



Feast of the New Day

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— NOWRUZ IN VANCOUVER —

MY MOTHER HAS BEAUTIFUL HANDS. Ever since my sister and I were little, my mother has used her hands to put just the right touch on everything she does. When we struggled to complete our drawing assignments, it was my mother's hands that were able to cover our eraser-streaked workbook pages with her beautiful sketches. When we had dress-up days at school, it was my mother's hands that worked late into the night, adorning our poodle skirts with rhinestone beads and making custom candy bags to match our Halloween costumes. Because of our mother, we always looked the part.

Where she used her hands the most was in the kitchen. She would gather us around the counter early in the day before a big dinner party as she prepared several dishes at once. We would kneel on the kitchen chairs to see over the counter, place our chins on folded arms, and just watch.

I recall my sister and I staring at her hands as she effortlessly rolled out dough, flat and thin and round. She had two mini rolling pins and provided each of us with our own balls of dough to make miniature versions of whatever she was creating. Our attempts were either too thick or too thin or would rip apart, and when my mother turned away from us to place something in the oven, we fought over who would get to use her rolling pin to fix our disasters, convinced that the magic was in the "mother pin." No matter who won the battle, our creations ended up disastrous, but she still baked our little monsters alongside her masterpieces. She even served them to us in front of her guests. At the time, we failed to see what is now crystal clear—the talent was in her hands.

Anyone who—like me—has had the good fortune of growing up in a Persian household, or who has been a guest at a Persian dinner party, knows first-hand that a Persian mother shows her love to



her family by feeding them. A lot. My mother is the quintessential example of this. A meal she serves you will leave you with two things: an uncomfortably full belly and an appetite for more.

It is this time of the year that my mother pulls out her biggest pots to prepare her most lavish feast of all—our annual family dinner to ring in the Persian New Year.

I've had the privilege of celebrating multiple New Year's days, but it is the Persian New Year that resonates with me most. My preference, I believe, has less to do with my heritage and more with the time of year when Persian New Year is celebrated. *Nowruz*, which translates to *new day*, is celebrated on the spring equinox: the moment the sun crosses the equator and spring has officially arrived. It is a time of rebirth, when greens and flowers are bursting from the ground, shedding the winter cold. It seems seasonally appropriate and most natural, then, to make resolutions, set goals, do a deep house clean, dress up in new party clothes, and drink green smoothies. This year, the equinox will occur on March 20th at 3:29am, precisely when family and good friends gather around the symbolic *haft sin* table to ring in the New Year with hugs and kisses, sweets, and a heavenly feast to honour nature's rebirth and to welcome in good fortune.

Persian food is well known for dishes rich in fresh and fragrant herbs—dill, mint, cilantro, parsley, fenugreek, chives—that simmer on the stove for hours. A Persian cook spends the day in the kitchen patiently prepping mounds of these greens, soaking and rinsing them thoroughly, and chopping them ever so finely to brighten up soups, stews, and rice dishes with their savoury aromas.

My mother always prepared her Nowruz dishes days in advance, cooking up batches big enough so every guest could take home leftovers. Her hands would be covered in speckles of wet *sabzi*—herbs that she'd either been chopping up or squeezing water from after giving them a bath. I'd always find myself on the sidelines, waiting to help by pinching the lima beans out of their skins or anticipating the moment she would need a second taste tester. But more often I'd be found sampling the coconut macaroons and other delicious sweets she'd purchased from the local Persian bakery, until she asked me to stop. My mother always taught us that the key to good cooking is patience, of which I have none.

Traditional Nowruz fare consists of smoked white fish over *sabzi polo* (rice with fresh herbs). Other favourites are *baghali polo* (herbed rice with lima beans) served with lamb, and *sabzi polo mahi* (herbed rice with fried fish).

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The Haft Sin Table

The *haft sin* table is a decorative tabletop of seven symbolic items that begin with *sin*, the Persian letter for S.

They are:

- *Seeb* (apple), which represents health and beauty
- *Seer* (garlic), which represents medicine
- *Serkeh* (vinegar), which represents age
- *Samanu* (a Persian pudding), which represents the sweetness of life
- *Sabzeh* (sprouts), which represent rebirth

- *Senjed* (the Persian olive), which represents love
- *Somaq* (sumac), which represents the sunrise and thus good conquering evil

Persians also add other symbolic items to their *haft sin* tables including mirrors and candles to represent the number of children in the family, their finest dishes stacked with fresh sweets, nuts, and dried fruits to share with family and friends, painted eggs that represent fertility, goldfish to represent life, a hyacinth to represent spring, coins to represent prosperity, and a Quran or book of poetry. Crisp, new money bills are stashed away in the pages of these books and presented to children as gifts at Nowruz.





Popular dishes you may find on the table are *kookoo sabzi*, which is like a soufflé with bushels of herbs, and our family favourite *gormeh sabzi* (stewed herbs with dried lemons, kidney beans, and lamb over saffron rice). At a Persian table you'll also find fresh mint, spring onions, radishes, and of course a touch of saffron to garnish your meal. And there's *tabdig*, the crispy bottom layer of rice that every family member pines for.

If there is a season for every cuisine, I definitely recommend sharpening your Persian culinary skills for spring. With its abundant use of herbs, what better time to enjoy these dishes than now when greens are sprouting up in our backyards alongside the tulips and hyacinths? What's more, our bodies are craving chlorophyll-rich green foods to put winter behind us and energize us for the longer days ahead. (Note: if not all the essential herbs have popped out

their shoots in time for New Year, their dried counterparts, available in bulk at Persian grocers, are a fine substitute.)

This is the time to get yourself invited to a Persian dinner! Persian or not, the first day of spring is a secular tradition that can be celebrated by all. It is a time to acknowledge, appreciate, and enjoy the abundance of life and nourishment provided by Mother Nature, whose generous supply of sprouting greens gives our bodies the burst of energy they need to rejuvenate us as we awaken from the cold winter nights and eagerly welcome the longer, brighter days.

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