Food52: How Writing My Cookbook Brought Me Closer to My Iranian Heritage

February 6, 2017

One of my favorite books about Iran, [Mirrors of the Unseen](https://www.amazon.com/Mirrors-Unseen-Journeys-Jason-Elliot/dp/0312427336?tag=food52-20), is by an Englishman named Jason Elliot. Early in the book, he asks the question, “[what have] the Persians ever given to the West?” The answer is an extraordinary list that goes on for three pages.

Eliot ticks off the following: The world’s first postal service (along with the motto that begins “Neither snow nor rain nor heat…”); the first bill of human rights; the calculator; the electric battery; and the domesticated rose. Further, he lists the concept of the Virgin birth, the date of Christmas, Christmas trees and Christmas lights, the idea of heaven and hell, and the Ten Commandments. As a cook, I would add marmalade, the mint julep, and paella.

I reference the above list not to brag about the ancient Persian Empire (although we Iranians do love to talk about our culture’s “firsts” and “bests”). I mention it to draw attention to the long shared history between the Middle East and the West in light of the recent immigration ban on seven Muslim-majority countries—including Iran—in the Middle East (the one that the Department of Homeland Security [reversed "any and all actions"](http://www.latimes.com/politics/washington/la-na-essential-washington-updates-department-of-homeland-security-halts-1486224232-htmlstory.html) related to on Saturday).

This history can easily be traced to 331 B.C., when Alexander the Great conquered the Persian Empire and brought pomegranates, pistachios, and saffron back with him to Greece, the cradle of Western civilization—but the exchange of goods and ideas goes back further than that. Europe and the Middle East have been interacting for literally thousands of years. In researching my cookbook [The New Persian Kitchen](https://www.amazon.com/dp/1607743574?tag=food52-20), I learned just how closely linked we all are, and not just by our cuisines, but also by religion and philosophy. Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are each Abrahamic religions, after all, and are closely related. It's a small world. **But for many Americans, the Middle East now seems like a distant, alien place.**

As recently as the 1970’s, America has had a close, reciprocal relationship with Iran. My dad’s family in Iran would come and visit us in Philadelphia bearing gifts of saffron and chewy gaz nougat embedded with bright green pistachios. Oil industry staffers and even American tourists flew home with tins of caviar, boxes of baklava, and sacks of luscious dried dates. But that era seems long forgotten, and there are large swaths of the U.S. where people have never met anyone from Iran, or the Middle East for that matter. **It’s easy to distance yourself from people when you don’t know them, and that’s partly why the divisiveness embodied by the refugee and immigration ban has found a way to take root.** Because Persian food was the catalyst for my own journey of self-discovery, the best way for me to get across the sometimes poetic, often quirky humanity of Iranians is through our food. And the best place to start is in Los Angeles.

Welcome to Tehrangeles, the affectionate name for the city with [the biggest expat Iranian population outside of Iran](http://globalbrief.ca/blog/2009/11/01/on-the-iranian-diaspora/). It’s where I sublet an apartment for a while so I could research my cookbook and, in the process, I bonded with my extended Iranian family. For the first time in my life, I experienced what it felt like to be in public and surrounded by people who looked like me: over a bowl of thick, bean-studded pomegranate soup at [Wholesome Choice Market](http://www.wholesomechoice.com/index.php), a supermarket with an emphasis on Persian food. There is a glorious prepared food section, where big Iranian men in chef’s whites stand over steaming vats, doling out fragrant plates of kabob, rice, stew, and even crispy [tahdig](https://food52.com/blog/12539-how-to-make-tahdig-persian-stuck-pot-rice) if you ask.

We ended up there because my cousin Shirin, whose personality could not be more fitting to the meaning of her name (“sweet” in Farsi), had taken me out for the day to explore Iranian markets. At Wholesome Choice, Shirin’s daughter Sanam, a recent college graduate and passionate music fan, ordered *jujeh*, a charred and tender chicken kabob colored orange from saffron and black from grill marks. It was there that Sanam told me that of all the Iranian yogurt condiments, her favorite is *mast o musir*, yogurt with shallots, and when I tasted the creamy concoction–a dead ringer for sour cream and onion dip–I knew it was going in my cookbook. As we walked through the parking lot, I saw car after car with a four-foot sheet of dappled *sangak* bread, made to order in the store’s hearthstone oven, draped over the backseat, because to fold it while it’s hot is to ruin it.

