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# A Guest in Azerbaijan

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Culture & Cuisine

WIENAND





# Contents

<b>Foreword</b>	<b>6</b>		
<b>The Country Azerbaijan</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>The Cuisine of Azerbaijan</b>	<b>103</b>
The City Baku	18	Baked Walnuts with Eggs	107
The Metropolis on the Caspian Sea	18	Filled Vine Leaves	108
The Old City	25	Sour Preserved Fruit and Vegetables	112
The Mukhtarov House	37	Grilled Minced Meat	114
The Heydar Aliyev Monument	39	Filled Pancakes	117
The Veiled Woman	41	Soup with Filled Pasta	118
Yanar Dag	45	Green Beans with Eggs	121
A Modern City in the Orient	46	Stuffed Aubergines, Tomatoes, and Peppers	124
The Blue Mosque of Baku	48	Filled Aubergine	127
Hammam	52	Aubergine Puree	129
<b>The Cultural Heritage</b>	<b>56</b>	Rice with Various Side Dishes	132
The Legacy of the Silk Road	57	Braised Chicken with Potatoes	137
The Nagorno-Karabakh Region	57	Mixed Grilled Meat Platter	139
Music	58	Home-made Pasta with	
Literature	63	Fried Minced Meat and Onions	141
The Temple of Fire	64	Stir-fried Meat and Vegetables	142
Yeddi Gunbaz	66	Fried Lamb's Liver	144
The Town of Shaki	68	Grilled Fillet of Sturgeon	149
The Church of Kish	72	Fillet of Sturgeon on Vegetables	150
Lahij – a Village in Ismailli	74	Stuffed Fish	153
Khinaliq – a Village in Quba	77	Sherbet	157
		Pomegranate Sherbet	157
<b>The Markets</b>	<b>80</b>	Preserves	160
Caviar	84	Sweet Flaky Pastry Squares	166
Cheese	101	Sweet Pastry Crescents with Nut Filling	169
		Rolls with Nut Filling	170
		List of Photos	172
		Map	174
		Acknowledgements	176



# The City Baku

## THE METROPOLIS ON THE CASPIAN SEA

The metropolitan flair is evident as the plane comes in to land: the capital of Azerbaijan welcomes visitors with an imposing skyline, whose ultra-modern buildings seem to rise directly out of the Caspian Sea. The country's wealth lies in this, the world's largest lake, and its gas and oil fields. As a result, the port is the most important economic centre and also the hub of many oil pipelines. In August 1918, when Britain marched into Baku with a troop of 1,000 soldiers, the English newspaper *Near East* wrote that the oil from Baku was unrivalled. "If oil is the queen, then Baku is her throne", observed Winston Churchill, and that rapidly becomes clear as you immerse yourself in this remarkable and exciting city. Although uncrowned, the oil magnates planned their private residences and corporate headquarters in magnificent style. In many cases these city palaces, mostly built of sandstone in around 1900, were designed as copies to scale of European models. They gleam in shades of ochre in a wide variety of styles. Many of them are eclectic in design, like the majestic Palace of Hajinskiy, in which General de Gaulle spent the night in 1944 on his way to Moscow.

Not far away stands the defiant, unadorned Maiden Tower, dating from the twelfth century. It was built at a time when people were just beginning to build art-historically important structures of Islamic culture. These included the Palace of the Shirvanshahs as well as hammams and mosques in what is now the Old City, today part of the UNESCO World Cultural Heritage. Here narrow medieval alleys radiate their charm while the new Baku greets visitors with broad avenues, manicured squares, and expansive parks. Mediterranean flair dominates on the lively lakeside promenade fringed with cafés, restaurants, and shopping malls. Especially in the warm summer months it is a bustling and popular avenue for strolling along. The opera house, which also stages ballets, is indicative of prosperity and an active cultural life, as is the concert hall. There are several stages for jazz and *mugham* as well as various theatres and museums. The city acts as host to international forums and events in politics, science, and culture, including the annual international Mstislav Rostropovich Festival, the Global Baku Forum, and the World Forum of Intercultural Dialogue. In 2012 Baku hosted the Eurovision Song Contest and the first European Games were held here in 2015. Baku is also the well-connected seat of several universities and research institutes.

One of the cradles of human settlement, Baku is at the cutting edge as regards architecture. The Heydar Aliyev Centre, for example, is a futuristic structure in immaculate white and without a single straight line; it is an approach to the "eternal skies", a link between past, present, and even future. Baku's landmark is the three reflecting Flame Towers, whose lambent "flames" rise heavenwards, proudly symbolising the "Land of Fire" – because that is precisely the meaning of the word "Azerbaijan".















## CHEESE

The basis for qatiq (yoghurt) and kesmik (curd cheese) is cow's, sheep's and goat's milk as well as buffalo's milk, which is especially prized. Soured milk and a pendir, which is reminiscent of feta, is also popular. Qurut has a particularly intense flavour; it consists of balls of kesmik which are rolled in salt whilst still damp to prevent mould; thereafter they can be kept for several months. Another aromatic cheese is shor, a granular cheese. It is produced by bringing milk to the boil and then adding a small quantity of qatik to make it curdle; the curdled milk is then passed through a cheesecloth. Like motal pendiri it acquires a special flavour because it is allowed to mature in a wineskin made of sheep's leather. Rennet cheese is made of sheep's milk, sometimes mixed with goat's milk; it is produced by the addition of rennet from newborn lambs, or of lady's bedstraw. Sachaq pendir, a smoked cheese often presented in the form of a plait, tastes particularly good with beer.







## Aubergine Puree

### *Badimjan ezmesi*

Serves 4 / 50 minutes

3–4 large aubergines  
3–4 red peppers  
3–4 medium-sized tomatoes  
2–3 sprigs each of basil, flat-leaf parsley, mint,  
coriander, and dill  
1 medium-sized onion  
2 spring onions  
Juice of ½ lemon  
Salt  
Freshly ground black pepper

Preheat the oven to 180° C / 350° F (upper and lower heat). Wash the vegetables and pat them dry. Wash the herbs and shake them dry. Pierce the skins of the aubergines and peppers a few times with a fork. Then place them with the tomatoes on a baking tray and cook in the oven until tender. Remove from the oven, and whilst the vegetables are still hot, remove the skin of the aubergines, skin the peppers and remove the core and seeds; skin the tomatoes. Leave to cool.

While the vegetables are in the oven, peel and finely dice the onion. Finely chop the herbs and the spring onions. Reserve 1 tbsp to garnish and put the rest with the chopped onions in a bowl.

Then coarsely chop the vegetables or mash them with a fork; mix with the other ingredients and season with lemon juice, salt, and pepper.

Aubergine puree is a popular hors d'oeuvre or side dish. It is served cold with bread as an accompaniment to grilled meat. You can prepare it before grilling the meat and serve it in little dishes, garnished with chopped herbs.

### Tip:

You can also add a crushed clove of garlic according to taste or – if you like it spicy – finely chop a chilli and add it to the puree.





