

BALTALI RICE



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In Azerbaijan, rice was originally grown on the fields of the Shaki-Zagatala, Aran, and Lankaran-Astara economic regions (a belt running through the center of the country from north to south). The subtropical climate of this area makes it suitable for rice cultivation. Initially, the inhabitants of these regions valued rice more than wheat, so it entered the traditional local cuisine. In the 18th and 19th centuries, rich merchants from Lankaran-Astara (the southernmost part of Azerbaijan) exported rice, flax, silk, vegetables, and fish products to the markets of Russia, and trade relations contributed to the development of industry and education in the city of Lankaran. After the record-breaking harvest of 102 thousand tonnes in 1928, rice yields gradually began to decline to 5-10 thousand tonnes per year in the following decades. In 2011, Azerbaijan began to revive its rice cultivation and the yield was 16 thousand tonnes in 2017.

The rice grown in Baltali, a village in Shaki District, has large grains with a soft texture and milky color. Some of the rice grown in Baltali is ground in a watermill and used to make Shaki halva and many other local sweets. It is also sold on local markets and used in local cuisine, although the majority of households prefer to buy imported rice for cooking plov and other traditional dishes.

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BLACK HALVA




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BLACK HALVA

This is a traditional halva-type sweet distinguished by its brown-black color, which results from the use of wheat sprout juice. The seeds of local wheat varieties are germinated in a tray for 15-20 days, and then chopped and squeezed through gauze. The juice is mixed with whole-wheat flour (made from local wheat, milled in a watermill) and the mixture is cooked in a copper container: An equivalent amount of butter (made from local cow's milk yogurt in a traditional swinging wooden device) is added, and everything is boiled for 10 hours, being constantly stirred with a long-handled wooden paddle. Spices (cinnamon, pepper, ginger, cardamom) are added one by one while stirring. Then the mass is cooled and local multiflower honey or sherbet (sugar syrup) and a mix of smashed hazelnuts and walnuts are added. The cooled mass is shaped by hand into balls or flattened egg shapes, which are rolled in sugar to prevent them sticking to one another. Black khalva is consumed as a sweet with tea. It can be stored in a dry, cool place for up to 2 years.

Traditionally, black khalva was produced once a year, exclusively for the spring holiday of Novruz, in the mountain villages of Damirchi (Shamakhi district) and Lahij (Ismayilli district). This family tradition is believed to be rooted in the Zoroastrian religious tradition of growing wheatgrass for Novruz. Each family produces black halve for their own consumption and to give as a gift.

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CAUCASIAN MOUNTAIN HONEY



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The mild climatic conditions in the mountainous and mid-mountainous areas of northwestern Azerbaijan have fostered a long-standing tradition of wild beekeeping called “tekne”. Tekne is a hollowed wooden log, a replication of the natural habitat of bees found in trees. Tekne hives are usually carved from soft trees, traditionally linden or alder. Each tekne hive yields approximately 1-3 kilograms of honey. Tekne honey is often darker in colour and more dense, with a more complex flavor profile compared to honey from modern hives.

With the widespread introduction of frame hives in the 19th century, tekne hives were rendered relatively less productive, and as they were increasingly replaced, wild beekeeping techniques fell out of favor. The newer frame hives, which include additional wax foundations, produce honey with a more familiar and pleasing taste to contemporary palates. The cost of crafting tekne hives is also more expensive compared to the modern approach. Today, only a few beekeepers in the mountain regions of northwestern Azerbaijan are preserving the tekne beekeeping method. Tekne hives have traditionally hosted the Caucasian Mountain Grey honey bee (*Apis mellifera caucasica*), a local breed native to the Caucasus Mountains. This breed is distinguished by its longer tongue, which enables the bees to get nectar from a wider variety of flowers and in larger quantities. It also possesses traits that enable it to fly better and in cooler conditions, as well as to overwinter. Despite these bees' advantages and high resistance and docility, the Caucasian Mountain Grey honey bee is increasingly being overshadowed by other bee breeds among Azerbaijani beekeepers.

