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Persian Cooking

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Persian recipes

Make perfect Persian rice with
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Discover cooking secrets from
Najmieh's kitchen to yours

Najmieh Batmanglij

The Queen of Persian Cooking



Persian Cooking

by Najmieh Batmanglij

**for
dummies®**
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Persian Cooking For Dummies®

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Introduction

Cooking Persian food is based on a philosophy reaching back to ancient times. Thousands of years ago, Zoroaster elaborated the ancient myth of the twins. One became good; the other, evil. One, the follower of truth; the other, of falsehood. This concept of duality is typically Persian, and it extends beyond moral issues. Persians often balance light and darkness, sweet and sour, hot and cold. The philosophy is both a science and an art. Increasingly, science is discovering links between food and health. And although the ancient Persian system of balance does not eliminate the need for doctors, it is an excellent nutritional adjunct to good health. For Persians, food is medicine. In fact, the word for a spice mix in Persian, *advieh*, means “medicine.”

These days, you can find Persian kitchen staples at almost every grocery story. For example, recently, I’ve found rose water and pomegranate molasses at my local supermarket! And what’s more, with the Internet, you can complete your Persian pantry with the click of a button. Hooray!

This book is intended for those who are new to Persian food, as well as for those who enjoy having creative fun in the kitchen. I hope it will serve as a key that unlocks all the secrets of Persian cooking for you. I’m excited for you to get together with family and friends and use this book to cook, tell jokes, and eat and drink as Iranians have done for thousands of years.

PERSIA OR IRAN?

Iran and *Persia* refer to the same place. These days, the word *Iran* is used to refer to the country and the word *Persia* or *Persian* is used to refer to the

culture (like Persian carpets, Persian cats, and, of course, Persian food). Persian, also called Farsi, is the language of Iran.

About This Book

If you haven't eaten Persian food and you'd like to give it a try in your own kitchen, but you don't know where to begin, this is the book for you! Come join me on a voyage of culinary discovery, along a path that stretches through the ages, across Iran from the Caspian Sea in the north to the Persian Gulf in the south. In this book, I help you master basic techniques, use spices delicately, and stock your pantry with key ingredients that may be new to you.

In this book, you discover how to cook rice, the jewel of Persian cooking, with a golden crust, known as *tahdig*. You become confident about the building blocks of *khoresh*, a Persian braise that has a depth of flavor. I also show you how to cook a range of different Persian vegetarian dishes that can be served as side dishes to the main course, creating a feast! If you're vegetarian or vegan, I offer options at the end of many of the recipes throughout this book, too.

This book includes my family's favorite recipes — I hope they become yours, too! The recipes in this book help you put together various menus to please everyone. Think of this book as a road map that will guide and lead you to your destination of a perfect Persian meal. You can refer to it on a need-to-know basis and skip through pages to learn about Persian food culture.

Here are my recommendations to guide you through this book:

- » Stock your pantry with the basic ingredients you need for cooking Persian food. Some of the recipes in this

book need special ingredients that can be found at Persian markets or on the Internet. Good news: You need only three basic seasonings for Persian cooking — salt, pepper, and turmeric — along with a Persian spice mix called *advieh* (see [Chapter 6](#)). **Note:** You don't need to make homemade *advieh* every time you cook; store-bought *advieh* (including my own, called Najmieh's Advieh, and available at

<https://persianbasket.com/advieh-najmieh-batmanglij-s-persian-spice-mix.html>) works, too.

- » Read the entire recipe before you begin to cook to make sure you have all the ingredients. If you don't have some ingredients, no need to panic — you can easily find replacements in your kitchen. For example, you can substitute yellow split peas for mung beans because they have similar cooking times. Fresh tomatoes can be replaced with canned tomatoes, and fresh sour cherries can be replaced with dried or frozen ones. You can even replace dried barberries, a specialty of Persian cooking, with dried unsweetened cranberries.
- » Setting out your prepared ingredients (known as *mise en place* in French) is standard practice in professional kitchens, but I recommend it for anyone who wants to cook with less hassle. If the recipe calls for, say, peeled tomatoes or chopped herbs, you'll be more efficient if you have these items prepared and ready to go before you begin cooking.
- » You'll need basic equipment for Persian cooking, including a nonstick pot for cooking *tahdig*, a good skillet or frying pan, and a wooden spatula to prevent scratching nonstick pots. ([Chapter 2](#) walks you through all the tools you need.)

