

## MAY YOUR MOUTH BE SWEET

Spring's arrival signifies the start of Persian New Year (and treats)

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I celebrate three New Years, but the Persian one, with its bounty of fresh herbs and saffron-stained sweets, is by far the most colorful. It is the celebration of spring, after all, and starts today.

Save for some outdoor parties, we didn't get into it much growing up. We're Jewish, my parents explained, and Passover, only a few weeks later, took precedent.

And so, year after year, I looked on with envy as my friends' families gathered around their glorious haft seen, a spread much like a seder, brimming with Sabzi Polo Mahi, herbed rice and broiled sturgeon, rose-water-tinged cookies, and seven (haft) symbolic offerings to greet the New Year.

I marveled at how they all began with the letter "s," or seen, and represented hope in some way: seer (garlic, for health), seeb (apple, for beauty), sabzeh (seed sprout, for rebirth), serkeh (vinegar, for patience), sumagh (sumac, for joy), samanoo (wheat sprout pudding, for fertility) and senjed (dried fruit).

But that wasn't enough. In addition to the haft seen, specific dishes laced with meaning were prepared. As I got older, I was determined to learn more about the New Year, or Norooz, as it is called by the millions who celebrate it around the world, from "Tehrangeles" to Central and Near East Asia. And so I did:

Persian New Year lasts 13 decadent days, and begins the second the sun crosses the equator, usually on the 20th or 21st of March. In Tehran, that was 3:37 a.m. today. The 3,000-year-old tradition has Zoroastrian roots and pre-dates Islam, so it has no major religious significance. It is rather a spring cleaning of the highest order: purging the soul of burdens, purifying the home, making amends, partying. It's also a culinary fete.

But I still needed to know about the dishes. So I contacted Najmieh Batmanglij, famed Persian cookbook author. Of the main dish, Sabzi Polo Mahi: "Sabzi represents rebirth and renewal and fish represents abundance and life," Batmanglij said via e-mail from Washington, D.C. "Norooz is based on fertility and rebirth, and everything around it symbolizes this."

For local flavor, I called Faz Poursohi, a native Iranian and executive chef of the four Bay Area Faz restaurants, and listened to his tales of Norooz in Soh, a rural area near Isfahan. Poursohi's family had their own farm, and thus an endless supply of fresh herbs, fruits and vegetables needed for New Year consumption.

To prepare for the wave of Norooz patrons, Poursohi shops for green garlic, dill, parsley, red radishes, green onions and watercress. Spring turns Berkeley Bowl and Monterey Market into his candy stores. "Because of the high Persian population in Berkeley, they're always prepared," says Poursohi, who, like many Iranian transplants, will spend Norooz in Iran.

Babak Rahimzadeh, owner of Bijan in Fremont and Walnut Creek, raids Fremont's multiple Middle Eastern markets to prepare for the high volume of Norooz catering. They'll be serving Sabzi Polo Mahi in both restaurants for lunch and dinner.

Of the holiday foods, Poursohi concluded: "Everything about Norooz has to do with beauty and rebirth." Indeed. The appetizer, Kuku Sabzi, is essentially a rebirth casserole, with its multiple herbs. The noodles in Ash-e Reshteh, a hearty soup of lentils and mint, represent the knots of life. Eating them symbolically helps to unravel your woes.

If there's one reason I'm bitter about missing Norooz as a kid, it's because of the endless sweets. Both on the haft seen and door-to-door (much like Halloween), kids have access to candies, cookies and other desserts representing prosperity, light and sweetness for the coming year, from baklava and saffron sherbet to chickpea cookies and sugar-coated almonds. They say, "Dahan-et shirin bashah." May your mouth be sweet.

This spring, and others to come, mine will be.

