

KALPAK



TRAVEL

# *Central Asian Cuisine*

*Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan,  
Turkmenistan & Uzbekistan*



## Introduction to Central Asian Cuisine

Food's an important part of any trip. We both worry and get excited about all the delicious things we might taste during our travels. We've put together a food guide so that if you're about to embark on a journey through Central Asia, you'll know what to expect. We'll unravel the mystery of lagman, plov, manty, beshbarmak and other such names you'll encounter on a typical restaurant or café menu. We'll also give you a bit of background about the cultural and historical peculiarities of the region's food habits. You'll understand the basics of a Central Asian nomad's diet based on meat and dairy, see how that differs from the settled people of the region with their love of vegetables, rice and noodles as well as the Russians who influenced the region when it was part of the Soviet Union. Why not download our guide, print it out and take it with you?

### Bread – Lepyoshka, Tandyr Nan, Patyr Nan – Лепешка /Нан

In Central Asia, a meal without bread is considered incomplete. It's almost sacred here! You'll find a variety of bread in stores and cafes, but the most common and popular one is a round shaped flat white bread. Typically, it's baked in a fire oven known as a tandyr (tandoori). As you travel, you will discover that the taste and shape of this bread will vary slightly from place to place.



### Boorsok (KG) / Boursak (KZ) / Pishme (TM) – Боорсок/Баурсак

In Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan little dried pieces of dough called boorsok and boursak are made for special events or respected guests. They're also served as appetisers in restaurants. They're a bit like doughnuts, but not sweet. However, we do like to eat them with homemade jam or dip them in honey. Most restaurants, hotels and guesthouses will serve them like this.



## Fresh Salads – svezhiy salat - Свежий салат

The salad that's most typical in Central Asia is a tomato, cucumber and onion salad. The dressing can be mayonnaise or oil, but most often it's just sprinkled with salt, pepper and fresh herbs. Most of the salads are made with produce that's grown locally. You can also get carrot, beet or cabbage salad. However, if you travel in summer, your seasonal salad will be tomato and cucumber.



## Herbs

However, if you're in a larger city, or a restaurant with a more extensive menu, you'll find a much wider variety of salads from which to choose. You'll find everything from Caesar to Greek. Many local salads, soups and meals include a generous portion of additional herbs like dill, parsley, chives or cilantro. Other herbs like basil, oregano and rosemary are used less often in Central Asia. It's best to try out the salad with herbs first, but remember if that makes the flavour too strong, you can always ask the chef to prepare a salad for you without them.



## Korean salads

In Central Asia's major bazaars you will come across stands with a variety of Korean salads. These spicy specialities are very popular among locals. They are home produced following old family recipes from the Korean families that were relocated to this region during the Soviet era.



## Soup – Суп

### Shorpo/Shurpa/ - Шорпо Шурпа

Soups are very popular in Central Asia, even on the hottest of summer days. Shorpo or Shurpa is a meat broth soup with big pieces of meat, very often fatty mutton. Its other ingredients comprise pieces of carrot and potato and of course a sprinkling of fresh herbs. Variations of this soup also include noodles or beans cooked in the meat broth. They are very popular in mountainous regions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.



### Borsch - Борщ

As you might expect from the influence of Soviet times, borscht is also popular. This red beet soup originates from Eastern Europe and Russia and is now widely found in Central Asia too. It contains meat, usually beef, as well as potatoes, cabbage, red beets and a bit of carrot and onion to round out the flavour. It'll be served with a swirl of sour cream and a sprinkling of dill, but you can ask for it to be brought to the table without this garnish.



### Lentil soup – Chechevichniy Sup – Чечевичный суп

You'll find lentil soup on offer in many restaurants, especially in large cities. The best cream of lentil soup is served in the region's Turkish restaurants. Lentil soup is also often served with a spoonful of sour cream – remember you can opt out of this if you wish – and a slice of lemon. The lemon can be squeezed into the soup to taste.



