



The cuisine of South Rakine villages



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About DAFNE Project



About South Rakhine

Rakhine State is situated in the western part of the Union of Myanmar, along the coast of the Bay of Bengal, with a long mountainous chain, the Rakhine Yoma, dividing the region from the flat area of what is called proper Burma.

The population of the state is over 3 million (2014), and more than 80% of the population live in rural areas.

The majority of the inhabitants in South Rakhine belong to the Rakhine nation, but there are other people, especially Burmese and Chin, that also live in the region. The main practiced religion is Buddhism, except for the Chin people who are mostly Christian.

The region boasts a tropical monsoon climate with features three main seasons. The rainy season, broadly from June to October when the main agricultural activity is paddy cultivation, is when the landscape takes an intense green colour. This is followed by a colder season, starting from November, when most vegetables are grown, and that corresponds also to the main harvest time as most of the paddy is harvested in December. And finally the hot season, which spans from February to May, is when groundnuts and oil production are among the most important activities.

Fishery activities are largely conducted throughout the year with changes in the type of catch, use of the fish, and modality of fishing.

The seasonal alternation is at the heart of local life, and influences economic activities, cultural practices and food preparation.





The cuisine of South Rakhine villages: between tradition and change

Recipes, ingredients and cooking styles from other Asian countries, especially neighboring China, India and Thailand, have become more widely spread across Myanmar in recent years. This is thanks, in part, to changes in lifestyle linked to the current new era of the country opening up and the turbulent period of development that is occurring throughout the country as a result.

Rural communities of South Rakhine embrace these changes and novelties: better communications, better services, and access to education for young generations are very much appreciated by all the people living in the small communities scattered along the Rakhine coastline. Local people also share the broader international pattern of social life characterized by an active use of digital tools and participation in online social networks. Not disconnected from the larger world, however, they also show a strong attachment to their traditional lifestyles, celebrating customary occasions, preserving their way of preparing and sharing food, and drawing their livelihood mainly from agricultural activities, fishing and resources available to them in their surrounding environment.

The most significant feature of southern Rakhine village cuisine is a deep attachment to the use of local ingredients. Resources which are gathered from the sea that runs along the entire Rakhine coastline, from the many rivers and streams that zig-zag their way across the region, from nearby hilly forests, and from backyard gardens tended to by almost every household.

Many of the basic recipes prepared and eaten by Rakhine people are similar to the dishes eaten in the rest of Myanmar, due to both a long history of cultural exchange between the two neighboring regions and to the common religious background that links food preparation with ceremonies and religious occasions. There are however, in the villages where these recipes were prepared, some distinguishing traits: a preference for some raw ingredients in the use of main spices and seasoning elements, as well as in the storage and preparation of the food.

There are four key elements that chiefly contribute to shape the taste and aspect of each and all dishes of southern Rakhine cuisine and that appear, in slightly different quantities and combinations, in almost every recipe presented in this book. The local ngapi - a powerful shrimp paste seasoning made using dried shrimps and appreciated across Myanmar for its quality - is used dissolved into hot water or directly mixed with the ingredients. Tamarind paste, produced during the dry season from ripe tamarinds, is preserved by each household to be used in cooking throughout the year in order to give the food a characteristically somewhat sour taste. The generous use of chilies (green, red, whole, fresh or dried) also gives the food that typically hot taste that Rakhine people seem addicted to. Locally produced turmeric, bought directly from the producer or from a spice merchant at the local market, gives colour to each dish, and increases its digestibility.

Except for the four core tastes and a few other ingredients, such as pumpkins (collected during the dry season and stored at home throughout the year) South Rakhine people prefer to cook and eat fresh food, and rely, for part of the daily consumption of food, on the collection of resources from the forest.

A typical example is the preparation of the Tosaya (*literally meaning: something to dip*). This is a dish that appears on the table of each family everyday and is made up of different vegetables - either boiled, fresh or pickled - accompanied with a watery hot chili sauce. Besides common vegetables, southern Rakhine people also use different types of leaves, roots, shoots, buds, and stems that they happen to come across during the day, from an incredible variety of sources.

The consumable resources available from the forests are highly seasonal. Sometimes, their availability shapes not only the choice of the dishes that will be prepared, or their taste, but also the use of time of the entire household. For example, at the end of the dry season when the trumpet - flower locally called Thakhut (*Dolichandrone spathacea*) - another very appreciated element of local cuisine, is available in the nearby hillside forest, young people go and collect them, and the whole family then shares in the task of selecting the part of the flowers to preserve, cutting them into parts and drying them. The final product is then used in the preparation of some of the most appreciated dishes.



