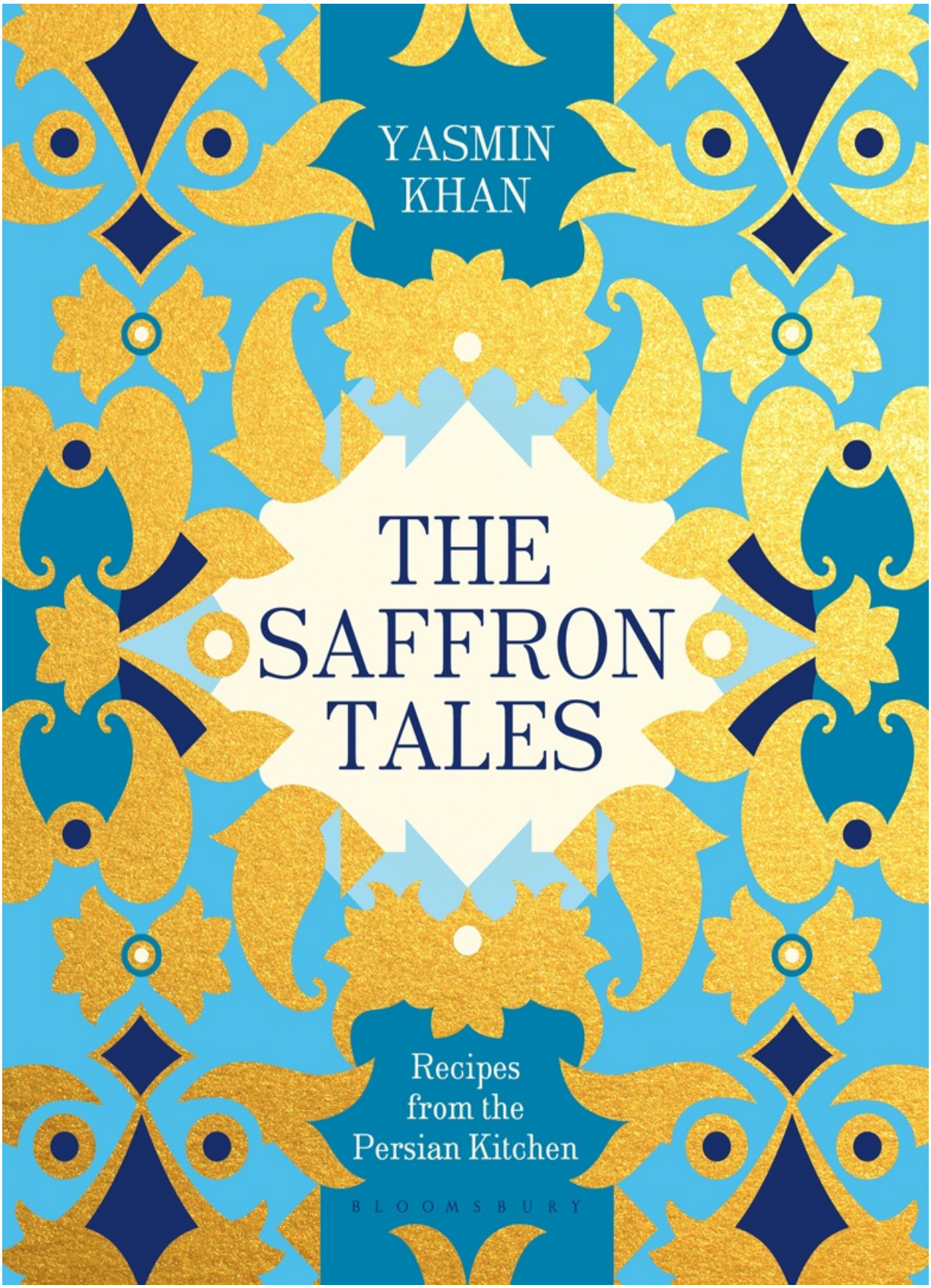
YASMIN KHAN

THE SAFFRON TALES

Recipes from the Persian Kitchen

BLOOMSBURY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Photography by SHAHRZAD DARAFSHEH *and* MATT RUSSELL

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • OXFORD • NEW YORK • NEW DELHI • SYDNEY

For Pedar Bozorg, my grandfather,
who taught me how to eat.

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DESSERTS


RUSSIA
KAZAKHSTAN
UZBEKISTAN
GEORGIA
CASPIAN SEA
ARMENIA
AZERBAIJAN
TURKMENISTAN
Tabriz
Rasht
Mashhad
Tehran
Qom
Kermanshah
IRAN
AFGHANISTAN
Isfahan
IRAQ
Ahvaz
Kerman
KUWAIT
Shiraz
PERSIAN GULF
Bandar Abbas
SAUDI ARABIA
QATAR
UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
OMAN

BEFORE WE BEGIN, I'd like to address a sometimes perplexing question: Iran or Persia? Persia was the name given to Iran by the Ancient Greeks several thousand years ago. Since that time, the West has used the term to describe the empire and the country whose inhabitants were called Persians and who spoke the Persian language. However, people inside the country have always referred to it as Iran, a place where Iranians live, who speak their native language, Farsi.

This all changed in 1935 when the Iranian government requested that all foreign embassies refer to their country as Iran.

To Iranians, the name Iran is inseparable from their country's rich and ancient cultural traditions, which gave rise to one of the world's most influential civilisations – pioneering advances in astronomy, science and medicine, as well as exquisite art, beautiful carpets and architectural prowess. For most non-Iranians, however, 'Iran' has no such cultural connotations and these days is more commonly associated with the country's recent political history. Because of this, some Iranians prefer to refer to their country as Persia when talking to non-Iranians, particularly when they are discussing something cultural, such as food. I use the words Iranian and Persian interchangeably in this book.

