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Samsa on Sheepshead Bay

Tracing Uzbek Foodprints in Southern Brooklyn

ZOHRA SAED

In southern Brooklyn, at the very tip of the borough where the beaches are the main attraction, runs Ocean Avenue. Along this long street, which begins on Emmons Avenue and ends near Prospect Park, is a long stretch of apartments, which, in the 1980s, were managed by Turks, Tatars, and Uzbeks. The buildings were hardly six stories high and nearly identical, distinguishable only by a few shades of brick, yellow or red. My childhood was spent zipping from one building to the next, playing in basements with the reckless freedom of childhood. My friends were the children of the superintendents who lived and worked in these apartments, so we were able to sneak in through all the nooks and crannies, playing hide and seek, and even crawling into the large dryers in the basements. The thread that held us together around the neighborhoods and in school was the Turkic languages: Tatar, Uzbek, Kazakh, and Turkish. But something else equally important bound us together: Turkic food.

The memory of my childhood is filled with an abundance of smells and tastes amid moored boats and seagulls that flew in a flurry above our heads. The most memorable is the taste of minced lamb tucked into dough and baked as *samsa* or fried as *bulani*. How can I ever forget Emmons Avenue in autumn, the view of the bay on a sunny day, a thermos of steaming black tea with cardamom, sweetened for the small family trips? Cupped in our warm hands, these treats simply melted in our mouths. The mini savory pies were celebratory foods; making them required all hands to be on deck. These labor-intensive meals were prepared by groups of women who gathered before special events such as picnics or holidays. Together, they painstakingly “knotted” the pastry, the Uzbek term for wrapping dumplings or other filled pastries.

Nomadic Culinary Roots

In the Uzbek household, the fundamental meal is a rice dish known as *osh* or *palau* (also called *pilov* or *pilaf*, as it is more familiarly known in the West). Variations of the *palau* traveled to India with the Moguls and became *biryani*, which means “fried” in Farsi, just as *korma* is *qourma*, which means “fried” in Turkic. *Quorma* was then taken as *gourmeh* in Iranian Farsi and turned finally by the French into “gourmet.” Given this etymological lineage, how can *korma* not taste delicious?

Lamb is the main protein on the Central Asian table. The meat is steamed, broiled, grilled, stewed, or tucked into pastry dough and either baked to form *samsas* or fried to make *chiborek* or *bulani*. Beef makes an appearance in noodle soups, like *laghman*, but rarely. Chicken, although present in roasts or kebabs, is not nearly as popular as lamb. Central Asian cuisine is a gastronomic testimony of a nomadic past, which is why there is such an abundance of lamb, goat, dairy (mostly yogurt), briny cheese, sausages, and dried meats. Lamb is famously made into shish kebabs and grilled on an open wood fire. The origins of shish kebab is *shush kebab*, a Farsi term that means “lungs roasted.” Lungs salted, skewered, and roasted in an open fire was a quick meal on the go along the mountains and steppes. The popular term used by Russians and Turks is *shashlik*, which some claim has Turkic origins meaning “hurried” or fast food, while others argue that it is a variation of the *seekhlik*, which means “with a stick.”

Vegetables are a rarity in the Central Asian diet. The national fruit is the melon, known as *kherbuza*, which means “donkey-goat” in Farsi. The story behind the *kherbuza* is that only after a donkey and a goat ate the melons did the king see it fit for the people to eat the fruit. The other national fruit is the watermelon, or *tarbuz*, a variation of the *kherbuza*, which translates into the more humorously literal “wet goat.” The joke is that even our fruits are named after animals.

Ka'zi, or horsemeat made into sausage, is a specialty among Turkic people. Even though the meat is considered taboo according to Islamic food laws, the Uzbeks allowed themselves some flexibility by slaughtering lame horses according to halal rules, rendering the meat permissible. Other religious Uzbeks made *ka'zi* passable in the Muslim Uzbek diet by telling a folk story that grants permission through *macru*, a religious concept that allows for a gray area in Islamic law. *Macru* permits some flexibility for eating animals for which the rules are unclear, such as rabbits.

This flexibility is not tolerated in Muslim countries outside Central Asia, however. In Saudi Arabia, Uzbek migrant workers caught preparing horsemeat

are deported from the country. In Afghanistan, Uzbeks are referred to as “donkey eaters” because of the rumor of Uzbeks making sausages, an unfamiliar food item to Afghans, who prefer their meat dried.