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CAUCASUS MOUNTAIN
CHESTNUTS



CAUCASUS MOUNTAIN CHESTNUTS

Chestnut cultivation in the north western part of the Caucasus region is one of the main sources of sustenance for the Azerbaijani mountain populations of the Caucasus. Chestnut trees grow together with oak, beech and hornbeam trees.

The mountain chestnuts of these areas are rather small and it is difficult to remove their skin. In the kitchen they are used to prepare traditional dishes such as pilaf, Galya (meat stew) and chestnut soup. In rural areas, chestnuts are also eaten simply roasted.

It is a fruit that is widespread in mountainous areas, but these chestnuts have different characteristics which vary from region to region. The most common variety comes from the Gabala district and is used for a traditional dish called “Dosheme Ash” or “Şabalıd plov” (which literally translates to chestnut pilaf).

Since 2003, a high mortality of chestnut trees has been reported, this due particularly to a fungus called *Cryphonectria parasitica*, which is more simply referred to as “chestnut cancer”. Climate change and poor forest maintenance play a role in the decrease of chestnut plants in the Azerbaijani forests, it rains less and less each year and periods of dryness are more frequent. Over the past two years, there has been a decline in yields and an increasing deterioration in tree health.

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GARAGYLCHYG WHEAT



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Archaeological and paleontological studies reveal that wheat cultivation in Azerbaijan dates back at least 6-8 thousand years. This is evidenced by the manual mills, known as kir-kira or el degirmany, discovered during archaeological excavations and dated to the 2nd-3rd centuries BC. The great 12th-century Azerbaijani poet Nizami Ganjavi wrote about methods of cultivation and processing wheat and its products. Azerbaijani literature from the 19th century also references various durum wheat varieties, such as “sary bugda”, “gara bugda”, “ag bugda”, and “gyrmyzy bugda”, as well as soft wheat varieties, such as khirda bugda, gyrka, and gyurgyan. The key grain-growing districts of Azerbaijan are Sheki, Ismayilli, Shamakhi, Jalilabad, Sabirabad, Agjabadi, Balaken, and Beylagan.

Garagylchyg is a notable local durum wheat variety traditionally grown in the district of Sheki. This variety is characterized by its tall stature, with stalks growing up to 155 centimeters, and up to 2 meters under irrigation. The grains are light yellow and have an elongated oval form, with 45 grains per ear, each weighing about 2.4 grams. Garagylchyg is well-suited to drought conditions and is adapted to non-irrigated cultivation, though it has moderate resistance to lodging. It is grown mainly in foothill areas, with the harvest beginning in mid-June. Garagylchyg flour, still often made in watermills, is used in traditional dishes and may be found locally. Unfortunately, it has become difficult for traditional garagylchyg wheat flour to compete with imported flour.

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ATA-BABA HAZELNUT




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ATA-BABA HAZELNUT

Ata-Baba hazelnut is an ancient hazelnut cultivar of Azerbaijan. Meaning “passed on from father to son” in local dialect, this peculiar variety is diffused in the northern part of the country, on the southern slopes of the Caucasus Mountains, between the districts of Gabala and Gakh. The area presents a rich biodiversity from an agricultural point of view. Foothills, mild climates, and the presence of water reserves, have all contributed to the development of hazelnut cultivation in the region. Every small-scale farmer throughout the region has at least a couple of hazelnut plants, demonstrating the strong link with the local culture and the hazelnut’s importance within the local economy. Ata-Baba hazelnuts are traditionally recognized as a curative food: together with honey, they have been consumed as a treatment for anemia and exhaustion, prescribed in particular to nursing mothers.

The Ata-Baba hazelnut is commonly consumed as a dried snack. They are a particularly important ingredient for the preparation of sweets for Novruz, the holiday that welcomes the beginning of spring. On this occasion, sweets like pakhlava (a dessert made with dough, honey and dried fruits) and shekerbura (baked pastry filled with ground hazelnuts, mixed with sugar and eggs) are produced in big quantities.

