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## **Kazakhstan**

### **Overview**

The Republic of Kazakhstan is the ninth-largest country in the world by landmass, about the same size as western Europe or Texas, but it is only the 62nd most populated, containing nearly 15.5 million people, about 60 percent of whom live in cities. North to south it stretches from the western Siberian plains to the Central Asian desert and the edge of the Silk Road; east to west it stretches from the Altai Mountains to the Volga. A landlocked country bordering two landlocked seas—the Caspian and the Aral—it neighbors China to its east, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan to the south, and Russia to the north and west.

Historically, the Kazakhs are a nomadic people, a mixture of Turkic and Mongol tribes who migrated to the area in the 13th century. Russia conquered part of Kazakhstan in the 18th century and the remainder in the 19th, and it became a Soviet republic in 1936. The Soviet Union's "virgin lands" project in the 1950s and 1960s had the twin effects of causing extensive immigration from Russia and other Soviet republics and of bringing to an end much of the traditional nomadic living and farming practices of the previous centuries. Among these Soviet immigrants were workers for the local industries and prisoners of the gulag, much of which was located in the steppes of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan gained its independence in 1991, and many of the immigrant communities returned home. Today, although the country prides itself on accommodating 120 nationalities, the population is predominantly a mixture of native Kazakhs (approximately 55%) and Russians (approximately 30%), with Uzbeks, Tartars, and Ukrainians the next-largest groups. Russian and Kazakh are the official languages. About 44 percent practice the Russian Orthodox religion, and 47 percent of the population is Sunni Muslim. All of these populations have had their own influence on the food of the nation.

Kazakhstan's economy outstrips all of the other Central Asian states combined. Rich in natural minerals (it is said that almost every element in the periodic table can be found in Kazakhstan), it has a particular wealth of deposits of petroleum, natural gas, coal, copper, iron ore, lead, zinc, bauxite, gold, and uranium. It retains a strong relationship with Russia, and ever since independence has leased 2,316 square miles (6,000 square kilometers) of land around the Baikonur Cosmodrome to Russia for continued use in its space program. Its main agricultural products are grain—largely spring wheat—and livestock—sheep, horses, and cattle—although its continental climate means that it also has good conditions for growing a wide variety of fruits and vegetables in summer. Generally speaking, Kazakhstan is a nation of meat eaters, with between 30 and 50 percent of daily calories coming from meat and 50 percent from starches.

### **Food Culture Snapshot**

Sholpan and Talgat live in an apartment in central Almaty, with their young daughter and baby son. A little over a year ago, when his mother died, Talgat's father came to live with the family. As the youngest son, Talgat is responsible for his parents and his sisters when the need arises. Both Sholpan and Talgat are middle-class

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urban professionals who work full-time, and they have regular help from an older woman, Gulfiya, who comes into their home to assist with cooking, cleaning, and child care.

Although both adults work, it is Sholpan's responsibility to take care of the family home and to shop for and prepare their meals. Home cooking is an essential component of their family life, extending even to the traditional fruit compotes or cordials that are always in a bottle in the fridge should anyone be thirsty. Talgat's favorite is made from dried apples and barberries simmered in water over a low flame, with the addition of raspberries in summer and dried apricots or raisins in winter.

Staple foods that are usually in the larder include fresh and preserved meats in the form of sausages and smoked meats, rice, eggs, wheat flour, ready-made breads and biscuits, and pickled fish, as well as a wide variety of fruits and vegetables in season. Nuts and dried fruits from the region are another important staple.

Sholpan and Talgat are typical of others in their social group in thinking that fruits and vegetables purchased from a supermarket are simply not fresh. The vast majority of fresh produce is still bought in outdoor or farmers' markets, which are centrally located, or from street vendors who bring their produce of the day into town to sell. Dried fruits and nuts are also best from the market. The impressive new supermarkets tend to be used for bulk purchases—or by the many foreigners working in the larger cities.

