today, culinary food historians agree that pasta probably originated in Iran. The first pasta dish is recorded in a 10th-century Arab cookery book, *Kitab al-Tabikh wa-islah al-Aghdiah al-Ma'kulat*, which calls it by the Persian word *lakhshah*, meaning to slide, presumably because of the slipperiness of noodles. (The Russian *lapsha* and the Yiddish *lokshn*, for example, derive from *lakhshah*.) The same book also mentions that the dish was invented by the Sasanian Persian King Khosrow I (531–79 C.E.). It was probably the Arabs who introduced noodles, and the hard durum wheat necessary for making them, to Italy in the 9th century via Sicily (noodles) and Genoa (ravioli).

No one knows exactly how the technique for making pasta

reached China. What is known is that before the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), China lacked the mills for large-scale flour grinding, which it acquired as she expanded to the west via the newly explored Silk Road. As soon as the mills appeared, however, Han cooks adapted or invented a vast array of “noodle foods,” as they were called by writers of the time. By the end of the dynasty, China already had developed the technique for swinging dough into individual strands. These were boiled and served with a range of seasonings, and, although they were generally considered common food, they were so delicious that even the emperor ate them. Other pasta foods include dumplings, steamed buns, and little wheat cakes. Some were invented by ordinary people, a 3rd-century chronicler reports, and some came from foreign lands.

The many types and names of Chinese noodle food offer the sorts of clues that delight linguistic scholars, who find hints of food origins in the wanderings of words. Among the Chinese favorites, for example, is *mantou*, a steamed, sweetened, bread-like bun. The term appears in Japan as *manzu*, meaning steamed bread with a filling; and in Korea as *mandu*, a kind of ravioli filled with beef. Tibetans make stuffed dumplings in a variety of shapes and call them *momo*. In Central Asia, *manti* is a small steamed pasta that may contain meat, cheese, or vegetables and is served with yogurt or vinegar; in Turkey and Armenia the same word refers to a stuffed pasta shell steamed, poached in broth, or baked; and in Iran it is a wonton-like pasta cooked in a broth. Although some suggest a Central Asian origin for such dishes, no one knows for sure. What is more important than the origin is that the dishes and their names are all related. They form a culinary bond — a sign of early and peaceful communication — that links distant and sometimes hostile cultures.

It is a curious fact that the noodles that reached culinary heights in China and Japan, not to mention Italy, occupy only a humble place in the cookery of their Iranian home. Rice, on the other hand, is the same story in reverse. The grain, cultivated in China and India for at least 5,000 years, seems to have reached Iran only in the 4th century B.C.E. It did not begin to play an important part in Iranian cookery, however, until the 8th century. Since then, rice has become something special in Iran. It is not the anchor of a meal as it is in China, but the basis of festive and



elaborate dishes called *polows* (parboiled and steamed rice). A *polow* may be cooked with a golden crust; it may be flavored with tart cherries, quinces, pomegranates, barberries, or candied bitter orange peel; it may include pistachios, almonds, walnuts, or rose petals. Like other good dishes, *polow* has spread far beyond its Persian source. Under such related names as *pilau*, *pilavi*, pilaf, paella, and *pullao*, and with such additions as chickpeas and raisins or onions and carrots, it graces celebrations from Afghanistan to Albania, and from India to Spain.

Similar tales linking east and west, north and south, could be told for rice pudding, for bread, and for dozens of other preparations based on vegetables, grains, fruits, herbs, and spices. This cuisine from the region that was once home to the Silk Road seems to have certain characteristics in common: foods and techniques that have been passed from region to region; a philosophy

