

Eating warm to ward off Kashmiri chill

Geese pickles, smoked fish, duck delicacies and dried vegetables are back on the menu as Jammu and Kashmir prepares for a long and bitter winter ahead.

Night temperatures have plummeted to below freezing point in the valley even though the four-month-long winter season has just started. 'Warm clothes are not enough to brave the sub-zero temperatures. We also need the right food during the winter months,' said Parvaiz Koul, a doctor.

Traditionally, Kashmiris have always turned to a rich repast to escape the climatic harshness.

Vegetables are dried and preserved for the winter months since snow often clogs the Jammu-Srinagar highway, the supply lifeline of the valley.

Dried tomatoes, brinjals, pumpkins and even dried fish are some of the choice winter fare.

A specialty like the 'Shabdeg' - duck and turnip cooked in an earthen vessel over the simmering heat of the hearth - is a famous grandma recipe the locals relish.

'As nights are long in the winter, the duck and turnip dish is allowed to simmer in a vessel whose mouth is sealed with dough. When the vessel is opened the next day, the appetising fragrance of the spices used in the dish permeates the entire home.

'In our childhood, the privilege to serve the dish belonged to the eldest lady of the family. All of us looked forward to the occasion when we sat around in a group to be served our share of the dish,' said nostalgic housewife Fahmida Akhter, 47.

Locals also keep handy 'fari gard' (smoked fish) during the winter.

'The fish is cooked with dried tomatoes and 'nadru' (lotus stems from Kashmir lakes). They make a wonderful serving,' said Ghulam Nabi, a chef.

'Harisa' - a boneless mutton preparation sold during the winter in downtown [Srinagar](#) city - is another major attraction.

'This dish is so tasty that one Afghan governor, who came here during the Afghan rule, is believed to have over-eaten himself to death. He perhaps did not know how to stop,' said Sajad Ahmad, a history teacher.

Kashmiris prepare some of the best local cuisine, other than the traditional feast called the 'Wazwan', only during the winter.

The local consumption of fish also goes up during the cold months.

The fish is cooked differently in winter. Deep-fried in mustard oil, it is cooked with lotus stems, radish and a lavish use of spices and condiments like chillies, turmeric and cloves.

'Kashmiri Pandits prepared special fish dishes for Muslim guests during Shivratri festival. They also used tomatoes and radish in the dishes. Fish at the Pandit neighbour's home used to be something I always looked forward to,' recalled Bashir Ahmad, 49, a forest officer.

Another winter specialty is the waterfowl - a migratory species that fly here in thousands each winter from Russian Siberia, China and Eastern Europe.

The greylag geese, mallards, teals, shovellers, gadwalls, pintails and widgeons are some species of migratory waterfowl used to prepare special winter dishes by the locals.

'In affluent families, geese pickles would also be made and kept aside for winter use,' said Habibullah, 65, an ardent bird watcher who lives in Chanduna village, 28 km north of Srinagar city.

F. Ahmed (© IANS / India eNews)