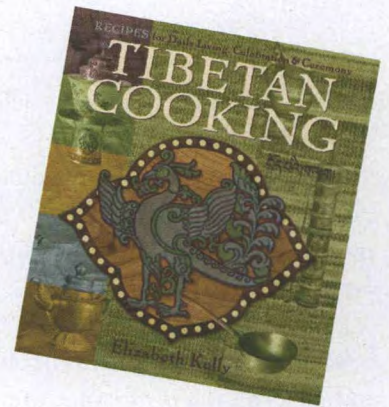


# Tibetan Cooking

A sense of community, comfort, health, and well-being are prominent on the ingredients list when it comes to Tibetan cooking. Elizabeth Kelly's new book, published by Snow Lion, is a deliciously practical paean of love – for food, for family, and for the Tibetan people. Here is an excerpt:



**M**y husband Gala [is] a carpet master from Eastern Tibet. Traditionally, Tibetan men are not cooks, but during his childhood in a refugee settlement in the northern wilderness of Nepal, he had learned many skills, among them cooking. He promptly saw the advantage of teaching me his favorite dishes and techniques ...

Gala has told me many stories over the years of the times when food was not readily available. His mother had to trade her jewelry and traditional hair ornaments for food. The story of his family's three-year journey on foot, running for their lives from the Communist Chinese army, is a poignant one. During his family's transition from impoverished circumstances in exile to the relative security of the modern world, food has been central to survival, both physically and spiritually. As he says, "People practice Dharma when they have food enough."

Gala's family comes from the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau where tribal peoples have lived for generations, managing herds of goats, sheep, yaks, and horses. Everything that was needed – food, clothing, and shelter – derived from the animals. The diet consisted of dairy products: milk, butter, various forms of dried cheese, and yogurt, as well as dried meat and the roasted barley flour called *tsampa*. Every moment of the day was spent in some aspect of survival and maintaining the food supply, beginning each morning with milking the animals. Families moved alongside their animals to different grazing areas on a cyclical basis. During yak caravans stretching over several months, the staples not grown in the region were obtained through barter. Wool and butter were traded for barley, salt, and tea.

Everything essential to the life of these nomads came from the land that supported the grazing herds.

Butter was stored inside a leather bag, sewn from a goat's skin. This could hold about one hundred pounds and

would serve as a sustaining gift to a local monastery. The people living close to the earth provided all the food for the lamas and monks, who were then free to read the texts and practice the Buddha Dharma, the treasure of Tibetan culture. In turn, the spiritual life of the nomads was nourished by the spiritual practice of the lamas and monks. The people relied on the lamas in all life-changing decisions and in the critical times of sickness, birth, and death.

This past spring, a powerful transition occurred in our own home and Tibetan food was central to the process of healing. Gala suddenly became ill and his life was threatened. The ancient ways of healing with herbal medicine, food, and prayer gave him back his life. We found a Tibetan doctor who was also a lama. Fortunately he was able to come to our home immediately, carrying many medicinal herbs with him in a huge bag. He performed the diagnosis, made the prescription, and conducted the appropriate puja. This process took all day. The lama then prescribed a course of treatment to follow.

Many visitors came to our home to wish Gala well, all appearing with bags of food: fresh vegetables hard to find in our area and abundant staples and beverages to serve other visitors. Many foods were offered through multiple pujas: whole grains, butter, honey, meat, sugar, and spirits. The abundance of good will represented in the offering of food was intended to remove obstacles and clear the way for recovery. Ironically, while all this food was coming into our home, my husband had to fast on a diet of thin rice soup and take herbal medicine around the clock. At times the absence of food is what creates balance. Meanwhile, family and friends gathered to feast and cook, providing inspiration to live and recover.

This situation exemplified the integrated relationship between sustenance and survival. While it is no mystery that people have to eat to live, it has always impressed me that water, food, and fasting are prominent in many Tibetan

Buddhist ritual ceremonies. At times, those present eat the consecrated food, and at other times the consecrated food is burnt as an offering. Realizing that food is not just a metaphor for spiritual nourishment but is itself spiritual, we can prepare and eat food with the appropriate intention. In so doing, the body, speech, and mind are nourished ...

