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BACK TO THE FUTURE

Historically a cultural and culinary crossroads, the vast Central Asian nation of Uzbekistan is home to chefs and producers honouring traditions while keeping a keen eye on the road ahead

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK PARREN TAYLOR

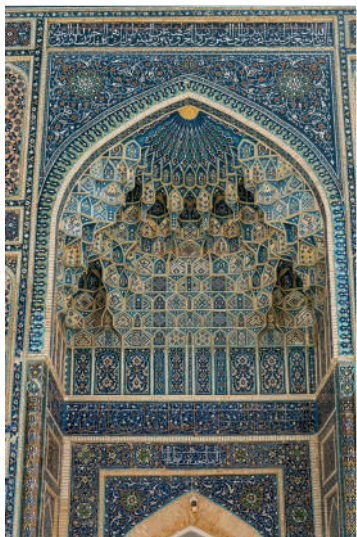


Opposite page:
Shah-i-Zinda
necropolis, Samarkand.
This page: Baker
Nargiza Shodieva and
her daughter Malika
Hafizova, Nonvoy
bakery, Konigil village,
Samarkand





This is the home of tandyr juniper lamb, where the meat is marinated in the spice for a day before making its way into the searing ovens. The method is extraordinarily traditional



This page, clockwise from top: Paxtakor metro station, Tashkent; eggs Benedict on patir bread at Maroon restaurant; detail, Amir Temir Gur-i-amir Mausoleum, Samarkand. Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Plov stall, Chorsu bazaar; Uzumfermer vineyard; Xan Atlas restaurant; fresh tandyr bread, Nonvoy bakery; Abduhafiz Nuriddinov; Chakich-pattern pestles; house-cured meats at El Sabor, Samarkand; a chef with a tray of somsas at The Eternal City, Samarkand

The team at Katta Tosh aren't like any chefs you'll have seen before. Seven men dressed in navy boiler suits and a sheen of ash and sweat, divide time between hauling tree branches and shovelling dried clay into a water bucket, reviving the soil into a usable squelch. At times, the ambient outdoor temperature in Uzbekistan might be a gasping 38C and here, among multiple blasting tandyr ovens, it feels as if the sun is seeking vengeance. It's incredibly demanding work, but the team, seemingly unbothered, continue to chatter away, their sentences punctured with hoots of laughter.

Katta Tosh restaurant sits on a snaking mountain road in the last hurrah of the Pamir-Alay range, south of the ancient city of Samarkand. Its breezy *tapchan* (raised dining platforms)

overlook the sun-scorched Kitob Pass: a beautiful valley which appears to be in the centre of nowhere.

It's the home of *tandyr* juniper lamb, where the meat is marinated in juniper for a day before making its way into the searing ovens. The method is extraordinarily traditional: there are only two places in the country that make lamb this way and, come the weekend, you'll find traffic jams two to three hours long, all waiting to place their order. Uzbeks love to eat their own food.

The kitchen responds with a conveyor belt of action. Great haunches of cooked, dripping lamb are removed from the tandyr, wobbling like a slow-motion earthquake as it whumps down into a plastic tub. After fragrant, still-steaming tasters are handed out, the towering tub of lamb is placed on a —————»

WHERE TO STAY

Courtyard by Marriott Tashkent Handily positioned between the capital's downtown area, railway station and airport, this comfortable four-star hotel also boasts a brilliant steak restaurant. Don't let the name fool you: MEATme Grill & Bar has a sumptuous set menu that shows off seasonal produce in modernised classic dishes. Doubles from £126. *Kichik Beshiogoch Street 126, Tashkent, +998 78 113 7177, marriott.com*

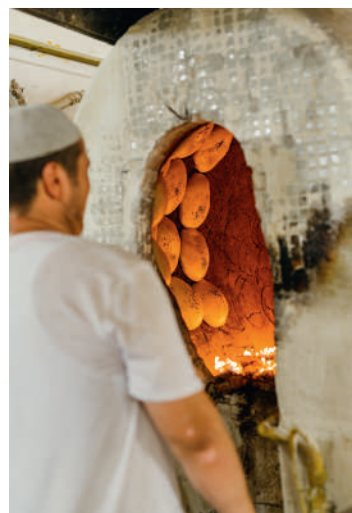
DoubleTree by Hilton Tashkent This plush, brand-new, five-star hotel may be a little far from Tashkent's city centre, but it's worth positioning yourself here for the food offerings. The excellent Maroon by Novikov restaurant serves up a fusion of local and

Mediterranean cuisine, while the rooftop Luna bar offers local alcohols and comes complete with an infinity pool. Wake up to an unbeatable breakfast buffet full of traditional dishes. Doubles from £159.