Introduction

When I was little and living in Iran, I used to sob my heart out each morning as my mother got ready to leave for work. Clinging to her legs, I would beg her not to go, and, to appease me, Mum would explain that she needed to go to work to earn money so she could buy me some pomegranates. I practically pushed her out the door when I heard this.

My obsession with pomegranates started early, nurtured by visits to my grandparents' farm where I could pick the fruit fresh from the trees. I had a knack for vigorously rubbing the leathered skins of the fruit between my hands, listening to its ruby seeds quietly pop and crunch beneath my fingers, until the pomegranate was soft and pulpy enough for me to tear a hole in one end and squeeze its scarlet juices into my mouth. I don't even want to think about the number of outfits I ruined over the years by being too hasty or clumsy in my efforts.

I was born in Croydon, south London, but my mother's side of the family comes from the sub-tropical shores of the Caspian Sea in northern Iran. Growing up in 1980s Britain, I was always acutely aware of the gulf that existed between the Iran I knew and loved and the Iran depicted on the news. As I got older, this gulf turned into a chasm and my frequent trips to Iran to visit my maternal family were greeted with surprise and intrigue from friends and colleagues alike. With raised eyebrows, people would ask probing questions, fascinated to know how an independent Western woman such as myself could take so much pleasure in visiting a country fraught with controversy and turbulence.

My answer was simple. I loved the exuberance, warm-heartedness and affection of the Iranian people; I loved the dramatic mountains and dazzling scenery of Iran's landscapes; and I loved the garlic and herb infused food that harmonised sweet and sour flavours so perfectly.

Shortly after I was born, my grandparents moved to a small piece of land

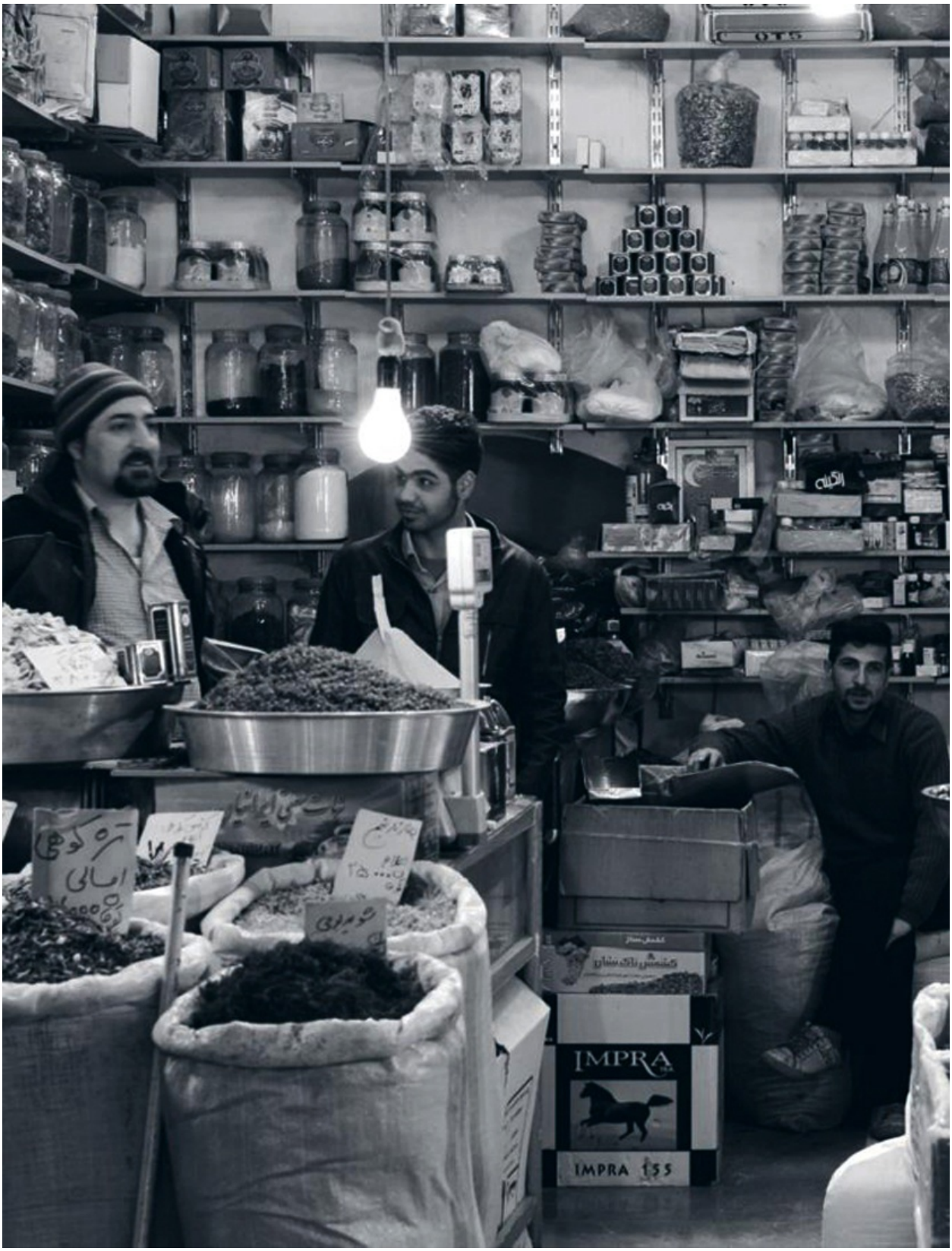
outside Astaneh-e Ashrafieh, a small town in the Gilan province of Iran, and began working the land, growing rice and vegetables for sale in the local markets. They grew pumpkins, squash, aubergines, tomatoes, potatoes, peppers, chillies, garlic, spinach, half a dozen different varieties of beans and countless fresh green herbs, as well as apples, oranges, quinces, blackberries, strawberries, watermelons, cantaloupe, kiwis, greengages, persimmons and loquat. Needless to say, no one ever went hungry at our house.

