

## **ARMENIAN FOOD**

Armenian cuisine is noted for its pleasing aroma, as a result of the expert mix of spices employed. Armenians use also many unusual herbs and greens in their cooking. The most exotic are collected at alpine meadows and combined in the most unexpected way. The taste will challenge even the most refined expert.

Many of Armenian specialties are barbecued. You can taste traditional *shish kebab* almost everywhere. The standard bread of the country, called *lavash*, is renowned for its quality. It is only about the thickness of one or two sheets of newspaper and the best is like a parchment. Armenians like to eat *lavash* with local cheese or shish kebab and fresh uncooked greens, using it for wrapping the food as a sort of sandwich. Ask an Armenian how *lavash* is made or visit any village to see it yourself. You'll be surprised and impressed.

European conventional bread and common European foods are also readily available. Restaurants, ranging from the luxury class to simple grills catered for all tastes.

Meat is served in a variety of ways. Armenian "Barbeque" (*Khoravadz*) is marinated and skewered on a flat metal "sheesh" (the origin of the "shish" in "Shish kebab"), then cooked quickly over very hot coals. It is not served with any kind of sauce. The pork and chicken are excellent. They also serve goat meat (*aytsi mis*) and lamb, a local favorite.

Armenian *kebab* consists of ground beef or goat meat shaped into something like a long, flat hot dog, then skewered and cooked on a grill. Removed from the skewer, it can be served plain or wrapped in *lavash*, thin bred very similar to a flour tortilla, except generally cut in rectangular strips. If you ask for ketchup, expect sweet tomato paste with chopped parsley mixed in.

A favorite dish is *dolma*, which consist of ground beef that is browned, mixed with rice, then wrapped in *grape* or *cabbage* leaves and steamed. Both are good.

*Khavurma* is bits of beef cooked in butter, then rolled in *lavash* with fresh herbs.

Armenians love fresh herb as salad greens. In formal settings, an early salad course consist of strips of *lavash*, *goat cheese*, *unsweetened yogurt*, and a *variety of greens*: usually a plate filled with fresh stalks from about three of the following: *parsley*, *dill*, *tarragon*, *oregano*, and *green onions*. The idea is to put some yogurt and goat cheese on a strip of *lavash*, add your favorite fresh herbs, then roll it up and eat it. In informal settings, meals often consist of a soup course and a dish of pasta, rice or cooked grain, served with large slabs of white bread and goat cheese or butter.

Other favorite salads include *tabouleh* (mostly chopped parsley, onions, and oil with a few tiny pieces of tomato), "Olivia" (reminiscent of Veg-All coated with mayonnaise, with little cubes of meat in place of the celery), and a dish consisting mainly of shredded beets, pressed into a pie dish and served in wedges with a topping of crumbed boiled eggs. A "summer salad" of tomatoes and sliced cucumbers in vinegar is outstanding.

Salt and pepper are often served in little dishes from which everyone uses their finger to pinch what they want.

A common dish in everyday fare is called *grechka*. It is a bit like coarse, dry oatmeal cooked with shred of beef. It's made of boiled buckwheat.

Local vegetables, especially the tomatoes (*lolik*), are delicious. They are sometimes served roasted

Armenia is famous for its fruits, some of which are recognized as superior to the same fruits cultivated in other countries at such latitudes. Depending on the season, strawberries, cherries, apples, pears, peaches, pomegrades, grapes (*grapes* of some 40 kinds grow on the territory of Armenia, mainly on the Ararat valley), *figs* and *apricots* are available. The country is especially known for its sweet apricots, which are considered "the queen" of Armenian fruits.

Many Armenians do not drink with their meals (especially anything cold), preferring hot tea or coffee after the meal. If you ask for water, specify "without gas" unless you really like carbonated water, which is the local preference. Bottled water is called *sheesh jur*. Coke is available at most restaurants and stores. Diet Coke (called Coke Light) is now bottled in Armenia, but less common. A lemon-flavored version of Fanta is worth trying. Pepsi products are rare. There is a local carbonated drink called "Hay-Cola" (Hay, pronounced "hi" is the Armenian word for Armenian").