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IVANOVKA SUNFLOWER OIL



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This is a traditional product of Ivanovka, a village of Molokans who rejected conformity and were forced to leave Russia in the 19th century.

The oil-making plant in Ivanovka was founded in 1920, at a time when the Molokan artels (cooperatives) functioned (the equipment was brought back in 1897). Since that time, oil has become the hallmark of the village and the collective farm.

Sunflower oil from Ivanovka is famous all over Azerbaijan and is in demand both for cooking and for medicinal purposes. Unfortunately, as demand rises, so does the quantity of counterfeit product: Ivanovka oil is cut with normal refined sunflower oil and sold as Ivanovka oil at lower prices.

Ivanovka sunflower oil is mainly used for seasoning salads seasoning and is also very good in baking (it goes into the local bread). The dish that many locals remember from childhood is local bread (made with flour milled from a mixture of wheat varieties grown in the collective farm fields and processed in a watermill) with sunflower oil and chopped white garlic.

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MADRASA GRAPE



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Madrasa is a local red grape variety named after the village of Madrasa in the Shamakhi region of Azerbaijan, historically known as Shirvan region. Currently, Madrasa vines are grown in several villages in Shamakhi and Ismailli districts located between 700 and 800 meter of altitude, where small-scale producers generally dedicate part of their vineyard to this variety, mainly for their own consumption. Shamakhi and Ismailli are mostly mountainous areas, with the highest peak, Babadag, that rises to 3,629 meters.

Madrasa wine is among the vintage wines that make up the so-called “golden fund” of the ancient Azerbaijani winemaking tradition. Wine production in the area is a millenary activity, as testified by several ancient findings, such as jars buried with remains of wine dating back to the 2nd millennium BC. The Greek historian Strabo, who visited Northern Azerbaijan in the 1st century AD described the cultivation of grape crops as so many that the inhabitants were unable to harvest them.

Madrasa grapes are medium sized with a slightly oval shape, and grow in conical clusters of medium density. The grapes go to bright pink to dark blue when fully ripen, with a thick waxy bloom. The skin is quite thick and tears easily, while the flesh is greenish and juicy with a harmonious taste.

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MARSAN TOMATO



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Marsan village, in the Gakh district of northern Azerbaijan, is famous for tomato production. During Soviet times, various tomato varieties were grown in the kolkhoz (collective farm), so most people did not grow them in the gardens. But one family safeguarded the seeds that were inherited from their grandparents and then shared them with a few families who wanted to cultivate tomatoes. According to local people, the Marsan tomato has slowly become a sort of “local brand” thanks to the selection work of farmers in the village.

The Marsan tomato is known for growing into large sizes without any fertilizer. The plants reach a height of about 2 meters, the fruits are spherical and about 10-13 centimeters in diameter. The red skin is thin and delicate, so the ripe tomatoes cannot be moved around well. This variety is sweet and juicy. The seeds are collected from the first tomatoes of the season, which tend to be larger. The seedlings are planted in the fields in May, and harvest continues until the first frosts of autumn. The soil is not fertilized, no pest management is required, and the plants should be watered sparingly so as not to compromise the tomatoes’ sweet flavor. Only a few families continue to grow the Marsan tomato, exclusively for their own consumption. It is used fresh in salads and other dishes; the biggest fruits are used to make tomato sauce and smaller fruits are preserved in marinade with other local vegetables.