### **Plov | Pilaf | Paloo | Osh | Ash – Плов Пилав Палоо Ош Аш**

There are around 200 varieties of plov. It's so important that it is featured on Tajikistan and Uzbekistan's items of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity as listed by UNESCO. Nationwide competitions are held to see who can make the best plov. It is of great social and cultural significance to the local population and as a consequence, served at all big events and ceremonies. Its main ingredients are lamb or beef fried in a large kazan (cauldron) with onions and yellow or orange carrots. It's cooked for around an hour. It can be served additionally with kazy (local sausage), eggs and, occasionally, with lemons. The best places to try plov in Central Asia are Samarkand, Penjikent, Shymkent and Osh, although every city and even family has its own special plov recipe.



### **Kurutob/Qurutob - Курутоб**

Kurutob is the national dish of Tajikistan. It is served in a large wooden plate in the centre of the table and traditionally eaten by hand, however nowadays it is also served with spoons or forks. Its main ingredient is a flat bread called Patyr or Fatyr made out of puff pastry. It is mixed with a salty dairy sauce, fresh herbs, tomatoes and onions drizzled with hot oil. It has no meat. The best place to sample it is in Dushanbe.



### **Besh Barmak (KG) | Naryn (UZ) | - Беш Бармак**

Besh Barmak literally means five fingers, as people used to eat it with their fingers in earlier times. It is the national dish of Kyrgyzstan but can be found also in neighbouring countries. First, the meat is boiled for couple of hours and in its broth, noodles are cooked. Afterwards small pieces of meat are mixed with the noodles and onion broth sauce is poured over the top. Kazakh Besh Barmak has large homemade pasta and large pieces of meat over it.



## Chuchuk (Kyrgyzstan) | Sujuk/ Kazy (Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan) – Казы

This traditional delicacy is served as an appetiser or together with national dishes such as plov and beshbarmak. It is a type of meat sausage, generously spiced with black pepper. It is basically horse meat with fat stuffed into thoroughly washed and salted intestines. There is also a smoked variety as well as the more commonly served fresh one; both are usually served cold.



## Kuurdak - куурдак, куырдак, говурдак

Kuurdak is a one pot meal consisting of fried meat, potatoes and onions. Traditionally it is made from mutton or beef with a generous portion of fat. First, the meat is fried with onions and then stewed. When a sheep is freshly slaughtered, the liver, kidney and heart would be used in this dish. This is more common in homestays or guesthouses. In cafes, it is usually served just with meat and without such internal organs.



## Cutlets with a garnish – Kotlety s garnirom - Котлеты с гарниром

You could be forgiven for assuming cutlets are simply meat, but in Central Asia that's not the case. This dish consists of minced beef mixed with bread, milk or butter, onions and sometimes herbs. The resultant patty is then then fried in a pan or steamed in a special pot. It's served with mashed potatoes, rice or buckwheat. Sometimes all three can be combined in one plate.



### Meat Skewer - Shashlyk - Шашлык

Shashlyk is a very popular meal in a region stretching from Central Asia to Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean. It is usually made from mutton or beef; alternating pieces of meat and fat are well spiced and marinated. It is served with pickled onions. It can be ordered as an add on to the main national dishes or separately as a side dish. In many cafes you can also get chicken, chicken wings or assorted shashlyks, prepared just like at barbecues over hot coals.



### Meat Dishes – Myasnye Blyuda - Samsy - Самсы



мясные блюда Meat dishes are very popular in Central Asia. Meat is usually cooked right through, though a handful of places in the big cities will accommodate a taste for rare or medium steak, usually in international restaurants. Everywhere else, you will be served your meat well done.

### Lagman – Лагман

Lagman is basically handmade pulled noodles in a meat or vegetable sauce. The meat is usually beef, while the vegetables include bell peppers, garlic, onion and fresh herbs. Depending on the location, additional vegetables are added. It has numerous variations from soups to main course dishes. Plain Lagman is a soup, Gyuro Lagman is the one on the photo. Boso Lagman has fried short noodles. If you find the same sauce served with white rice the dish will be called Gan Fan. Its origins can be traced to China, to the Uighur and Dungan minorities of Western China.



