

ARTS & LIFESTYLE

Innovation, care and authenticity elevate high-altitude eating

Shoba Narayan visits four Ladakh restaurants showcasing the delights of Himalayan dishes in northernmost India

Ladakh, India's northernmost region, sits high in the Himalayas, with villages at 3,000 metres and roads snaking over some of the world's highest driveable passes. Bordered by Tibet and Pakistan, Ladakh has a stark yet spectacular landscape of snow-capped peaks, high-altitude deserts and centuries-old Buddhist monasteries, and has long attracted travellers in search of adventure and spirituality. With a growing season that lasts only a few months each year, the region has evolved its cuisine around resilient ingredients such as barley and buckwheat, seasonal wild herbs, apricots and a tradition of drying vegetables to sustain communities through the winter. It is not a place many would associate with exceptional food. Yet Ladakh's culinary scene is undergoing a transformation. Across the region, chefs and restaurateurs are embracing local recipes, indigenous ingredients and centuries-old techniques, and presenting them in ways that feel at once authentic and contemporary. Rather than looking beyond their borders for inspiration, they are rediscovering the richness of their own culinary heritage – and in doing so giving Ladakh's cuisine a voice on the global stage. Here are five restaurants leading the way.

Alchi Kitchen, Leh
Winner of a Nari Shakti Puraskar (Women's Power Award) from the Indian government, chef and owner Nilza Wangmo, 47, was one of the first to open a restaurant focusing on Ladakhi cuisine.



Steps away from the 1000-year-old Alchi monastery, the walls of her restaurants are filled with photos of film stars and politicians, from Farhan Akhtar to Rahul Gandhi. "I learnt cooking from my mother and grandmother, and it feels good to pass on this legacy," says Wangmo about her all-women staff. Try the meat or vegetable stuffed khambir, a pita-like flatbread. Wash it down with fresh apricot juice or gur gur cha (butter tea). If you are adventurous, try unusual dishes such as skyu (soup with mutton or beef bones, dried vegetables and wheat pasta) or phemar (sweet buttery dish made with barley flour, gur gur cha, sugar and yak cheese powder).

Namza Dining, Leh
Padma Yangchan and Jigmet Disket are on a mission to make Ladakh's culture and

cuisine accessible to the world. "We found that there was very little documentation on Ladakh cuisine and many dishes existed only in the memories of our elders," says Yangchan, who also received the prestigious Nari Shakti Puraskar. "For us, this isn't just a restaurant. It's about safeguarding our cultural heritage and ensuring these stories and flavours are carried forward." To recreate dishes such as zathuk soup with dried nettles, Gyuma sausages, yat-khandi pulao, whose origins trace back to the Silk Road, and sha-gok, featuring slow-cooked Himalayan lamb ribs, the pair travelled to remote villages and nomadic communities to learn recipes and techniques first-hand. Their efforts have paid off. Namza Dining has become a favourite with travellers seeking authentic, meaningful food experiences, while also

inspiring a renewed sense of pride among locals.

The Heritage Kitchen by Stone Hedge, Hunder
Set in the heart of Nubra Valley and led by chef Deachen Lahmo, this restaurant occupies the 200-year-old mud-brick home of owner Stanzin Tsephel. At its heart is the chaap – a hearth surrounded by vessels, including pitchers from which chang, a fermented barley drink, is poured. The experience centres on a seven or nine-course degustation menu displaying the breadth of Ladakh's cuisine. Dishes include barley soup; buckwheat pancakes with Ladakhi cheese; gya-thuk noodles; a sea buckthorn kombucha palate cleanser; a fragrant pilaf; and chhu-tagti, Ladakh's signature bow-tie pasta in a savoury broth. The meal ends with simmered apricot.