- » Personalize the recipes to suit your tastes. This practice comes naturally when you have confidence in the kitchen. If you're new to cooking in general, give yourself time — you'll get there!
- » An everyday Persian meal is made up of rice, braise, and small side dishes, such as yogurt-based salads. A platter of fresh herbs, cheese, and flatbread always accompany a Persian meal. Most of my recipes are made for four to six people — you'll have plenty of food, but if you're planning to cook for more than six people, you can scale up your recipe. As a rule, if you're doubling a recipe, double the spices as well. If you're more than doubling a recipe, I recommend initially going easy on the spices and then adjusting them to your taste at the end of your cooking.
- » All recipes have English titles followed by the original Persian titles in parentheses.
- » All oven temperatures are in Fahrenheit, but the Appendix at the back of the book provides conversions to Celsius.
- 🍅 Vegetarian recipes are marked with the tomato icon in the Recipes in This Book (after the Table of Contents), as well as in the Recipes in This Chapter list (at the beginning of every chapter). For nonvegetarian recipes, when possible, I include tips on altering the recipes to make them vegetarian — you can find that information at the ends of the recipes.

Finally, within this book, you may note that some web addresses break across two lines of text. If you're reading this book in print and you want to visit one of these web pages, simply key in the web address exactly as it's noted in the text, pretending as though the line break doesn't exist. If you're reading this as an e-book,

you've got it easy — just click the web address to be taken directly to the web page.

Foolish Assumptions

In writing this book, I made a few assumptions about you, the reader:

- » You've tasted Persian food at a Persian restaurant and you want to make it in your own kitchen.
- » You're interested in cooking and you have some experience with it. (If you're totally new to cooking, I recommend starting with *Cooking Basics For Dummies*, 5th Edition, by Bryan Miller and Marie Rama [Wiley].)
- » You're curious and want to learn about Persian food and interested in familiarizing yourself with unfamiliar ingredients.

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout the book, you see icons in the margins. Here's what each icon means:



TIP

The Tip icon highlights information that will make your life easier — in the kitchen, at least!



REMEMBER

Whenever I tell you something so important that you should commit it to memory, I use the Remember icon.



WARNING

When you see the Warning icon, be extra careful — the information here will help prevent something from going wrong.



**CULTURAL
WISDOM**

Persian food is an integral part of Persian culture. I use the Cultural Wisdom icon to highlight some cultural information that can enrich your experience of Persian cuisine.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet that includes tips on how to buy key Persian ingredients (such as good-quality basmati rice, dried barberries, saffron, pomegranates, grapes, date molasses, and yellow split peas), Persian cooking tools and techniques, and how to build a *khoresh*. To get this Cheat Sheet, go to www.dummies.com and type **Persian Cooking For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the search box.

Where to Go from Here

If you're new to Persian cooking, I recommend starting with [Part 2](#), which is all about common Persian cooking techniques, how to use Persian ingredients, how to build a *khoresh*, and how to bring a meal together. [Parts 3](#) and [4](#) guide you to building your own menus — you'll find everything you need, from appetizers to desserts.

You don't need to create a feast the first time you make a Persian meal. Just try one recipe, and then build on your repertoire from there. The key is to have fun!

I hope this book serves as a key that unlocks all the secrets of Persian cooking for you. I'm excited for you to get together with family and friends and use this book to cook, tell jokes, and eat and drink as Iranians have done for thousands of years. *Nush-e joon!* (This traditional wish in Persian is similar to bon appétit in French. It means, "May the food be nourishing.")

Part 1

Getting Started with Persian Cooking

IN THIS PART ...

Look at the history of Persian cooking.

Discover the essential kitchen tools for Persian cooking and how to use them.

Stock your kitchen with the special ingredients needed for Persian cooking and find out how to use them.

Chapter 1

Exploring Persian Culture through Food

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Surveying a few thousand years of Persian cooking at a glance
 - » Understanding how Persian meals are served
-

Every country expresses itself in food — the meals and casual delights created from what grows in its soil, swims in its seas, and grazes on its fields. Yet food is so much more than sustenance. In ways both subtle and powerful, it maintains bonds of family, friends, communities, and entire societies.

I was born in Iran, but I've lived away from it for the past 40 years, researching and writing cookbooks about Persian cuisine in exile. A few years ago, I wanted to renew my ties directly and went back to Iran to see and see again the amazing markets; meet cooks and restaurateurs; and share kitchens, tables, tastes, and scents that convey the very essence of Persian cooking. This book is the simplified, yet authentic result.

You know more about Persian food than you may think. When you ask for oranges, pistachios, spinach, or saffron, you're using words derived from Persian that refer to foods either originating in the region or introduced from there, because Persia was a great trading center of the ancient and medieval worlds. The land was the first home of many common herbs, from

basil to cilantro, as well as scores of familiar preparations, including sweet-and-sour sauces, kabobs, and almond pastries.

