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From Hearth to Spectacle: The Commodification of Wazwan and the Crisis of Food Culture in Kashmir

Abstract: *This paper aims to shed light on how a significant social and cultural shift has occurred with the advent of fast food restaurants in Kashmir. As a result, people are eating less in the familiar and safe environment of their own homes and more in the public arena of gastronomic spectacles. The culinary traditions of Kashmir have largely revolved around home kitchens, with the bigger community gatherings known as wazwan (a Kashmiri feast) or niyaz (offering) reserved for more inclusive occasions. Wazwan and other restaurant meals have become ubiquitous and commercialised, making dining a social performance, a type of recreational tastemaking, and a form of performative consumption. By looking at the spoilt meat scandal of 2025 in Kashmir via a critical lens, this analysis presents this change as a sign of cultural alienation and fetishisation rather than just a public health issue. The article utilises ideas of spectacle, differentiation, and food security to analyse how the modernity of taste has altered class identities, dismantled traditional foodways, and introduced new health hazards in a political context that suppresses and neglects alternative, more complex narratives.*

Keywords: Kashmir, Culinary Spectacle, Wazwan, Culture, Commodification, Taste, Food, Consumption.

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From Hearth to Spectacle: The Commodification of Wazwan and the Crisis of Food Culture in Kashmir

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Introduction: Food as Cultural Text and Biological Imperative

Food is far more than mere sustenance; it is a primary text through which culture is written, performed, and internalized. It possesses the remarkable ability to forge community, transmit history, and encode social structures, offering profound insights into a society's traditions, gender roles, and power dynamics ("The Intersection of Culture and Cuisine"). This cultural dimension is built upon a fundamental biological fact: the human preoccupation with food is a species-wide universal, driven by the evolutionary demands of our "calorie-hungry big brains" ("The Intersection of Culture and Cuisine"). The ancient invention of cooking—outsourcing digestion to culture—not only made sustenance more efficient but also laid the groundwork for cuisine to become a cornerstone of identity ("The Intersection of Culture and Cuisine").

From this dual foundation of biology and society, taste itself emerges as a learned cultural construct. While biological predispositions exist, individual preferences are "not independent of culture" (Allen, Gupta, and Monnier 295). As Allen, Gupta, and Monnier argue in their study of the interactive effect of cultural symbols on taste, evaluations stem from both an objective sensory process and a subjective social one (295). We learn to appreciate flavours like coffee or chili peppers not through innate preference, but through their embeddedness in social rituals and cultural contexts (Allen, Gupta, and Monnier 295). Consequently, what a society deems "good," "healthy," "high-brow," or "low-brow" is never neutral; these distinctions historically map onto and reinforce socio-economic hierarchies, with gourmet diners often holding the power to define culinary worth ("The Intersection of Culture and Cuisine").

This theoretical framework provides the essential lens for examining the profound alimentary transformation in Kashmir. The shift from a home-centric food culture, where trust was familial and the grand *wazwaan* feast was a rare communal rite, to a landscape dominated

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by commercial eateries and digital delivery platforms represents more than a change in convenience. It is a seismic shift in cultural practice, social distinction, and biological impact. The purpose of this study is to suggest that the commodification of Kashmiri cuisine, which is exemplified by the routine availability of the traditional *wazwan* and is catalysed by the "new normal" of on-demand consumption, has transformed food from a place of cultural trust into a show of social distinction (Bourdieu). The scandal involving rotten meat in 2025 signals a critical rupture, revealing the fragility of this new system and compelling a reckoning with its consequences. These consequences include the deterioration of traditional foodways, the escalation of generational and class divides, the rise of dietary disease, and the concurrent deterioration of approved historical narratives. By tracking this journey from the domestic hearth to the internet platform, we are able to see how the very flavour of Kashmiri identity is being rebuilt, both for the better and for the worse, in the turbulent modern era of the valley.

The Scent of Something More Than Meat

The confiscation of thousands of kilogrammes of contaminated meat from restaurants located all over Kashmir in the summer of 2025 sparked a storm of public disgust and bureaucratic spectacle, as was to be expected (Food Safety Department). The controversy, however, provides a striking metaphor for a more ubiquitous degradation. That is because the adage of the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach, which states that "man is what he eats," reverberates ominously across the valley (Feuerbach 27). This event is not an isolated occurrence but rather a manifestation of a fundamental shift in the way Kashmiri meals are prepared and consumed. For many decades, the phrase ‘domestic sphere’ was synonymous with the Kashmiri tradition and culinary culture. Meals that were made and consumed within the home were considered to be the embodiment of cultural trust and continuity. The *wazwan*, which consisted of a spectacular multi-course feast, was the one and only exception to this rule. It was an uncommon gastronomic spectacle that was saved for weddings and other significant events. But over the course of the past twenty years, there has been a rapid proliferation of restaurants, initially in urban areas and then spreading to rural regions. This has resulted in the once-exceptional *wazwan* becoming a routine that is available for commercial consumption. This paper contends that this shift has transposed food from a locus of cultural sustenance to a spectacle of distinction, a pedantic performance of taste that mirrors a parallel decay in the body politic. The rotten meat, therefore, is both a literal health hazard and a symbolic rupture, forcing a

