

RICE AGE Bamiyan's version of the Afghan staple *palow*—made with basmati rice, orange peel, almonds and saffron—includes tender Cornish hen.

EatOut

THE CITY'S BEST RESTAURANTS, BARS AND CULINARY RICHES

What about Kebab?

Afghan cuisine—a widespread but little-known phenomenon in New York—is the ultimate fusion food

by **Meredith Phillips** Photographs by **Patrik Rytikangas**

A *fgghanistan*: The very word conjures visions of rocky, hard terrain, calling to mind neither the lush imagery of, say, Persia, nor the old-world allure of China and India. Its position in Central Asia—bellied up to the former USSR, nestled

against Pakistan and pointing a thin tendril between Tibet and China—left the country exposed to centuries of plunder, as conquerors fought their way through the towering mountains, plunging valleys and arid deserts. But extreme geographical conditions couldn't stay

the spice and sild traders, who steadily tackled Afghanistan's farmed Khyber Pass on the land route to India and back, leaving a fragrant trail of cardamom, cumin, coriander, cloves and cinnamon in their wake; heck, name a spice that starts with *c*, they left it. As a result, the

cuisine evolved enviably as a lavish combination of Eastern and Western culinary traditions.

While Afghan food displays its own distinctive and feisty character, it hews closest to that of its neighbor, Iran, and reveals traces of Chinese, Indian and Pakistani cuisines. New York's numerous Afghan restaurants—scattered around Manhattan and in Afghan-populated portions of Queens—provide tantalizing introductions to this polyglot cuisine.

"Afghan cooking? Let me make it very simple for you," says Sayed Shah, co-owner of **Bamiyan** (358 Third Ave at 26th St, 212-481-3232), a welcoming, if not fancy, restaurant decked out with fluffy pillow seating on the floor and fringe red decor. (These days, the restaurant suffers the dubious distinction of seeing its name in headlines, since its namesake village is where the Islamic fundamentalist Taliban movement recently destroyed ancient Buddhist statues.) "Mediterranean food is a little underspiced, a little bland," says Shah. "And Indian food? It's a little overspiced. We know to stay in the middle."

Shah, who says that he's a 41st-generation descendant of the prophet Muhammad, soon emerges from the kitchen, bringing over a plate of delicious, ribbony homemade noodles dressed with butter, tangy yogurt, dried mint and paprika. Rice and bread are both common to the cuisines of central Asia, but pasta, hailing from China, is a huge bonus of Afghan food and one of its most pronounced departures from Persian cuisine. (Afghanistan, in turn, shared its noodle tradition with Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan, all of which once lay within its borders before being claimed by Russia and ultimately becoming independent states.)

Shah is right: in the proper hands, Afghan cuisine is nothing if not balanced. Sweet and salty, creamy and tart rub up against each other constantly. One of the most rewarding ways to eat Afghan noodles is in the form of *ashak*; steamed raviolis stuffed with scallions, dressed with yogurt and mint, and topped with crumbled ground beef, and sometimes with kidney beans and tomatoes. Noodles also take the form of *mantoo*, which resemble dumplings and are filled with spiced beef, coriander, fresh parsley, dill and onions and topped with more meat and, of course, yogurt. Cooling, tangy and light, the ever-present yogurt serves

both as a vehicle for herbs—mint, dill, paprika—and a foil for the pungent flavors that might be found in meat.

Bamiyan is an excellent place to order Afghanistan's famed charcoal-grilled kebabs, because the cooks here are wizards with meat, whether it's beef, chicken or lamb. Marinating meat in a combination of saffron, garlic, yogurt and coriander and grilling it on a skewer is one of the most common ways of preparing meat in Afghanistan. (In fact, kebab carts in New York are frequently owned and operated by Afghans.) At Bamiyan, the *barg kebab* consists of butter-soft, pink chunks of grilled filet mignon bathed in a saffron-spiked marinade.

TimeOut
New York

Issue 287

March 22–29, 2001

Other ways of cooking meat are baking it casserole-style under a layer of rice; cooking it in a stew (called a *quorma*) with peppers, onions and tomatoes; turning it into sausage; or serving it atop a *palow*—a rice dish flavored with orange peel, saffron, almonds and pistachio. In Bamiyan's *shireen palow*, the chunks of lightly charred Cornish game hen are incredibly moist and tender. The *koobideh* is a fantastic sausage made of minced beef. Though lamb is the most common Afghan meat, hail to the beef at Bamiyan.

Meat, however, is not typically served in quantity in central Asia. More likely contenders for everyday eating are the vegetable dishes, of which quormas are the most common. Eggplant and pumpkin—important crops in Afghanistan—make frequent appearances in multiple guises. Bamiyan's *bourani baunjaun* is a memorable example. Sautéed rounds of skin-on eggplant are served on a thin layer of yogurt, in a tomato ragu with more garlicky, minted yogurt on top. In the addictive pumpkin-flavored *boulanee* (pot stickers), the gourd is whipped into a paste, scented with cinnamon and cloves, blended into the pasta dough and fried.