
In Search of Mongolian Barbecue

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Asking about barbecue in Mongolia can get you some strange looks. Barbecue is not interesting, they say. They'll tell you food is not interesting. And among foods, dairy products are certainly more interesting than barbecue, a subject that is "not taken seriously," as one Mongolian professor told me. The ethnologists with whom I spoke at the National University of Mongolia indicated that no one has ever done a study on barbecue or even on meat. At most the subject receives passing mention. In Mongolia, when people have a party, they cook an animal. In a country that lives primarily from its animals, this is a given, an obvious thing, like the color of the sky or the change of seasons. Why, they wonder aloud, would anyone try to study such a thing?

But such pessimism about barbecue is not enough to stop a North Carolina Tar Heel from studying a subject so near and dear to her heart. Others have been inspired by their love of pulled pork to drive hours upon hours to experience the regional variations of American barbecue — but I am the first, far as I know, to go all the way to Mongolia in search of barbecue. I said I'd go to the end of the earth for a good barbecue sandwich — and I wasn't joking.

As it turns out, true Mongolian barbecue is nothing like the stuff marketed as "Mongolian barbecue" in the United States. In fact, the two traditional Mongolian methods of making barbecue are virtually unknown in the West.

Ultimately, my search took me to Bayanhotag sum, Hentii aimag, where I learned firsthand how to make *horhog* and *boodog* from Purevtogtokh (Purev), a man who

learned from his grandfather and now cooks for tourists outside Ulaanbaatar. A translator and I traveled with him to his family home, where I essentially threw two big barbecue parties for his relatives and neighbors. Before I go into what I learned about the labor-intensive process of making real Mongolian barbecue, I should provide some background on barbecue and its history in Mongolia.

What is Barbecue?

Food is so taken for granted that it rarely appears in histories; yet, there may be nothing more illustrative of the universality of the human experience. The concept of cooking an animal and celebrating in a large group has probably been around as long as men have been hunting. It is mentioned in stories of Chingis Khan and of events in the Middle East more than a millennium before that, in the Bible.

Not only in legend, but also in modern-day culture, the concept of barbecue spans the world. Natives in the Caribbean built frameworks of sticks on which to slow-cook meat over a fire; the word barbecue arrived in Europe via Spain from their term for such structures. While barbecue in the United States usually involves a large metal grill, the North Carolina variant, "pig-picking," originated from the practice of turning a pig on a spit over a fire and picking the meat off the outside as it cooked. Hawaiians bury a pig underground with piles of hot stones; Mongolians put hot stones inside the animal or inside a container. True Mongolian barbecue is simply that country's variation of the global concept that might best be summed up as "cook a critter, have a party."

For Mongolia, first some terminology. Perhaps the most concise definition I got for Mongolian barbecue came from a translator Solongo: "In traditional barbecue, they use hot stones, and that's how they cook it. The trick of it is everything has to be closed. The container is closed tightly, and no air is coming out." In fact, to most Mongols, barbecue means either *horhog* or *boodog*. The first of these is what Solongo is describing: placing meat and hot rocks inside a sealed metal container. In *boodog* the cooking is done made by placing hot stones inside the sealed skin of the animal. *Horhog* and *boodog* are cooked both from the inside by the hot rocks and pressurized steam and from the outside by the heat of a fire.

What we are *not* talking about here is *shorlog*, an imported kind of shishkebab involving cooking marinated chunks of meat, fat and sometimes vegetables on skewers on a grill.

