

Eating in Kathmandu (and Lalitpur too!)

A run down of great restaurants in the valley that serve authentic and delicious local Nepali and Newari cuisine.

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Delicious, varied and fresh, this Samaya Baji set plate just cries out to be eaten!!

Food Courtesy: Utsav Restaurant



For such a small country, Nepal has some pretty great food. And despite the proliferation of restaurants that cook other countries' food, and cook it well, most Nepalis I know still prefer their own food, which is as it should be. Part of keeping a country's traditions alive is when local cooking is everyone's daily habit, not just special occasion fare.

While dahl-bhat-tarkari is undoubtedly the bedrock of Nepali cooking in many parts of the country, there is a lot more variety than that to be had—and there are also amazing and interesting local dishes to be found outside the valley, and I think each trip should be a chance to experiment with what's good locally. I have fond memories of the cold potato achar with yoghurt that I was served at the home of friends I visited in Ridi Bazaar, Gulmi District. Tasty and refreshing, I've never seen it before, or since, and I have no doubt similar treats are to be found in most places in Nepal. And of course there's mo-mo, but that would call for an article in itself, so for the purposes of this one we're setting it aside, though I, like everyone else in the city, have my own favorite hole-in-the-wall mo-mo joint that I frequent religiously.

Some of the best local cuisine I've had has been home cooking by my Nepali friends, there's no double about that, but luckily there are also some great restaurants here in Kathmandu that provide authentic

versions of home cooked favourites. And the number seems to be growing, great news for any foodie.

If what you're looking for is the full experience, in a traditional setting with great staff and service, Bhanhha Ghar in Kamaladi (4225172) and Bhojan Griha in Dilli Bazaar (4416423) are two of the best I've found for a great dahl-bhat-tarkari, high-end and full service. The former is, in fact, one of the first Nepali restaurants I ate at when first coming here years ago, and while I only discovered Bhojan Griha last year—years too late, I might add—it was fantastic. A perfect, complete Nepali meal at its best, with fantastic atmosphere and friendly, competent staff, set in a historic old building, the residence of the royal priest 150 years ago. The rooms and hallways just exude history there. Local music and dancing happen most nights at both locales, and the atmosphere manages to be both classy and relaxed, making for a very enjoyable evening.

If you're looking for a place that's a little more day-to-day, look no farther than Thakali Bhanhha in Thamel (4701910). To be found at the corner of Z Street, just upstairs, this is a simple place, understated and clean with pleasant staff too. Despite being in the heart of the tourist area, it's mostly filled with Nepalis, so you know it's good. Their fixed non-veg khana comes on authentic copper plates with a choice of three curries—mutton, chicken or fish. Of course I chose the latter, and it was great, a nice change from the other more usual ones. The



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A full perfect Nepali meal - who could ask for anything more.

other highlight for me was a dish of chicken, potato and phing. It was reminiscent of some Bhutanese food I've had, yet with a taste all its own, and something I could most certainly eat every day. Badal and sukuti (wild boar and goat) also featured on the menu, in various incarnations—fried, boiled and chilli. I also had Can-champa, which I ordered primarily because I'd never heard of it before. When your plate arrives, it might look a little dry or unappealing if, like me, you'd never seen it before, but don't be put off—these fried buckwheat treats are crunchy on the outside and soft and fluffy inside. They'd be perfect as a snack with beer, and it was great fun to find a Nepali food I've never had before. I'm getting hungry just looking at the pictures I took! If Anthony Bourdain ever came to Nepal for his travel and food show, No Reservations, and I was in charge of planning his schedule, I'd bring him here for sure! (And to that hole in the wall mo-mo joint, and in fact to just about every place on this list!)

No article on Nepali food could be complete without writing about Newari food. And while I have always felt that the best I've had was in Newari homes—is there anything better than good home cooking?—recently I've

come to find some restaurants that are also doing fantastic things to bring authentic Newari flavours and delicacies to restaurant eating.

Degaa Resto-Lounge in Kumari-pati (5008679) is a place that provides an upscale atmosphere while remaining true to its roots: among the new Indian menu items can be found all the Newari favourites: Samaya Baji Set, chatamari, bara, aloo tareko and more. With a lovely professional bar, it's a great place both to enjoy a delicious full meal or to relax in the evening with drinks while munching on delicious, well made local treats. And they have a line of cocktails made with aila, the potent traditional alcohol, in case you want to go local with your drinking as well as eating. It's a great combination!

For more Newari food, simple and authentic, look no farther than The Village Café in Pulchowk, in the lane just on the side of Laxmi Bank. This small garden restaurant is lovingly and rustically decorated, and the menu is exclusively Newari and very reasonably priced. The brainchild of SABAH Nepal, it's been only a year since the idea began and just six months since they've started serving food. Newari women who were already good cooks were provided with

training in cooking commercially, and in addition to dining the restaurant now provides food delivery, catering, training, stalls and retailing. A really great side to this is the ingredients are all grown on farms belonging to the cooks and their families and other group members, and it's all natural and organic, so what you're eating is a real full circle meal—food both grown and cooked, not by professionals, but by local farming families. Some more good news is that no msg is used in any of the cooking, a boon for those allergic or health conscious.

And everything is delicious! I had the Samaya Baji plate, a generous portion of goodies, of which the bara was a delight, light and fluffy. I supplemented my order with the mushroom chatamari and one of my favourites, aloo tama, the thick, deliciously tangy soup made with bamboo shoots, potatoes and beans. The Village Café is also one of the few places I've ever seen yomori on the menu—they claim to have the best in town!—And while I'd tried the "black" one before, with sesame and molasses inside, the "white" yomori with coconut and condensed milk was a new flavour experience for me. I'll be coming back here!

I'm sure that anyone reading this knows that attempting to write an article about the best places to sample Nepali food would be impossible: it's both a matter of personal taste and luck in finding the right place. I know that there are many eateries, large and small, still out there that I haven't found yet, and you likely have your own favourites that have gone unmentioned here: that's part of the joy of living in Kathmandu, there are so many great places to eat and I am always looking forward to what I have yet to discover. So while this article can give you some suggestions of what to try, it could never be definitive. There's a lot more great food to find or re-experience, so get out there and start eating! ■

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