I remember sitting with my grandmother, cross-legged on the kitchen floor, making jar upon jar of pickled garlic, and being sternly lectured by my uncle, also a rice farmer, on how important it was to cook rice properly so that all the grains stayed separate. But it was my grandfather, Ahmad Rabiee, who really nurtured my love of good food. *Pedar Bozorg* (which means grandfather in Farsi) was the kind of man who would drive for several hours just to buy a kilo of his favourite oranges when they were in season, or embark on solo hikes through the mountainous terrain of Gilan's forests to source pots of his favourite organic honey. One time he poked me and my cousins awake with his walking stick at 6am to share a basket of figs he'd just picked from the tree in the front garden. And we knew if we weren't up and at the table by 6.05am, he'd have eaten the lot.

The inspiration behind this book came from my desire to share the Iran I know and love. Armed with little more than a notepad and a bottle of pomegranate molasses, I traversed more than 3000 kilometres of the country's rugged landscapes searching for recipes and stories that captured modern Iranian life.

I travelled from the snowy mountains of Tabriz to the cosmopolitan cafés of Tehran, via the rice paddies of the Caspian Sea and the majestic deserts of central Iran, ending up at the tropical fishing ports of the Persian Gulf. On my journey I visited saffron farms and pomegranate orchards, artisan chocolatiers and ancient tea houses, cooking and eating with farmers, artists, electricians and school teachers. As we ate together, the people I met shared the stories behind the food they love and the country they call home, and it is their stories that are interwoven with the recipes in this book.

Some of the recipes are for dishes that have been cooked the same way for thousands of years, others are modern interpretations of Iranian classics, and others still take inspiration from Persian ingredients. Many reflect my personal preference for moving towards vegetarian and plant-based food. At the heart of all of the recipes though is a common thread: a celebration of a side of Iran that never makes the headlines but that is central to its story – its amazing food.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A taste of Iran

Persian cuisine weaves together a myriad of delicate spices and elegant flavours gathered from Iran's position at the heart of the old Silk Road.

Those unfamiliar with the food often come to the *sofreh* (the patterned tablecloth on which dishes are served) expecting spicy, fiery flavours, perhaps more befitting the country's climate and politics, and are often surprised to find that the cuisine is gentle and soothing – a poetic balance of subtle flavours such as dried limes, saffron and orange blossom.

Slow-cooked stews known as *khoresht* and elaborate rice dishes layered with herbs, vegetables, legumes, meat, nuts and fruit are the bedrocks of Persian cuisine, creating a dazzling mosaic of scents, textures and colours at the dining *sofreh*. There are innumerable different types of *khoresht*, with regional and seasonal specialities, but each will be sure to have a sour and sweet balance – Iran's most dominant taste.

Outside the home, kebabs are king and on every street corner you will find succulent cuts of meat or fish, often marinated with yoghurt and spices, threaded onto skewers and barbecued over hot coals. Kebabs are served sprinkled with sumac (a tart red spice made from the dried berries of the sumac bush) and are either piled high on white rice or tucked into large flatbreads, and are always accompanied by some grilled tomatoes, fresh herbs and crunchy pickles.

Iranians adore fresh fruit, which accompanies breakfast, lunch and dinner, and those in-between times when you might want to take a break from eating. The moment you walk into an Iranian's house you will be presented with tea, sweets and a large platter of assorted fruit, and failure to eat at least three different varieties risks causing serious offence to your host. The country's fertile soil and diverse climate nurtures peaches, apricots, grapes, persimmons, melons, kiwis, figs, cherries, quinces and, of course, the mighty pomegranate – Iran's

national fruit, shrouded in mythology and celebrated through the ages in Persian art and poetry.

Using fruit to flavour savoury dishes is another defining feature of Persian food. Pomegranates, plums, greengages, sour cherries and apricots are salted, dried and pounded into flat fruit leathers or cooked down into pastes or molasses to be added to savoury dishes such as *khoresht* and soups. When no one is looking, I've been known to sneak a teaspoon of homemade pomegranate molasses from my grandmother's fridge, relishing its pucker-your-lips sharpness. Lemon juice, pomegranate molasses and verjuice are all used to sharpen dishes, along with the bitter and piquant juice of Seville oranges (*narenj*).

Iran is a vast country and the regional differences are striking, not only in culture, language and climate but also in cuisine. Depending on which part of the country you are in, the dishes that are found on the *sofreh* will vary. Meatballs stuffed with prunes and walnuts might feature in the Turkish-influenced north-east of the country. Garlicky aubergine dips might appear by the Caspian Sea. Sweet rice dishes, layered with fruit and nuts, abound in central Iran; with perhaps some spicy fried squid in the south. In each region, the *sofreh* celebrates the best local and seasonal produce, in dishes that have been perfected over centuries to suit the local climate – but there are also some nationwide commonalities.




Eating the Persian way

Traditionally the main meal of the day is eaten at lunchtime and is often a

leisurely affair, followed by a short siesta. (Well, it is hot.) The *sofreh* is likely to hold a couple of larger dishes – a stew, a rice dish or a kebab – alongside smaller plates of salads, yoghurts, pickles and platters of fresh herbs, and diners help themselves to as little or as much as they like. Meals are eaten with a fork and spoon (perfect for scooping up those mounds of steamed rice) and washed down with water, juice or *doogh*, a cool and refreshing savoury drink made with yoghurt and mint.