A Few Words on Meat in Mongolian Culture

I was told many times that in order to be considered "real food" in Mongolia, a meal must contain meat, even though historically other food products from the traditional herding culture have also been significant. The numerous petroglyphs in the Mongolian Altai attest to the importance of hunting by those who inhabited the area thousands of years ago. An encyclopedic description of the *Mongolian Way of Life* summarizes how with most of the meat from hunted animals, people would make *horhog* or *boodog* or fry it on a stick in the fire. The meat from hunted animals could also be boiled. Meat was seasoned with wild onions and grasses and sometimes milk products in soups. It was common to eat the head, legs and insides first before the meat because they go down easily. Each organ meat was traditionally divided evenly among everyone in the *ger*

(*Mongolian Way* 1987). Early historical sources, such as the *Secret History of the Mongols*, while not providing details about how meat was prepared, emphasize the importance of serving meat in traditional hospitality (*Secret History* 1998)

Yet, as the Franciscan William of Rubruck astutely observed in the 13th century while discussing the Mongols' tastes in meat, "In summer, so long as lasts their *kumis*, that is to say mare's milk, they care not for any other food" [Fig. 1] (Rubruck 2004). Indeed,



Fig. 1. Milking a mare, Tamir River region, Arkhangai aimag.

there is an amazing range of milk products, not just *kumis*, which form the core of the summer diet. As a recent text explains,

The main reason for the heavy focus on dairy products in summer is the need to consume milk and its derivatives before they get spoiled very fast in the summer heat. Plus summer is not the time to slaughter animals and therefore the meat supplies drastically reduce in those months. Herders also refrain from slaughtering their animals in hot weather lest the meat become spoiled in a very short time (Baabar and Enkhbat 2002: 34).

The Mongolian language actually has specific words describing the hunger for meat during the summer. Barbecue, an exception

to the summer's meatless diet, helps to quench this meat hunger.

My host Purev explained that since 1921, with urbanization, to the degree that Mongols have become more settled and don't have so many milk products in the summertime, they eat more meat than they did before. He said it is no longer true that meat is only eaten for special events in the summer, though *horhog* or *boodog* is still a treat.

A Concise History of Barbecue in Mongolia

The preparation of *horhog* and *boodog* reflects the conditions of nomadic life where there might be minimal cooking equipment. As Professor Lkhagvaa of the Mongolian University of Science and Technology told me, the use of hot stones is a very old practice. "The easiest way of making food is...making fire, heating two stones...barbecue is maybe from this, putting it on the meat and between it."

There is no archaeological evidence regarding when *boodog* first was made, although it is safe to assume that its preparation from hunted animals dates from ancient times, soon after humans discovered fire. The idea of making *boodog* with livestock (as is common now) is relatively new but may date as far back as the time when people began herding animals. Excavations of Xiongnu graves in Mongolia from two millennia ago have yielded bronze cauldrons containing bones of animals presumably from the ritual preparation of food to accompany the deceased [Fig. 2]. It is possible that *horhog* could have been prepared in such

cauldrons if they were covered with a metal lid and it was weighted down with stones.

In the absence of such lids among archaeological finds, as Professor Byambadorj of the National University of Mongolia explained to me, *horhog* likely evolved from the ancient *boodog* cooking technique. *Boodog* is difficult, he said, because it requires the animal to have a good skin for making it. Also, hunters began making *horhog*, he said, because they needed to use the animal skin instead of burning it, and so they needed something other than the skin to cook the meat in. They began using a part of the stomach of a sheep or goat, taking it with them, making *horhog* in it, and then keeping the skin to use for something else. As Purev told me, the use of modern metal containers for making *horhog* began probably in the 1920s.

Surely one of the earliest explicit references to what we might assume was the preparation of *boodog* is in the late 14th century *Yüan shih*, the official history of the Yüan (Mongol) Dynasty in China. The story relates how the young Temüjin, the future Chingis Khan, was fleeing for his life with a few companions, among them his brother Khasar (Qajar):

Fig. 2. Burial goods in a Xiongnu grave, including bronze cauldron containing animal bones. Tamiryn Ulaan Khoshuu, Arkhangai aimag, Feature 97.



When they reached the Panchu-ni (Baljuni) River their provisions were entirely exhausted and, since the place was desolate and remote, there was no way to obtain food. It happened that a single wild horse came northward. The prince Hacha-erh (Qajar) shot it and killed it. Thereupon, they removed the hide to make a cauldron. They produced fire from a stone. They drew the water of the River. They boiled and ate it. [Tr. by Cleaves 1955, p. 397; cf. Weatherford 2004, p. 57, where he interpolates details not in the original.]