Ka’zi is considered the ideal meat for winter, since it is purported to have heating properties, and in this regard, Central Asian traditional medicine is similar to the Ayurvedic and Chinese health traditions. Horses, like chickens and turkeys, are believed to have warming effects on the body, and so they are considered a cure for those who are sensitive to the cold, have poor circulation, or even suffer from incontinence. Medicinal eating is a rationale that allows for the eating of *ka’zi*, a culinary tradition that traces back to the Mongols.

The horse holds an important position in Central Asian mythology. The word for “name” in the Turkic language is *ot*, which also means horse. The tradition of preparing and selling *ka’zi* was not brought to the United States by the Uzbeks who had come via Afghanistan. Perhaps the derogatory reputation of horsemeat and living in a more religious society affected their taste and longing for these sausages. Instead, *ka’zi* made its debut on the streets of Brooklyn after the year 2000 with the third wave of Uzbek immigrants to southern Brooklyn. This group came directly from Uzbekistan.

The addition of potatoes to the Uzbek diet has an indirect connection to the Civil War in America, during which cotton was not exported to Europe. The shortage of cotton led to the Russian conquest of Tashkent in 1865, Samarkand and Bukhara in 1868, and Khiva in 1873. To satisfy the need for cotton, cotton fields replaced wheat fields. To make up for the lack of wheat, the Russian government sent train cars filled with a New World tuber, which served as a substitute starch in Uzbekistan in the late nineteenth century. Potatoes came in by the freight car load. My grandfather once recalled how the people at first thought the *khatichka* were rocks that the Russians had brought to throw at the people. This is perhaps why the word for potato in Uzbek is an alteration of *kartoshka*, the Russian term. But that was then. Today, the people of post-Soviet Uzbekistan refer to potatoes by the proper Russian term *kartoshka*. For the Uzbeks of the diaspora who migrated after the 1917 Bolshevik invasion, however, the word is still *khatichka*, which I always heard as Khadija, said quickly like a sneeze. I grew up thinking the potato was named after a woman.

The suspicion regarding vegetables is not limited to the “Russian rocks” of old, for even local vegetables, like zucchini and squash, are referred to as “pot scrubbers.” According to tradition, vegetables are either fed to livestock or dried and used to scrub pots. During the Soviet era, Moscow’s greed for cotton destroyed Uzbekistan’s food crops, and starvation spread across most of Central Asia in the early years of Sovietization, which brought about changes

in traditional foods. Soviet propaganda photographs—like a famous one by Max Penson—depicted images of joyous, cotton-picking Uzbeks, with baskets full of vegetables from their farms and new technology from Russia. In reality, Uzbekistan faced dire conditions in which families were forced to sell the wood beams supporting the roof of their homes for a few loaves of bread. Others consumed compressed bricks of cottonseed after the oil was harvested; many died from this lethally indigestible meal.

In more fortunate homes, meat dishes were stretched with the addition of vegetables; lamb was reinforced by potatoes or replaced with pumpkin. Potatoes were mashed and added along with the meat to make steamed lamb dumplings known as *mantu*. Soon, potatoes were given starring roles, such as in special pastry dishes known as *khanum*. These knish-like pastries, filled with mashed potatoes, were otherwise known as “ladies.” What all this meant was that the potato was finally integrated into the Uzbek table as an inexpensive, but filling, meal.

Through Sovietization, new ethnic groups were relocated to Uzbekistan. Tatars, who were deported from Crimea, were relocated to Tashkent and the outer towns of Uzbekistan. They brought their love of *chiborek*—or *bulani*, depending on what side of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) you were standing on—along with them. Closely related to the Uzbek steamed dumpling *mantu* is the Korean *mandu*, which appears to have been introduced to Korea in the sixteenth century under the Mongols, when Uighurs played a leading role in governing Korea. In the first half of the twentieth century, thousands of Koreans were forcibly relocated to Uzbekistan and returned the *mantu* to its origin in the form of *mandu*. The Koreans also introduced fresh salads and pickled vegetables. The most popular of these among Uzbeks is a salad called *yongoqli chim chi*, which, coincidentally or not, sounds awfully like *kimchi*, the ubiquitous Korean pickled vegetables. Made of julienned carrots, *yongoqli chim chi* is now an integral part of a typical Uzbek home meal and is regularly served in Uzbek restaurants. The migration of Russians to Uzbekistan meant that there was also plenty of vodka, despite Islam’s taboo against alcohol. Now the Soviet era may be over, but vodka is still a part of the post-Soviet Uzbek table.