## Manty – Манты

Manty is a dumpling stuffed with minced meat, fat and onions. It is cooked over steam and served with ketchup, vinegar or sour cream. There are also variations with pumpkin or potatoes without meat, though you won't find these in every restaurant. One portion usually comprises five dumplings. Small pieces of dough with a filling called Pelmeni are served as a soup boiled in broth, but you'll also see it fried as hoshan.



## Hoshan – Хошан

Hoshan is a type of manty, but fried in oil. Regular hoshan has also five pieces in one portion. There is also super hoshan which is kind of a local fast food that is the size of a burger. This super hoshan is made from yeast dough, whereas manty is made from unleavened dough.



## Samsy - Самсы

Samsy is another type of local fast food, sold almost everywhere in cafes in fast food chains or made at home. Indian samosas, triangle shaped dough stuffed with meat or vegetables, were introduced to India by Central Asian traders in the 13th and 14th centuries. In Central Asia they are always stuffed with meat and onions, and unlike samosas, baked in the oven and never fried. Occasionally, you'll find samsy with a cheese or potato filling.



### Tandyr Samsy - Тандыр самсы

Tandyr samsy is quite different from regular samsy as it is baked in a special tandyr (tandoori). These are fire clay pot ovens. The dough is filled with meat, fat and onion stuffing, however it has more sauce in it. It is usually served with a pot of tea or even a meat broth. You need to cut the hard bottom side, eat the inside filling with a spoon and then soften the dough in the broth or tea before you eat it.



### Pirojki – Пирожки

Pirojki is a dough filled with mashed potatoes or cabbage. It is served with a tea as starter or as a snack in the afternoon. It can be either fried or baked. Pirojki originated in Eastern Europe where it's known as pierogi, becoming popular in Central Asia in the Soviet era.



### Fast Food: Pizza/ Burgers/ Wraps – Pizza / Gamburger / Shaurma - Фаст Фуд Пицца Бургер Шаурма

Fast food is widespread in Central Asia, although it's only in Kazakhstan that you'll find the international fast food giants like McDonalds or Burger King. In the other Central Asian countries, you'll have to be content with local variations of burgers and pizza. You can even find pizza with traditional sausage. Outside the cities there is practically no fast food. In rural areas especially, you'll be served a diet of local cuisine instead.



## Fruits and vegetables- Ovoshi i frukty - Овоци и фрукты

In the big cities, supermarkets will stock both seasonal and exotic fruit and vegetables. Outside the cities, you'll find the supply is more limited to local produce, such as apples, apricots, peaches, plums and pears. Watermelons and melons are big in size and very tasty. The vegetable choice is mostly limited to carrots, turnip, beets, onions, cabbage, bell peppers, tomatoes and cucumbers. Accordingly most of the dishes outside the cities are limited to these ingredients.



## Dried fruits and nuts – Sukhofrukty i Orekhi - Сухофрукты и орехи

Central Asians love dried apricots, raisins and all manner of nuts. Almost every table will have a plate filled with various dried fruits and nuts. In bazaars and supermarkets you can find a huge variety of such product, perfect for taking with you as a snack for the journey.



## Kurut - Курут

Salty white dairy balls are a popular snack for locals. They're made of suzmo or drained cottage cheese. If mixed with water you will get the refreshing drink called chalap. If formed into balls and dried, it is called kurut.



## Eating in Cafes & Restaurants

In Central Asia, when people go to a cafe or invite guests they set the table with different appetisers, various salads, fruits, vegetables, jams, honey and sweets. The goal is to have a table full of delicious things with plenty of choice. If you order a salad, soup, main course and dessert, it might all come at once. You are not expected to finish all the food on the table.



## Eating in guesthouses

Many guesthouses and homestays in the countryside serve dinner on the floor. The floor is covered with a tablecloth surrounded by special homemade cushions to sit on. It is often done for guests as an honour in a special dining room. Stepping on the table cloth or stretching your feet towards the tablecloth is unacceptable – you need to tuck your feet in.



Another variant of sitting on the floor is to eat at a low table with short legs. You still need to sit on the floor, but the meal stays on the table. You might worry about finishing everything that comes to the table, but that's not expected. It's polite to leave something, symbolising you had enough and your hosts provided enough food.