Dinner is often more casual: perhaps some bread, cheese and herbs or simply a glass of warm milk. One of my grandfather's cherished sayings was 'Eat breakfast on your own, share your lunch with your friends and give your dinner to your enemies.' This proverb encourages us to take time to quietly savour breakfast and contemplate the day ahead, take joy in our lunch and use it as a time to connect with our loved ones, and to eat lightly at night, a time when our digestive fire is at its weakest and the body is beginning to wind down for the day – a practice that is now advocated by most nutritionists.

Modernity is certainly inescapable in Iran today. It is an incredibly young country, with two thirds of the population aged under 35. This new generation of Iranians has enthusiastically embraced fast food; hamburgers, fries and pizza are ubiquitous throughout the country. At the same time, just as in many Western countries, vegetarianism is gaining in popularity amongst Iran's middle class youth, as the social, environmental and health implications of eating too much meat become a wider cause for concern.

Young Iranians are developing their own contemporary food culture, creatively fusing the ingredients and cooking styles of Persian and Western food. This merging of the old and the new is one of the defining features of contemporary Iranian cooking, and many of the recipes in this book reflect this, offering a selection of ancient dishes from the Persian *sofreh*, reinterpreted for the modern kitchen.

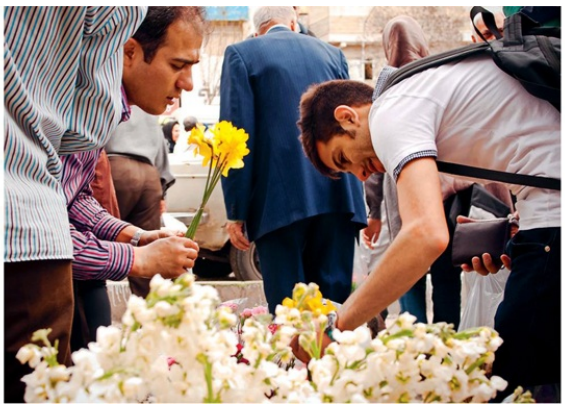



Food to feed a crowd

As with many cultures, food plays an important role in social customs and traditions in Iran. At the heart of this is the concept of sharing food, which is central to the Iranian approach to eating. An Iranian would never simply reach into the fruit bowl and take a bite of an apple; instead, they would cut the apple into slices and offer it around the whole group, even if that meant there was only one slice left for them at the end. If that happened, they would simply start again with another apple from the bowl. Sometimes when I've been travelling on my own on a bus or a plane in Iran, people sitting nearby have offered me fruit and nuts, or some of their lunch – anything they have. Even if you have very little, it is important to share what you can, wherever you are eating, and this is one of the nation's most charming traditions.

The communal spirit cultivated through food is found in other areas of Iranian life too. On the anniversary of the death of a loved one it is customary to make vast pots of a certain dish, perhaps a soup, or a sweet saffron and cinnamon rice pudding known as *sholehzard*, and deliver portions to all of your neighbours as *nasri* (a religious and symbolic food offering).






Festive feasts

Food symbolism also features heavily at Iran's main cultural festival, *Nowruz*, the Iranian New Year. *Nowruz* is an ancient Zoroastrian celebration that marks the beginning of the Persian calendar and coincides with the spring equinox, which in the Western calendar falls on either the 20th or 21st March. Zoroastrianism is the 2500-year-old religion of Iran, steeped in mythology and symbolism associated with the element of fire. It is believed to be one of the world's first monotheistic religions, and many of its beliefs and practices are deeply connected to nature, astronomy and the seasons.

The weeks before *Nowruz* are all about purification rituals as the whole nation embarks on a massive spring clean, decluttering their houses and cleaning them from top to bottom. Outside of the home, a pre-*Nowruz* frenzy hits the stores and markets, which are packed from early March with people buying new goods for the New Year.

On *Char Shambe Soori*, the last Tuesday before the festival, small bonfires are lit in people's gardens or on the street. It is customary to gather with your family and jump over the flames, repeating ancient adages to cleanse yourself of any misfortune and impurities from the year before and prepare yourself for the year ahead. Symbolically, the fire takes away your yellow pallor (sickness) and feeds you its fiery red power, giving you vitality and strength for the New Year.

At the exact astronomical moment of the equinox, families gather in front of

an auspicious, beautifully decorated *Nowruz* altar to see in the New Year together. This altar will always have seven symbolic objects on it, each beginning with the letter 'S' in Farsi, representing wishes for prosperity for the year ahead.

Objects placed on the altar vary from house to house, but typically include sprouting wheatgrass symbolising rebirth and renewal, painted eggs symbolising fertility and creativity, candles representing life and luck, a mirror symbolising the field of possibilities, apples representing health, garlic representing medicine, vinegar representing age and wisdom, a gold coin representing wealth, and hyacinths representing beauty. A goldfish in a bowl is always placed on the altar, symbolising life within life. And often the collected works of Iran's most celebrated poet, Hafez, whose work is considered to be of divine provenance, will also be on the *haft-seen* altar or, alternatively, a copy of the Quran.

Fresh herbs and greens are incorporated into many *Nowruz* dishes as they are said to symbolise rebirth and new life. The first meal of the year is *Sabzi polo baa mahi*: a mixed herb and rice dish served with fried fish (the Iranian equivalent of turkey with all the trimmings at Christmas); smaller dishes such as *Kuku-ye sabzi*, a fragrant mixed herb frittata, are popular too.