Makhtumkuli, Tashkent, +998 78 150 7070, hilton.com

Savitski Plaza This four-star hotel is built in Samarkand's new Silk Road Samarkand Complex – a 'tourist city' some 20-minutes' drive from the centre. With design inspired by the famous Savitski art gallery, the hotel features large handsome rooms, an excellent local on-site brewery and a restaurant, and is within walking distance of the Eternal City ethno-park. Doubles from £68. *Rowing canal, Konigil Massif, Samarkand, +998 55 705 5555, silkroad-samarkand.com*





The unfathomably juicy jiz-biz astonishes: named for the hissing sound of the meat hitting the oil, this is a traditional shepherd's meal of lamb chunks with onion. Its layers have melted into a rich gravy, the gelatinised fat sticking to lips and teeth as they sink in



This page, from left: Registan Square at dusk; applying loaves to the wall of the tandyr before baking, at Chorsu bakery.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: the courtyard at Tilya-Kori Madrasa, Samarkand;

Farangiz Bakaeva teaches cooking; Farangiz's ingredients for plov; salads at Khan Chapan in Tashkent; preparing plov at Farangiz's home in Samarkand; a stall sells dried fruits and nuts at Chorsu bazaar; Farangiz's completed plov; loaves in a tandir oven at Chorsu bakery



miniature cart track leading to the second-storey kitchen for plating. Already, big calloused hands are busy hooking and sealing new haunches into the tandyr.

Two lamb dishes are brought to the tapchan, where dinners sprawl with a chilled glass of the salty, refreshing yoghurt drink *ayran*. The juniper has grown headier with resting and the roasted version is succulent enough to make the British weep. However, it's the unfathomably juicy *jiz-biz* that astonishes. A traditional shepherd's meal of lamb chunks with onion, its layers have melted into a rich gravy, the gelatinised fat sticking to lips and teeth as they sink in. It's simply the best lamb you can imagine: a proper way to honour the animal's delectable sacrifice.

Mutton has been the backbone of this region's cuisine since ancient times. It was the meat of the Bactrian and Sogdian civilisations who inhabited these lands starting around 2300BC. Central Asian nomads were heavily reliant on indigenous sheep breeds like Karakul and Hissar, which store fat in their odd, plump

tails in order to survive the arid steppe. Locals still use this white, nubbly fat, called *qurdiuq*, to cook with.

Uzbek cuisine is intrinsically interwoven with its history. Over the millennia, Central Asia has been conquered by Alexander the Great, Islamic Arabs, Genghis Khan and the Turco-Mongol emperor Timur, who made Samarkand his capital. During this repeated colonisation, Uzbekistan became the centre of the Silk Road, its legendary cities becoming places of scholarship, wealth and trade. The Silk Road's legacy – alongside awe-inspiring architecture such as Samarkand's Registan Square – is a vibrant cuisine highly influenced by cross-Asiatic and European ingredients and methods.

Tandyr are one such inheritance. These amphorae-like ovens are everywhere, emanating solar levels of heat from kitchens and courtyards. Tandyr are used to cook the essential elements that make up any Uzbek meal: meat, bread and pastries. While meat is hung or speared like kebabs, the latter are pressed directly on to the 300C inside walls to bake. ➤➤

WHERE TO EAT

Bog'i Baland Anjizor This Samarkand fig orchard is the last remaining royal garden, known as Bog'i Baland, from the age of Timur. Though it now farms multiple fruits, it's famed for luscious golden figs. Join locals for breakfasts in the sun-dappled fig trees, with homemade jams, non, kaymak and more. Breakfast from £10. *Anjizor Street, Samarkand*

Cafe Parvarda Run by celebrity chef Bahrriddin Chustiy, who travelled across Uzbekistan to bring regional flavours to his menu, this café does a breakfast platter laden with fruits, nuts, somsa, flatbreads, chocolates, yoghurts, salads, jams and patir. Breakfast from £7. *24 Istiqbol Street, Mirabad District, Tashkent, +998 90 899 0055*

Emirhan Known for its sunset terrace overlooking the turquoise domes of Samarkand's Registan Square, Emirhan's Central Asian menu brings together Silk Road classics. Try their Uighur dish of lagman noodles, beef and tabbouleh salad. Dinner from £15pp. *Makhmudzhanova Street, Samarkand, +998 88 891 6000*