The Uzbek version of *mantu* features spices strongly associated with the Middle East, such as a generous amount of cumin and black pepper. *Mantus* are typically served with a minty yogurt sauce. Popular throughout Central Asia, *mantus* has numerous regional variations. In Afghanistan, they are sometimes filled with cooked meat and served with *kormas* made of lentils and diced carrot. Uzbek *mantus* are filled with meat and red onions; tradition requires that their size be no bigger than the center of a palm of a hand.

A favorite dish among the Turks is *manti*, which are very tiny dumplings, something Uzbeks call *chichwara*, but tied up like tortellini. Whenever I see tortellini, I think of Marco Polo chatting with Kubla Khan somewhere on the steppes.

From the very beginning, food traditions in Central Asia were already crisscrossed with the multiple tastes and aromas of the Middle East and East Asia. Long before their migration to the United States, Central Asians set their table with the culinary offerings of the Americas, the Middle East, and East Asia. And let us not forget South Asia: chili sauce is a reminder that the winds blew from that direction as well.

A Turkic Palimpsest in Southern Brooklyn

By name alone, Sheepshead Bay sounds like the ideal culinary location for Central Asians nostalgic for the lamb's head soups of their homelands. In truth, the neighborhood was named for the once abundant sheepshead fish. It is, for the most part, an Italian, Irish, and Jewish neighborhood that is separated by a bridge from Manhattan Beach, a wealthier neighborhood. The majority of Central Asians who now reside there sought out southern Brooklyn through word of mouth from earlier Turkic immigrants.

Sheepshead Bay was my childhood neighborhood. I grew up there in a small pocket of vibrant and varied Central Asians. This community expanded as an older, more established community of Turks and Tatars befriended newly arriving Afghan Uzbeks, helping them find work as superintendents in apartment buildings along Ocean Avenue, from south of Prospect Park all the way down to the beach. Over time, these new arrivals found work as framers in frame shops, as rug dealers in Persian rug stores, and as neighborhood shopkeepers. The commonalities of the Turkic languages kept their connections strong. During the 1980s and 1990s, in an expression of unity, the various Turkic-language groups gathered to march together in pan-Turkic spirit at the Turkey Day Parade under a common red and white star crescent flag. This was quite a controversial move, as many Turkic people felt loyal to their particular Kazakh, Uzbek, or Afghan flags. But the collective need for communal celebration and social networks proved more urgent.

Reportedly, the first New York City–based Central Asian organization composed of a unified community was founded in 1927. The numbers were small, consisting mainly of Turkic-speaking people who wished to preserve their language. Although the organization was open to all Muslims, regardless of ethnic affiliation, including African Muslims, there was a respectable representation

of Turks, who had migrated from Turkey. Because of immigration restrictions, however, the community of Turkic people was not able to grow. From 1944 to 1947, following the Stalin-era deportation from their lands, Crimean Tatars came to New York, many of them survivors of the Crimean genocide of 1944.

Founded in 1964, the American Tatar Association opened an office in Flushing, Queens, where large communities of Asians now reside. This was an important year in the migration of Turkic people from Turkey and from Central Asia, including my father, then a teenager, and my grandfather. At the time, the two of them were in Karachi, Pakistan, awaiting word that would grant them entry into the United States. The good news finally arrived, but tragically, as they prepared for the long journey, my grandfather suddenly died, and the loss left my father bereft and his desire to move to the United States dissipated. He thus stayed in Pakistan, worked as a waiter at a café, finished his dental degree, and returned to Afghanistan. In Karachi, he witnessed waves of Turkic people—Uzbeks, Kazaks, and Uighurs—living in the Turkistan Anjuman, a community housing center in Karachi. They all were biding their time while waiting to leave for the United States. My father finally ended up coming to New York in 1980, and he came very much like the majority of Afghan and Uzbek immigrants of that time, with a family in tow. The one-dollar bill and the quarter that he once received as a tip while working as a waiter at Tawana House Café in Karachi are now framed, serving as homage to the dream of a teenager who once wished he could come to America with his father.

During the late 1970s and 1980s, Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach became the principal places where Afghan Uzbeks came to settle. They found a home in the community established by earlier immigrants, complete with a halal butcher shop, an ethnic grocery store, and a small mosque. Owing to the rise in popularity of Afghan food during the 1980s, many opened restaurants. All the while, as many Afghan Uzbeks prospered, they began to move away from the neighborhood, and by 1991, a great number had resettled in the middle-class suburbs of New Jersey and Long Island. Throughout it all, the Uzbek families maintained a traditional family structure in which women stayed home as homemakers. When they did work outside the home, it was mostly part time.