Purev related a modern equivalent of this old story of destitute flight from pursuers. Before the 1921 revolution, he said, there were men who stole livestock from the wealthy and distributed it to the poor people some distance to the east. To escape the animals' owners, they had to ride thousands of kilometers, and they had no time to sit and eat while on the run. So, as they were riding, they would catch marmots, large rodents that inhabit the steppe of Mongolia. They would stop to take out the bones and heat up some rocks in a fire, then stuff the rocks inside, tie it shut, hang it from their saddle and continue to ride. After galloping for an hour or so they would stop to remove the hair and put the marmot on a fire to cook the skin. They would drink the broth, eat the meat, drink some cold water from a stream, and keep riding.

Barbecue in Mongolia: When, Where, Why and by Whom?

Everyone I asked told me barbecue in Mongolia is generally a summer thing. It's common knowledge in Mongolia that the animals aren't fat enough in the winter or spring. People also have more free time for special meals and gatherings in the summertime

because they are not as busy with the herds. The summer is also when people have enough milk to distill vodka from it, and when city people have their month-long vacations. The preparation of barbecue is always done in the countryside.

Barbecue in Mongolia is used mainly for celebrations. *Horhog* and *boodog*, while they have long existed alongside other cooking methods, have always been the food of special occasions, such as Naadam (the big sports festival in July) or the arrival of honored guests. Purev told me people make barbecue during the felt-making time in early summer and also when a family's grown children come home from the city to visit. Today it remains the food of celebrations largely because it is enough to feed a large group. People enjoy it since it isn't everyday food, especially in the summer when little meat is eaten. As much as anything, the focus is not on the food itself but on the occasion for which it is served.

Generally, making barbecue in Mongolia is thought of as something done by men. However, gender roles may in fact vary. Carengerel, mother of the family I stayed with in Bayanhongor Aimag, said her husband can do barbecue but doesn't, though he does hunt marmots. No one in the area is well-known for barbecue, she said, but everyone can do it, *horhog* with mutton or goat. In her area, she said, people don't make *boodog* with goats, only marmots.

The description I received from Catherine Heffernan, an American Peace Corps volunteer, on how *horhog* is made in Selenge aimag and Tov aimag seemed to assign importance to gender division of labor in making the barbecue. When the layering of meat and hot rocks was done in the can, she said, the wife put in the meat and salt, while the husband put in the hot rocks. The husband, she observed, kept the fire going.

Barbecue and Health

There is a significant connection between barbecue and healing. When the barbecue is done, before eating it you must first toss one of the hot, greasy stones back and forth between your hands, a practice that is supposed to be good for your health [Fig. 3].



Fig. 3. Handling the hot stones at a Mongolian barbecue.

Purev told me playing with hot stones makes you less tired, and in the spring everyone is tired. You're supposed to touch them with your fingertips, too. I was skeptical at first, but holding hot stones actually gets kind of addictive.

According Martha Avery, "These stones are very therapeutic, so you can use them. Hold them in your hands, or sit on them, or put them under your feet. For example, if you have stomach problems, put them on top of your stomach for a while. The stones will be black and oily. Don't wash them off!" (Avery 1996).

Ankhtaya, master teacher at the traditional medicine school at

Mambadatsun Monastery in Ulaanbaatar, told me a little bit about how the hot stones used in making barbecue are also used in traditional healing. The tradition is not connected to Buddhism, she says, and she has no idea when it began, though her guess is that people have been doing this as long as they've been making *boodog*. These practices are being used just as much now as in the recent past, she said, though it is possible these treatments were used more in the 17th and 18th centuries than they are now.

