



Eat the World

THE CULINARY MELTING POT HAS MIXED UP OUR SENSES OF WHERE TO FIND EXEMPLARY EATS. **ADAM H. GRAHAM** EMBARKS ON A FEW UNLIKELY FOOD QUESTS THAT WILL ADD LESSER-KNOWN STAPLES TO YOUR EPICUREAN TREASURE MAP. **ILLUSTRATED BY RIETY**

NOT MANY PEOPLE GO TO BHUTAN IN SEARCH OF CHEESE. BUT THAT'S HOW I ROLL.
A food's birthplace, quite logically, used to be considered the best place to eat it. While people still make pilgrimages everywhere from the Karaköy neighborhood of Istanbul for crisp, honey-kissed baklava with Turkish coffee, to Jabugo, Spain, for 5J ham from its acorn-fed, pure-bred Iberian black pigs, today the borders have blurred, putting our musty concept of authenticity under a microscope. As our understanding of food history grows ever-more

culturally interwoven, we free ourselves to be more objective about matters of taste and flavor.
This shift in culinary thinking first began around the time of the famed 1976 Judgment of Paris, in which French wine critics did blind tastings of American and French wines. To the shock of everyone, California vintages beat out their French counterparts, where the varietals were thought to have originated. Ditto for when Tokyo Pizzeria e Trattoria da Isa's Yamamoto Hisanori won the World Pizza Cup in Naples, Italy, in 2007

and then, for good measure, in the following two years as well. Over the years, London chefs have won accolades for their Indian curries, Korean pit-masters have nabbed Texas barbecue trophies and South African, Taiwanese and even Nepalese distillers have conquered whisky competitions.
With chefs and brewers, vintners and culinarians moving around the world and experimenting with local flavors and ingredients, food has become less of a one-way ticket and more of a round-trip voyage. Following are a few of my favorites.



Bali

MOST VISIT BALI IN SEARCH OF BLISS. My trip here is no different, except I'm not seeking metaphysical perfection. Not a feeling that can be induced by the terraced rice paddies, gamelan music or balian medicine men, this bliss has a distinct form—sweet, soft and mahogany. It's transcendent chocolate.

I know a thing or two about cocoa beans. For one, I live in Switzerland, a magnet for many milk-chocolate cheerleaders. I've traveled the globe from Belgium to Belize to Brooklyn in search of artisanal nibs. I've traversed the Amazon jungles of Ecuador and met with cacao farmers and food historians to research the origin of chocolate. But I hadn't ever heard of Bali-style chocolate, until I stumbled upon it by accident. Twice.

In 2012, I was visiting the island as part of an extravagant around-the-world trip. In Bali, we ventured to Santi Agro Wisata, an organic farm just off a woodsy mountain road in Tampaksiring-Kintamani, 15 kilometers north of Ubud. Supposedly we'd come for the pricey *kopi luwak*, or civet coffee, prized for its nutty, low-acidic flavor that I don't find all that remarkable. No, it was their chocolate that was a revelation. Not only was it among the best I'd ever had, but also, I later learned, it was impossible to find outside of Bali. When I got home, multiple searches online for "Santi" or "Bali style chocolate" came up empty. "Had they closed?" I worried.

On a return trip four years later, the memory of this candy ingrained on my brain, I know I want to track down the origin, but I have several stops to cram in. After visiting the nearby water temple Tirta Empul, my driver pulls into a dirt parking lot on a familiar-looking road. He says we are stopping to taste the world's most expensive coffee. Because there are so many farms in the area with similar names, I don't expect to be returning to the same one. Until I spot the red and white sign for Santi Agro Wisata. My heart starts racing and my mouth, Pavlovian, begins to water.

Visitors are given a tour of the grounds along a shady trail that circles the property. There are few plants that don't thrive in Bali and a walk through the farm is a fragrant and memorable journey of the senses that's testament to the island's fertile abundance. Cacao is intercropped here, meaning it's grown aside other plantings like coconut, lemongrass, coffee, ginger, nutmeg, clove and vanilla. While cacao's origins might be in South America, Bali's ebony volcanic soil is the ideal lab for earthy and delicious chocolate.

Yet, the best part about the Santi's chocolate is not how it's grown, but how it's prepared. Rather than play up the percentage of cacao in the bar like many artisan chocolatiers, Santi takes their 100-percent organic chocolate in a different direction, by eschewing dairy completely. Instead they use native coconut milk, sweetened with coconut sugar, both from coconuts grown on site. This creates a softer- and bolder-tasting chocolate that—ingenious in the tropics—does not melt.

The finished product doesn't have the snap that most chocolate bars do. Slicing into a thick hunk of it is like cutting into a soft loaf of banana bread or a firm piece of tofu—a process that's almost as satisfying as eating it. In cooler climes, I discovered back in Europe, the chocolate does splinter when cut, but it's still worth the trade-off for its dark coconut richness.

The quarter-kilo sized bars are made at the farm and cost about US\$10 apiece. I savored the hunk I brought home from my first Bali trip for several months. On the second visit, I purchase two bars assuming they'll last me a few months. They're gone within two weeks. Bliss, I suppose, doesn't last forever.

Santi Agro Wisata: Jalan Raya Tampaksiring-Kintamani, Gianyar; 62-81/933-117-053; chocolate bars from Rp140,000.

Kyoto

IT'S DIFFICULT TO OVERSTATE THE OMNIPRESENCE OF RAMEN THROUGHOUT JAPAN.