In this chapter, I walk you through the long history of Persian cooking (in just a few pages!) and introduce you to the way in which Persian meals are served.

Going Back to the Beginning

Kingdoms had risen and fallen for thousands of years before the Persians arrived in the plateau known as Iran. Ancient Persians inherited the civilizations of the past; they absorbed and transformed the arts of Mesopotamia, Assyria, Babylonia, and Elam (present-day southwestern Iran).

The Persians had their kings of the fifth and fourth centuries BCE to thank for their famous royal kitchens and love of food. Darius the Great paid attention to agriculture and urged the transport of seeds and plants. To feed the famed Persian horses, alfalfa seeds were exported to Greece. To feed humans (and for pleasure), plants were transported from province to province — rice was imported from China and India, sesame from Babylon to Egypt, fruit trees from Persia to Anatolia, and pistachios from Persia to Syria.

We know from the fifth century BCE Elamite clay administrative archives discovered in the 1930s in southwestern Iran, that ancient Persians used many herbs and spices, such as cardamom, celery, cumin, dill, mustard seeds, saffron, and sesame. The ration register also includes both fresh and dried fruit and nuts, such as almonds, apples, dates, figs, mulberries, pears, and

pistachios, which confirms Iranians' love and use of these herbs, spices, fruits, and nuts for more than 2,500 years.

The royal courts of two ancient Persian empires, a thousand years apart, were famous for their cuisines. Today, we would call them "foodies." What we know about Persian food is from archaeological kitchen tools; architecture, miniature painting, and poetry; linguistics; and old texts and cookbooks. Several cookbooks were written in Arabic during the tenth century, but we know that many of the recipes were borrowed from Persian royal kitchens of the sixth century and later taken to Europe by the Arabs.

The great ancient trade routes that are now called the Silk Road connected China to Italy with Iran at its center. As a result, Iran looked both east and west and became the trading center of the ancient world. Thus, Persia both influenced and was influenced by the culture and cuisines that existed between the Mediterranean in the west and China in the east.

Having some give and take with China, India, and Turkey

Rice, which was cultivated in China and India 5,000 years ago, seems to have reached Persia only in the 4th century BCE, but it did not become an important part of Persian cooking until the 15th century. Since then, rice has become not so much the anchor of a meal (the way it is in China), but the basis of festive and elaborate dishes called *polows*. Like other popular dishes, *polows* have spread far beyond their Persian source. Under such related names as *pullao*, *pilavi*, *pilaf*, and *pilau*, they grace celebrations from Afghanistan to Albania, and from India to Turkey.

Noodles and noodle dishes are often associated with Chinese and Italian cooking. In fact, according to legend, Marco Polo brought noodles from China to Italy in the 13th century. Today, however, food scholars agree that pasta probably originated in Persia. In fact, it was the Arabs who introduced noodles, and the hard durum wheat necessary for making it, from Persia to Italy in the ninth century via Sicily and Genoa. No one knows exactly how the technique for making pasta reached China. What can be said with certainty is that before the Han Dynasty in the second century BCE, China lacked the mills, which the Iranians had, for large-scale grinding of the durum wheat used to make pasta.

In the second century BCE, a Chinese imperial guard called Zhang Qian, was sent west on a diplomatic mission. In Persia, he discovered and took back to China not only the domesticated seeds of grapes (for making wine) and alfalfa (for feeding horses), but also such exotica as broad beans, coriander, cucumber, pomegranates, sesame, and walnuts.

Later, Persian cooking, already international, helped to influence the conquering Arabs of the 7th century and the Mongols of the 13th century. Between the 13th and 15th centuries, the Mongols, who later ruled parts of India, took both Persian cooking and the Persian language to India. Today, kabobs, *koofteh*, *biriyani*, and korma in Indian cooking all show the influence of Persian cooking.

During this period, Persian cooking also greatly influenced the cuisines of Mughal India and Ottoman Turkey. We know that the Ottoman Empire invited Persian chefs to cook in their royal kitchens. Today, what is called “Ottoman cuisine” in Turkey is very similar to

Persian cooking, and many of the names of dishes still show their Persian origins.

Seeing how the Arabs introduced Persian food to North Africa and Europe

You might think that the conquest of Persia by the Arab armies in 637 would end the rich Persian civilization and trade, because the desert warriors were rough men and nomads. But instead, within a few generations, the conquerors were building new cities in the circular style of the Persians, constructing buildings with the vaulted domes and courtyards, absorbing and extending Persian scholarship, wearing Persian-style clothes, drinking Persian wine, eating Persian food, and writing cookbooks that included Persian recipes in Arabic. Persia provided the model for the splendid centuries known as the Golden Age of Islam (from the 8th to the 14th centuries). The Arabs introduced Persian cooking ingredients and techniques to North Africa and Europe. These exchanges formed a culinary bond — a sign of early and peaceful communication — that linked distant and sometimes hostile cultures.