Wedding halls were popular places to gather and eat, and meetings there kept the community socially connected. More than any other event, weddings were the main attraction. In order to become a member of the Turkistan American Association, all members were required to attend one another's weddings and funerals. Indeed, to miss a life event of this magnitude meant losing one's social position in the community. In a community in which eating at home or

at communal dinners was of paramount importance, there was little need for fast-food Uzbek restaurants. Nonetheless, after the Soviet-Afghan War, Afghan food was unpopular among Russian immigrants in Brooklyn. Even though the cuisine was becoming increasingly popular among the general New York public, especially in Manhattan and Queens, Russian New Yorkers kept their distance from both Afghan restaurants and Afghan New Yorkers, despite often sharing the same zip code.

The economic disaster in independent post-Soviet Uzbekistan is what caused a new wave of migration—economic refugees—to enter the United States. Not surprisingly, many moved to the same neighborhoods that earlier waves of Central Asian immigrants had established. This time, though, the new immigrants did not come as families. Instead, most were employed by affluent Russian immigrants in need of affordable domestic servants. Due in part to Uzbekistan's crumbling health sector after 2004, Uzbek migrant workers were predominantly educated women, most of them pharmacists, medical doctors, and surgeons. In New York City, however, they served as nannies and elder care assistants for Russian families. While riding the subway, I often chatted with older Uzbek women who once worked in the health sector in Uzbekistan but chose to work as a nanny in Brooklyn. Being a nanny in New York City meant earning three times what a physician made in Tashkent. The money was hard to resist, even if the long hours were nearly impossible.

From Halal Meat Shops to Fast-Food Joints

The Central Asian community in Brooklyn was built on several layers of migration involving different groups of Central Asians—Tatars, Turks, Uzbeks (including Afghan Uzbeks), and Kazaks—before, during, and after the Soviet era. Each of these groups left an indelible mark on the restaurant culture of New York City. What is remarkable about the recent growth of Uzbek and Uighur restaurants in Sheepshead Bay and Brighton Beach is their ability to weave back and forth between two of the more established communities in these neighborhoods, the Russian and the Turkish.

In the mid-1990s, Turkish restaurants began opening along the strip of newly renovated Emmons Avenue. With the new condos and the tearing down of the summer bungalows that were built in the 1930s came a strip mall and even a casino boat that promised to bolster the economy of this neighborhood. Most of the new Turkish restaurants specialized in kebabs, and these Turkish kebab restaurants thrive to this day. Even the smaller, more residential streets feature eateries that specialize in shish kebabs or *shashlik*. Accordingly,

it would not be unthinkable to refer Sheepshead Bay by the culinarily appropriate moniker “Shish Kebab Bay.”

Café Kashgar on Brighton Beach Avenue is a narrow restaurant with meals rarely costing more than ten dollars. The affordable price is not the only magnet that draws hungry Central Asians to the restaurant; the perfectly knotted *mantus* and *samsas*, as well as the succulent sticks of roasted lamb, also brings them in droves. The tiny TV screen in the corner of the establishment perpetually flickers with Uzbek television shows and films, and at times, there also are Russian movies. The clientele are gold-toothed natives of Tashkent, Baku, or Moscow, and the mood is always jovial. The wait staff is fluent in Russian, Uzbek, and Tajik. Invariably, a tableful of patrons arrive bearing their own bottles of vodka and drink to their own reflections, as the restaurant has cleverly positioned large mirrors on both sides of the walls to make the space look bigger than it actually is. Café Kashgar was the first of its kind to open in Brooklyn. After years of working in the kitchens of other restaurants in the United States, the owner, a Uighur with green eyes, decided to open his own restaurant where the meat was halal. “You can’t find food safe to eat here, so I opened my own restaurant,” he once told me as I waited for my take-out order to arrive.

The first wave of Turkic immigrants to Brooklyn opened halal butcher shops and ethnic groceries that catered to the specific needs of the community, which was composed primarily of families with traditional patriarchal structures intact. In contrast, the third wave chose to open small restaurants that featured all the foods missed at home. There was a ready-made clientele for this: the growing number of single workers, childless couples who came for work, and those who had left grown children back in Uzbekistan. Like the Pakistani restaurants along Brooklyn’s Coney Island Avenue that cater to twenty-four-hour cab drivers, these Central Asian restaurants offered shish kebabs that were different from those sold in Turkish shish kebab restaurants. The Turkish version is “dry”; the Central Asian version is skewered with extra fat. Even the *mantu* is made in a similar fashion—salty and fatty to suit the desires of Uzbek migrant workers leaving for work late at night to Manhattan Beach or to one of the luxury condos on Brighton Beach a few steps from the tiny restaurants lit up with fluorescent lamps and a few framed photographs of Samarkand and Bukhara.