Nowruz celebrations go on for two weeks, during which time all schools and workplaces are closed as people visit friends and family, often with boxes of sweets and pastries in hand, to wish them a Happy New Year. At the culmination of the festivities, the whole country embarks on a national picnic at their local riverbank. The wheatgrass that people have been growing on their *Nowruz* altar is taken outside and they make a wish by tying knots in it. The wheatgrass is then thrown into the water and they watch it run downstream, where it will slowly merge back into the ecosystem, along with their hopes and dreams for the year ahead.

Ancient Zoroastrian teachings dominate modern Iranian culture in other ways too. The winter solstice is another significant festival in the Iranian calendar and traditionally involves Iranians staying up late into the night to commemorate the longest night of the year, feasting on red fruits such as pomegranates and watermelon, which symbolise the crimson hues of the winter sun at dawn.

The reading of poetry from Iran's most celebrated poets, such as Hafez, Khayam, Rumi and Ferdowsi, is an essential part of the night's festivities, and many long hours are whiled away reciting poetry and nibbling on *Ajil*, a colourful mix of roasted nuts, such as pistachios, almonds and cashews, with dried apricots, figs and mulberries.

To this day, my parents throw *Shab-e Yalda* parties for 30 or so of their close friends, playing games that grow increasingly raucous as the night goes on. They begin the evening with high-brow Persian literature and by the early hours of the morning have descended into singing 1970s Iranian pop songs, punctuating their feasting and drinking with dancing to the rhythmic beats of hand-held *tonbak* drums.




Eating for health

Zoroastrian teachings have also had a profound effect on Iranian eating habits through their role in the development of Iran's system of traditional medicine, known as *Tebb-e Sonnati*.

Similar to Ayurveda in India and traditional Chinese medicine, *Tebb-e Sonnati* views illness as a sign that different elements within the body are out of balance and sees food and diet as important tools for bringing the body back into a state of balance and health.

Tebb-e Sonnati is a highly complex medical system whose principles are still used in everyday Iranian life. At its most basic, it categorises food as 'hot' or 'cold'. This has nothing to do with the actual temperature of a dish, but rather

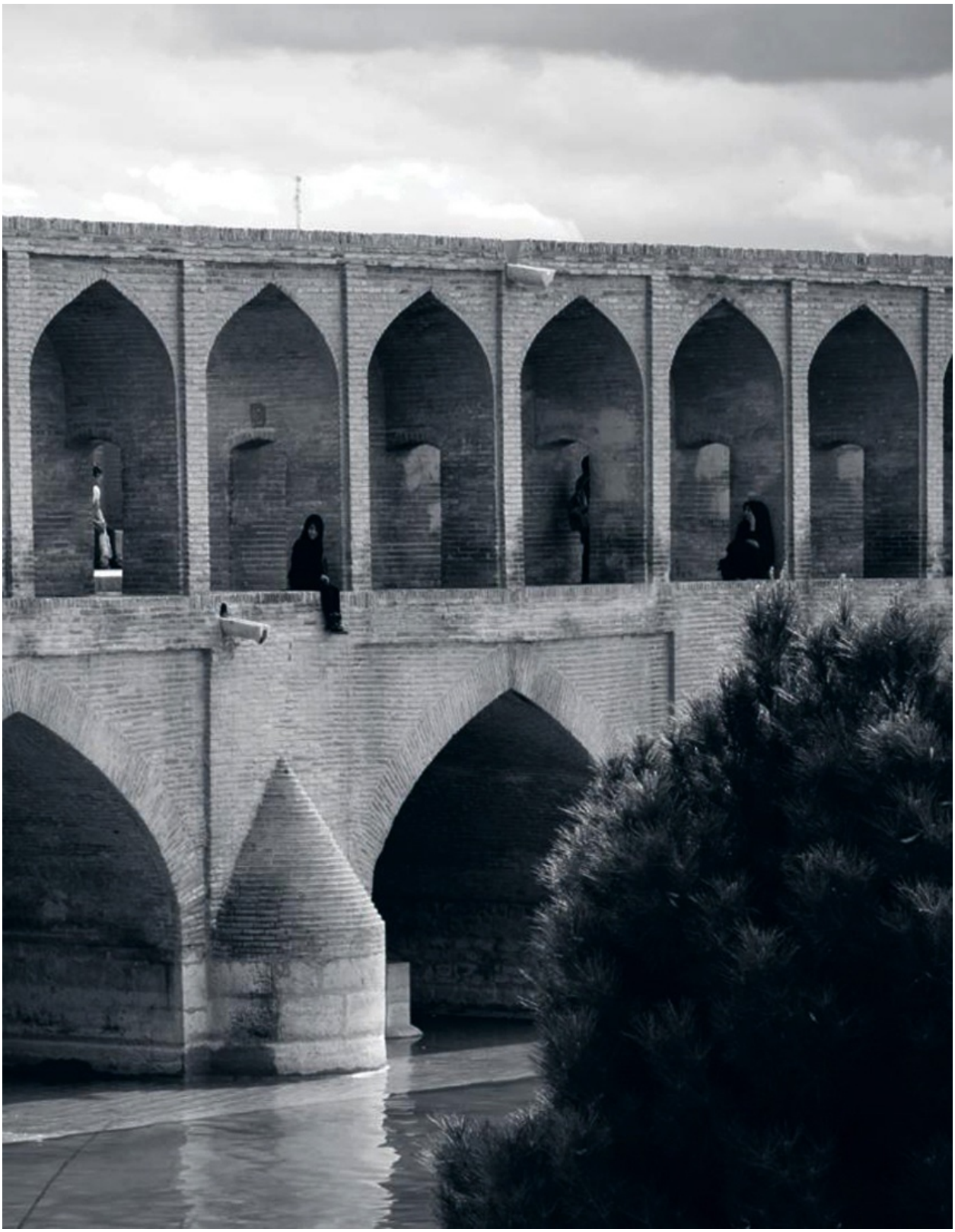
its energetic quality and the effect it has on your body when it is eaten. Every Iranian has an inbuilt encyclopaedic knowledge of which foods are hot or cold, a body of knowledge largely passed on by oral tradition. When considering what to eat, an Iranian will think about which food combinations go well together, as well as what is good for their particular constitution and which foods to avoid in particular seasons or for particular ailments.

