

# Bashir & Bashir



FIGURE 1: *Bashir's helper is mixing the boiling milk.*  
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EXTENDING FROM THE KARAKORAM mountain range in the north to the Great Himalayas in the south, Ladakh is a region in Northern India known as “the land of high passes.” Among the soaring mountains of Ladakh, at an altitude of 3,500 meters, Leh is the small capital town of this geographically isolated area. It is home to Tibetan Buddhists and Shia Muslims and it hosts thousands of foreign tourists every year who come trekking in the thin mountain air. Leh has a bazaar where hundreds of people gather each day to do their local trading. The bazaar cuts the town like a main artery. Shops are lined up on each side, selling anything from hiking gear to handcraft. Women sell apricots on a sidewalk. Some others sit behind the colorful display of their fresh vegetables. In narrow

alleys, shops open with their daily routine. The barber sweeps the floor of his shop with walls painted violet, the pashmina shop owner neatly lays out his goods and looks out for the first tourist to drop by, and waiters of tea shops go around to offer the first tea of the day to shop owners. In this waking city, on a side street, a man opens his shop every morning to sell *curd* (yoghurt), *lassi* (a yoghurt drink), and *paneer* (a white cheese). His shop is called Bashir & Bashir Milk Shop.

Inside the shop, pots of yoghurt line shelves that are visible from the street. The pots have shiny steel surfaces. Some have the letter “B” marked on them with thick orange paint. The wooden shelves where these pots sit are also painted orange. The rest of the shop is dark, the air is still. It has a



FIGURE 2: *Bashir is transferring boiled milk into a container through a cloth filter.*

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temple-like quality. A temple of sleeping milk. Milk boils at the back in a large, deep pot over a stove. The pot is blackened from years of exposure to open flame. A young boy is stirring the heating milk with a stick as long as himself. The stick has a razor-sharp end to scrape the milk that clings to the bottom of the pot. The stove makes a *shshshsh* sound in the background, and grows louder as more kerosene is pumped into the burner. The shop is hot, and the steam coming from the back blurs one's vision. A small batch of artisanal cheese is in the making, with its colors, sounds, and rituals.

While his helper holds a large cheesecloth over a blue plastic barrel, Bashir pours the boiled milk over the cloth, filtering the milk into the barrel. Bashir then pours this boiled milk into a large plastic orange pot on the floor and

mixes it with a yellow liquid using a wooden spatula. He is on his knees the whole time and mixing the off-white liquid in a calm circular motion. With the spatula he draws gentle circles, his head lightly tilted to one side. He stirs the milk calmly as the morning sun penetrates his shop. Watching his wooden spoon swirling the milk, you half-expect Bashir to uncurl from his place on the ground and begin to whirl, his checkered pants and blue sweater now a white robe. In his white robe he spins, with one hand in the milk and the other pointing toward the sky. Slowly, the cheesemaker becomes the transformation of the milk, the rotation of the planets, a dervish representing the universe in ecstatic motion.

The milk in the low orange pot does not curdle, so he adds more scoops of the yellow liquid, which he says is lemon juice.



FIGURE 3: Bashir is mixing the heated milk with lemon juice to start the curdling.

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Then he adds a bit more and a bit more while he keeps mixing. Finally the milk starts to curdle; at first it seems a mistake to the observing eye, a glitch among the smooth satin of milk, until it is undeniably present, an explosion of white strands of clotted milk frantically swimming among the swirls. The whey becomes a turbid yellow color. Bashir starts dumping the yellowish liquid, scoop by scoop, onto the shop floor, where it disappears down a drain. He then transfers the clotted milk into another metal bowl, wraps a cloth around it, and ties it tightly, causing more liquid to squeeze out onto the floor. This white bundle in the bowl will become *paneer* after a day of rest.

As he lifts up his head from the finished ritual, smiling, I ask about the young boy at the back: “Bashir, is that your son back there?” He doesn’t answer.

Bashir’s full name is Bashir Amad Gojri. He is one of the Muslim Indians of the Kashmir region. Bashir & Bashir is open March through October, during the high tourist season. In Leh Bashir stays in a one-bedroom apartment. According to him, it is not a house, just a place to sleep. The rest of the year Bashir stays at home with his family in Kashmir. This year, as for the past fifteen years, in October



FIGURE 4: Curdled milk releases the whey, which Bashir removes with a pitcher.