It is not impolite to inquire about dietary preferences or restrictions when inviting Tibetan guests for a meal. Ask the lama's attendant for this information if you are planning to invite your teacher. You will then know how many vegetarians will attend and can balance the meal accordingly. Some Tibetan monks and lamas are vegetarians, but most do eat meat. Fish is the animal eaten least among Tibetans. Beef, lamb, and pork, being large animals, are preferred because offering the life of only one of these animals feeds many humans. In traditional monastic settings the main meal is still taken at noon, so lunch invitations are often preferable.

The serving suggestions included with many recipes in this book help with meal planning. Be creative! If the food is prepared with love, it will be perfect. ☺

*And here to whet your appetite are a couple of Elizabeth's delicious recipes:*

### THREE FRIENDS: Ping Sa Serves 6

*This dish can be served as a main dish in a vegetarian meal with the addition of bread or grain. Mushrooms dominate the dish, so it would be perfect to serve when meat-eaters are in the minority at the table, and they will still feel satisfied with the meal.*

**Ingredients:** 30 dried shiitake mushrooms; 3 cloves garlic; 2 tablespoons ginger; 1 small onion; 2 large sweet red peppers; 1 1/2 pounds fresh snow peas; oil; salt or soy sauce; 1 teaspoon cornstarch; 1 1/2 cups water

Wash the mushrooms quickly with very hot water. Place them in a covered bowl with hot water to soften for 1 hour. Remove the stems before cooking.

Finely chop the garlic, ginger, and onion, setting them aside in one bowl. Wash and remove the seeds from the red peppers, and cut them into 1 1/2-inch pieces. Wash the snow peas, removing any large stems.

Put 1/4 inch of oil into a skillet and fry the onion, garlic, and ginger over a medium flame. Add a little salt to bring the water out of the onion. When the onion is transparent, add the red peppers, stirring continuously. After 1 or 2 minutes, add the mushrooms and 1/2 cup of water. Turn the heat down and cover.

Simmer for 5 minutes. Dissolve the cornstarch in 1 cup of water, and add 2 tablespoons of soy sauce. Add this to the pan along with the snow peas. Cover and simmer for 5 minutes. The dish will be colorful, red and green and shiny.

### SWEET FILLED STEAMED ROLLS: Desi Palep Serves 4 to 6

*This makes a very filling breakfast along with Tibetan tea, a salty complement, or with yogurt. It takes more than one hour to prepare.*

**Ingredients: Dough:** 8 cups unbleached white flour; 4 teaspoons baking powder; 1/2 teaspoon baking soda; 2 cups cold water

**Filling #1:** 2 cups cooked Tibetan wild yams (dhoma<sup>1</sup>); 1/4 cup unsalted butter

**Filling #2:** 1 16 oz. can cooked red beans; 1/2 cup maple syrup; 1/8 cup unsalted butter

Sift the dry ingredients together in a bowl. Gradually incorporate the water into the flour mixture by slowly pouring it into the center, while mixing in a circular motion from the center outward. When the dough has formed, knead about five minutes until it is soft and pliable. It should not be sticky. Let the dough rest 20 to 30 minutes, covered with a bowl or plastic. While the dough is resting, prepare the filling.

**FILLING #1:** Melt the butter and mash it together with the cooked dhoma until a smooth paste is formed. The natural sweetness and flavor of the dhoma makes a very special and distinctive filling, similar to chestnut.

**FILLING #2:** Blend the beans, syrup, and butter in a blender and you will have a fine, rich filling that resembles dhoma. Very easy.

Roll out the dough about 1/2-inch thick. Cut the dough into 4-inch circles. In the center of each circle place 1 teaspoon of filling. Twist and pinch the circle closed.

Place in an oiled steamer. Steam for 20 minutes. Serve immediately.

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<sup>1</sup> These small tuberous vegetables are indigenous to Tibet and were formerly harvested only from the wild. They are dug from the earth and dried, in which form they last indefinitely. Dhoma is naturally sweet, and tastes very much like chestnut.

Dhoma is now grown in small quantities for commercial sale as a Chinese export. It sells in Nepal packaged as Tibetan Wild Sweet Potato, although this is a cultivated variety. It has sometimes reached us as a precious gift in a hand-sewn bag, complete with bits of Tibetan stone and earth: dhoma harvested by hand from the wild, an ancient culinary treasure.

Before cooking it is necessary to sort through the dhoma to remove any small stones. Wash the dhoma thoroughly. Then boil them gently for 15 to 20 minutes until tender. The dhoma may be eaten boiled like this, but are most often used in combination with other foods.