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Chef Abdurahim Mirzayev, 59, cooks plov - a dish known around the world as pilaf, in a small cafe in Tashkent. — AFP photos



A man sells rice for plov - a dish known around the world as pilaf, at a bazaar in Termez.



Uzbek farmer Mukhtor Gazatov, 60, picks carrots - one of the core ingredients to plov - a dish known around the world as pilaf, at his farm outside Tashkent.

Extreme weather costly for Uzbeks' beloved plov dish

The sweet-flavored, yellow carrots grown by Uzbek farmer Mukhtor Gazatov are a key ingredient in his country's national pilaf dish-but extreme weather has devastated this year's harvest. Cooked with meat, onions, rice and plenty of oil, the carrots are a must-have to make Uzbekistan's beloved plov, a staple in the Central Asian country of 35 million people. "They are sweeter than the orange kind and lend a special flavor," the 60-year-old told AFP at his farm outside the isolated republic's capital. But one of the worst droughts in years has hit the ex-Soviet region.

Gizatov's crops were ruined while shoppers grumble over carrots that are four times more expensive than before, pushing up prices of a plate of plov. "When the weather is that hot, some carrots simply burn out. The carrots that survive are smaller," said Gazatov, whose annual income fell by a third. City temperatures surged past 40 degrees Celsius (104 degrees Fahrenheit) in early June-a month when readings are typically in the mid-30s or lower. Unseasonably cold weather earlier in the spring had already delayed the harvest and compromised its quality, causing carrots to crack, Gazatov lamented. Scientists link such shifting weather patterns and extreme temperatures to the effects of climate change.

Whole lotta plov

In the capital Tashkent, it is not hard to see where the demand for Gazatov's crop is. Restaurants with plov-heavy menus are dotted throughout the city, whose region is one of several that claim to make the best version of the dish. Plov is served at weddings where ingredients are cooked in massive cast iron pots. Thursdays are earmarked for plov-making followed by love-making in married households-according to legend, at least. Plov's prominent role in public life motivated the government's decision last year to create a "plov index", echoing the Big Mac index used as a measure for the cost of living in other countries.

In the first nine months of this year the price of plov in Tashkent rose by nearly 30 percent, according to the index, due to steadily rising prices for meat and the explosion in carrot prices. Navruz Khurramov, an expert with the EastFruit information and analytics platform, said this year's climate swings had compounded rising costs observed from the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic. "Uzbekistan had non-beneficial weather conditions, which limited this year's harvest. Local prices were also affected by the high prices in markets connected to Uzbekistan like Russia" where not enough carrots were planted, Khurramov



A man sells meat at a bazaar in Termez.

told AFP.

Water scarce-region

Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia, and looks to rivers that rise in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to feed its massive agriculture sector. In recent years the government has aimed to reduce areas sown for water-thirsty crops like cotton as well as the rice used in plov, while seeking out more water-effi-

cient methods of irrigation. A growing population and shrinking glaciers in its upstream neighbors have added urgency to these efforts. This summer water was particularly scarce, offering a snapshot of a potential future where many types of farming become unsustainable and prices run away from incomes.

Neighboring Kazakhstan's decision to restrict exports of animals and feed after a mass drought-related cattle die-off

added to the pressure on prices at Uzbek markets. If there is a check on rising prices for plov's ingredients, it is the ruthless competition between eateries focused on a single meal. Abdurahim Mirzayev, a 59-year-old career plov chef, said that he chose to sacrifice profits this year to ensure his rough-and-ready restaurant on the outskirts of Tashkent was full every lunchtime. His version of the dish, known as "wedding plov" or "holiday plov", is embellished with raisins and chickpeas.

But carrots are essential to plov's distinctive aroma and cannot be replaced, he said. "You have to make plov with love and from a pure heart," Mirzayev said, his hands moving quickly through pockets of steam from the meat and vegetables sizzling in the pot. Javokhir Djamoliddinov, deputy director of the national statistics committee that maintains the "plov index", said he believes Uzbekistan will always find a way to serve its favorite dish. He pointed hopefully to a recent dip in prices for carrots and government action to control food prices in general. "We have always eaten plov," he said, "and we will always eat it in the future." — AFP



Men eat plov - a dish known around the world as pilaf, in a small cafe in Tashkent.



A woman sells flatbread at a bazaar in Termez.



Chef Abdurahim Mirzayev, 59, cooks plov - a dish known around the world as pilaf, in a small cafe in Tashkent.