Khan Chapan An extensive modern Central Asian menu includes classics like *beshebarmak* (meat and noodles in broth), manti dumplings and 1m-long sword-like shashlik kebabs, served canal-side. Dinner from £20. *Usta Olim tupik 5, Tashkent, +998 71 205 0020*

Nonvoy Bakery This family-run bakery on the edge of the pretty Koni-gil Tourist Village in north-east Samarkand is an extraordinary place to start your day. Join in a baking class with sister Guli, as her father-in-law kneads dough and her husband battles the tandyr. Afterwards, sample your efforts at a stream-side breakfast. Classes from £30. *Koni-gil Village*

Oblokul Manti This unmissable Samarkand spot has achieved legendary status for having the best manti in Uzbekistan. Entirely family run, Oblokul serves classic Silk Road manti dumplings either steamed or fried – get both. There are a couple of outlets, but head to the original and you may be able to visit the kitchen to see the manti being made at ferocious speeds, while locals come to buy them in bulk or as celebratory gifts. Lunch from £8pp. *Muliyon Street, Samarkand, 998 97 936 2608*

Plov Lounge Try multiple types of plov, alongside a vast menu of Uzbek traditional dishes, at this Tashkent restaurant. Or, if you've topped out on plov, try their spicy Uighur lagman noodles, Tashkent-style duck, deep-fried *chebureki* dumplings and salt-pickled vegetables. Dinner from £17pp. *25 Abdulla Qodiriy Street, Tashkent, +998 90 951 5588, plovlounge.uz*

Qand chocolatier Chocolate seems incongruous in Uzbekistan, until you try the astonishingly good range at this luxury chocolatier Qand. Belgium-sourced chocolate enrobes local ingredients like pistachios, walnuts, Uzbek lemon, apricots and raspberries. Visit their Tashkent café-cum-shop to see how chocolate should really taste. Chocolates from £3. *Shakhrisabz Passage 6, Mirabad district, Tashkent, +998 99 001 5588, qand.uz*

Xan Atlas This Samarkand restaurant set out to introduce Uzbek dishes to visitors at a time when traditional restaurants were fewer and farther between. In a seasonal menu of meats, soups and salads, its crowning glory is the Kazan kebab, a shepherd's dish with gummy, sweet potatoes, and lamb that's crisped on the outside, succulent on the inside. Dinner from £14. *Makhmud Kashgary Street 92, Samarkand, +998 66 233 1831*



This page, from left: Pastries at Plov restaurant, Tashkent; kutab (qutab) flatbread at Maroon restaurant; Khansky beshbarmak at Khan Chapan; Kosmonavtlar (Cosmonauts) metro station, Tashkent. Opposite, clockwise from top left: The Sherdor Madrasa in Samarkand; the Khan's sword at Khan Chapan restaurant; mador somsa flatbread with mountain greens at Sister Nabira's Place; a breakfast spread at the Parvada Cafe, Tashkent

Bread, or *non*, is more than an everyday staple in Uzbekistan; it's sacred, a symbol of fertility and prosperity used at births, weddings and simply for greeting guests. While there are many forms, the most common version is round and patterned by a *chekich* (needled stamp). *Non* unfailingly accompanies every single meal: as locals will tell you, 'We eat bread with bread.'

Somsa, pastry parcels derived from samosa, are another Silk Road legacy treasured by Uzbeks. Sukok, a prettily rural village on the outskirts of capital Tashkent, is renowned for its local *mador somsa*. *Mador* is a rare kind of wild garlic that grows in the mountains surrounding Sukok and was an important

ingredient during Uzbekistan's 20th-century famine. Today, it's an inexpensive indulgence and visitors pile into the village when *mador* season begins every spring.

At Davr Choyxonasi, the *somsa* are made by the ladies of the family. Three generations sit on rugs, folding and filling the dough with a mix of herbed greens: spinach in the off-season, *mador* in summer. The youngest family member, an angelic two-year-old boy, watches over the proceedings while playing with a ball of dough. The matriarch leads the way to the *tandyr* to demonstrate how to place the *somsa*, shaped like an empanada, on its scorching inner wall. She dons a thick glove, flecks the *somsa* with water, then simply reaches straight into the mouth of hell to place it with steady *sang-froid*. After that, she hands over the glove with a wry, gold-teethed smile.

