

Yak Burgers, Nouvelle Style

Anyone who has milled among throngs of chanting pilgrims in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa will quickly say this is a city where spiritual hunger is easily satisfied, but an empty stomach faces a lonely road to nirvana.

Tibetan cuisine will never dominate the kitchens of the world's trendy dining spots. Staples include tsampa, a bland, dry barley flour rolled into balls and dipped in salty yak butter tea, or momos, tough and gamey yak meat dumplings. However, a gastronomic joint venture between a former nomadic herdsman and a quartet of Westerners is proving to be a genuine contender.

Dunya Restaurant, which takes its name from a word that means "world" in several languages, including Arabic and Indonesian, and its upstairs companion bar are breaking new culinary ground. A stark contrast to the drab linoleum flooring and stained tablecloths adorning most Lhasa restaurants, Dunya is a well-lit dining room with high ceilings, blonde wood tables and woollen (and clean) Tibetan placemats.

Jannette Troost, a native of Rotterdam in the Netherlands who is part of the founding foursome, believes the new bistro marks a certain evolution in Lhasa's economy. Looking out onto Beijing Donglu, the dusty main street of the Tibetan quarter, which remains a rabbit warren of whitewashed buildings, Buddhist monasteries and unevenly cobbled sidewalks laced with puddles of stagnant water, the 40-ish former school principal marvels at the changes. "Five years ago, this wasn't an accessible destination. Twelve years ago,

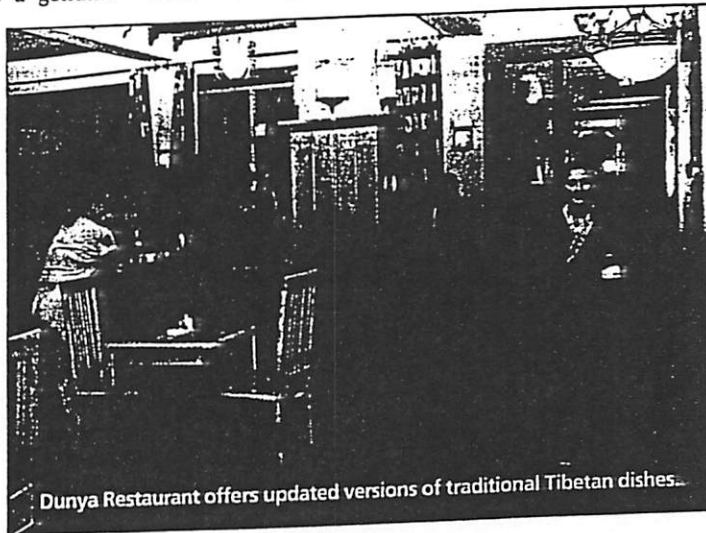


RESTAURANTS

Dunya Restaurant 100 Beijing Donglu,
Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region,
China. Tel: (86) 891-633-0489.

this was just a small village."

Dunya, an early entry among Western-Tibetan joint-venture restaurants in Lhasa, is the brainchild of the management of the Yak Hotel, three Dutch tour guides-cum-entrepreneurs and an American teacher. A local building boom fuelled by Han



Chinese migration from poor regions of other provinces, coupled with annual tourist growth, convinced Dorjee Tashi, a former nomad, to persuade his tour-guide friends to create an upscale, tastefully decorated place for tourists and a slowly increasing middle class.

Dunya's menu doesn't completely turn its back on traditional Tibetan dishes but instead works hard at producing updated versions. Thukpa, normally a greasy, thick

meat and noodle soup, is seasoned with green onions in a lighter broth that makes it more delicate. Dunya also tries its hand at Western dishes such as broccoli au gratin and Italian pasta dishes, though the liberal use of heavy cheeses means they are best eaten quickly, before the inevitable cooling and cloying take place.

The small but diverse offerings stake out a previously nonexistent middle ground between luxury hotel buffets, Nepalese imports and street stalls. Under the guidance of Dutch head chef Fred Malvern, one of the founding partners, and a crew of Nepalese cooks he has trained, the pasta dishes and pizzas are supported by a tangy tomato sauce that's aided by the use of spices imported from Europe. Turned loose, the underchefs whip up tasty dal bhat, a Nepalese lentil curry that retains some zip without being overpowering.

The upstairs bar is one of Lhasa's few watering holes, though the city's 3,660-metre altitude makes serving draught beer nearly impossible, as several major brewers have sadly noted. Locally brewed Lhasa Beer, "the beer from the roof of the world," remains the staple beverage, and is always served in bottles.

Even amidst the current bustle of the dinner rush, Dunya's owners have fresh memories of hitches that almost prevented its opening. When construction began, the contractor refused to use red bricks to decorate the walls. Says Kristin Koos, another of the restaurant's founders: "In Tibet, bricks are used for building toilets; we had to tell them several times we still wanted to use brick. And it was still tough to convince them." ■ Will Swarts

Will Swarts, who recently visited Tibet, is a writer based in Connecticut.