moment of introspection into how consumption patterns have been reconfigured by forces of commodification, class aspiration, and political silence.

The Domestic Hearth: Historical Foodways and Cultural Trust

Traditional Kashmiri cuisine was deeply embedded in the ecology of the home. As food scholar Krishnendu Ray notes, "The home kitchen is the primary site where taste is formed and cultural identity is reproduced" (Ray 112). When it comes to Kashmir, the everyday meals that were cooked in domestic kitchens, such as *haakh* (collard greens), *rajma* (kidney beans), and *nadru* (lotus stem), were less about pomp and ceremony and more about nourishment, seasonality, and the rituals that were performed within the family. There was an innate faith in food, which was connected to well-known sources, hands that were familiar, and previous generations' wisdom. A big, meat- heavy ritual that strengthened community bonds and marked major life events, the *wazwan* was the antithesis of this daily simplicity. It was prepared by an expert cook or *wouste waze*. In other words, it was the opposite of the routine simple life but it marked crucial cultural occasions of festivity. Its rarity was key to its significance. Anthropologist Francesca de'Angeli's work on feasts posits that their power derives from "calculated excess and temporal limitation," creating a "mnemonic peak" in community life (de'Angeli 45). The *wazwan* functioned precisely as such a peak, its lavishness delineating the sacredness of the occasion from the profanity of everyday sustenance.

The Digital Turn: Convenience, Generational Divides, and the "New Normal"

Because of the proliferation of digital platforms, the shift of Kashmiri eating culture has entered a new phase. This has resulted in the establishment of what is commonly referred to as the "new normal" of easy-going consumption. It is more than just a matter of convenience; this phenomena, in which browsing, selecting, and delivering prepared meal can take place within minutes, reflects the complete incorporation of Kashmiri consumption into worldwide trends in on-demand gastronomy. Before the Covid pandemic, the business model of meal delivery was essentially non-existent in the valley. However, after the pandemic, it has become an essential component of urban life, bringing about a major change in the pace and social geography of eating (Schlosder 3). This digital transformation has exacerbated generational gaps, escalated market competitiveness, and established a resilient economy of taste that

functions in tandem with the physical spectacle of eateries. However, this economy of taste may be susceptible to fragility.

The adoption of this culture is deeply generational. While Generation X and older segments of Generation Y, who came of age before these options were prevalent, often view fast and processed food with suspicion and cling to the practice of carrying home-cooked *tiffin*, Generation Z are the primary architects and consumers of this new ecosystem (Moodie et al. 237). Growing up with global media and social media, their culinary standards are affected by digital visibility and variety. They view food delivery apps and eateries as "third places" for socialising, celebration, and intellectual interaction, which have moved out of the home (Oldenburg 16). The relative, although stressful, calm between 2016 and early 2019 allowed businesses and youngsters to experiment with themed cafes, global foods like *shawarma* and *momos*, and start-up events.

The August 2019 political shutdown was a paradoxical catalyst. The crisis weakened dine-in culture but strengthened meal delivery. Digital grocery and meal platforms became necessary as public health concerns made market visits uncomfortable. This time normalised home delivery of commercial food, which endured post-lockdown and currently defines urban consumption, especially among students and young professionals. This resilience is tempered by volatility. Market saturation with copycat start-ups has led to fierce rivalry without diversification, risking a homogenised gastronomic scene vulnerable to economic or political shock (Hamreen 2025).

This digital and generational shift completes the picture of Kashmir's alimentary transition. From the domestic hearth, to the public spectacle of the eatery, and now to the private-digital interface of the delivery app, the spaces of consumption have progressively multiplied. Each stage has its own logic: tradition, distinction, and convenience. Yet, together, they expose the valley to the full spectrum of modern food system risks—from the public health scandal of rotten meat to the private, daily consequences of processed food diets and the economic precarity of a saturated gig-economy market. The "new normal" is thus a complex adaptation, a form of "culinary resilience" that allows life to proceed amidst conflict, but which also deepens dependency on a system whose long-term sustainability and cultural costs remain uncalculated.

