devoid of any of the exotic spices that Indians make wonderful use of.

Except for one: chillies. Lots and lots of large, green, extremely hot chillies. In fact, the Bhutanese don't use chillies as a spice; they're treated as a vegetable, eaten as a viand, and sometimes, to my horror, picked on by the locals without batting an eyelash. This, after my tongue feels like it's been to Dante's Inferno, or is paying for the sins committed by my other body parts.

Fortunately, the setting wasn't so terrible when we had our first taste of the national dish, ema datse, or chillies slathered (or is it disguised?) in a cheese sauce - think good old macaroni and cheese, but rated XXX.

By the way, there are other versions of this, like *kewa datse* (potatoes in cheese sauce) and *shamu datse* (mushrooms in cheese sauce), but the chillies are the all-time favourite.

I should have gotten the hint when, sitting in the dining room of our beautiful lodge in Phobjikha Valley, with a fire keeping us warm on that cold, rainy night, our amiable Bhutanese guide Tshering ordered some *ema* dates - with three platters of rice.

Now there were three of us hungry travellers with very unladylike appetites, plus our guide and driver, but the platters were huge ones, and Tshering had the frame of a teenager barely out of high school, so we wondered about the disproportion.

Tshering replied with a twinkle in his eye that he wanted us to sample three varieties of rice, in three different colours, including a deliciously nutty red version.



Suffice it to say that you can eat *ema datse* like the Philippines' very own *bagoong* (shrimp paste) - just a touch atop a mountain of carbs, and your mouth is exploding with flavour. Naturally, sub-standard *Bicolana* that I am - even *Bicol Express* (Filipino dish with lots of chilli) intimidates me - sampling more than a touch sent me scurrying for the rice and the water as tears streamed down my face.

Thankfully, Tshering had the best antidote - a bottle of the locally made beer, Red Panda, cool and flavourful and brewed in the traditional way, so you can almost taste the barley grains.

There would be more encounters with *ema datse*, and when there was nothing else I could eat, having sworn off meat, I managed to eventually enjoy it. I would later learn that lots of carbohydrates, chillies, and even animal fats were essential to the Bhutanese diet, to keep them warm in the winter. Somehow, with the Bhutanese's straightforward ways, the radical cuisine made sense.

We had another sublime taste one day, visiting Cheri Goemba, another monastery on a hill outside the city of Thimpu. Here, Tshering ran into an old schoolmate, now a monk in this Buddhist country where every family still gives up one son or daughter to the religious life.

The monk invited us into his room, a small, simple wooden space with a bed, and a window with a fantastic view - how easy to contemplate the divine, I thought, when waking up to this sight each day. There he served us stale biscuits and the Bhutanese tea called *sudja*, laced with butter and salt. It tasted oily, more like a soup than a tea, and absolutely delicious - a drink that warmed the body, in a place that soothed the soul. It was the taste of Bhutan itself. ■