Tsam Khang, Leh
A former monk, chef Jigmet Mingyur brings a quiet confidence to every beautifully plated dish. Lunch is served at a sun-dappled table set among the gardens, framed by wild roses, while the menu celebrates local ingredients through dishes such as buckwheat crepes, barley soup and chhu-tagti, Ladakh's signature pasta. After the meal, Mingyur leads guests through the gardens, pointing out edible herbs that find their way on to the plate. "I love all ingredients, but my favourites are skotse and kosnyot – wild chives and wild cumin. I can use them in almost every dish, because wild chives have both onion and garlic flavours, while wild cumin has notes of cumin and fennel," he says.



Above, Heritage Kitchen is in a mud-brick home; top, Gyuma sausages at Namza Dining The Heritage Kitchen by Stone Hedge; Namza Dining



Disney documentary spells out how the magic happens

What goes into making a Disney theme park, a site known for its magical fairy tales, spellbinding illusions and emotional storytelling? That's the question explored in *Disney Worldbuilders*, a feature-length documentary that will be released on Disney+ on August 20. For audiences in the UAE, it will also offer a behind-the-scenes glimpse at Disneyland Abu Dhabi, as Disney continues work on its seventh theme park resort and first in the Middle East. The documentary's trailer features former Disney chief Bob Iger visiting the future Yas Island resort. The footage appears to show the same trip during which Iger had shared photographs from the park's site. "You have to dream big, you have to have a wild imagination," Iger says in the trailer, wearing the same outfit seen in the Instagram photographs of his trip to Abu Dhabi earlier this year. In January, Iger posted the images with the caption: "Walking the site of what will one day be Disneyland Abu Dhabi! Lots of work ahead, but all very exciting!"

Directed by Oscar and Emmy-nominated filmmaker Leslie Iwerks, *Disney Worldbuilders* also features interviews with current Disney chief executive Josh D'Amaro, plus creative figures including filmmaker James Cameron, Marvel Studios president Kevin Feige, animator Pete Docter, filmmaker, "Disney Legend" Jon Favreau, and Jennifer Lee, filmmaker and former chief creative officer of Walt Disney Animation Studios. The film explores how Disney stories, including *Avatar*, *Star Wars*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, Pixar, *Frozen* and *Zootopia*, evolve from the screen into immersive attractions, while also offering a look at new lands and resorts currently in development around the world. "I wanted to understand what ignites the imaginations of the storytellers behind some of the world's most beloved stories," Iwerks said. "As I sat down with each of them, I discovered a common thread: they often traced their creative journeys back to a single childhood moment – walking through the gates of Disneyland and realising that impossible dreams could become real." The documentary will have its premiere at Disney's D23 fan event on August 16 before arriving on Disney+ four days later. Disneyland Abu Dhabi was announced in May 2025 and



A render of Disneyland Abu Dhabi; top, Bob Iger in the documentary Miral; Disney

is being developed by Miral on Yas Island under Disney's "capital-light" business model, in which Miral will fund, build and operate the resort while Disney oversees the creative development and receives royalties. Disney has said the park will feature themed accommodation, retail, dining and entertainment, while Iger has described it as being "authentically Disney and distinctly Emirati". In May, Disney reaffirmed that the project remains on track despite regional instability. In a letter to shareholders released alongside the company's quarterly

Disney Worldbuilders features interviews with Disney CEOs, Marvel president and James Cameron

earnings, then-Disney Experiences chairman D'Amaro said the "strategic logic" behind the Abu Dhabi development remained unchanged. "We have multiple experience expansions under way using a capital-light model, including working with local operators to bring a new cruise ship to Japan and a theme park resort to Abu Dhabi," he wrote. "The strategic logic of our Abu Dhabi plans is unchanged. Major new theme parks are necessarily long-term in nature given the lead time of these projects, and this investment approach has consistently benefited our business." When the project was first announced, D'Amaro described Disneyland Abu Dhabi as its "most advanced and interactive" resort to date. He has previously said the project could take up to two years to design, followed by another four to six years of construction, meaning a potential opening date in the 2030s.

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