### **Major Foodstuffs**

Traditionally, the most important foods for Kazakhs were meat and dairy, and these continue to play a prominent role on Kazakh tables. Sheep, horse, and camel are the traditional meats, and beef is popular. Wild goat is still relatively commonly consumed in rural areas, though the population of *saiga*, or long-nosed antelope, which used to be a staple, has dropped to the extent that it is now protected. Poultry is less frequently consumed than red meat but is becoming increasingly popular, especially chicken and duck. Meat is bled at slaughter, and the animal's head faces west in keeping with halal practice (Mecca is west of Kazakhstan). Camels are slaughtered on their knees, presumably since the animals are so tall. A carcass is usually divided into 12 pieces, each of which has a traditional owner when the meat is served: the head and pelvic bone for guests, kinsmen, and the elderly; the liver and tail fat to all of the in-laws; the breast/brisket for the son- or daughter-in-law; the anklebone for the son-in-law; the rump for a friend; the large intestine for the herdsman; the heart, fat, and cervical vertebrae for the girls; and the kidneys and neck vertebrae (and the ears from the head) for the children.

Horse is an especially important meat. In fact, everything about horses is redolent of Kazakhstan, and there are few more uplifting sights than a herd of horses galloping together across the steppe. Superb horsemen, Kazakhs breed different herds of horses to work, milk, and eat. Horseflesh is often the main meat in traditional Kazakh dishes, and it is also made into a wide array of sausages and preserved meats, each with a different flavor, texture, and balance. Horses raised for eating are encouraged to develop extensive deposits of fat, as this is particularly prized, especially the yellow fat from mountain-fed horses (lowland horses are leaner, and their fat is whiter). On the whole, the fattier the sausage the better. One sausage type, *kazy*, is made from the long strips of meat and fat from the ribs, seasoned with garlic, salt, and pepper and threaded in large, long, whole pieces into the guts. The meat and fat for *shuzhuk* is chopped before being seasoned with salt, pepper, and garlic and stuffed into guts. *Karta* is made from the thickest part of the rectum, which is washed carefully so as not to break up the fat that surrounds it and is then even more carefully turned inside out so that the fat is encased inside. Whole preserved meats include *zhal*, the oblong accumulation of fat from underneath the horse's mane, which is cut off with a thin piece of flesh and then salted, and *zhaya*, which is the salted upper muscular layer of the hip with up to 4 inches (10 centimeters) of fat. *Sur-yet* may be made of any part of the horse's flesh cut into in a piece of between 1 and 2 pounds (0.5 and 1 kilogram) and salted. All of these will be either dried or smoked, and all are boiled for up to two hours before use.

Sheep are an important meat source, and fattiness is also prized in this meat. The sheep are bred to have particularly fat rears, and this fat, as well as fat from the tail, is an important ingredient in many dishes as well as being eaten in its own right. The most expensive *shashlyk*, or kebabs, are those with the most fat included. Mutton is also preserved in sausages such as *kyimai*, a blood sausage, and *ulpershek*, made of the heart, aorta, and fat. No part of the animal is wasted. Children collect the knuckle and anklebones to play a throwing game called *asikya*—historically, this was also used to help them learn how to count. Men may be given one of these bones on their wedding day to symbolize hope for a son.

Although it borders two inland seas (the Caspian and Aral), Kazakhstan is landlocked, so as much freshwater as sea fish is consumed. Sturgeon, carp, and pike perch are particularly common, the former eaten for both its meat and its eggs—caviar. Sturgeon and carp are farmed, and in recent years programs have been put in place to try to repopulate the Aral Sea with Aral and Syr Darya sturgeon. As result of Russian and other northern European influence (especially German), salmon is eaten, and pickled fish in many forms is common, usually herring.

Milk from cows, mares, and camels is consumed in the form of milk, yogurt, cream, and cheeses, all of which may be fresh, soured, or fermented. In the countryside, beestings (the first milk after the birth of a calf), or *uyz*, are commonly consumed either boiled and drunk as a warm liquid or boiled, cooled, solidified, and eaten in slices. Fresh milk is usually drunk boiled and is sometimes added to black tea. Slightly fermented milk drinks are traditional, especially kumiss made from mare's milk, *shabat* from camel milk, and *airan* from cow milk. Slightly yogurty and sour, sometimes with a slight fizz, these drinks are refreshing and nourishing and a typical start to a meal or offering to a guest. Both kumiss and shabat are highly recommended for their health-giving properties, renowned for being good for the digestion and the liver, and even a cure for tuberculosis. Boiled soured milk from cows and mares is often strained and formed into small balls that are left to dry in the sun. The resulting *kurt* is eaten as a snack alone or with tea, or diluted in broth or porridge.