Almost all traditional Iranian recipes are based around these principles. Take *Fesenjoon*, one of the country's most popular meals: chicken poached in a sauce of ground walnuts and pomegranate molasses. Since walnuts are classified as a 'hot' food, they are paired with pomegranate molasses, which is a 'cold' food, in order to bring balance to the dish, and one's own body.

Traditional *Attari* shops can be found in most neighbourhoods across Iran. These sell herbs, tinctures and *arak* (distilled plant essences) and offer specific advice for physical ailments or one's personal constitution based on *Tebb-e Sonnati*'s principles. With the revival of interest in plant-based natural medicines in recent years, they have become increasingly popular.

A final note

Like many cultures around the world, Iranians welcome people to the dining *sofreh* with a blessing, our equivalent of *bon appétit*, if you will. We offer this blessing to each other when we begin and end meals, and your fellow diners will repeat it to you if you seem to be enjoying a particularly tasty meal. The phrase is *Noosh-e jan* and literally translated it means 'Let your soul be nourished by what you are eating.' As you journey through the tapestry of recipes in this cookbook, I wish you nothing less.




Pickled Cucumb
Urum Ada
Anjoman
Anjoman Dates
گلپر
Garden angelica

The Persian store cupboard

In 1987, my grandfather visited the UK for the first time, a five-week trip that was also his first adventure abroad. Along with woolly jumpers and presents for me and my newborn sister, he brought with him a five-kilo bag of rice, all the way from his small town in northern Iran, as he was worried that the quality of rice over here would be inferior. And that, of course, would be a disaster. Fortunately, these days a rice-toting grandfather is not essential when cooking classic Iranian food. Most of my Persian store-cupboard essentials can be bought in larger supermarkets, and the rest can be found at Middle Eastern, Turkish or Indian grocery stores. You can also order many of these ingredients online.

Barberries

Barberries are small, red, dried berries. As they are very sharp and sour, Iranians sauté them with a little sugar and butter before adding them to dishes, where they glisten like little rubies adorning your meal.

Bread

Traditionally made in a large clay oven known as a *tanoor*, yeasted or unleavened flatbreads are eaten alongside most meals in Iran. You can find breads such as *barbari*, *sangak*, *lavaash* or *taftoon* in speciality Iranian stores, but if they are not available then simply do as most Iranians in the diaspora do and use pitta breads, wheat tortillas, Indian naan breads or thick Turkish flatbreads to eat alongside Persian meals.

Date molasses

This dark, sticky sauce (sometimes labelled date syrup) is an incredibly versatile natural sweetener. It has a rich, treacly flavour and is useful if you want to reduce your intake of refined sugar without compromising on flavour. You can buy date molasses in any health food shop and many larger supermarkets.

Dates

Iranian dates are small, black and so soft that they practically melt in your mouth, with a unique fudgy flavour. If you can, do check the inside of the box before buying to make sure they are fresh and soft, then keep them in the fridge so they don't dry out too quickly. If you can't find Iranian dates then I recommend using Medjool dates as they have a similar (if not quite as intense) flavour.

Dried limes

Earthy, slightly bitter and mildly sour, dried limes are a quintessential Iranian flavouring and are central to a number of Iran's most popular stews. To cook with them, first pierce their hard shell with a fork a few times and then add whole to soups or stews so that they can rehydrate in the cooking sauces. Just before serving, squash the limes against the side of your pot until they burst and all their juices flow into the dish. You can also grind dried limes to a fine powder in a spice grinder, for use as a seasoning, but just be aware that they can lose their intense flavour very quickly when ground, so use them sooner rather than later.

Fenugreek

Fenugreek leaf – sometimes labelled *methi* (its Indian name) – has a slightly bitter, curry-like taste. If you are new to it, add it in small pinches until the flavour is to your taste. It has an altogether different flavour from fenugreek seeds.

Golpar

Sometimes labelled 'ground angelica', *golpar* is the Persian name for the ground seeds of the native *Heracleum persicum* plant, and it is used extensively in Iranian cooking. It is my favourite Iranian spice and its deeply aromatic, bitter, musky and citrussy aroma gives many Persian dishes their distinctive flavour. As well as being added to soups, stews and pickles, *golpar* is used to temper any sour fruit. It is commonly sprinkled on sour cherries, kiwis or pomegranates (along with a

pinch of salt) as it has the ability to accentuate a fruit's natural flavour. *Golpar* is probably the only spice in this book that you can only find in a specialist Iranian store or online, but I highly recommend trying to track it down and experimenting with it in your kitchen.

Ground rice

Ground rice is commonly used as a thickening agent, or to make pudding-like desserts, and you can find it in most Indian or Middle Eastern stores. This shouldn't be confused with rice flour, which has a completely different texture and is primarily used for baking.

Herbs

The abundant use of herbs is one of Persian cuisine's defining features, and a typical Iranian kitchen will have an assortment of jars of dried mint, dill, coriander, parsley, oregano and fenugreek leaf in the store cupboard, and bunches of fresh basil, parsley, coriander, chives, mint, tarragon and dill in the fridge.

Fresh herbs are often dry fried, to evaporate some of their moisture and intensify their flavour. Because I don't always have access to large amounts of fresh herbs, I tend to stock up on dried herbs so that I can mix them half and half with fresh ones whilst cooking.