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Bashir will go back to Kashmir. His face lights up when he explains that his daughter will be getting married this fall in Srinagar.

I ask Bashir again if the young boy is his son. Looking at the name of the business, one expects two generations to be working in the shop. He moves his index finger over his lips and makes a *shhh* sound. “Worker, worker . . . shhh!” he says, his smile shy and playful. His current worker is Hussein. He has worked there for two years now. Why then the name Bashir & Bashir? “This is a good name,” he explains, “a double name, a lucky name.” No double Bashirs then, no son and father. This may seem like a marketing gimmick but merely reveals an irony, a disruption in this artisanal business. His son is not in the cheese business at all. Bashir wanted him to study and work in a big company. Bashir tells me that he learned his trade from his father, who is now 72. His son, however, doesn’t know how to make cheese. Bashir’s skills will not be transferred to the next generation, and this once family business will most likely come to an end when a season arrives and he is too old to open his shop.



FIGURE 5: Cheese curd is transferred to another meshed bowl to remove the remaining whey.

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An old Tibetan man with a round friendly face and thick reading glasses enters quietly. Without saying a single word, he dumps the contents of a white plastic canister into one of the blue barrels of milk and leaves. He is one of the local farmers who bring their milk to the shop. Bashir explains that most of the milk is gathered in a collection center outside of town. Two times a day milk is brought into the town of Basko, twenty kilometers outside of Leh. Bashir explains that he receives more milk between June and August, twice as much as in September. “June, July, August . . . good business . . . very busy, no time for lunch.” he says.

Now and then Bashir walks over to metal pots on shelves with yoghurt and dips his finger into one of them to check if it has set. He offers me fresh *paneer* from an earlier batch that

morning. It is delicious, tastes a bit like ricotta but less grainy. In such a simple product the taste of milk comes through. It is gentle, caring, even cuddling. He prepares *lassi* served with a thick cream of yoghurt on top. He takes a few spoons of his yoghurt and mixes it in a plastic pitcher with a wooden stick. He churns yoghurt with salt or sugar, using this stick, rubbing it back and forth between his palms. Sweet *lassi* is very popular, but I get the salted version. It reminds me of its Turkish relative, *ayran*. I take in the *lassi*, I savor it, and I draw a silky line from Leh all the way to Istanbul. My eyes sting with nostalgia for our common nomadic past.

A mother comes to buy a *lassi* for her daughter, who looks thirsty and excited with her red, round Tibetan cheeks. The shop floor is too small, so she and her daughter remain outside.



FIGURE 6: *A knot on the cheesecloth and it is ready to rest for a day.*

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Bashir, sitting sideways, leans out to his left to do the sale through a glass door closed halfway. He is now Bashir the salesperson.

But Bashir is mainly an artisan, practicing the most intimate act of transforming nature into culture, taming milk into yoghurt and cheese. Productions like these are important because they present to us the link between the source of our nourishment and the producer. The story of milk is as old as humanity; it is cyclical and intimate, just like the story of a mother and a child. The human narrative goes from milk to cheese, father to son, but more and more, sons do not pick up the trade of their fathers, and more and more, cheese comes from factories. Culture wins over nature, and over human nature. The culture of milk is not only physical and chemical. It is human, artistic, mystic,

and vulnerable to change. Food production is not only about efficiency, hygiene, and convenience. It is also about waking up each day to take part in a cyclical story of transformation, which is personal and close, like the tie between a father and his son.

When I say goodbye, Bashir doesn't accept any money for the countless *lassis* or the tea. As I leave, indebted, he says, "No worry, come for breakfast." He will open his shop again the next day, but I will have departed by then. As I get ready to leave Leh that evening, I wonder which shop will open in its place, when Bashir can no longer run his shop and none of his children step forward to continue the trade. Another artisanal production will cease. Perhaps leaving its place to packaged products from New Delhi with long shelf lives.



FIGURE 7: *Bashir serves his customer a lassi.*  
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Ladakh used to be on the Silk Road between Southeast Asia and China, until the border with Tibet was closed in the 1960s. Ladakh nowadays is renowned for its remote mountain beauty. Its economy is less and less based on agriculture and more and more on tourism. It remains to be

seen to what extent tourism can help Ladakh preserve its food heritage and capitalize on the local flavors of the land. Cheese production after all is only one of the narratives of the love between the land and its people, extending over geographies and generations. 🍷