Identifying the influence of Islamic dietary restrictions

Before the Arabs arrived, Persians were Zoroastrians (followers of one of the world's oldest religions — one that influenced not only Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also Buddhism and Greek philosophy) and were wine makers and drinkers.

Wine was an integral part of the Persian culture, and all Zoroastrian ceremonies included drinking wine.

However, with the arrival of Islam, wine was forbidden,

and Islamic dietary restrictions were imposed on Persians. The consumption of alcohol, pork, and some seafood were forbidden for believers of the faith. Additionally, the concept of *halal* (an Islamic method of slaughtering animals, very similar to kosher in Judaism) was introduced to Persians.

Recognizing the similarities and differences from region to region

Iran is a big country, highly diverse in climate and terrain, with mountain ranges, grasslands, and deserts. Seas lie to the north and south. Here and there are great cities where many cultures mingle. These regions have distinctly different climates, and until the advent of modern transportation, each had its own local ingredients and food culture.

Every region in Iran has its own style of cooking. But certain basic themes remain. For instance, yogurt and its by-product, *kashk* (fermented sun-dried yogurt) is used all over Iran, but in northwest Iran, yogurt is more prevalent, whereas in central Iran *kashk* is more common. Fruit and its molasses are used in recipes all over Iran, but pomegranate and citrus are the souring agent of choice in northern Iran, whereas tamarind and dried lime are popular in southern Iran and vinegar is popular in central Iran.

Understanding the philosophy behind Persian cooking

Thousands of years ago, Zoroaster elaborated on the ancient myth of the twins. One of the twins became good and the other, evil; one, the follower of truth and the other of falsehood. This concept of duality is typically Persian, and it extends beyond moral issues. We often balance sweet and sour in cooking. For Persians, food is

also classified as *garmi* (hot) and *sardi* (cold). Dates and grapes, for instance, are hot fruits; oranges, peaches, and plums are cold. This classification of ingredients has nothing to do with the temperature or spiciness, but rather the nutritional properties of the ingredients. This concept of balancing dishes is similar to the Ayurvedic diet in India and yin and yang in China.

Eating Persian-Style

Traditionally, Iranian meals are served on a *sofreh* (a cotton cover embroidered with prayers and poems), which is spread over a Persian carpet or a table. Besides the main course, a Persian meal at home always includes *Nan-o Panir-o Sabzi Khordan*, a platter of bread, cheese, and whatever vegetables and herbs are freshest in the garden or market that day. Added to this are small dishes called *mokhalafat* or *mazze*, which often include yogurt-based salads, pickles, egg *kukus* (an egg, herb, or vegetable omelet much like an Italian frittata), seasonal fresh fruits like melon, puddings and custards, and dried fruit such as dates. They're spread out for the family and friends or any uninvited guests who may appear.

All those sitting around the *sofreh* are asked to help themselves to what they like, before, during, and after the meal. There is no rule or order that governs the way you eat the meal, unlike the idea of first course, second course, and so on found in western meals.

Chapter 2

Tools of the Trade

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » Purchasing pots and pans
 - » Shopping for knives and other miscellaneous tools
 - » Making life easier with kitchen appliances
-

In order to make the recipes in this book, you'll need some tools — everything from pots and pans to knives, cutting boards, and more. Many of these items you probably already have; others may be unfamiliar to you. In this chapter, I walk you through everything you'll need so you can take an inventory of your kitchen and make a list of the tools you may want to add.

Pots and Pans

No matter what you're cooking, using the right pot or pan is important. In this section, I list all the pots and pans you'll want to have on hand.



TIP

You may see the terms *reactive* and *nonreactive* used when referring to cookware. These terms refer to the type of metal from which a container is made. Aluminum, cast iron, and copper are all reactive. Stainless-steel, ceramic, glass, and metal cookware with enamel coating are all nonreactive.

Nonstick pot

A nonstick pot is essential for creating a rice with a golden crust, known as *tahdig*. Use a deep, nonstick pot with a lid to allow the rice grains to swell properly and a good crust to form without sticking. I use a 5-quart pot that measures 11¼ inches in diameter and 3¼ inches deep.

When steaming rice, be sure to wrap the lid of the pot in a clean dish towel to absorb any condensation and prevent the rice from becoming mushy. [Figure 2-1](#) illustrates how to do it.