Fresh fruit in season is plentiful and prized. In summer, there is a profusion of raspberries and currants of every color, peaches, apricots, melons, and watermelons. Many of these are dried for use in winter, too, the local dried fruits being supplemented by a vast array of imported dried fruits from southern neighbors, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The sheer variety of differently prepared dried raisins, apricots, cherries, and plums from multiple fruit varieties make Kazakh markets a jeweler's shop of glowing color. Autumn is one of the more important fresh fruit seasons, for Kazakhstan is famous as the birthplace of the apple. Most apples eaten in the world today originate from its wild *Malus sieversii*, and the old capital, Almaty, is named for the apple—*Alma-ata* means "father of apples." Although many of the ancient orchards have been lost since independence, apples remain an important crop. Ranging from the highly scented and enormous Aport apple, which can be as large as a baby's head and will grow only on the land around Almaty, to the tiny wild crab apple, they are eaten fresh, dried, or made into brandy.

Alongside displays of dried fruits one finds an equally astonishing array of nuts, grown locally and imported. Almonds of every size, walnuts, cashews, pistachios, and even nutty little apricot kernels are sold in markets everywhere and served as snacks at home. A wide variety of honeys are also sold for consumption and for health. Unlike its Silk Road neighbors, however, Kazakhstan does not have a huge market in spices and herbs. In its markets, meat, dairy products, dried fruits and nuts, and fresh fruit and vegetables predominate. In summer, a profusion of the sweetest tomatoes are on sale; all year, onions, cabbage, seasonal greens, and fresh herbs, especially parsley and cilantro, are available. The influence of several immigrant communities can be found in the most commonly consumed salads: Russian beetroot salad and spicy Korean carrot salad.

With 70 percent of its agricultural land under cultivation, Kazakhstan is the sixth most important global wheat exporter, and wheat is grown in great

quantities for the internal markets as well as for export. Wheat flour is consumed as bread, pasta, or noodles and is the key ingredient in the casing for different types of dumplings and pies. Bread is an important staple food, and there are numerous local breads, many of them the round, flattish, leavened loaves called *non* or *nan* with a distinct raised edge and attractive center decorated with a stamped pattern. Despite the name, these breads are not the same as the flat, unleavened Indian *nan*. *Nan* may be plain (*taba nan*), or it can include some fried onions rolled into the outer rim, or have sesame or nigella seeds strewn on the surface, or have a little tail fat added. Highly decorated smaller versions of this loaf, called *damdy nan*, are often served in restaurants. This type of loaf may also be enriched with egg to make *salma nan*. Egg-enriched puffy fried breads, or *boursak*, are very popular, and these, too, may be either simply savory or sweetened with



Bread sellers in Shymkent, Kazakhstan.  
([Travel-images.com](http://Travel-images.com))

sugar (*yespe boursak*) or, for a more complex preparation, have curds added and be boiled before frying (*domalak boursak*). Many of the dumplings that Kazakhs love to eat are made with leavened dough: *Samsa* are stuffed with meat, rice, and onion, shaped into half-moons, and baked; *belyashes* are shaped into small rolls, stuffed with meat or fish and onion, and fried; and *cheburek* are made in rounds, stuffed with meat and onions with the edges pinched together, and fried. Russian dumplings, *perogi* or *pelmeniy*, are also popular. *Manti* are more Chinese in style, made with a thinner, unleavened, wheat-based dough and steamed. *Gutap* dough is also unleavened but enriched with butter, the filling is rich in egg and herbs, and the square fritters are deep-fried. Many of these may be served with a sour cream sauce.

Rice is another important starch grown in the country and the basis for one of the national dishes, *plov*.

**Plov**

This is a classic of Kazakh cuisine. Although it is clearly related to the typical rice dishes or pilafs common throughout Central Asia, plov has its own particular characteristics. Carrots are the main flavoring agent, and it rarely contains dried fruits (unheard of in most of its cousins). It is much less highly seasoned than other similar rice dishes from along the Silk Road. Typically, any meat can be used, though red meats are preferred. Lamb, including the fat from the tail, is the most common option, though some restaurants offer horse, and beef is popular with many families making it at home.

