

## Ara Making



Ara (ཇ་རག་) is the most common alcoholic drink in traditional Bhutan. As *ara* plays an important role in the social and religious culture of Bhutan, it is made at home all over Bhutan. The practice of making the distilled *ara* is very common, mostly undertaken by women of the household.

Several cereals are used for making *ara* and the practice varies from region to region. In eastern parts of Bhutan, maize is the most common material for *ara* although millet, rice and wheat are also used. In the highlands and valleys of central Bhutan, wheat and barley are commonly used while buckwheat is also used sometimes. In western parts of Bhutan, wheat, rice and barley are the main ingredients for *ara*. People today also used apples and potatoes to produce *ara*.

The cereal, which serves as the main ingredient, is cooked in a large cauldron over a fire. This is often done in a shed outside. A vital ingredient is the yeast which is produced separately or often bought from specific communities well-known for making yeast. The local yeast is organically produced by mixing the powder of a plant and corn flour. It is often the quality of the yeast which will determine the quality of the *ara*. Most Bhutanese have small discs of yeast in stock to be used for making *ara*. The cooked cereal is laid out on a large bamboo mat for cooling and powdered yeast is sprinkled on the top. Once the cereal, mixed with the yeast, has reached a favorable temperature, it

is put into a large container, either made from bamboo or wood. It is wrapped with blankets and left to ferment in the corner of a room.

If it is cold, more yeast is required and the cereal takes more the time to ferment. If the amount of yeast is not right, it can affect the period of fermentation and the quality of *ara*. When the cereal is properly fermented, one can tell this with the aroma emitted by the fermented cereals. After the fermentation is over, the material—called *lum*—is stored in a wooden or bamboo container which is sealed airtight. When the *lum* is soft and juicy it is ready for distillation. The brewers often taste the *lum* to check if it is good enough for making *ara*.

Once properly fermented, some of the *lum* is placed in a large container to start the distillation process. The distillation unit consists of three vessels: a long vessel known as *arazang* (ལྷ་རྩམ་ཟངས་), made of copper in the past, a small earthen pot which is placed inside the larger one on a tripod using three sticks, and a bowl shaped vessel called *khataw* (ཁ་ཏཱ་) which is placed on the top. The distillation process has the following steps:

1. Put the *lum* fermented cereals in the long *arazang* vessel and place it on the stove.
2. Add water to the *lum* fermented cereal.
3. Insert the tripod or three sticks to create a tripod and place the small pot, in which to collect the *ara* drops. A small amount of water is poured into the small pot.
4. Place the *khataw* vessel on top of the *arazang* vessel and seal the joint with a long strip of cloth.
5. Fill the *khataw* vessel with the cold water.
1. 8. Create fire under the *arazang* and when the water in the *khataw* vessel becomes hot, remove the hot water and pour cold water into it.

The alcoholic content and volume of the *ara* spirit depends on the number of times the water in the *khataw* vessel has been changed. People generally change it two or three times, remove the *khataw* and use a ladle to scoop out a bit and check the quality of the *ara*. Often the lady who makes it could place the content near a flame and see if it catches flame. The alcohol content is considered high if it catches fire.

The process of distillation takes roughly two to three hours. Once the distillation is over, the *ara* from the small pot is poured into an *ara* container made of bamboo or wood. *Ara* may be also mixed with powder of red sandalwood to give it a rose color or with eggs, maize, dried meat, garlic fried in butter or other ingredients to give it a special flavor.

Written by Sonam Chopel and Karma Phuntsho. Sonam Chopel was a researcher at Shejun Agency for Bhutan's Cultural Documentation and Research and Karma Phuntsho is a social

thinker and worker, the President of the Loden Foundation and the author of many books and articles including *The History of Bhutan*.