

Hönté: Dumplings of Western Bhutan

Hönté (ཧོན་ཏེ་) is a food item considered a specialty of the Haa and Paro valleys, and is most particularly associated with Haa, Bhutan's westernmost district. *Hönté* are usually made during the regional New Year celebrations called *Lomba* (ལོ་འབུག་), which falls at the end of the tenth Bhutanese lunar month. The dumpling shells are made from sweet buckwheat and are filled with turnip leaves and many other ingredients.

In the past, due to the country's difficult terrain and lack of communication, food culture of a given region was not as readily exchanged, leading to a diverse array of seasonal and regional offerings. *Höntés* are most associated with Haa, while *puta* (ཕུ་ཏ་) buckwheat noodles and *khulé* (ཁུ་ལེ་) buckwheat pancakes are associated with Bumthang. Paro residents are renowned for their festive food *jomja* (ཇོམ་ཇུ་), and those from Shar valley are well known for *mengé* (མེན་གེ་), a holiday rice dish. People in the southern parts of Bhutan commonly make a festive food called *sheroti* (ཤེ་ལ་རོ་ཏི་).

Rice does not grow in Haa; instead the climate dictates that they grow barley and buckwheat like the people of Bumthang. When *Lomba* approaches, the people of Haa busily begin making the *hönté* dumplings not only for their own consumption but for giving as gifts to others.

Hönté is a vegetarian dumpling, for which the main dough is made from sweet buckwheat. The dumplings are stuffed with a mixture of dried turnip leaves, perilla seeds, cottage cheese, butter, red chili powder, onion, spring onion, garlic, coriander, ginger, Sichuan pepper, pumpkin seeds and salt. Some claim that as many as sixteen ingredients can be included in *hönté* dumplings. Today, many people mix fine wheat flour from India with sweet buckwheat flour as the fine wheat flour allows them to make very thin cover, akin to that usually associated with momos.

To make *hönté*, the sweet buckwheat flour is first mixed with water to make a dough. The filling mixture is made by mincing dried turnip leaves into small pieces. This is mixed with onions, spring onions and coriander, which are also chopped to tiny pieces. Perilla seeds, chilies, Sichuan pepper, garlic, ginger and salt are pounded using a mortar and pestle before being added to the vegetables. Butter or oil is then added to the mixture. One must ensure the amount of salt, oil and chili are right before putting the stuffing into the cover to make dumplings. Once the filling is ready, one takes a small lump of the sweet buckwheat dough. After creating a round ball, one pushes one's thumb into it to create a cavity for the filling. The cavity is then uniformly stuffed with the filling such that the wrap does not either become too thin and break, or be too thick. To achieve the ideal thickness, people sometimes put the round lump of dough on a board and flatten it using a rolling pin, just like they are making *momos*.

Once enough stuffing is inserted, the dough is pinched closed to prevent the dumplings from breaking open. The filled dumplings are then steamed until they are fully cooked. Traditionally, people used earthen vessels to steam the *hönté* dumplings but today most people use metal steamers. Once they are completely steamed, they are ready to eat, but some take the additional step of flash frying the *hönté* in oil to make them slightly crispy. Frying also helps release the butter in the stuffing and makes the *hönté* less oily.

As noted above, *Hönté* is considered a seasonal specialty of the Haa district. Given the rise in popularity of this once-seasonal dish, it is now not uncommon for visitors to encounter *hönté* on the menu while visiting Haa. They are still most commonly made on the household level during *Lomba*, when *hönté* are given as presents to friends and relatives. *Hönté* is often served with a spicy chili pickle called *ezé* (མེ་ལྗང་). Like *momo*, the dumplings are considered a proper meal and are eaten on their own without accompanying dishes. Today, some restaurants serve *hönté* throughout the year and one can also find *hönté* in other parts of Bhutan.

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