14 oz medium-grain white rice  
 2.2 lb lamb or beef, chopped into small cubes  
 3 tbsp sunflower or corn oil  
 2 pinches ground coriander  
 1 medium onion, peeled and sliced  
 2.2 lb carrots, cut into strips  
 2 tbsp ground mixed spices (cumin, coriander, cinnamon)  
 3½ c water  
 6 cloves garlic, peeled

Wash the rice until the water runs clear, and soak it in water. Heat the oil on high heat, and fry the lamb or beef until very well cooked, about 30 minutes, adding a couple pinches of ground coriander to reduce the smell of the meat. Add the onion, and fry for 2 minutes, then add the carrots and the spice mix. Fry for about 20 minutes until the carrots begin to caramelize. Turn down the heat to low, and add the water and a teaspoon of salt. Turn the heat to high, cover with a lid, and bring to a boil. Add the garlic and then the rice, which should be pushed gently under the surface of the liquid but not stirred. Replace the lid. Cook for 20 minutes, until the water is absorbed and the rice is cooked. Tip out onto a large dish, and serve with a tomato and onion salad.

Every meal ends with something sweet. Chocolate- or vanilla-flavored light sponge cakes, sandwiched together with jam, covered in sweetened cream, and brightly iced, are commonly bought at bakeries and served as desserts or with tea. Local factories produce a vast array of brightly wrapped boiled sweets in fruit, nut, and chocolate flavors. There is a thriving chocolate-making industry, and locals take rightful pride in the quality of the beautifully wrapped bars.

**Cooking**

Preparing Kazakh food is fairly labor-intensive. Although dishes tend to be composed of relatively few ingredients, meals are composed of multiple dishes, so a lot of chopping and mixing is required. In most households cooking is a female occupation, the responsibility of the senior woman in the house, aided by her daughters or daughters-in-law as required.

Middle-class Kazakh kitchens are somewhat simpler than Western kitchens. The room itself tends to be small, and the main piece of equipment is a domestic stove with an oven and surface burners (either electric or gas). The majority of cooking is done on the burners, and in many lower-middle-class households the oven is put to use as an additional storage area for pots and pans rather than as a means of cooking. Poorer households without these facilities continue to use the traditional dried-cow-dung fire. Some rural households have a clay oven in their backyard, used for baking bread and meats, but this type of oven is traditionally Uzbek, not Kazakh. The Kazakh "oven" is a more temporary affair made of two large, heavy metal pans of similar size, one used as a lid for the other, buried in the cow-dung fire. Grilling is done over charcoal outside.

Deep-frying and sautéing are done in large, deep frying pans; boiled dishes, especially meat-based stews, are made in large cast iron or steel saucepans, or *kazans*. Dumplings are steamed in large multilayered pans called *kaskans*. Narrow rolling pins or a large broom handle are used to roll out bread or pasta dough. Handleless china cups or soup bowls, called *pialas*, are used for measuring volumes of about 1 cup (200 grams) dry and 8.5 fluid ounces (250 milliliters) of liquid ingredients. Spices are

bought ready-ground, and often ready-mixed, from the market, so milling and crushing are not usually done at home.

### **Typical Meals**

Most Kazakhs in urban and rural areas eat three meals a day, the largest of which is dinner. All meals are accompanied by tea, either black or green. Black tea may have milk added.

Breakfast is usually eaten at home; it consists of tea and either bread with jam, honey, or cheese, plus hard-boiled or scrambled eggs, or a thin porridge with sweet toppings of jam or raisins. Some savory items are interchangeably consumed as either breakfast or lunch foods: breads stuffed with chopped eggs and greens or cabbage, or pancakes spread with a thin layer of minced lamb and rolled. Lunch is light and often eaten outside the home—perhaps manti or samsa, or soup (*sorpa*), or Korean-style salad bought from a street vendor or small restaurant. In many offices, people will bring in leftover food from home to eat at lunchtime.