From Occasion to Routine Commodity

The incursion of commercial restaurants signified a transformative change. Initially serving urban tourists and an emerging middle class, these eateries commenced providing "mini-wazwan" or distinctive meat dishes throughout the year. According to food theorist Fabio Parasecoli, this commercialisation is a worldwide occurrence in which "local culinary capital is extracted, simplified, and repackaged for continuous consumption, divorcing it from its socio-ritual context" (Parasecoli 89). The *wazwan* was thus stripped of its communal, ceremonial ethos and transformed into a marketable product. Its routine availability catalysed a new culinary psychology. Dining out, especially on such symbolically charged food, became less about hunger and more about what Pierre Bourdieu terms "distinction"—a performance of social taste that classifies the classifier (Bourdieu 56). As time passed, the restaurant transformed into a stage where cosmopolitanism, economic capital, and a pedantic connoisseurship over spices and textures were displayed. This is consistent with Guy Debord's theory of the society of the spectacle, which states that social relations are mediated by images and that consumption serves as the primary form of participation (Debord 23). A Kashmiri family is seen engaging in a show of cultural fluency and modern leisure while they are eating at a well-known restaurant. They are giving the *yakhni*, *goshtaab* or *rogan josh* a careful evaluation while sharing pictures of it online.

Ethnobotanical Resilience and the Foraging Counter-Spectacle

As modern Kashmir succumbs to the culinary show, a contrasting and deeply distinct relationship with food endures among its rural and upland inhabitants. Culinary practice serves not as a method of consumption for differentiation, but as a form of biocultural resilience—an approach to preserving ancestral ecological understanding in the face of climatic change and cultural erosion. Recent ethnobotanical studies in the western Himalayas of Kashmir reveal that ethnic groups, such as the Pahari, Gujjar, Kashmiri, and Bakarwal, employ a varied array of wild edible plants (WEPs) to bolster food security and maintain cultural identity (Haq et al. 5). This technique directly opposes the commodified, homogenised food of metropolitan eateries, embodying a counter-spectacle grounded in locality, seasonality, and intergenerational transmission.

A pivotal study published in *Forest Policy and Economics* documented 99 wild edible plant species and 9 fungus species essential to the culinary practices of these groups (Haq et al.

2). The Pahari people demonstrated the most comprehensive knowledge, employing the widest array of species, succeeded by the Gujjar, Kashmiri, and Bakarwal populations. The use ranges from tender leaves (most prevalent) to tubers (least prevalent), employing preparation techniques such as stir-frying, boiling, and drying for winter preservation, so guaranteeing year-round nourishment (Haq et al. 7-8). This advanced knowledge system, as noted by experts, constitutes a sort of "adaptive capital," allowing communities to withstand market volatility and climatic disturbances (Shumsky et al. 114). Species such as *kunji* (*Pteridium revolutum*) and Himalayan fir (*Abies pindrow*) serve both nutritional and therapeutic functions, exemplifying a comprehensive integration of sustenance and health that starkly contrasts with the adverse health effects associated with commercial diets (Haq et al. 9).

Despite this, this robust system is currently facing a significant danger. It is not the commodification that is the fundamental driver of erosion; rather, there is a knowledge gap between generations, worsened by migration, shifting livelihoods, and the attractiveness of modern foodways (Haq et al. 10). In addition to that, this information is also gendered. According to the findings of the study, women, who are the primary foragers, had a higher level of knowledge of WEPs (51.49%) compared to males (45.51%). This makes women the most important curators of this heritage, despite the fact that they are frequently vulnerable (Haq et al. 12). The situation is made worse by climate change, which is causing species movement and a decline in the populations of important plants such as *Kuth* (*Saussurea costus*), as observed by local foragers (quoted in Haq et al. 14). At the same time, the sustainable foraging techniques that Gujjar tribes have traditionally maintained are in danger of being threatened by the excessive exploitation of foreigners who are looking for marketable species such as *Trillium govanianum* (Haq et al. 15). In response, a movement that is being led by community activists and elders is making significant efforts to re-value the traditional wisdom that has been passed down. In order to provide a conscientious contribution to the preservation of biocultural heritage, they advocate for the ongoing collection, cultivation, and use of WEPs (Haq et al. 16). As ethnobiologist Shiekh Marifatul Haq emphasizes, this "pioneering documentation from the viewpoint of food ethnobotany is essential" to combat the erosion of species-specific knowledge across ethnic groups (qtd. in Haq et al. 18). Elders are instructing youth in sustainable practices, such as foraging away from water sources to allow regeneration, directly linking culinary practice to ecosystem stewardship (Haq et al. 17).