The gauntlet is weathered and crisp and the inside feels something like a sauna. The *tandyr's* heat is all-consuming, as is the genuine fear of brushing against its scorching lip while reaching in. It takes a few tries to perfect, but the result is well worth it. The *mador somsa's* distinctive bitter green colour is brightened beautifully by sweet onion and floral dill.

More typically, *somsa* are finely layered triangles reminiscent of *sfgliatelle*. The finest come from a local joint called 4 Tanur, in a southern suburb of Samarkand. Like most Uzbek restaurants, it's not high end: it's basically a corridor-thin kitchen stuffed with *tandyr* and a *shashlik* grill, with guests seated in the greenery-filled courtyard. Outside, a stall does its best to keep up with demand, selling to-go *somsa* by the hundreds.

Here, the *tandyr's* walls are spotted like leopards, revealing where crowds of *somsa* have been pressed on then prised off the surface. Unlike others, the beef inside these *somsa* isn't minced but diced, making it more substantial and saucy. Its fat-soaked pastry is divine: so flaky, so crisp, it feels as if it could give you paper cuts. The best part, however, is the crunchy, nut-brown disc on the bottom, where pastry met clay.

Most families don't have *tandyr* in their homes, which is perhaps why Uzbekistan's true national dish – indeed, the national obsession – uses cast-iron cauldrons called *kazan* instead. *Plov* may be —————>>

FOOD GLOSSARY

Achichuk A classic tomato onion salad that always accompanies plov

Barberry A tart berry from an evergreen shrub

Bayan shirey A white Azerbaijani grape

Hissar and **Karakul** Breeds of sheep that store fat in their plump tails, which is used in cooking (see *qurdiuq*, below)

Jiz-biz A traditional shepherd's dish of lamb and onions, supposedly named for the hissing sound of the meat hitting the oil

Jupiter A hybrid American grape derived from muscat

Kaymak A thick cream similar to clotted cream

Kazan A wok-like lidded cauldron used for cooking plov

Mador Wild garlic found in the Sukok area

Mountain cumin A milder version of the familiar cumin spice

Non Bread (eaten with every meal)

Patir A layered flatbread, similar to a paratha

Plov Uzbekistan's national dish, made with rice, meat, carrots and spices

Qurdiuq The tail fat from certain sheep breeds

Qurt A fermented, sun-dried cheese from Central Asia

Shakarob A salad similar to *achichuk*

Shashlik Cubed meat kebabs

Sogdiana A grape native to Uzbekistan

Somsa Stuffed pastries akin to samosa

Tandyr Outdoor clay oven, also known as *tandoor*





proudly Uzbek, but it's a true Silk Road amalgamation. Derived from pilaf, plov contains cumin from India, rice from China, yellow carrot and beef from Uzbekistan – and nowhere does it better than Samarkand. Their plov is legendary.

While other regions mix the ingredients all together like stir-fried rice, Samarkand's plov is layered in the kazan. Supposedly, this was originally done to prove it was freshly made rather than mixed and reheated. It's universally acknowledged as the finest plov; speak to a Samarkandian and they'll offer some choice 'porridge slop' insults to any version that isn't theirs.

Under the watchful eye of her mother-in-law, Farangiz Bakaeva conducts cooking masterclasses from the Adras family's flower-decked courtyard. It begins with Uzbek golden carrots, the defining ingredient of Samarkand plov. This more delicate, sweet incarnation holds its shape, doesn't release extra water and helps the rice become thick and sticky.

'Everybody spends a lot of time cutting the carrot,' explains Farangiz. 'It's like a ceremony. The night before a big event, like a wedding or funeral, usually the men gather, cook something and cut the carrots together.'

These ceremonial plov can reach immense quantities – literal tonnes – but it's a dish designed for sharing. Plov is a product of an oppressed, agricultural society that needed calorie-rich meals to keep poor workers fed during long days in the fields.

Russia was this region's final coloniser, first the empire, then the USSR. The Soviets turned life here on its head, repressing religion and culture and transforming Uzbekistan into a country-wide

This page: Siyob bazaar, Samarkand.