### SABZI POLO MAHI

Serves 6

3 cups basmati rice

1/2 cup chopped fresh chives or scallions

2 cup loosely chopped fresh dill

2 1/2 cups chopped Italian parsley

6 stalks green garlic, washed and trimmed, tender green part minced (or 3 garlic cloves, peeled and minced)

3/4 cup butter

1 teaspoon ground saffron dissolved in 4 tablespoons hot water

3 pounds fresh Lake Superior whitefish or salmon

Vegetable oil

4 limes

1. Clean and wash rice three times in warm water. Bring rice to a boil in 8 cups water. Boil rice until al dente and drain.
2. Clean all herbs, chop and mix with garlic. In a bowl, combine rice with herb mixture.
3. Melt butter and 2 tablespoons water in a large pot. Add rice mixture and sprinkle with saffron water.
5. Place clean dish towel over rice and cover firmly with lid so that steam cannot escape. Cook 1 hour on very low heat.
7. Cut fish into 8-ounce portions. Season with salt and pepper.
8. Lightly flour the fish and cook in hot oil 3-5 minutes on each side, depending upon thickness.
9. Heap rice onto an oval platter and surround the rice with fish portions. Garnish with lime wedges and serve family-style.

\_ Faz Poursohi, Faz Restaurants

Per serving: 960 calories, 59 g protein, 95 g carbohydrates, 40 g total fat, 17 g saturated fat, 205 mg cholesterol, 140 mg sodium, 4 g fiber. Calories from fat: 38 percent.

\_ Times analysis

### KUKU SABZI

Serves 4

1 bunch spinach, chopped

1 bunch cilantro, chopped

1 bunch Italian parsley, chopped

1 medium onion, grated

1/2 cup chopped walnuts (optional)

5 eggs

Canola oil to coat frying pan

1. Mix all ingredients except oil until blended well, and eggs are slightly foamy, 10 minutes.
2. Heat oil in medium or large skillet so it's more than coated. Pour mixture in skillet and make sure that it's spread evenly in the pan.
3. Cook on medium-high heat, about 15-20 minutes. Flip, and cook on other side, 15-20 minutes. Kuku should be golden green and slightly crispy on the outside.
4. Put kuku on a plate and let cool completely. Cut into squares or triangles and serve with pita bread as an appetizer or side dish.

\_ Courtesy of Mino Yadegaran

Per serving: 250 calories, 15 g protein, 9 g carbohydrates, 19 g total fat, 3 g saturated fat, 265 mg

cholesterol, 150 mg sodium, 4 g fiber. Calories from fat: 68 percent.

\_ Times analysis

### SHIR BERENJ

Serves 4

You can make this rice pudding dessert pop with a garnish of saffron water and halved pistachios.

1 cup rice

2 cups water

3 cups whole milk

1/4 teaspoon salt

1 teaspoon rose water

Dash of cardamom

1 1/2 tablespoons sugar

Dash cinnamon

Halved pistachios (optional)

Pinch saffron, dissolved in a couple of tablespoons hot water (optional)

1. Wash rice and combine with water, milk, salt, rose water and sugar in a heavy-bottomed saucepan. Bring to a boil, reduce heat to low and simmer until the rice is tender, about 25-30 minutes. Stir frequently to prevent the rice from sticking to the bottom of the pan.

3. Pour into small pudding dishes. Decorate with cinnamon (and pistachios and saffron water, if using), and let cool, storing in the icebox until serving time. Serve cold with additional sugar or honey.

\_ Adapted from Maideh Mazda's

"In a Persian Kitchen"

Per serving: 320 calories, 10 g protein, 53 g carbohydrates, 7 g total fat, 4 g saturated fat, 25 mg cholesterol, 240 mg sodium, trace fiber. Calories from fat: 19 percent.