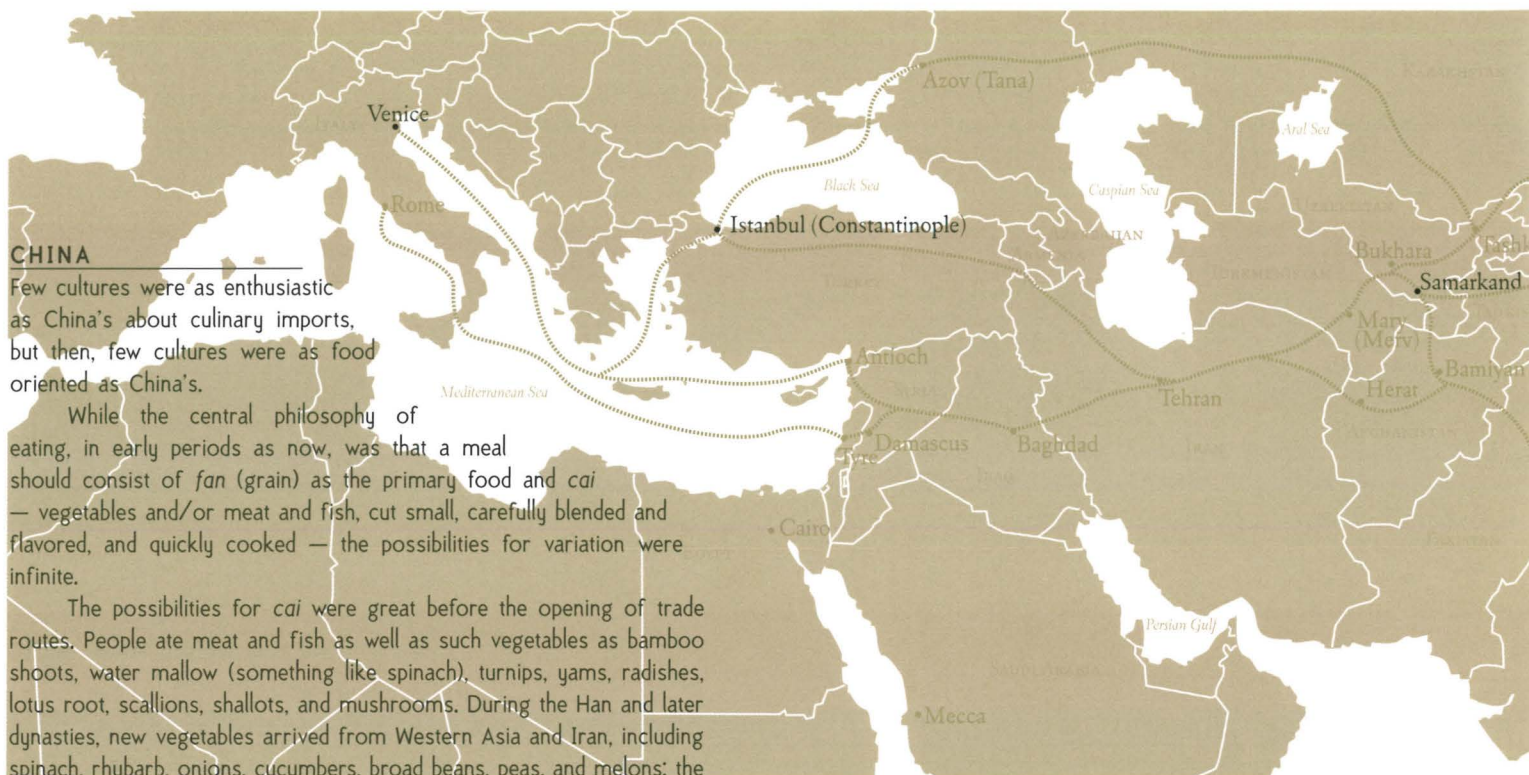
of healthy, balanced eating from China's yin-yang to India's *ayurveda* and from Iran's "hot and cold" to the Salerno Regimen of the Italian Middle Ages; and a particularly generous insistence on hospitality. That is the result of a long shared history, which began with an intrepid Chinese traveler of the 2nd century B.C.E., Zhang Qian.