This ethnobotanical environment shows a clear divide in modern Kashmir. The urban region becomes a place of consuming, where taste is worshipped while scandals of spoilt meat and outbreaks of lifestyle diseases are going on. On the other hand, the mountainous terrain puts on a show of conservatism, where foraging and eating wild foods is a radical way to remember and adapt to the environment. The fight of these communities to keep their food independence shows what is being lost as more and more people go to commercial restaurants: not just safety and health, but also a deeply rooted, long-lasting, and culturally rich way of knowing about food.

The Rotten Meat Scandal: A Crisis of Spectacular Consumption

The emerging commercial food system has an unavoidable dark side, and that dark side is the issue involving rotten stinking meat scandal of 2025. When food becomes largely a symbol, the attraction of the experience might mask the authenticity of the food's material sources and the safety of the food itself. The controversy brought to light the vulnerability of the supply chain, which is a danger that is inherent to a system that places a higher priority on scale, availability, and aesthetic presentation than it does on entrenched trust. A greater betrayal was hinted at by the public fury, which was centred on immediate cleanliness. This deeper betrayal was the inability of this new, spectacular manner of consumption to deliver on its implicit promise of superior quality and prestige. The health-conscious Kashmiri, now dissecting sugar molecules in a cola can with Talmudic precision, was confronted with a far more visceral threat, revealing the spectacle's hollow core. This mirrors food safety scholar Marion Nestle's argument that "industrialized food systems create distance between consumer and producer, fostering ignorance and vulnerability that are only revealed in moments of catastrophic failure" (Nestle 203).

Consequences: Altered Tastes, New Classes, and Imported Pathologies

The consequences of this shift are multifaceted. First, taste preferences have been systematically altered. The constant availability of rich, meat-heavy restaurant food elevates these tastes to a new norm, potentially eroding the appreciation for simpler, vegetable-forward home cuisine. Second, it has created a new class distinction—between those who participate regularly in the economy of spectacular dining and those who remain within the traditional

domestic economy. This gastronomic divide often maps onto urban/rural and class-based fault lines.

Most gravely, it has contributed to a public health crisis. There has been a significant increase in the prevalence of non-communicable diseases in Kashmir, which is correlated with the trend towards restaurant meals that are high in calories and fat and are available on demand. According to epidemiological research, there has been a significant rise in the prevalence of hypertension, coronary artery disease, and type 2 diabetes in the region, and dietary changes have been identified as the primary cause of this rise (Bhat et al. 1128). The rotten meat scandal thus represents both an acute and a chronic threat: the immediate danger of foodborne illness and the long-term pathology of dietary transition.

The Parallel Rot: Suppressed Narratives and Epistemic Hunger

The scandal's severity is amplified by the fact that it coincides with other types of sanctioned deterioration, the most notable of which being the state's prohibition of literature that deal with Kashmir's history and politics. This establishes a striking parallel, although one that is terrifying. Just as the rotten meat corrupts the physical body, the suppression of narratives corrupts the body politic. The state's act of banning, without providing a counter-narrative, creates what Michel Foucault calls a "regime of truth" maintained not by articulation but by enforced silence (Foucault 73). The public's frantic scrutiny of their own meals stands in stark contrast to the imposed inability to scrutinize sanctioned history. The question 'What did I eat?' becomes a grotesque parallel to 'What am I allowed to know?' Both point to a profound crisis of trust and agency. The spectacle of food consumption, therefore, can also be read as a diversion or a manageable domain of critique in a landscape where more fundamental critiques are foreclosed.

Conclusion: Beyond the Palate

The evolution of Kashmiri cuisine from the reliable hearth to the fashionable eatery is a microcosm of deeper socioeconomic shifts that have taken place. The crisis surrounding the unhealthy meat is a moment that calls for a reckoning with the price of this new alimentary system. It is a visceral break in this spectacle. It demonstrates that the fetishization of taste and the spectacle of dining have resulted in the emergence of real risks, such as the deterioration of traditional foodways, an intensification of class differences, and the introduction of dietary

diseases. In addition, when the controversy is considered in conjunction with the censoring of historical narratives, it highlights the fact that deterioration can be both cognitive and physical in nature. In order to combat the infestation, it is necessary to investigate further than the kitchen inspection and the restaurant boycott. In order to accomplish this, it is necessary to conduct an in-depth analysis of the very systems—commodification, spectacle, and political silence—that have not only transformed the food that Kashmiris consume, but also the way in which people relate to their culture, their history, and themselves.

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