## Desert and coffee – Desert i Kofe -Десерт и кофе

Central Asia is a tea-drinking and meat-eating destination. If you need your coffee fix after a meal, you'll need to head off to a cafe where you'll also find a choice of cake and desserts – it's not common to find more than one dessert in a restaurant. However, you'll find such places aren't cheap – a cup of coffee can cost almost as much as a meal, expensive by local standards. In homestays and local restaurants, coffee is usually of the instant variety. Pack your own coffee machine if you're a fan of the brewed stuff.



## Tea - Chai - Чай

Locals drink tea a lot, and even on hot days hot tea is very popular. In most places green tea is very common and in cities you can choose between green and black tea. It is served in small half-filled bowls. Serving a full bowl of tea is considered impolite, whereas a full Western-style cup of tea is OK. In some mountainous regions you'll also find black tea served with milk, salt and butter.



## Special drinks and refreshments

Kyrgyz and Kazakh people drink fermented horse milk, called Kumys, Kumys or Кымыз. It has a unique, sour taste. In Kazakhstan you can also taste camel milk, Shubat Шүбат. It is a once in a lifetime experience to try, but be aware that you might not agree with your stomach if you're not used to it! In Kyrgyzstan, especially in Bishkek, you will see national drinks everywhere: jarma and chalap. Jarma is a brown drink made from a mixed grain brew and chalap is a white milky drink.



## Vegetarians

In large cities there are a variety of restaurants and plenty of choice in the menu. Vegetarians could try manty with potatoes or pumpkin, lentil soup, plov cooked without meat, vegetarian pizza or side dishes like vegetables, potatoes, rice or pasta.

It gets a bit tricky outside those big cities, however, as most dishes are prepared in one pot with meat. You'll have a hard time in some places convincing the locals that a vegetarian dish can taste good. They've been brought up with the notion that the best flavour comes from meat and, as you're their honoured guest, will want to offer you the best food they have – which means meat! As a vegetarian, it's still possible to travel through Central Asia of course, but make sure your guide and hosts are clear that you don't wish to eat meat. Your travel agent can assist you with this before you leave home.

## Menu – basic description of common dishes

Name of the dish in English letters	Basic ingredients or description	Name of the dish in Cyrillic letters
Lepyoshka/nan	White -round flat bread	Лепешка /нан
Boorsok /boursak /pishme	Fried pieces of dough	Боорсоқ/баурсак
Svezhiy salat	Fresh salads	Свежий салат
Shorpo/ shurpa	Soup - meat broth with a piece of meat, carrots, potatoes	Шорпо/ шурпа суп
Borsch	Beet soup with cabbage, potatoes and meat	Борщ
Chechevichniy sup	Lentil cream soup	Чечевичный суп
Plov  pilaf  paloo  os	Rice with carrots and meat	Пилав/ палoo/ ош /аш
Besh barmak (kg)   naryn (uz)	Noodles with pieces of meat & sauced with broth and onions	Беш бармак
Kurutob/qurutob	Puff pastry with fresh herbs, tomatoes, onions and dairy sauce drizzled with hot oil	Курутоб
Kuurdak	One pot meal of fired potatoes with meat and onions	Куурдак, куурдак, говурдак
Chuchuk, kazy	Local horse meat sausage	Казы
Shashlyk	Meat skewer	Шашлык
Kotlety s garnirom	Cutlets with a garnish/side dish fried meat patty with rice or mashed potatoes	Котлеты с гарниром
Laghman	Handmade pulled noodles with meat and vegetables sauce served as a soup	Лагман
Gyuro laghman	Served as a second course, with less no broth, just meat & vegetable sauce	Гюро лагман
Manty with meat -With potatoes -With pumpkin	Dumpling with minced meat, fat & onions or instead of meat potatoes and pumpkin.	Манты с мясом -с картофелем -с тыквой
Samsy	Local fast food, triangle shaped dough stuffed with meat or vegetables	Самсы
Pirozhki	Dough filled with mashed potatoes or cabbage - baked or fried	Пирожки
Kymys, kumys	Fermented horse milk	Кымыз
Shubat	Fermented camel milk	Шубат
Ovoshi i Frukti	Fruits and vegetables	Овощи и фрукты