Hospitality is a critical part of Kazakh life, and dinner tends to be an important time for this. The dining table in most homes is always set with two three-tiered plates of dried fruits, nuts, and sweets, ready for any guest who happens to visit. A typical meal for guests might start with savory boursak, little hollow doughnut-like fried puffed breads, and some salads—perhaps *sveyko nay*, made of grated beetroot and finely minced garlic; *mimosa*, or crab salad, made of chopped crab, hard-boiled eggs, rice, cucumbers, and sweet corn with a dill dressing; and a tomato and onion salad with garlic, this last one essential if plov, the Kazakh pilaf, is on the menu. Plov is traditionally made with horse or fat mutton, but many families prefer their plov made with beef. A soup of some kind, either fish or meat broth, will probably be served along with the meal. Every dish is placed on the table, and guests are exhorted to help themselves before the family begins eating. Mainly homemade up to this point, the meal may turn to purchased items for dessert. Along with tea with hot milk there will be a profusion of sweetmeats: dried fruits and nuts; fresh fruit (watermelon, raspberries, pomegranates, according to season); fruit jams, eaten by the teaspoonful; and cake, perhaps *midovi*, a honey cake with cream. Any cookies or chocolates brought by the guests will also be served.

### **Eating Out**

Kazakh cities have numerous restaurants, and eating out is a popular pastime, with large groups meeting for business or social entertainment. In the summer, many restaurants have large open-air seating areas with live music to encourage parties to stay and enjoy the hospitality—and order more food. Many restaurants offer typical foods of the region, in particular Kazakh, Uzbek, or Georgian dishes. Although some of these restaurants specialize in a particular cuisine, many of them offer a broader range of dishes from the region.

Other Asian restaurants are also popular, especially Korean and Chinese, and there are a few Indian and Thai restaurants in the major cities. In many cases local ingredients are used to prepare classic dishes on these menus. The meat wrapped and steamed in a banana leaf in a Kazakh Thai restaurant is as likely to be horse meat as chicken.

Snacking is extremely popular, and many of the local foods lend themselves to the quick street-food treatment. Several of the favorite meat and vegetable dumplings, in particular manti and samsa, are readily available in markets, on the street, and in small, fast restaurants that let you drop in for a quick bite. One is also never too far from an open-air grill that has been wheeled into position in a park or on a street corner and is loaded with shashlyk, which are then served with bread, sliced onion and tomato, and a spicy sauce. Typical Western fast food is also available, and the local McBurger chain is a popular choice, but local foods seem to remain the preferred option for most snacking outside the home.

### **Special Occasions**

The traditional Kazakh feast is known as the *dastarkhan*, which is literally the word for the tablecloth on which food would be laid out but is better translated here as a festive table. The dastarkhan

is an expression of the importance of sharing generous hospitality with family, friends, and guests. Based on the nomadic tradition of the early Kazakh peoples, it has sheep as its centerpiece. Before the feast begins, the table is decorated with the snacks always laid out on a Kazakh table: dried fruits, nuts, and sweets. Guests are offered kumiss, fermented mare's milk; shabat, fermented camel milk; or airan, liquid yogurt, to drink. The small, puffy fried breads called boursak are served. The rest of the meal is focused on the meat, starting with the sheep's head. Traditionally this is presented to the most senior person at the table, who carves it and serves the other guests according to their status. Older people and children are taken particular care of—the children usually get the ears. *Beshbarmek* follows. This is a dish of boiled meat, in this case mutton or lamb, served in whole pieces on the bone on a dish of broad noodles and stewed onions. The meat is again served to the guests according to the most suitable part for them (pelvic bone or leg for elderly guests of honor, the cervical vertebrae to the girls), and each person has a soup bowl of the broth that the meat and pasta were cooked in, known as sorpa, which is served in small soup bowls called pialas. Black or green tea is served.

Nauryz, the spring equinox at the end of March, is another important celebration, whether marked at home in the city or back in the family village. Of course, the sharing of food plays a

### ***Beshbarmek***

This dish is simple and filling. With the use of good ingredients and a healthy appetite, it is quite delicious. The same recipe can be used with any red meat: horse, beef, or mutton, depending on availability and preference. Horse will produce the leanest result, mutton the fattiest. Many families and restaurants prefer it made with mutton.