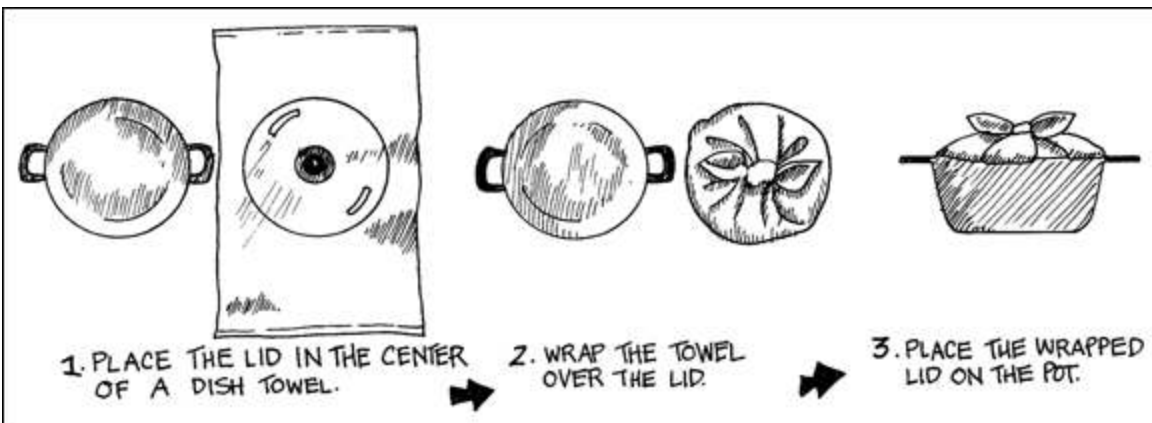


Illustration by Elizabeth Kurtzman

FIGURE 2-1: Wrapping a pot lid.



TIP

Nonstick pots scratch easily. Look after yours by using a silicone spatula or wooden spoon when touching the bottom of the pot.

Note: You *can* use a stainless-steel pot for making golden *tahdig*, but it may not come out whole and some of it may stick to the bottom of the pot.

Braiser

An enameled cast-iron braiser with a cover (see [Figure 2-2](#)) is best for making a *khoresh* (a Persian braise). Your braiser should be wide enough so that the ingredients aren't lying on top of one another while they're being sautéed, but deep enough to contain the broth. Le Creuset makes a very good braiser, but you can find a less expensive option made by Lodge.

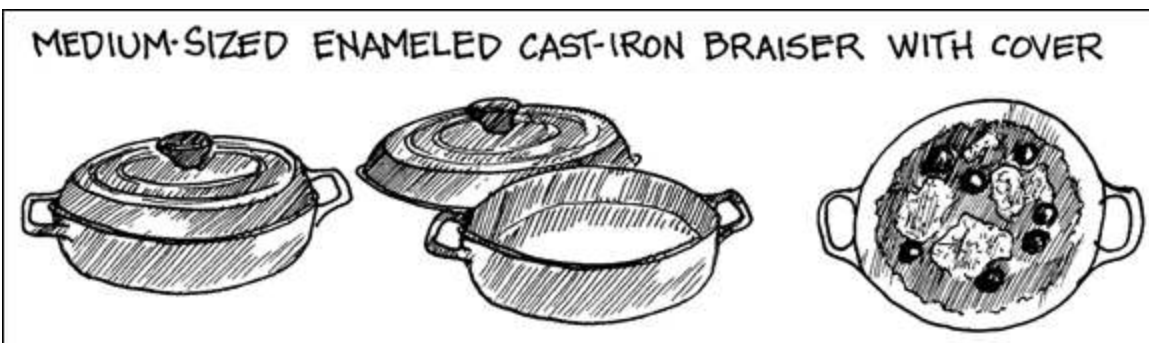


Illustration by Elizabeth Kurtzman

FIGURE 2-2: Braiser.

Saucepan with lid

A small saucepan is necessary for boiling ingredients. It's also great for cooking eggs, potatoes, grains, and legumes. You can find saucepans in various sizes — for example, 1½ quarts, 2½ quarts, or 3 quarts. If you don't own a saucepan, I recommend 1½ quarts, but if you already have one in another size, as long as it has a lid, you'll be fine.

Wide skillet

Wide skillets are good for caramelizing onions, toasting spices and nuts, cooking patties and meatballs, and searing meat and fish. You can find skillets in various sizes — 10 inches and 12 inches are common. If you're in the market for a skillet, I recommend 12 inches, but if you already have a 10-inch skillet, you'll be able to make any of the recipes in this book.