Indian and Asian stores are the best places to stock up on fresh and dry herbs affordably or you could try growing them at home on a window sill or in your garden.

Kashk

This pungent Iranian seasoning is made from fermented whey and has a deeply umami flavour. *Kashk* can come in liquid or dried form, which you then reconstitute with water. It has the taste of a strong goat's cheese and is used, very sparingly, as a topping for soups or alongside some dips. You can find it in Middle Eastern stores or you can use sour cream with a sprinkling of Parmesan as a substitute.

Nuts

Persians love to eat nuts plain, roasted with saffron, lemon and salt, or ground down and cooked into stews, soups and desserts. Almonds, walnuts and pistachios feature in both sweet and savoury dishes, bringing with them a fantastic richness, texture and elegance.

The most important thing to remember when storing nuts is that they deteriorate when they get old and walnuts in particular can turn quite bitter, so buy them in small batches, store in airtight containers and always taste them before using them for cooking.

Orange blossom water

This is a highly aromatic floral water made from the flowers of the Seville orange. It can vary in intensity, so use sparingly and add a little at a time until you get the balance of flavour you are comfortable with.

Pickles

Small bowls of Iranian pickles – known as *torshi* – are served with almost every meal in Iran and can range from whole bulbs of sweet and sour garlic (aged for up to 7 years), to small, salty, cucumber pickles or aromatic concoctions of spiced and diced vegetables such as aubergine, cauliflower and cabbage. Iranian pickles are characteristically very crunchy and sour, offering a refreshing textural contrast to tender kebabs, soothing stews and pillowy rice dishes. They are available in Middle Eastern stores or can be ordered online.

Pomegranate molasses

This is my favourite ingredient, which I add to stews, soups and salad dressings, and dribble on ice cream. It is a thick, sticky syrup made from cooked-down, fresh pomegranate juice, and is frequently used to marinate lamb and chicken dishes in northern Iran.

As the sweetness of each batch of pomegranates will differ, it is rare to find two bottles that are exactly the same, and brands vary considerably too, so it is worth shopping around to find the one that tickles your taste buds. I like a good

bit of sharpness to my molasses so always opt for Iranian brands, which tend to be quite thick. As a rule of thumb, I find Turkish varieties almost always have added sugar, which makes them quite sweet, while Arabic brands tend to be lighter in consistency, and so are better for salad dressings.

Rice

Long-grain white rice is the prized grain of Iranian cuisine, and many Iranians don't consider themselves to have eaten a proper meal without it. I use good-quality basmati rice when I cook Iranian food because its ivory grains elongate and separate perfectly as they cook.

When it comes to making *tahdig*, the buttery, crispy rice crust that Iranians prize so highly, you will need to use a non-stick pan with a snug-fitting lid. As there are health concerns surrounding the use of non-stick pans, I recommend seeking out brands such as GreenPan, with a non-toxic coating. That said, most Iranians use rice cookers for their daily meals, as they are a quick, easy and foolproof way to prepare rice. These are readily available online, and if you eat rice a few times a week, it is worth investing in one. Look for an Iranian rice cooker, rather than a generic Asian brand, as it will have a special feature that enables you to make *tahdig*.

Rose water

Rose water is made by simmering rose petals in barrels of water and collecting and condensing the rising steam. It has been produced in Iran for over 2000 years and today is used not only in cooking but also therapeutically as a remedy for any number of ailments, from insect bites to headaches. As the strength varies, it is best to err on the side of caution when adding rose water to recipes as just a little bit too much of it can leave a chalky taste in your mouth. Use less rather than more until you are confident it won't be overwhelming.

Saffron

Iran is one of the largest saffron producers in the world, and there is no scent more evocative of the Iranian kitchen than saffron's sweet, earthy aroma.

Iranians use saffron in a very specific way: the strands are first ground into a fine powder and then soaked in hot water, producing a highly potent, scarlet elixir that can transform a dish with just a few drops. Try to buy good-quality Iranian saffron, available in Middle Eastern stores or online, as its flavour, aroma and colour are unmatched.

Sour cherries

Sour cherries are very popular in Iran, where they are eaten fresh or made into juice, jam, fruit tarts and even layered into rice dishes. Whilst you can sometimes find whole frozen sour cherries, or even very tart Iranian ones that need rehydrating in water in some Middle Eastern stores, for the recipes in this book I recommend using the packets of dried sour cherries (sometimes labelled Morello cherries) that are sold in larger supermarkets or health food shops, and are often lightly sweetened with fruit juice.

Sumac

This tangy, lemony spice is made from the dried and ground berry of the sumac bush and provides a fantastic acidic kick to any dish. In Iran it is always served alongside fish, chicken or lamb kebabs, but I also love it as a final flourish on a salad to add a dash of colour or an extra bit of zing.

Tamarind

Tamarind is a chewy sweet-and-sour fruit that is very popular in southern Iranian cooking, where its pulp is added to stews and soups, giving a characteristically tart flavour. I like to buy blocks of tamarind pulp to use in my cooking. You need to first soak it in hot water to soften it and then run the pulp through a sieve to remove the stones. Tamarind paste is also widely available and can be used in any of the recipes that follow, but do be aware that the pastes are often preserved with salt, sugar or other additives which will affect the taste of your final dish, so you may have to adjust the seasoning.

Yoghurt

As well as being an excellent digestive aid, yoghurt adds a welcome cooling

element according to *Tebb-e Sonnati* (Iran's traditional medicine system; see Eating for health) and is essential to counterbalance the richness of some Iranian stews. It is served with every meal in Iran, either in its natural state or mixed with vegetables for a more substantial side dish. Keep a big pot of natural yoghurt in the fridge and use it liberally alongside any Iranian dishes – it has a particular affinity with the rice-based ones.