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: Landscape near Aman-Kutan, south of Samarkand; Uzumfermer vineyard, Tashkent; Shahmou Abdurakhimov, owner-chef at the Sister Nabira's Place restaurant, Sukok village, Tashkent; Bibi-Kanym Mosque seen from Hazrat Khizr Mosque, Samarkand; making mador somsa at Sister Nabira's Place; workers tend the tandyr ovens at Katta Tosh Tandiri restaurant, Kishlyk; Mr Umid at the Anjirzor fig orchard, Bogi Baland, Samarkand; fresh herbs at Chorsu bazaar, breakfast at the Anjirzor fig orchard

cotton farm. When the USSR was dismantled in 1991, Uzbekistan finally gained independence (albeit under an authoritarian leader until 2016). Arbitrary borders were drawn between the Stans, forever dividing their integrated populace – but not their food.

Samarkand still feels like a blended city. Its historic reputation as a place of learning is still going strong, with its huge university campus bringing students from across Asia and beyond. Its largest diaspora is Tajik; Farangiz is one of the many Samarkandians with Tajik heritage. Although Tajikistan also claims plov as a national dish, there's a sense that labelling a dish as this or that nationality plays into old, divisive tactics. It's at odds with what the 35-year-old state of Uzbekistan is hoping to be.

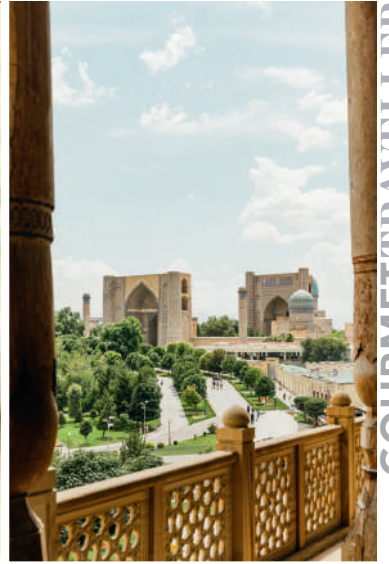
Our Tajik-Uzbek-Samarkand plov is a work of art. They say patience is the most important part of plov, but an easy case could be made for oil. Farangiz adds two great ladlefuls – one sunflower, one *zigir* (linseed), which lends an earthy, nutty flavour – for every kilo of Uzbek rice. Using cotton to create layers, Farangiz adds carrots, onions, chickpeas, barberries, raisins, lamb, garlic, chilli and mountain cumin, before adding the rice and seasonings. When served, it's topped with quail's eggs.

The resulting dish has a gentle flavour that's immensely moreish. There's sweet tackiness from the carrots, sour hints from the barberries and the local rice is like a beautifully chewy arborio. The mountain cumin is far less heavy-handed than the version known in the west, which is lucky: cumin is Uzbekistan's prime spice and becomes a fast, familiar friend.

Uzbek tables always heave with food. Farangiz's family serve up somsa, non, kaymak, fruits and the classic plov accompaniment, *achichuk*, a tomato-onion salad. There's also a surprise in the form of kimchi. Korean food has been part of the cuisine since 1937, when Koreans were exiled to Uzbekistan from Vladivostok. Here, the kimchi is incongruously but brilliantly matched with another Uzbek favourite, dill.

Post-USSR, Uzbekistan's prolific cotton fields were largely converted to orchards. Now, Soviet homogeny has given way to an astonishing array of nuts and fruits so lush and flavourful they almost redefine the very idea. The melon, for which Uzbekistan is renowned, is remarkable; you don't need teeth; it simply surges honey-fresh sweetness across your tongue. Wild cherries, which line mountain roadsides, get sun-boiled into hot, rich bonbons. Peaches taste like they've been stolen from a deity's garden, their meaty flesh bursting with tart, sugary nectar.

Grapes, however, are perhaps the biggest success story. Uzbekistan had an ancient viticulture, but





This page: Lamb is taken from an oven at the Katta Tosh Tandiri restaurant in Kishlyk. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Local beer at the Green Bear bar, Samarkand; deep-fried mantu dumplings at the Obloqul restaurant, Samarkand; Barotov Mahmudjan of Obloqul; making steamed mantu; dried cheeses on tandyr bread, Kurt bozor, Kishlyk; juniper-roasted lamb; making mantu; Chorsu bakery; breakfast at Nonvoy bakery; the landscape south of Samarkand – Kitab township and beyond

vast amounts of knowledge, understanding and the grapes themselves were lost over the colonial centuries. Alcohol comes as a surprise in a largely Islamic country, but it's part of Uzbekistan's mosaic past – you don't become a Soviet state without learning to love vodka. Known more subtly as 'white tea' around non-drinkers, vodka is the favoured drink in Uzbekistan.