For sleeping problems, Ankhtaya says, you can put hot stones on your head, hold them in your hands, or place them on the back of your neck. Putting a hot stone on the back of your neck will also help to relieve nervous problems. Placing a hot stone on the side of your head, directly in front of your ear, can help improve a problem with your hearing. Placing a hot stone on your back, in the area of your kidney, can help with a kidney problem. She said these ailments are caused by coldness, which is why hot stones are helpful. Holding hot stones can also help prevent these conditions.

Ankhtaya also had some health advice on eating barbecue. People with liver problems, such as Hepatitis B, should not eat *boodog* because it contains a lot of fat, which is not good for people with liver problems, she said.

The Process of Making Horhog

Making *horhog* can be described very simply, although the actual preparation process is rather involved. You slaughter an animal, chop it up, and put the meat, still on the bones, into a metal container with potatoes, onions, spices, and hot rocks, then put it on the fire, cooking the meat from both inside and outside, with both heat and pressure. "It tastes nice and it looks nice,"

Purev said of *horhog*, "but it takes a long time and hard work."

The process of making *horhog*, begins with selecting the proper stones. About 100-200 km before we reached our destination in southern Hentii aimag where I was to learn how to make traditional Mongolian barbecue, we stopped to collect stones for making *horhog* and *boodog*. The proper kind of stones, Purev explained, are not available in the area where we were going. You have to get river stones, he said, because they will not break easily. They must be round and smooth, with no cracks. We collected the stones by a small, slow-running stream that used to be a big river. We selected from the collection the next morning but did not have to clean them, since heating them in the fire killed any germs. Occasionally stones will explode when heated. Before placing them in the *horhog*, they must be red-hot.

The other essential non-food requirement is the container itself. We used a 40-liter (roughly 10 gallon) metal container of the sort used for storing water or dairy products—a small milk can, if you wish. Some of these have a clamp with which to fasten down the lid securely, although in Mongolia people have even been known to improvise by holding the lid down with an iron anvil. Using wooden wedges to tighten the clamp may be necessary. Since such cans

normally do not have seals, it may also be necessary create one (in our case it involved placing under the lid a layer of plastic bags and newspaper). The idea is that the container should be as airtight as possible but also safe from exploding. The key to the rapid cooking of *horhog* is the pressure from the steam inside the container. Readers should note that pressure cooking can be dangerous. Making *horhog* in an improvised pot at home is not recommended; even when using a proper pressure cooker with a safety valve, when opening the cover one must be very careful to release the pressure gradually first.

Although any kind of meat may be used, *horhog* is generally made with mutton. The sheep is slaughtered immediately before the *horhog* is assembled. Mongols do not use the word "kill" with animals. The word is always translated as "to cut." They slaughter sheep by cutting a slit in the lower part of the belly and then reaching a hand inside up past the elbow to squeeze the aorta [Fig. 4]. When a skilled person does this, the sheep dies in a matter of seconds, and no blood is spilled on the ground. During the entire process, Purev said, it is necessary to pray, because that way it is not seen to be against the tenets of Buddhism which prohibit killing living beings. If a goat is being slaughtered, they hit it on the head with a hammer and then cut its throat to drain the blood. The meat is cut into chunks, leaving the bones in; the entrails are processed separately (see below).

The recipe

Add to the can the following:

Water, maybe half a gallon;
1/3 of the meat and vegetables: carrots and potatoes, peeled and partially pre-cooked.



Fig. 4. Cutting a sheep, Tamir River region, Arkhangai aimag.

If necessary, add more water to cover completely.

Add half of the spices (onions, garlic, salt, pepper, peppercorns and laurel leaves, or, if you have them, traditional seasonings of wild onions and grasses).

Add a layer of hot rocks, blowing off the ash on them first.

Add another third of the meat and vegetables, the other half of the spices and, as needed, water to cover.

Then add another layer of hot rocks.

Add the final third of the meat and vegetables and cover with hot rocks. The can should then be approximately two-thirds full.