As it is possible to see from the high number of recipes of this handbook prepared by women, cooking, in most households, is still something mainly women do. However, men also appreciate the pleasure of preparing food, and this for example is especially the case for fishermen. Since they have to spend long periods of time out at sea on their boats, they have learnt how to prepare local recipes, seafood ones especially, using the typical elements of local cuisine (ngapi, tamarind, turmeric, and chili) that they never fail to bring with them and add to the catch of the day.



"I learned how to cook from my father, who was a fisherman. Sometimes fishermen have to spend a whole month on the fishing boat, and have no choice but to cook for themselves. Now I enjoy cooking whenever I can, I usually cook seafood dishes and also cook when my wife is too busy."

U Tin Ko Ko,
bamboo craftsman, Laung Kyo village

Some of the recipes presented in this book belong to the Chin tradition. There are in fact many Chin villages in the area whose inhabitants still practice their special ways of preparing food, linked to the use of specific herbs, such as the Sit Tone that is used for one of the recipes in this book, or to the traditional preparation of ingredients. The different religion, since most of Chin people are Christian, the use of their own language, and carefully preserved cultural practices, do not represent an obstacle to their high integration into the network of surrounding Rakhine communities.



"The world is changing and changing. But we keep Chin nation tradition alive, for example by celebrating each Chin National day every year on 20 February. On that day, in each village we gather to share our favorite food with one another, especially the Chin chicken salad (San Kaw Htoke), accompanied with traditional sticky-rice wine."

Salai Tin Htwe



Promoting an authentic taste of traditional South Rakhine food, together with collecting and sharing knowledge on its characteristics, occasions, ingredients and specificities, is also a way to support local people in preserving the roots of their cultural identity as they continue to enter into an era of rapid development and modernization.



"Some of our products are famous. In Kywe Chaing we produce the best ngapi of Thandwe region. It is very good because we take extra care during the drying process. For example, we never dry the shrimp on the sand, but always lye them out on nets set on stands. It is very important to pound the dried shrimps when they are not too dry, but to make sure they are not too moist or damp. We also produce the best quality of bamboo wares. At this time of year for example, we produce thin bamboo threads which are used to tie nipa palm leaf thatch that everybody uses to remake their roofs just before the onset of the rainy season. We should rely on the quality of our products to improve our lives."

U Aung Zaw Lin,
farmer, Kywe Chaing village

Tourism in fact has, so far, touched very marginally South Rakhine, and has been mainly limited to the famous beaches of Ngapali, or, for Myanmar national travelers, to the more southern beach of Khantaya. There are however many other beautiful spots, and varied natural landscapes, including extended mangroves, coastline, hill paths.

Beach resorts and restaurants in main touristic locations often offers a mix of international cuisine and local dishes with only a distant relationship with traditional Rakhine food. The capacity to introduce travelers to the characters and tastes of traditional cuisine could be also an opportunity to diversify the livelihood sources of local communities.





Many people are now coming to the village, because of the beauty of the beaches. We should be able to sell dry fish, ngapi and other products that visitors from other regions appreciate, instead of having to work as daily labourers."

Daw Khin Than Than,
daily-wage labourer working in fish drying production, Kywe Chaing village



The recipes included in this handbook do not pretend to represent the entire diverse spectrum of traditional Rakhine food. Time and space restraints have meant that only a limited number of recipes from the larger repertory of daily and special dishes could be included. We hope, however, that this quick glance into a world of people, nature, culture and practices, can contribute to increasing attention and curiosity towards this beautiful land, and give an opportunity to people from other regions to gain a better understanding of these communities. It is also anticipated that this handbook will help encourage more people to visit the region who are otherwise usually directed to the handful of most well-known touristic spots of Myanmar.

Finally, we want to heartily thank all the people that prepared the recipes, opened their houses and kitchens to us, guided us through their world of knowledge, experiences and daily life. This book is about food, cooking and tradition, but it is first and foremost an act of sharing.

Mariateresa Calabrese, May 2017



Morning Food

Kauk Hnyin Htoke

prepared by Daw Khin Mya Win, Kyar Nyo village

ကောက်ညှင်းထုပ်

Leaf-wrapped sticky rice packets

The leaves of a palm tree, called Salu leaves (*Licuala longipes*) in Myanmar, are used to wrap the rice packets. If Salu leaves are not available, you could use banana leaves or even cooking paper. The usual packets are between 2 and 3 inches. For the filling, sticky rice is mixed with either cowpeas of the variety called catjang (*Vigna unguiculata* subsp. *cylindrica*), bananas, or coconut. The Rakhine bananas, although small, are generally appreciated for their good flavor and the bright pink color when cooked. They have also the quality of remaining firm when steamed or boiled.