Wine, however, is having a renaissance: an old acquaintance in a modern country. Vineyards plaster the Tien Shan foothills near Sukok, where they're allowed to flourish unfettered, big and leafy. Around them grow roses, tomatoes and apricot trees, while the Tien Shan mountains form a snow-capped horizon.

Organic family winery UzumFermer has collected and recovered some 125 grape species from across the country. There's familiar riesling, cabernet sauvignon and pinot noir, but local sogdiana and white Azerbaijani bayanşira (Bayan shirey) too. And only five countries in the world grow jupiter, a heady American hybrid that UzumFermer can harvest up to four times in a single season. Their Callisto wine – a nod to a moon of Jupiter – is a playful sogdiana-jupiter blend that's hard to get your head around. The intense nose is mango, passion fruit and tropical punch, but the palate is cranberry-dry, tart and tannined. Reds are similarly delicious and diverting; MerryTash has dark chocolate, spices and cherries and a heavy, caramelised nose, while the cabernet sauvignon is all barbecue and gunpowder washed in silky plum notes.

Otherwise-familiar grapes behave wildly in Uzbekistan's heat-washed, arid vineyards, leading to a wealth of experimentation at UzumFermer. In summer, the soil gets to 60-65C and there's so much sun and sugar that wines hit a punchy 13% ABV.

TRAVEL INFORMATION

GETTING THERE

Uzbekistan Airways fly direct to the capital, Tashkent, from London Heathrow and Gatwick. Flight time is around seven hours. uzairways.com

GETTING AROUND

Travel with an expert For the best experience, local specialists such as Veres-Vert offer tailor-made, guided tours that cover flights from the UK, B&B, domestic flights, culinary and cultural experiences, with tailored culinary tours available. From £2,000pp for 10 days. veres-vert.com

RESOURCES

Uzbekistan Travel is the official tourism board with information to help you plan your trip. uzbekistan.travel

'Take rieslings,' says our guide. 'In Germany, they're mostly planted in or on the mountains because they love the cold. But here, the grapes have become "Uzbekish": they've fallen in love with hot conditions – 40, 50, 60C. You can eat them with a spoon.'

The semi-sweet riesling is wonderful. Harvested late, its aroma is crisp and floral, but the hugely layered flavour eddies round your mouth. Zippy pineapple gives way to sweet mock orange, and then the wine seemingly remembers its a riesling and falls back to citrus and stone fruit.

Wine is part of Uzbekistan's new culinary era. While most restaurants here are traditional and will remain so, the recent rise in tourism brings with it new hotels and fine-dining establishments.

In the blissful cool of El Sabor's shiny new kitchen, his starched whites gleaming, Sanjar Muhitdinov slices through a plump, pink paradise tomato with millimetre precision. It's as far removed from Katta Tosh's sweaty heave and dripping haunches, plastic buckets and overalls as you can get. Yet Sanjar, the executive chef at Hilton Samarkand Regency, is still making traditional Uzbek dishes: achichuk and shakarob tomato salads.

After a week of gorgeously grease-slicked plov and meaty shashlik, Sanjar's refined salads are a fresh, floral godsend. They're a tangy, sensual symphony of hotel and locally grown produce: cucumber, chilli, sun-dried cherry tomatoes, fresh tomatoes, purple and green basil. Atop, he grates his 'Uzbek parmesan': *qurt*, Central Asia's nomadic, fermented, sun-dried cheese. Traditionally eaten as a snack or used in stocks, chefs have only recently seen *qurt* in a modern, Parmigiano Reggiano-adjacent light.

The salads are served with a platter of antipasti, topped with bulbous Uzbek capers. In lieu of pork (which is happily served in Uzbekistan), he dry-ages dorper lamb into a pungent, Iberico-style jamón that's almost better than the original. The Hissar tail fat has become soft-smoked, silken lard that melts in the mouth. Traditionally salted and stored, Sanjar contemporises it by brining it for three days to remove that strong lamb smell.

'We're putting our signature on it,' he says, 'but we're not going to go far away from our traditions.'

It's a welcome contemporary twist on an ancient menu. For millennia, Uzbekistan's traditional cuisine became a lighthouse in a revolutionary storm, but it's by no means stuck in a culinary rut. This is a culture long defined by its desire to adapt and learn; now, Uzbek chefs are looking to both the past and future as their country cautiously discovers its new-old self. □

Jo Davey and Mark Parren Taylor travelled courtesy of specialist tailor-made tour operator, Veres-Vert. veres-vert.com