Close the can securely and place it in the stoked fire or on top of a stove on high heat. Cook for approximately an hour and a half. A smaller container of the dish takes less time.

No part of the animal is allowed to go to waste [Figs. 5, 6]. When

the sheep was being cut up for *horhog*, everyone in the extended family helped in processing the entrails. These insides are made into several dishes:

1) Blood sausage, for which the blood is mixed with flour, salt, water, onions and garlic, put into the large intestines and boiled.

2) Liver wrapped in the fat lining from around the organs and cooked directly in the flames. The dung fire is supposed to give it a good taste. The liver thus cooked may be served as an appetizer during the preparation for cooking *horhog*.

3) Soup made from the organ meats, seasoned with onions, pepper and salt. It is cooked on top of a stove, inside the stomach where hot rocks have placed, a smaller version of the process used for making *horhog*. It is called "origin myth soup" and is not ever served to tourists; it is just a local dish. The boiled entrails, like the liver, may be served as an appetizer.

4) *Ikh Mongol*, or "the great Mongolian meal," is called this because it includes the head, the tail, the four hooves and a sausage made from the insides – essen-

tially, it is the whole sheep. When they made it in Hentii, the head, hooves and tail were taken outside, the hair cut short and then burned off with a blowtorch [Fig. 7], and then all of it was washed very well and boiled. An older person cuts and distributes the meat, and it is distributed in a very specific way. A young woman, I was given a small part of the mouth that is customarily given to young girls because it is supposed to help them sew better.

To this point what I am describing is "traditional," but as we know, tradition is not unchanging. Since my barbecue teacher Purev has spent the last several years working at tourist camps, when he prepares *horhog* and *boodog* in the countryside he is making traditional Mongolian food but also adapting the menu to urban tastes and ingredients.

Thus, while the *horhog* began to cook, we went to work making salad: chopping cabbage and carrots. The salads were of the sort served at tourist camps.

Cabbage and vinegar, salt, sugar, oil;

Carrot, mayonnaise and garlic; Cooked potato and carrot, corn, peas, salt and mayonnaise.

When the *horhog* was done, the container was removed from the stove and set on the floor of the ger to cool for a bit. Then everyone was called in, the container was opened, and the hot rocks were passed around ("juggled" might be a more appropriate term until they cool a bit). Then everyone drinks the broth,



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Fig. 5. Butchering the sheep. Fig. 6. Scraping off the stomach lining. Fig. 7. Using a blowtorch to burn off the hair around the tail.



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Fig. 8. Dishing out *horhog*.

which is very rich, thick and fatty. Finally the meat is divided [Figs. 8, 9]. Traditionally, the meat is divided evenly among everyone in the ger. The choicest piece is the shoulder blade, called the *dal*, which is offered to the honored oldest member of the group, who then divides it among everyone present. One sheep typically feeds around 30 people.

It is important after eating the meat from *horhog* not to drink cold water because it can cause the fat to congeal in your stomach and get stuck there, making you sick. Hot tea is an acceptable drink with barbecue. Milk vodka (*airag*) is the traditional drink, although commercial bottled vodka is quite common nowadays, drunk neat, of course.

The Process of Making *Boodog*

As with *horhog*, the preparation process for *boodog* is a lot tougher than it sounds, and it takes a long time. The word *boodog* comes from the verb *bookh*, which means "to tie." As with *horhog*, pressure-cooking is essential to the process, though with *boodog* the cooking is done inside the animal's skin instead of in a metal container. To

make *boodog*, you must remove the animal's bones and internal organs through the neck. Then you put pieces of meat on bones inside the skin, along with spices and hot rocks. You remove the hair with fire from the outside, and this fire also adds heat to the cooking process from the outside, meaning that, as with *horhog*, *boodog* cooks from both inside and outside.

