

Why I Love Mutton

By Rioko Imaoka, Ph.D. Fellow, Osaka University and a regular member of the Japanese Gobi expedition:

"In 1992 I went to the Bogd soum of the Bayan Hongor province, where our expedition stayed. I wanted to see by own eyes how nomadic herders live in winter. The road is not short one, almost 600 km. On the way I gulped several time from the bottle of vodka I was offered regularly. Though it is often enough for me to have a jug of beer to feel drowsy, this time I had no choice because of severe cold.



"I had enough clothes on me. Over special design Arctic jacket made of bird feathers I had a wind proof coat as well. Beneath woolen sweater I had also woolen underneath. There were fur boots on my feet. I was well protected against cold, but not enough for the huge refrigerator Mongolia turns into in winter.

"I begun to feel cold sneaking inside me, and my stomach began to miss the fatty lamb I was offered to take to the road. Usually I can not stand fat and always left it untouched. But this time, the local lamb turned to be magic and warmed me up more than any modern clothes.

"Sun went down and it was getting even colder. In a family we stopped over, the housewife, after fumbling in a cloth box, produced a candle. That time it was a rarity and when she light it up, children went into cheers. Soon the dinner was ready. When I eat camel meat it felt rather sourish.

"After dinner we went to sleep. Though hosts offered me to sleep on a bed I chose the floor. The hosts were kind to put a wolf fur blanket, and I slipped into my thick sleeping bag. The host and his two children lay next to me on a thin rug made of sheep wool and covered with a fur blanket. The hostess flew off the candle and went to sleep on the bed with a small baby.

"In the morning I woke when breakfast was already waiting on the table. The hostess put yesterday's booz (minced meat wrapped in flour and steamed) into a cup, filled it with hot tea with milk and gave it to me. So I eat booz in tea. The tea was made of goat milk and booz - of camel meat. This was my first stay in a gher, and the first experience of Mongolian cuisine, I will remember forever. "





"In summer I happened to watch the festive of first airag (mild beverage made of fermented mare's milk) Women were milking mares and the sound of milk dropping to bucks was slowly dissipating in blue skies. "The first milk collected was offered to the nature and then to the hearth. In the back inside the gher old people were sitting and quietly talking. Inside a big caldron a sheep intestines were boiling which looked awful. But everybody has own tastes and Mongols enjoy eating

them. Elder people gave to each a share of the meat and intestines, even the nature got it as this is a custom of nomads to offer some to the spirits.

"In summer nomads eat mostly diary products. There is no lunchtime, and people drink tea with milk and yogurt whenever they want. There is always a pile of boortsog (kind of cakes) on the table and people eat it mixing with fresh cream. "Even alcohol is made of milk. Such food has plenty of milk acid and is good for health.

Probably that is why nomads survived on meat and milk alone for thousands of years.

Foreigners about Mongolia

"I was impressed how well my Mongolian friend, herder Galkhuu, could distinguish things at far distance without using any binoculars. "Look, there walks a herd of antelopes," or "You see the goat of our neighbors?" And I could not see anything?

"When I was in Gobi it just happened to be the Lunar New Year, an event worth of seeing. It is a big celebration for all Mongolians. Neighbors, relatives of our host- all gathered in his gher greeting joyfully each other. After a lavish feast the guest begun a kind of entertainment and man named Sodnom began to sing a long song. He would take a breath and then sing, sing and sing. The guests joined him. But when I tried to follow them, I quickly run out of my lungs. I think this was harder than to sing at the London Opera."





"Mongols are very simple people, very similar to the nature they live in. They are not afraid even when strong wind blows threatening to take away their gher. And they do everything by themselves. Staying with them I learned how to enjoy small things in life and what is real peace of mind."

James Blanden

A British reporter who stayed in Gobi Desert last winter.

"I learned that when needed Mongols can unite very quickly. When I was observing the general election last summer and seeing the landslide victory of the Mongolian People's Revolutionary party, it occurred to me that is probably how it was in times of Chinggis Khaan and this ability to unite in time of need still survives."

"Of course, I can not forgo a weakness of many Mongolian businessmen who think that using official position for private purposes is normal. Perhaps, this trait is inherited from socialist times."

A South Korean diplomat posted now in Ulaanbaatar

"What struck me immediately was that Ulaanbaatar expanded tremendously. The city I visited long time ago was a small settlement. And now it turned into a modern city. Also it should be mentioned that people share their opinions more openly and free."

"What made me sad is the almost complete destruction of the Erdene Dzuu monastery which is the symbol of Mongols. There were many amazing exhibits when I visited the Erdene Dzuu some 40 years ago (1958). But today I found only remains of past wonders and no one can tell why it so happened. I expected to see a country with flourishing democracy, reviving the name of Chinggis Khaan and its cultural heritage. And I think that the true nature of Mongolia will much depend on whether Mongols will succeed with the preservation of their historical and cultural heritage."

Prof. Robert Rupen, North Caroline University, UK

A renowned expert on Mongolia. He was announced persona non-grata for his



book "Mongols in 20th Century" published in 1963. Only after 40 years he visited Mongolia again on the invitation of Mr. G. Akim, well known Mongolian journalist who recently published Mr. Rupen's book in Mongolian language.

"Mongols are very open people speaking out what they think. They learned very quickly from Russian and Czech geologists with whom we worked together."



"I think Mongols are people able to see the world accurately even from a horse saddle. This was main reason for me to come back often. In general, Mongols make a strong impression anywhere they go."

"What is their common shortcoming? They trust very easily especially adventurers coming from abroad. Another trait that can be considered a shortcoming is that they cross streets anywhere they want. Well, I lived here long enough to understand Mongols and do not really pay much attention to their shortcomings."

Arberg Campe, Germany

a veteran geologist with more than 30 years of living and working experience in Mongolia. Author of three books on natural resources of Mongolia.