At another market, [Mission Ranch](http://missionranchmarkets.com/), Shirin’s husband Iraj, who always has a twinkle in his eye, cajoled me into trying *jegar*, liver kabob, a popular street food in Iran. Freshly grilled on metal skewers and tucked into flatbread with basil leaves, the mineral flavor of the meat is perfectly balanced with the peppery sweetness of the herb. I fell in love with *jegar*, and when I visited Iran a few years later, I devoured unladylike amounts of it at tiny street side concessions that specialized in the stuff. Last, we visited a lavish boutique where nuts and dried fruit were displayed like jewels in gleaming cases. I bought pink and orange disks of dried peaches and mangos, all preserved without additives, whose fibrous flesh I tore into as soon as we got outside.

While in L.A., I spent a lot of time in Westwood, the beating heart of the Iranian community, an area officially recognized by the city as Persian Square. My cousin Rehyanak, who works with developmentally-challenged children and is an avid tango and swing dancer, took me to eat *abgusht*, the hearty lamb and chickpea soup that is customarily served on Fridays in winter. At [Café Glace](http://www.cafe-glace.com/), I drank a *majoon*, a sweet, frothy shake made with dates, nuts, and banana. I discovered [Saffron and Rose](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/04/06/dining/saffron-and-rose-persian-ice-cream-shop-los-angeles.html?_r=0), purveyors of thick, chewy Persian ice cream in dreamy flavors like pomegranate, rose, cucumber, and orange blossom. I shopped at [Elat kosher market](https://www.yelp.com/biz/elat-market-los-angeles), home base for L.A.’s many Iranian Jews, where a man in a yarmulke portioned out my *zereshk*, sour red barberries for cooking in basmati rice.

During my stay in California, my family held a few feasts, and for me they were a primer on Persian cuisine and etiquette. **I learned that at a home-cooked Persian meal, everything is set out on the table at once in a glorious display of colors and fragrances.** These meals were not unlike American potlucks, with food in different types of dishes, crowding the table in a makeshift assembly line. My cousin Sepideh, a fashionista and yogi who works as a civil engineer, showed me how to snip an unwieldy sheet of sangak into manageable squares with scissors. Jafar, a wiry anesthesiologist with a roguish sense of humor, taught me to eat sabzi khordan, the customary platter of fresh herbs, feta cheese, and bread, by tucking a pinch of herbs and cheese into a swathe of sangak, before trouncing my husband at backgammon. I slurped down ash-e reshteh noodle soup garnished with a green, yellow, and white starburst made of mint, saffron, and the fermented yogurt kashk, and dotted with little pyramids of crisp, fried shallots. I watched Ali, an inventor who’s spoken at the Davos World Economic Forum, deftly peel and slice pomegranates into sections like orange segments.

When it was time for dessert, gentle Mahin shyly handed me a styrofoam container of her sholezard, sweet rice pudding suffused with saffron and rosewater. Later, I spent a day cooking with her at her home, where she keeps tiny songbirds. She offered me a bowl of [ajil-e moshkel gosha](https://food52.com/blog/18522-problem-solving-nuts-for-shab-e-yalda-the-longest-darkest-night), translated as “problem solver” nut mix, an elevated trail mix made of green raisins, dried mulberries, roasted chickpeas, and pistachios, that is given out at Persian holidays and in an ancient tradition that goes back to Zoroastrian times is believed to make prayers come true.

At the end of one of our family gatherings, Iraj served strong black tea from gold-rimmed glasses and played the Persian hammer dulcimer known as a santur. Samar showed me all the fruit trees growing in the backyard, but what I especially remember is the jasmine bush, so delicate and fragrant, like something from The Thousand and One Nights. Ali gave me a copy of the Shahnameh, the 10th century epic poem that tells the myth of the founding of the Persian Empire, in which I learned that once upon a time, the ancient Persians were vegetarians.

The time I spent in L.A. that summer gave me a deeper understanding of Persian cuisine, but my family's open hearts and sincere kindness gave me newfound pride in my heritage.

Like everyone affected by the ban, my family was blindsided. Many of my relatives in L.A. are visa and green card holders, and while everyone is hoping for the best now, we don’t know what will happen. There is an overall feeling of shock in our community that America, a place that welcomed my father to Philadelphia decades ago, may now be unsafe. As a dual citizen of the U.S. and Iran, I certainly won’t be visiting Iran again any time soon (I may very well not be able to return to the U.S. if the travel ban is reinstated). I hope that we as a country can keep Muslims and Middle Easterners in our embrace. **There are no magic solutions to bridging the gap that has opened up between us.** But we're all more similar than we think, and looking to food as a translator is a good place to start.