Saffron

USING THE RECIPES IN THIS BOOK

Cooking in Iran rarely involves following a recipe. Measurements are always approximations, grabbed in handfuls and pinches, and ingredients are always comfortably substituted with whatever is available in the shops that day. Persian cooking is informal, unpretentious and relaxed. A little bit more of this or less of that won't make any difference to most of the dishes in this book, and I encourage you to use these recipes as a guide rather than a prescriptive set of instructions. (Although it's worth noting that the oven temperatures are for conventional ovens; if you are using a fan oven, simply reduce the temperature by about 20°C.)

Do as the Iranians do and use your taste buds and your eyes to determine which direction a dish should go in. Taste your dishes throughout the cooking process so you get a feel for the dish. Remember that you can always add but you can't take away, so add your ingredients in stages and know that the final third of cooking time is when you can make the most useful tweaks to a dish. A dash of olive oil here, a squeeze of lemon there or a generous sprinkling of salt is sometimes all that is needed to elevate an average-tasting dish to an exceptional one.

So season well, use whatever oils you prefer, substitute herbs if you need to and, above all, just enjoy the process of cooking something new.


1&1
1&1
1&1
Pomegranate Paste

Pomegranate molasses

Planning a meal

Persian food doesn't separate starters from main courses; instead small dishes are interspersed with larger ones on the dining table and guests simply help themselves to as little or as much of each dish as they fancy. Natural yoghurt, either plain or mixed with some vegetables, and a crisp salad or platter of fresh herbs are also present at every Persian meal and are necessary to bring some lightness, freshness, crunch and tang to complement the earthy, rich flavours of the stews and rice dishes.

Iranian New Year

Mixed herb kuku

Mixed herb rice with baked salmon

Salad Shirazi

Choux buns with rose water and pistachio cream

Vegetarian feast

Aubergine and mushroom tahcheen

Yoghurt with spinach and garlic

Carrot and pistachio salad

Rhubarb and cardamom cheesecake

Vegan feast

Aubergine fesenjoon

Persian rice (replace butter with sunflower oil)

Salad Shirazi

Orange blossom and date pudding (use non-dairy milk)

Barbecue

Corn with sumac and za'atar spiced butter

Persian rice

Dr Asaf's juicy lamb kebabs

Lime and saffron chicken kebabs

Yoghurt with pomegranate and mint

Mixed herb platter

Persian picnic

Saffron, potato and barberry kuku

Cucumber salad with sekanjibeen dressing

Broad bean, sour cherry and rice salad

Date and walnut squares

Christmas or Thanksgiving

Pistachio soup

Roast chicken with pomegranate and za'atar glaze

Red cabbage, beetroot and date salad

Persian rice

Poached quince with mascarpone and pistachios

Quick and easy weekday suppers

List of gluten-free recipes

BREAKFAST

Persian ajil granola
Date, almond and tahini energy balls
Date and cinnamon omelette
Tomato and spring onion omelette
Baked eggs with spinach and sumac
Scrambled eggs with feta and dill
Spiced butternut squash preserve
Carrot, cardamom and rose water jam

MEZZE & SIDES

Mixed herb platter
Olives marinated with walnuts and pomegranates
Yoghurt with beetroot and mint
Yoghurt with cucumber and dill
Yoghurt with pomegranate and mint
Yoghurt with spinach and garlic
Burnt aubergine and walnut dip
Chicken livers with pomegranate molasses
Gilaki pinto beans
Corn with sumac and za'atar spiced butter
Mixed herb kuku (use gluten-free flour)
Green bean and caramelised onion kuku (use gluten-free flour)
Saffron, potato and barberry kuku (use gluten-free flour)
Herby baked falafels with a fennel and watercress salad

SALADS

Salad Shirazi

SOUPS

MAINS

DESSERTS

List of dairy-free recipes

BREAKFAST

MEZZE & SIDES

SALADS

SOUPS

Legume noodle soup
Spicy lentil and tamarind soup
Butternut squash and dried lime soup
Pomegranate soup

MAINS

Persian rice (replace the butter with sunflower oil)
Smoky aubergines with egg and tomato
Stuffed aubergines
Rice with lentils, dates and walnuts
Garlicky beans with dill and egg
Gilaki herb stew
Bandari fishcakes with a tamarind and date sauce
Grilled mackerel with a spicy pomegranate salsa
Lemon and saffron baked sea bass
Whole baked fish stuffed with walnuts and pomegranates
Prawn, coriander and tamarind stew
Apricot and prune chicken stew
Chicken stew with spinach and prunes
Chicken with walnuts and pomegranates
Aubergine fesenjoon
Lamb meatballs stuffed with barberries and walnuts
Slow-cooked lamb shoulder with dried lime and split peas
Lamb and mixed herb stew
Rice with lamb, tomatoes and green beans
Spiced beef with eggs and spring onions

DESSERTS

Poached quince with pistachios (without the mascarpone)
Orange blossom and date pudding (use non-dairy milk)

Date and walnut squares (replace the butter with coconut oil)

About the author

Yasmin Khan is a writer and cook from London who loves to share people's stories through food. An avid traveller whose passport is never too far from her pocket, she runs cooking classes, pop-up supper clubs and writing retreats around the world. Prior to immersing herself in the fragrances and flavours of the Persian kitchen, Yasmin worked as a human rights campaigner, running national and international campaigns for NGOs and grassroots groups, with a special focus on the Middle East.

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About the photographers

Shahrzad Darafsheh is a Tehran-based photographer specialising in narrative, documentary, fine art and portrait photography. She is inspired by nature and capturing the intimate spaces of reality forged between people and places.

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