Marx and Lenin watch Engels wed in southern India

Marx, Lenin and Ho Chi Minh gathered in southern India on the weekend to watch their friend Engels tie the knot. But there wasn't a German, Russian or Vietnamese in sight as members of the local Communist Party in the state of Kerala attended the wedding at a boutique tourist destination. The hammer and sickle remain in vogue across Kerala, where the Communist Party has governed for much of the last six decades, with revolutionary names like Stalin and Trotsky popular. Engels and Lenin are brothers, while Marx and Ho Chi Minh are the sons of a local party activist, according to the newspaper

Mathrubhumi.

All four men are active members of the Communist Party, the report said, but Marx flew back from the hyper-capitalist Gulf city of Dubai to attend the wedding in Athirappilly. India leaned more towards the Soviet Union during the Cold War, and Russian monikers including even Pravda-the name of the USSR's state newspaper-are not unheard of, particularly in the south. Tamil Nadu's current chief minister is M.K. Stalin, named by his father in honor of the Soviet dictator just days before he died in Russia.

A wedding in that state in June saw Socialism married off in front of brothers Communism, Leninism and Marxism. His bride was P. Mamata Banerjee, named by her grandfather for a firebrand left-wing politician in West Bengal, who ironically ended decades of communist rule in the state back in 2011. — AFP



This photo shows groom Friedrich Engels (second left), bride Bismitha along with Communist party members Marx (left), Lenin (second right) and Ho Chi Minh (right) posing for pictures during their wedding ceremony held at Athirappilly, in Thrissur District of Kerala state. — AFP

Clapton guitar, Cobain setlist, Whitney jacket under hammer

Eric Clapton's guitar, Kurt Cobain's handwritten setlists and Whitney Houston's multi-print Versace jacket are among the star-powered music memorabilia hitting the auction block this weekend. Clapton's 1968 Martin D-45 acoustic instrument is the toast of this year's "Icons & Idols: Rock 'N' Roll" from Julien's Auctions, which anticipates the guitar could fetch \$300,000 to \$500,000 during bidding this weekend. "And I think that's a conservative estimate," said Martin Nolan, executive director of the house. "The collectible on the art market right now-it's very, very hot, these prices are going through the roof," he told AFP during a preview of the auction that will include some 1,000 pieces.

The 76-year-old Englishman Clapton, who in recent years has made a very public turn to far-right conservatism, taking an ardent anti-Covid-19 vaccination stance and facing accusations of racism-played the guitar during the 1970 debut live concert performance of Derek and The Dominos, the group he founded that was behind the classic "Layla."

A sheet of partial handwritten working

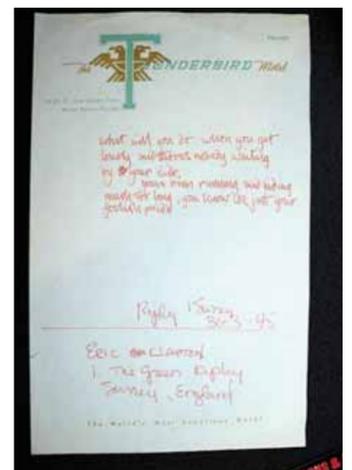
draft lyrics to that 1970 hit are also for sale, and estimated to go for \$30,000 to \$50,000. Asked if Julien's considered the controversy surrounding Clapton in choosing to highlight items connected to the rock star, Nolan said "there will always be something controversial." "I could go down the list with every star that's represented here," he said. "We don't focus on that; we focus on what's good, the amazing music that they've given us for many, many decades." Also included in the two-day auction-bidding will take place online and at Manhattan's Hard Rock Cafe November 19-20 — is a handwritten setlist from Nirvana frontman Kurt Cobain. He scrawled songs including "Come As You Are" and "About A Girl" on a tablecloth he signed along with bandmates Dave Grohl and Krist Novoselic.

Last year at Julien's annual event a retro acoustic-electric guitar the late star played during the legendary 1993 MTV Unplugged performance snagged



Eric Clapton's 1968 Martin D-45 acoustic guitar is on display during a press preview. — AFP photos

a record \$6 million, the most expensive guitar ever sold at auction. The year prior, the cigarette-singed cardigan that grunge's reluctant poster boy wore during that same performance went for \$334,000. Several outfits worn on stage by the late American pop diva Whitney Houston are also going under the hammer, along with a plaid and paisley print Gianni Versace jacket and matching velvet trousers. Julien's estimates the ensemble, which the superstar wore circa 1992, could go for \$3,000 to \$5,000. — AFP



A sheet of partial handwritten working draft lyrics to Clapton's 1970 song 'Layla' written at The Thunderbird Motel, in Miami Beach is on display during a press preview.