Ingredients

Wrapping

50 green Salu leaves
150 thin bamboo strings (or kitchen strings) for tying

Filling

500 g sticky rice

Seasoning

5 ripe Rakhine bananas for 10 packets
2 cups grated coconut pulp for 20 packets
100 g boiled cowpeas var. catjang for 20 packets
1 tbsp salt

Serves

10 person/ 50 packets

Preparation method

Wash the sticky rice, soak it in water for 15 min, and drain it.

Clean the leaves.

Peel the bananas and cut each lengthwise into halves.

Put salt into the sticky rice and mix well.

Use one leaf to wrap the rice, putting for each parcel 2 tbsp of rice with a piece of banana in the middle, then close the wrap securely by tying with the bamboo strings at 3 places, taking care not to let the water seep into the packets when boiling.

Boil the packets for 2 h.

For stuffing with boiled cowpeas or grated coconut, mix the sticky rice with each of these before wrapping into packets.



When different fillings are used, the parcels usually closed leaving a clue of the content (e.g. a longer end of the bamboo string for bananas, a longer piece of leaf for the coconut, nothing for the cowpeas filling).

These banana leaves packets can also be found outside Thandwe airport, and are an appreciated takeaway gift for travelers visiting the area. Thandwe is a popular port of entry for people coming to enjoy the white beaches stretching along the Rakhine coast from north to south along the Indian Ocean, and the surrounding peaceful villages. The most famous of these beaches, Ngapali, is a well-known tourist destination for foreigners and local visitors alike.



We prepare this food especially in the cold season, when we get new sticky rice from our fields. We use Salu leaves that we collect from the evergreen forest, in the hills, and that we use also to make hats. Most of the people like this food, especially with the stuffing with Rakhine banana.

Daw Khin Mya Win





About DAFNE Project

This book was produced as part of the DAFNE project "Women, Environment and Community Forests for food security in Rakhine" funded by the Italian Agency for Development Cooperation and implemented by Istituto OIKOS and ASIA NGO (Association for International Solidarity in Asia) in cooperation with RCA (Rakhine Coastal Area Conservation Association).

The project aims at improving natural resources management in South Rakhine, through the establishment of Community Forests in 10 villages; at increasing environmental awareness among the youngest population through an environmental education programme developed in 64 schools; and at improving the living conditions of local population through the support to the creation of new economic activities in 29 villages. All the project activities promote women empowerment and leadership.

The project area has its centre in Kyeintali, a small town located on the shores of Kyeintali stream and on the main road halfway between Thandwe and Gwa. Around Kyeintali, in both Thandwe and Gwa townships, the project involves two types of villages: those of the hilly area - where the main activities are paddy cultivation and the growing of groundnuts, and have deciduous and evergreen forests as natural resources - and those by the sea, where many villagers practice fishery and work on large coconut plantations along the beaches. Many resources and practices are however common.

This handbook was redacted as part of a group of activities aimed at promoting Rakhine culture and gastronomy. It hopes to also act as a tool to facilitate the future development of activities that link communities with natural resources management and tourism.

With this objective, OIKOS and FoSTA collected information in the 29 villages of Thandwe district involved in the project about their local food culture: their eating habits, recipes, and ingredients used to prepare traditional foods, including everyday food, festive food, favourite dishes, and desserts.

The handbook, however, is a collective body of work, finalized with the participation of villagers from 5 villages where the selected 24 recipes were prepared for final documentation, together with the support of the entire DAFNE Project Team - especially Daw Chaw Su Su Win, U Myint Aung, and U Wai Yan - who contributed to all stages of the redaction with their dedication and their deep knowledge of local culture.

The cuisine of South Rakhine villages is characterized by the use of the natural ingredients, a preference for fresh produce and by seasonality which also influences patterns of livelihood activities and the course of daily life.

We hope that this quick glance into a world of people, nature, culture, and practices can contribute to increasing attention and curiosity towards this beautiful and under-appreciated land, and give an opportunity to people from other regions to gain a better understanding of these communities. It is also anticipated that this handbook will help encourage more people to visit the region who are otherwise usually directed to the handful of most well-known touristic spots of Myanmar.

The persons that prepared the recipes found in this handbook opened their houses and kitchens to us, and guided us through their world of knowledge, experiences and daily life. This book is about food, cooking and tradition, but it is first and foremost an act of sharing.

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