Today, Italian and Chinese cooking together with Indian, Persian, Uzbek, and Turkish cuisine represent the tasty, inexpensive, down-to-earth, and cheerful food that is a lasting influence of the ancient Silk Road. And with the increase in culinary awareness and health concerns, and a trend toward simpler, more rustic ingredients such as flour with bran, brown rice, and fresh and seasonal food, America has become a kind of modern Silk Road entrepot where wonderful ingredients from all over the world — and instructions for cooking them — are available to everyone.

(Left) A girl sells scallion bread at a Xi'an market.

(Right) Flat bread is a staple at this market in Tashkent, Uzbekistan.

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CHINA

Few cultures were as enthusiastic as China's about culinary imports, but then, few cultures were as food oriented as China's.

While the central philosophy of eating, in early periods as now, was that a meal should consist of *fan* (grain) as the primary food and *cai* — vegetables and/or meat and fish, cut small, carefully blended and flavored, and quickly cooked — the possibilities for variation were infinite.

The possibilities for *cai* were great before the opening of trade routes. People ate meat and fish as well as such vegetables as bamboo shoots, water mallow (something like spinach), turnips, yams, radishes, lotus root, scallions, shallots, and mushrooms. During the Han and later dynasties, new vegetables arrived from Western Asia and Iran, including spinach, rhubarb, onions, cucumbers, broad beans, peas, and melons; the Chinese classified them, developed them, and found new ways to cook them.

It was the same with fruits and nuts. China was blessed with superb produce, including peaches, plums, apricots, and persimmons, and from the south came mangoes, bananas, and citrus. The Chinese also carefully cultivated new fruits arriving from the Silk Road — figs and dates, cherries, melons, pomegranates, grapes, almonds, pistachios, walnuts, caraway, coriander, and sugar cane.

Then there were fermented and pickled foods, used for flavoring but also useful to travelers. The soybean was as central to Chinese cuisine, then and now, as ginger. It provided bean curd and soy sauce, among other preparations.

Still, the first rule of Chinese dining was "nothing to excess"; even children were admonished to eat only until they were 70 percent full. Thus gourmets developed the fashion for "natural foods," which fit China's Daoist roots as well as Buddhist precepts. What was natural food? It was food gathered in the mountains or woods — edible plants, herbs, mushrooms, and the like — cooked as simply as possible so as to reveal its unique flavor: It was the kind of culinary philosophy good cooks advocate today.