The neighborhood housewives of my childhood, women who dressed up and took turns visiting one another at their small apartments and cooking meals together, are now a distant memory. Gone is the time when *mantu*, *chiborek*, *samsa*, and *chichwara* all were readily available under the supervision of

these women. To the new generation of working women and third-wave bachelor workers, these women of the older generation are now stuff of legends. The new generation of Central Asians does not rely on mosques or community centers to provide a sense of community; often lacking the bond of family or children to pull them home each evening, they instead rely on restaurants to serve as venues of community building. It is in restaurants where they gather to share the foods of their homelands and recall and reimagine a shared past and envision a collective future.

The Sovietization of Uzbekistan brought Uzbeks and Russians closer together, even if that sense of closeness had residues of colonial hierarchies lingering among those who moved to the United States. The Russian language connected these communities, as did the Russians' Orientalist nostalgia for Samarkand, Bukhara, and Tashkent, which contributed to the success of local restaurants catering to the fad of hookah lounges and Arabian Nights-inspired decor. Elaborate Uzbek restaurants with Orientalist names like Ali Baba or 1001 Nights are the more recent examples. These new restaurants, replete with cushions, scarves, and a rotund statue of the Molla Nasruddin, evoke an old Uzbek palace that satisfies the Russians' nostalgia for their own private East. There is irony in the realization that the neighborhood is more welcoming of restaurants that feature faux mosque-like architectural design than actual mosques that serve the area's Muslim community. In fact, any talk of building a mosque is met with vehement protests, a reminder that the ethnic and racial divide of Brooklyn is not merely a thing of the past but a feature of the present.

From halal butcher shops to garish orientalist restaurants, the food imprint of Central Asian Americans does not begin and end with kebabs. The growing community has moved beyond the narrow place where Borough Park and Ditmus Park rub shoulders to encompass a neighborhood composed of ethnic shops, halal butchers, and restaurants. The neighborhood comes to life during weddings—and most colorfully during *nowruz*, commonly referred to as the Persian New Year. Commemorating the first day of spring and the March equinox, *nowruz* is celebrated not only by Iranians but also by people across the Central Asian diaspora.

Uzbek television has a strong following both online and via satellite. Typically, the production crew is made up of former actors and actresses from the Tashkent Theater; they perform in dance programs, plays, and films that can be viewed on the TV sets of restaurants that have their doors open to the street. This is yet another way that Central Asians have created networks that criss-cross geographic borders. Often, language and food connect Turks to Tatars to Uzbeks to northern Afghans to Uighurs. In this regard, pan-Turkism is not

merely a romantic notion. Rather, it is a lived reality for immigrants, a vital form of support for new immigrants to locate work, to find marriage partners, and to build business alliances.

The importance of the Central Asian restaurants to the lives of Central Asian Americans in southern Brooklyn goes beyond the culturally digestible themes of “Ali Baba.” Ironically, it is inside the walls and on the tables of Orientalist-inspired trappings that many of the traditional foods that have been lost through the confusion and chaos of migration have been rediscovered. *Ka’zi*, whether made of beef or horse, was once a culinary art form forgotten by the Uzbek American household. It now can be enjoyed in the neighborhood restaurant. The Uighurs of northwestern China have reintroduced the traditional way of preparing *mantus* and handmade noodles to the immigrant Central Asian population that had, like most other immigrant groups, adapted speedier versions of these foods as they adjusted to the American way of life. It is now possible once again to taste *mantus* and *samsas* wrapped in handmade dough instead of mass-produced wonton wrappers or store-bought puff pastry sheets.

I am tired of the term “authentic” when applied to culture and, especially, to the crossroads of cultures that make up Central Asian cuisine. But I cannot deny that the new wave of Central Asians has brought with them tastes, aromas, and cooking techniques that were long forgotten by the earlier generation that had become used to dousing their *bulani* and *chiborek* with ketchup. The end of the Soviet era brought about a reunion of sorts in southern Brooklyn. Sitting side by side, elbow to elbow, in restaurants on Emmons Avenue and Coney Island Avenue are the multitudinous people who share the Turkic language and food. Among them are Afghan Uzbek Americans, like myself, speaking Uzbek that predates the linguistic influence of Russian, although the Uzbek spoken here now is littered with English words. As I sit in one of these restaurants laughing along with an Uzbek TV show, I order another plate of steamed lamb dumplings and think to myself how delicious life in Brooklyn is.