\_ Times analysis

### ASH-E RESHTEH

Serves 6

1/4 cup dried chickpeas

1/4 cup dried navy beans

1/4 cup dried red kidney beans

3 tablespoons vegetable oil, plus 1 tablespoon for garnish

3 large onions, thinly sliced, plus 1 for garnish

5 cloves garlic, crushed, plus 6 for garnish

2 teaspoons salt

1/2 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper

1 teaspoon ground turmeric

10 cups water

1 cup green lentils

4 cups beef broth

1/2 pound dry Persian noodles, or linguine

1 tablespoon flour

1 cup coarsely chopped fresh chives or scallions

1/2 cup dill weed, chopped

1 cup coarsely chopped fresh parsley

10 cups washed and chopped fresh spinach, or 3 pounds frozen

1 fresh beet, diced in 1/4-inch pieces

FOR GARNISH:

1 tablespoon ground turmeric

4 tablespoons crushed dried mint

1 1/2 cups liquid whey or sour cream

1. Soak the chickpeas, navy beans and kidney beans in 4 cups of water for at least 2 hours. Drain and set aside.
2. In a large, heavy pot, heat 3 tablespoons oil over medium heat. Add the 3 onions and 5 cloves garlic and fry for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally, until golden brown. Add the salt, pepper, turmeric and soaked beans; stir-fry for 1 minute.
3. Add 10 cups of water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to medium, cover partially, and simmer for 45 minutes.
4. Add the lentils and beef broth. Cook 20 minutes longer.
5. Add the noodles and flour and cook about 10 minutes, stirring occasionally.
6. Add the chopped chives, dill, parsley, spinach, and the beet. Continue cooking, stirring occasionally for 30 minutes, or until the beans are tender. Add salt and pepper to taste, and add more water if the soup is too thick.
7. Meanwhile, prepare the garnish in a skillet set over medium heat. Heat 1 tablespoon oil, add 1 peeled and sliced onion and fry for 15 minutes, stirring occasionally. Add 6 cloves peeled and crushed garlic and stir-fry until golden brown. Remove from heat, add 1 tablespoon ground turmeric and 4 tablespoons crushed dried mint. Mix well and set aside.
8. Stir the whey or sour cream into the soup, saving a dollop for the garnish, and mix well with a wooden spoon.
9. Pour the soup into a tureen or individual serving bowls. Garnish with a dollop of whey or sour cream and the garnish prepared in step 7.

\_ "New Food of Life: Ancient Persian and Modern Iranian Cooking and Ceremonies," by Najmieh Batmanglij

Per serving: 610 calories, 26 g protein, 77 g carbohydrates, 23 g total fat, 9 g saturated fat, 25 mg cholesterol, 1,870 mg sodium, 15 g fiber. Calories from fat: 34 percent.

\_ Times analysis

#### SPRING FOR NOROOZ

Inspired? Faz executive chef Faz Poursohi recommends Monterey Market and Berkeley Bowl to get all your fresh herbs for Norooz, and the rest of the season. You can find more herbs, spices and other Persian ingredients at these markets:

Zand Pastries, 1401 Solano Ave., Albany. 510-528-7027.

International Market, 1106 Meadow Lane, Concord. 925-676-7844.

Bibi Bazaar, 251 Hartz Ave., Danville. 925-831-2424.

Damavand Market, 37012 Towers Way, Fremont. 510-793-2606. Also in Fremont: Yekta Market and Royal Food Market.

#### RING IN THE NOROOZ

Haven't got a haft seen? The following restaurants will be serving the delicacies of the Persian New Year:

Bijan, 1690 Locust St., Walnut Creek. 925-935-1972. Also in Fremont at 39935 Mission Blvd., 510-440-1755.

Faz, 5121 Hopyard Road, Pleasanton. 925-460-0444. Also in Danville, San Francisco and Sunnyvale.

Pomegranate, 1585 University Ave., Berkeley. 510-665-5567. Also in Walnut Creek at 1389 N. Main St., 925-944-9292.

Shiraz, 21314 San Ramon Valley Road, San Ramon. 925-829-5558.

Alborz, 2142 Center St., Berkeley. 510-848-8877. Also in San Francisco.

Maykadeh Persian Cuisine, 470 Green St., San Francisco. 415-362-8286.