1 large, fat piece of mutton on the bone (approximately 4 lb)  
 4 onions  
 Salt  
 Pepper (optional)  
 1 egg  
 1 c water  
 4½ c white flour

Place the meat, a little salt, and one peeled whole onion in a large saucepan, cover with water, bring to a boil, and simmer until cooked—approximately 2 hours—frequently skimming off any scum that rises to the surface.

About an hour into the cooking of the meat, slice the remaining 3 onions thinly. Skim some fat and bouillon from the meat pan, and place into a smaller saucepan. Add the sliced onions, bring to a boil, and simmer gently until the onions are soft but not disintegrating. Season with salt and a little pepper if desired.

Now make the pasta. Beat together the egg and water with 1½ pinches salt in a large bowl. Gradually add the flour, and mix together with your hands, kneading firmly and scraping the dough from the sides of the bowl as you go. Keep adding flour and kneading until the mixture doesn't stick to the sides of the bowl any more—approximately 4–5 minutes. Tip out onto a large, clean work surface, and roll and knead it hard into a springy ball. Return to the bowl, cover, and let rest for 15 minutes. Flour the work surface. Cut the dough into 4 pieces, sprinkle each piece liberally with flour, and knead each for about a minute. Form 4 neat balls, pressing each one flat and allowing it to bounce up again. Then, take one ball at a time and press it flat with the knuckles, turning over and over in flour, and finally roll out through the lasagna setting of a pasta machine. Cut the pieces into long rectangles. Remove the cooked meat from the pan, and boil the pasta pieces in the broth until cooked, approximately 4 minutes.

To serve, place a generous layer of boiled sliced onions on a large dish. Cover with the pasta and then the rest of the onions. Place the meat on top, and take the dish to the table where the guests can help themselves. The broth should be served alongside in individual soup bowls, and the entire dish is eaten with a spoon.

crucial role.

Traditionally, every household makes its *nauryz koje*, a thin, savory porridge made with seven ingredients: ground wheat, water, tail fat and the pelvic bone from a sheep, pieces of kazy (horse-meat sausage), garlic, and salt. Neighbors invite one another to their houses to taste some. It's also a time for sweets: *tary/tara*, or dried wheat fried in tail fat with honey and served with hot milk, and *chak-chak*, a kind of extra-small boursak drenched in honey and sugar that has been boiled to the hard ball stage, perhaps decorated with walnuts or raisins.

Islam has influenced the traditional feasts of the Uighur and Dungan communities (groups of Turkic and Chinese origin). Shek Beru is held just before Ramadan; traditionally, a sheep is slaughtered and shared with neighbors, with a particular focus on sharing with the elderly and the poor. After the fast, Oaza Ait is a period of feasting and celebration in which traditionally one would visit 40 houses to taste food and share hospitality over a period of about three days. On the day of Oaza Ait itself, children visit the mosque to eat a special fat pancake called *kokidi* that is prepared for them.

To mark a year since a significant death, for example, that of a parent, many families will follow the old Kazakh tradition of *as beru*, a special meal to celebrate the person's life and the end of mourning. In many families the meal must include boursak, as the smell of the frying as the breads puff up in the hot oil is supposed to reach the spirit in heaven.

### **Diet and Health**

As in other former Soviet states, life expectancy in Kazakhstan improved during President Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign of the mid-1980s; fell sharply beginning in 1992; and then began to improve again after 1997. Compared to other newly independent states, its infant and maternal mortality rates remain relatively high, as are its rates for cancer (especially lung cancer, in line with rising tobacco use) and infectious and parasitic diseases such as tuberculosis and hepatitis. The rate of cardiovascular disease in Kazakhstan is higher than in the rest of the region, due to the high rate of consumption of saturated fatty acids and salt. Male life expectancy, at 59 years, is 11 years lower than that for females.

In common with other Central Asian countries, the core thinking on diet and health is based on the Galenic humoral theories popularized in the region by ibn Sina's *Canon of Medicine* in the 11th century. Many Kazakh dietary beliefs continue to center on helping to digest the large amounts of saturated fat in the diet. Green tea, sweets, fresh herbs, and fruit all help with the digestion of protein. Green tea also provides valuable antioxidants and vitamins that are helpful in balancing the animal-product-heavy diet. Nonetheless, vitamins A and C are found to be lacking in many people's diets.

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### **Further Reading**

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