But those tourists on a specific soup pilgrimage might head directly to Fukuoka, birthplace of *tonkotsu* (pork bone) ramen, or to the Sugamo district of Tokyo to Tsuta, a tiny noodle joint that became the first ramen place in Japan to receive a Michelin star last December. They do not necessarily target Kyoto. The ancient capital's historic *ryokan* and quiet, internationally renowned restaurants are better known for *kaiseki* meals and genteel tea ceremonies. I was no different for my first few visits there.

Then I heard about fire ramen. Game-changer. A secret within a secret. As it turns out, locals do know Kyoto specifically for its ramen—whose proliferation is tempting to chalk up to the tastes of students at the city's dozens of universities. On Ramen Koji, an entire floor of the train station is devoted to ramen stands, serving at least eight different regional styles of the beloved noodles and broth.

But *Menbakaichidai*, the birthplace of fire ramen, is not there. I find the discreet ramen shop in Kyoto's historic Kamigyo Ward. It has four tables and a 12-seat counter where the fire ramen, which I would describe as "a greasy jewel box," is a must. The fire I speak of is not a flicker you might find under a fondue pot. It's a red molten liquid flame poured from a cast iron pot into your bowl. During my visit, chef Miyazawa Masamichi heats two tablespoons of vegetable oil flavored with green onions to 182 degrees Celsius before lighting them with an open flame and letting the volcanic liquid cascade into my soup bowl. When the oil hits the broth, it combusts, creating a massive explosion that nearly makes kindling of my misplaced chopstick.

Yes, it's showy. Yes, it's definitely dangerous. But the process chars the thin slices of pork *chashu* and green onions, imbuing the ramen with a perfectly smoky creaminess I

haven't tasted anywhere else. After two winter months in Japan (and dozens of steamy bowls of excellent ramen), it is hands down the most flavorful I've eaten.

Miyazawa's trademark ramen is becoming an icon, but in truth it's a take on the classic green-onion ramen. It's topped with a mossy tangle of thinly sliced *kujonegi*, a certified Kyoto variety of spring onion favored by Japanese for its distinct vegetal sweetness. The broth is a mix of homemade soy sauce and a secret formula of stocks including chicken and nine types of seafood. Submerged deep under the raft of green onions are thin toothsome brown noodles and delicate slices of tender *chashu*, a lean pork belly imported from Mexico.

Diners who order this primordial dish must give up cameras and phones, wear protective aprons, and pay respect to the strict rules listed on the wall. Children cannot order it unless they promise to finish it, and there are no Halal or vegan versions. Politically correct ramen it is not. But it's only available in Kyoto. And it's worth every slurp.

Menbakaichidai: 757-2 Minami-iseya-cho, Kamigyo-ku, Kyoto; 81-75/812-5818; fireramen.com; price per bowl ¥1,150.





Bhutan

IN THIS NATION SQUEEZED INTO THE 7,000-METER-HIGH HIMALAYAN FOLDS, Gross National Happiness measures the quality of life. Yet when I visited Bhutan, the happiness I sought was in the form of cheese. Not the iconic dish of roasted chilies and melted cheese that's ubiquitous across Bhutan, but, rather, soft, quality, creamy European-style cheeses made from fresh, pure mountain milk.

I'd first heard of Swiss-turned-Bhutanese cheese-maker Fritz Maurer from some food writer friends. In the 1960s, Maurer was working with an NGO in Bhutan and started a program intended to help the country build its own dairy industry. After, he never cashed in his return ticket. He married a Bhutanese woman, had five kids, and set up shop in Bumthang, a small city in eastern Bhutan.

These days, Bumthang has a new airport, but I went the long way, an 11-day road trip of temple tours, *dzong* visits and meditative treks over Himalayan passes decorated with colorful depictions of Rinpoche and other tantric deities. I ate many plates of chili cheese. Too many.

The culmination of my spiritual and culinary pilgrimage comes on a sunny December afternoon. Maurer is wearing a traditional Bhutanese *gho* and a chunky knit sweater. He looks more like a kilt-wearing

Scotsman than the Swiss-Bhutanese hybrid he's become. Like many Swiss, his humor remains as dry as the Himalayan air.

His cheeses include a hard, buttery Emmentaler and a pungent Gruyère, both available for sale in Bumthang's tiny Yoser Lham Shop, decorated with cowbells and fondue-recipe calendars. The shop's worn wooden walls seem to absorb the wafting odors coming off the wheels of cheese in the neighboring fermentation room and are a homey whiff of Alpine goodness for me. Next door is the Red Panda Brewery, which Maurer helped start. It brews a cloudy but crisp Weissbier made with live yeast and a tart apple cider, and sells jars of golden local honey, all high-quality products that Maurer introduced to Bhutan.

"You can preserve traditions—but you can't preserve culture. It changes as humans do," Maurer says when I ask him what it was like being a foreign-food pioneer in Bhutan. He tells me immediately that the quality is not yet where he wants it to be. "We're trying to encourage the farmers to sell us better quality cream and milk because you can't make great cheese without fatty cream," he says in the Red Panda dining room. "Sometimes the farmers skim the cream off or water the milk down." To counter that, he borrows a dairy-economics tactic from home: "We tell them that the better quality their cream, the more we'll pay."

Because bringing cheese home is never an easy task due to variable heat and cold conditions in the cargo holds of airplanes, I buy a few hunks of Maurer's cheeses and eat them over the course of my stay. They are not as uniformly creamy and floral as the cheeses in Switzerland, but they are dense and delicious, and have a coarse, crumbly texture and a rustic Himalayan flavor all their own. It is a reminder that food can be culturally transformative—and is always better when shared.

Red Panda Brewery and Yoser Lham cheese shop: Bathpalathang, Bumthang; 975-17/115-216 or 975-3/631-145; cheese from US\$5. ☎