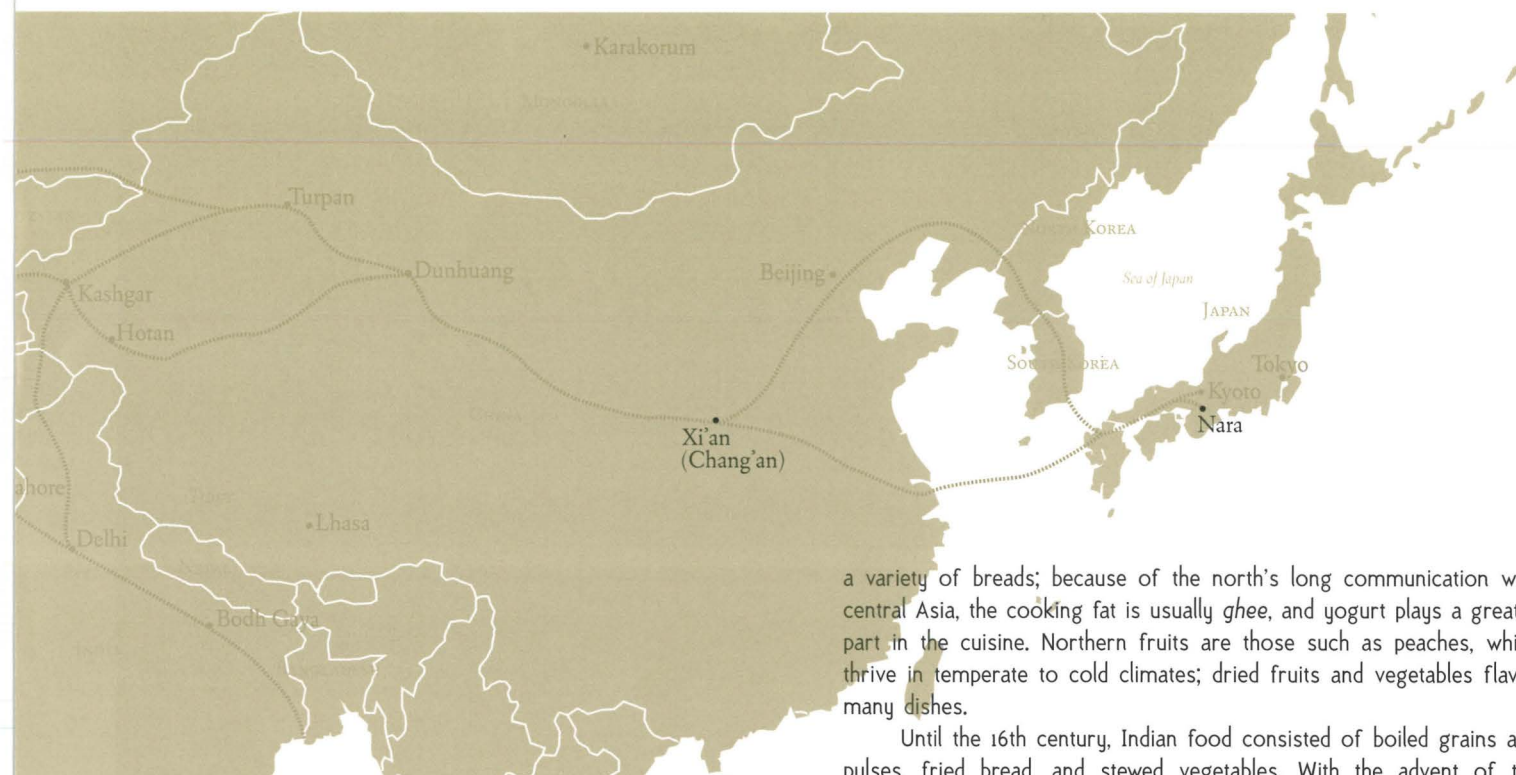
IRAN

The Persians had inherited a millennia-old tradition of Mesopotamian cookery from the empires of Sumeria, Babylon, Assyria, and Akkad, to name a few. Sumerian tablets record about 20 kinds of cheese, 100 soups, 300 breads. Their cooks dried grains, beans, dates, grapes, and figs; they preserved fruits in honey; they flavored their various stews with garlic, onions, leeks, and possibly mint, mustard, cumin, and coriander. The various Mesopotamian kingdoms borrowed dishes from one another, as recorded in their names.

According to Roman historians — hardly friendly commentators — the Parthians, who ruled an empire that at its height in the 1st century B.C.E. stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus rivers and from the Oxus (Amu Darya) to the Indian Ocean, were very fond of palm wine and ate lightly of grains, vegetables, a little fish and game. We may suppose that the later Parthians, originally nomadic horsemen, ate such dairy products as clarified butter (*ghee*, which keeps well in hot climates) and yogurt (often fermented with cracked wheat and still common in Kurdistan, where it is called *tarkhineh*). As the prime middlemen controlling the Silk Road, they taxed and no doubt enjoyed exotica arriving from east and west.

All these elements converged in the court cooking of the second Persian empire of the Sasanians (221–651 C.E.), whose magnificent capital, Ctesiphon, not far from what is now Baghdad, was the bustling entrepot of Silk Road trade. A 4th-century poem, "Khosrow and His Knight," outlines the most favored dishes of those with discriminating tastes; among them are desserts such as almond and walnut pastries, coconuts from India, and Iran's own dates stuffed with walnuts or pistachios.