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MOTAL CHEESE



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Motal is a traditional cheese produced throughout the Caucasus. This product has a very long history and is associated with the movement of pastoralists and their animals between winter and summer pastures, and their need to preserve dairy products. Motal is produced in small quantities in mountain pastures, particularly in late spring. It is named for the sheep or goat-skin sack in which it is aged and stored. The sack can be made with the hairy side of the skin facing in or out; if the hair is on the inside, it helps the cheese to coagulate (thus, less rennet is used) and ferment, and also absorbs excess salt. The downside to this method is that hairs end up in the cheese. When the sack is made with the hair facing out, more rennet must be added. The rennet is made from a lamb's abomasum, which is cured for a month in salted water with some grain and a piece of iron, to regulate the pH. To make the cheese, a spoonful of the rennet is added to every 10 liters of milk (sheep's and/or goat's milk). The curds are separated from the whey and allowed to dry, and then salted and packed into the skin sack. Some shor (another cheese typical of the Caucasus) is added, which helps the motal to season properly. Mountain thyme may also be added. It is crucial that the skin sack has no holes in it and that all of the air is squeezed out before it is tied shut. The sacks of cheese are then left in a cool place to mature for at least a month, and ideally 3-6 months. During aging, the sacks are turned every 4-5 days. It should be noted that ripening motal in a glass, ceramic, or plastic vessel is ineffective for bringing out the cheese's distinctive characteristics.

Motal cheese is crumbly and very salty. In finished form, it is usually divided into chunks of about 0.5-1 kilogram. It is whitish or pale yellow and tastes similar to a mature blue cheese. Once properly matured, motal can be stored for several years. It is eaten with bread and pairs well with onions, garlic and basil, and dry red wines. You can also wrap motal in a pita or lavash with chopped greens (cilantro, dill, onions, and basil) and fresh cucumber slices.

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NANE ARAQ



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Despite its name, which literally means “mint vodka”, nane araq is a non-alcoholic distillate of wild mint.

To prepare it one kilo of wild mint leaves are needed. These leaves are boiled in about 5 litres of water. The extraction of wild mint essence takes place during the boiling: as soon as the liquid reaches boiling, over 85°-90°C, its vapor collects in the lid of the pot. Every 5 minutes the steam drops from the lid are collected in a cup. This takes a lot of patience and takes 7-8 hours. The distilled plant water is then stored for several days in a dark room until it is ready to be consumed.

1-2 teaspoons are added to cakes, pastries and almost all traditional sweets as a flavouring. It is also taken on its own, in the morning as soon as you wake up, in small doses, as a medicine for gastrointestinal diseases. It is an excellent cure for stabilising blood pressure.

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RUSHANKA ONION




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RUSHANKA ONION

This variety is named after the village of Rushan, and is also cultivated in home gardens in nearby villages, including Ivanovka. The onions grown in Rushan are particularly disease resistant.

The Rushanka onion is a locally selected shallot variety with small, elongated purple bulbs that weigh 25-75 g. It has a sharp, sweet-and-spicy flavor. Rushanka onion is mostly used fresh in salads, or eaten on its own, chopped and dressed with pomegranate juice.

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BAKU ZINJILFARAJ



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Zinjilfaraj (anjilfaraj) is a traditional Baku dessert made with figs grown in the Absheron region. These figs are famous for their excellent quality.

The figs used in this recipe are collected in July and August. They are boiled for 4.5 hours. After they have cooled down, their flesh is detached from the peel and they are boiled again to increase how concentrated the mixture is and to reduce the water content. Flour is then added slowly, little by little, in order to make the mixture even more compact. Star anise, fennel seeds, cinnamon and doshab (white mulberry syrup) are added to the figs and mixed in for a while. This mixture is then left to cool. A very thin layer is formed which is then cut into diamonds or squares. The pieces are placed in containers and dried in the sun for 2 to 3 days. The pieces must be turned often, so that they dry perfectly on both sides.

This sweet that is made from figs is believed to stimulate the immune system, strengthen the body, aid the vascular system and stimulate the immune system. Zinjilfaraj is mainly prepared by the older generations who used to use the large amount of figs that were produced in the Absheron region. The best areas for growing were relatively flat, protected from the wind and well ventilated. If the ground was on an incline of more than 20 percent, terraces were built to plant the fruit trees. Fig trees are planted in fall and spring.

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