Boodog is made with either marmot or goat because these two animals have a skin that can tolerate having hot rocks inside without breaking. It is theoretically possible to make camel *boodog*, but in reality it is impossible because a camel, which is large, would take a whole truckload of hot stones. Sometimes barbecue people in Mongolia tell jokes in

stomach breaks, it ruins everything. In Hentii, it took two men to wrestle the stomach and intestines out. It's also important to avoid cutting anything that will cause the whole carcass to fall down. "It's like surgery, only without looking," Purev explained.

Finally, when all the bones have been removed, the de-boned goat skin is turned inside-out to separate the remaining meat. The de-boned skin for *boodog* is called *tulam*. If a little bit of hair gets stuck inside, the hot stones will burn it up and it will not be in the *boodog*. This time though, because it was still May and the hair was very long, there was way too much hair, and they used a blowtorch to remove the hair from the inside the skin. Watching two grown men, armed with a blowtorch, wrestle with an inside-out goat is an odd sight for a visitor.

Once the goat was finally turned back right-side-out, they stuffed it with the following:

- Spices (onions, garlic, laurel leaf, salt, pepper, peppercorns);
- hot rocks;
- meat, bone-in;
- hot rocks;
- more meat and spices, and one kidney;
- hot rocks.



Fig. 9. *Horhog* served al fresco Khoit Tsenkher Valley, Khovd aimag.

which "camel *boodog*" is the punchline.

The process of removing all the bones and organs through the goat's neck takes a long time and requires a good knowledge of anatomy. The carcass is suspended during the process; bones must be removed one at a time, each one requiring some effort. It is absolutely essential to remove everything without breaking the stomach or making any holes in the skin. If the

They made a point of placing the hot rocks in certain places inside the skin. Then they tied it up as tightly as possible, even though steam continued to escape. Traditionally the skin is tied shut with hair from a horse's tail. Nowadays, wire or plastic string may be used – whatever is available. Once the *boodog* bag is tied shut, they burned off the remaining hair with a blowtorch. Traditionally, the skin with hot rocks inside is placed on an

elongated fire that encompasses the whole. Purev said that a big grill can be used for cooking *boodog*, like the one used for cooking pigs in the United States. As I observed it in Hentii aimag, however, the cooking was done with a blowtorch. The meat is cooked both by the hot stones inside and the fire from outside. If the cooking skin has really been tightly sealed, it may be necessary to open it occasionally during cooking to release some of the pressure and prevent its exploding. Purev said that many a burn has been caused by exploding *boodog* after someone accidentally burned a hole through the skin.

The *boodog* takes about an hour to cook (much less time than it took to de-bone the goat!); it is done when soft all over. The skin should be an even, golden-yellow color. When everyone has gathered, someone cuts open the *boodog* and distributes the rocks and meat.

As is the case with mutton *horhog*, it is important not to drink cold water after eating goat *boodog*, because it can cause the fat to congeal in your stomach. It is, however, a good idea to drink cold water after eating marmot or horse meat (the fat is different and will not congeal).

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Marmot Boodog

Traditionally, *boodog* is made with marmot. Because marmot meat has a lot of calories, it is believed to have good and healthy meat (Gongorjav 1999). Marmot reportedly tastes a lot like horsemeat. A strange thing about marmot, Purev said, is that three people can eat a marmot and be full, and so can ten.

Because making *boodog* requires that the animal's skin stay

intact, the hunter must shoot the marmot in the head and be careful not to put any holes in the skin. Hunting marmots relies on the rodents' innate curiosity. "Twirling a tuft of yak-tail will arouse the marmot's curiosity. When it rises up to get a better look, the hunter has a chance for a good shot" (Goldstein and Beall 1994, p. 65). Marmots are also trapped for their skins, which have been exported in such large numbers in recent years that the government enacted a ban on all marmot hunting.

Bat, who works for a company catering to foreign hunters, explained that, despite the hunting ban, which includes the penalty that the marmot and the hunter's gun will likely be confiscated and the hunter fined, people still hunt enough marmots to sell marmot *boodog* along the roadside in the country. The taste

it in Ulaanbaatar. But it was nowhere to be found, even though I had been told that there are restaurants in Ulaanbaatar which serve *horhog* made on a small scale. The only advertised commercially available barbecue in Ulaanbaatar was the new franchise of the Michigan-based BD's Mongolian Barbecue. As a billboard announced, its general concept is "Create Your Own Stir Fry."