Indeed, it was Persian cooking, already international, that helped to define the courtly cuisines of the conquering Arabs of the 7th century and the Mongols of the 13th. In medieval Arab cookbooks appear the Persian foods and preparations that were to travel with the conquerors far beyond Iran's borders. The herbs and spices are familiar: Iran's mint, coriander, saffron, and caraway, as well as cinnamon and ginger from Ceylon and China, and cloves from the East Indies. Ground almonds and walnuts thickened the rich sauces. Pomegranates and limes, combined with dates, honey, and sugar, produced the sweet-and-sour contrasts that characterize Persian cuisine today. Persianized Arabs adopted the braises, salads, breads, cheeses, and omelets of Iran, and



created magnificent *polows* from rice that had been imported for cultivation centuries before from the East.

Such classic Persian preparations spread throughout western Asia and into Europe with the Arab diaspora; the Mongols, like the Arabs before them, combined their own nomadic traditions with those of the Persian court and exported the new cuisine. It was the Mongols' descendants who helped shape the cuisines of India as we know them today.

INDIA

Successive waves of settlement as well as trade gave India early access to the fruits, vegetables, and spices of cultures both East and West. The Aryan invaders who came from Central Asia to India in about 1500 B.C.E. left in their Sanskrit language a number of clues to the origins of various foods. Foods native to India such as the eggplant, for instance, often have names derived from pre-Aryan languages. Imports are given prefixes that indicate their origins, and the names of later imports are often versions of the names from their home countries. Thus the stuffed pastries known as *samosa* in India are called (like Arab *sanbusaq*, Turkish *samsa*, and Central Asian *sambusaivaragi*) after their medieval Persian originals, *sanbosag*. And, especially in the southwest, there are dishes adapted from and named after those of the Portuguese, who ruled a colony at Goa for 400 years. Indian cooks gave their recipes complexity with the addition of such spices as cardamom, mustard seeds, cloves, cumin, and ginger, not to mention generous lacings of chili peppers, imported by the Portuguese from the New World in the 16th century.

Such a cosmopolitan past inspired as many cuisines as there are regions in India. As in China, a broad division exists between rice eaters in the south and wheat eaters in the north. Northern cuisine centers on

a variety of breads; because of the north's long communication with central Asia, the cooking fat is usually *ghee*, and yogurt plays a greater part in the cuisine. Northern fruits are those such as peaches, which thrive in temperate to cold climates; dried fruits and vegetables flavor many dishes.

Until the 16th century, Indian food consisted of boiled grains and pulses, fried bread, and stewed vegetables. With the advent of the Islamic Mughal empire, however, came the Persian-based cuisine of Western Asia. The Muslims were meat eaters, and even today the north of India, where they were dominant, is known for its meat dishes. But Mughal innovations — including *polows*, pastries, stuffed vegetables, baked bread, sherbet, and such sweet confections as *halvah* — transformed Indian cookery. Indian cooks adapted the luxurious creations for vegetarian dining to suit their own tastes. Mughal cookery and later imports from the New World helped shape Indian cuisine into the rich tapestry it now is.

ITALY

After the collapse of the Roman Empire, Italy became a series of city-states and remained so well into the 19th century. Nonetheless, from the 14th century on, it was the cradle of the renaissance of European arts, including culinary ones. This was in no small measure because of its contacts with Arab and Jewish traders through Venice, Naples, and Genoa. Arab traders excelled at absorbing and passing on local cooking styles and ingredients at each of their stops along the Silk Road. Italian upper classes were greatly influenced by Arab, Chinese, and Japanese courts and copied the dining style, refinement of cuisine, manners, and etiquette of the Arab courts. Exotic spices and sugar became symbols of their wealth. The great Italian court cooks discarded the techniques of purees and porridges as well as the tendency to disguise ingredients, common at the time, and brought out the flavor of individual ingredients by careful seasoning and moderate cooking. Historically, it was usually the upper classes that set culinary trends — cooking with rose water, saffron, orange peel, dried fruits, sugar, and the use of almond pastes were all picked up from the Arabs (who in turn had taken them from the Persians) and passed them on to the rest of Europe.

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