Billy Downs, president of BD's, told me about the franchise. The project began when a restaurant owner in Ulaanbaatar who served a similar style of "Mongolian barbecue" contacted him to ask for help with the cooking process. "They didn't feel like they were doing it the right way, so they contacted us for help," Downs said. "We decided to open a whole restaurant."



Fig. 10. Cooking on the griddle at BD's in Ulaanbaatar.

The restaurant is set up like a salad bar of uncooked things: meats, vegetables and sauces. Diners fill a bowl with their choice of ingredients, and cooks prepare the food on a hot griddle with two long metal cooking tools they call "swords" [Fig. 10]. Whether the food served at BD's is authentically Mongolian is a good question; both Mongols and Americans in Mongolia said they don't think so. Mongols said the slivers of meat

designed to cook quickly are part of their food culture, but not the rest. Americans suggested that the BD's concept may have first been packaged as "Mongolian" in China or Taiwan and then exported to the U.S.

Barbecue for Sale?

Before I went to Hentii to learn how to make Mongolian barbecue, I did a pretty extensive search for

for marmot boodog trumps enthusiasm for enforcing the hunting ban. As one Mongol asserts, "Mongolians are crazy about Marmot!" This, despite the danger that live marmots are known to be carriers of the plague.

In any event, it is certainly not the traditional "Mongolian barbecue" I have described above, even if some aspects of the

preparation resemble what one can find in everyday practice.

In the countryside, Mongols generally cook in a big metal bowl (we might call it a wok), either balanced between three rocks or set into a round hole over a fire. In the process of making soup and other dishes, they first brown all the little pieces of chopped up meat, then may add a small amount of vegetables, carrots, potatoes and/or cabbage, then stir the mixture around and let it cook a little bit before adding water.

As Paul Buell's article in this journal demonstrates, Mongolian cooking in earlier times incorporated a great deal from other food traditions and in turn helped to transmit recipes across Eurasia. BD's cooking style is a blend of elements from several cultures, with sauces and ingredients from all over the world. It is not impossible that one of its sources is Mongolian tradition. "Mongolian barbecue" in BD's style is certainly a growing phenomenon. "It's clever," said Layton Croft, an American working on Mongolia with a non-profit organization. "There's a market for this around the world, and it's not a Mongolian thing, but if someone's going to come here as a tourist, they're going to say, hey, I had Mongolian barbecue in Mongolia...it's clever because it's entrepreneurial."

Yet in Ulaanbaatar, clearly it is also entrepreneurial to offer traditional *horhog*, which Downs added to the restaurant's menu recently along with some new variations. "Whenever you tell a Mongol 'chicken *horhog*,' they start laughing," Downs said. But, he said, "It's amazing flavor." While the "create your own stir-fry" remains the food of choice among foreigners who come to the restaurant, Mongols do order *horhog*, and there are plans to add the traditional Mongolian foods to the menu of BD's restaurants in the United States.

Meanwhile, in Mongolia, the one commercial enterprise in which both *horhog* and *boodog* have

been very successful is tourist camps. Employees at Chinggisiiin Khuree, a tourist camp roughly 20 km from Ulaanbaatar, for example, say that on a typical weekend they feed 70 to 100 guests per day and business is increasing. On one hectic day 1,000 guests came.

Considering I traveled several thousand miles searching for Mongolian barbecue, it's a bit strange to expect that it will follow me home. I look forward to the day when "real" Mongolian barbecue is served at restaurants not only in Ulaanbaatar but also in the United States. Folks may have to drive a distance to visit one of the restaurants – the nearest one to me is about 300 miles away – but it's a whole lot closer than Mongolia.

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About the author

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