

A Sip, A Bite, A Mouthful:
A memoir of food and growing up in Shiraz

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*In memory of my beloved brother, Mohsen,
for whom I terribly miss reading, writing, and cooking*

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BOOK I: Growing Up in Shiraz

From where I stand in time and space, I look back through a window called food for several reasons:

Because taste and smell are the two senses most loyal to my memories; because numerous times, through food alone, I have come to savor a wealth of people and places.

Because the finely elaborate ritual of cooking, as well as its absence continues to reveal the highlights of my life.

Because I have seen all of my sisters fall into humming a Persian tune only while they are cooking; and I have watched them cook in silence, which told me that they were not happy.

Because only two things in the world can make my head spin with euphoria, and one of them is the scent of Gillan's *dom-siah* rice being steamed.

Chapter One: Meeting the Cooks: My Mom and My *Maama*

Saleheh squatted under the yard's wall, right next to the valve on the water pipes that ran the length of our house. She had the round edge of her black, semi-transparent head wrap, a *maghna*, crossed at her neck and thrown back over her shoulders as she always did when her hands were busy with messy chores. In a big, round, copper tray placed in front of her, six *shoorideh* fish were gliding and glistening under Saleheh's skilled hands and the summer sunbeams, ready to be cleaned and stuffed. Mom was in the kitchen, preparing the fish filler: fresh coriander and fenugreek that Saleheh had already cleaned, washed and finely chopped to be fried in a paste-like mixture of turmeric and chili pepper powder. While most of the dazzling scent of the spicy filler wafted out to the street through the kitchen's window, the trail also reached the other end of the house and into the backyard where I was sitting with Saleheh.

It had been almost two years since we had purchased our new house in Shiraz in 1968. At the farthest corner of the yard, the already-chopped-and-simmered tomato flesh had been flattened on other copper trays to be sundried and further thickened without losing its glittering, red hue. For the entire two or three weeks of the paste-making process, Saleheh, Mom and occasionally an older sister carried the trays in and out of the building—into the sun, out of the dust, into the air, out of the rain—like an insecure cat moving her kittens around. Sooner or later, a muddy ball always escaped a pack of my siblings to land in the middle of the trays, doing irrevocable damage.

From where I was sitting with Saleheh, we could see our flowerbeds encircling the central pond or the *hoze*, as well as the fruit trees that surrounded it. We had a black mulberry tree that had been adopted from Bushehr, my parents' birthplace, as a sapling. It produced gigantic, juicy berries the size of fat fingers and painted half the yard's tiles as well as the faces, arms and legs of all enthusiastic mulberry pickers a dark purple. Then there was our grapevine, which grew into a tall, wide tent of green grapes over a couple of years, providing Mom the supplies to make stuffed grape leaves (*dolmeh*) at least twice a year. We also had a wild pomegranate tree that no one would either claim responsibility for planting or vote to cut down. From late summer to mid-fall, the tree gave extremely sour and acrid pomegranates, good only as a chaser with Iranian vodka.

Finally, standing in our flowerbeds surrounding the central pond was a single, sour orange tree, a *naaranj*, which wore a perfumed, white robe of blossoms in the spring and an orange robe of fruit in early summer. Short-lived, homegrown sour oranges gave us all the more reason to eat fish during that period. No amount of money could buy the joy of running off to the other end of the yard in the middle of lunch to pick an armful. We peeled the rinds across the middle so that, when cut in half, the bitterness of the hard skin would not infuse the pulp when we squeezed them over *halva sefid* fish, that had been rolled in a mix of turmeric and flour before being stir fried, or on the stuffed *shoorideh* fish served with mixed herb rice that we prepared that day.

Saleheh scaled the fish one at a time, working from tail to head all the way to the side fins. She then briskly cut off the fins before giving the body a hasty, first rinse. I crouched down to face her, with chin in palm, as flying fish scales landed in my unkempt hair amidst the soft buzz of hovering flies. I used to sit and watch Saleheh for long hours, registering how she prepared each food and tucking the details away in the hidden recesses of my mind. I studied her hands intently, but often learned nothing because I was so mesmerized by the sharp contrast

between the dark pink skin of her coarse palms and the dark brown that stretched across the backs of her hands.

Saleheh's presence in our home was a vital necessity, but we took it for granted, just like breathing. In my mind, she had been with us since time immemorial, frozen in the same small, strong stature, face smooth and eyes brimming with love and pride. In reality, Saleheh sought refuge in my parents' house back in the 1940s when she was in her late teens. She had been born a slave to a tiny population in the then Arabic-speaking, feudal island of Ghase (later called Kish) off the South coast of Iran in the Persian Gulf. The Island was ruled by a *sheikh* (1) and Saleheh and her female relatives were unpaid servants in the houses of the sheikh's family. They also worked along the shore, where they opened and sorted the oysters that their fellow male pearl diver slaves lifted from the sea, always under the vigilant eyes of the *sheikh's* staff. Saleheh's husband was but one of those breath-holding divers who, one day, did not resurface.

"Tell me the story of when we were all in the mineral water springs near the Caspian," I suddenly begged Saleheh with all the persuasion that my ten-year-old tone could muster, for I knew she had already repeated the tale at least a hundred times.

"Sit more far, more far," she chided, urging me with her bobbing head, as if the motion might physically ward off my request. "You get scales all over you, *maama!*" *Maama* was what Saleheh was to me, but it is customary among Iranians to use one's relation to the other as a term of endearment.

"Go on, tell me," I insisted, scooting back an inch.

"Okay, okay," she gave in. "Your mother and sisters and everybody in the family is in this walled mineral hot water because that year we go to Mashhad and then to Caspian, and then they hear water good for bone pain..."

"I know, I know," I snapped dismissively, "tell the part when we were inside the hot water pool, it was an all-women section, right?"

"You were there also, only too little to remember. Ha?!" She rubbed her forehead with her arm and switched from her serrated knife to a sharp-bladed one for gutting the fish. I sat quietly at full attention as she pressed her hand against the fish's head and sliced from tail to gills with the other hand in one effortless stroke. She put down her knife and dug her hand into the fish to remove the gills and entrails before throwing the flesh into a nearby colander for a final washing.

"And?" I prompted, bringing myself back to the story as she reached for the next fish.

"Anyway," she continued, "ten, twenty, maybe thirty women are in the pool."

"All naked?" I asked anxiously, knowing my favorite part was fast approaching.

"Most naked," she assured, "some with underwears, I don't know. Suddenly, I look up just by accident and see this goon coward (*naa-mard*) peeping above the wall, looking at peoples' wives and daughters." (2)

"And where were you? In the pool?"

"Naaa, of course no; I was inside the compound, but not in the pool. That's how God enabled me to see the coward."

“And what did you tell him?” I asked, bouncing up to laugh even before she got to the part that I found so hilarious.

Saleheh could not help breaking into her own soft laughter as she watched my amusement. She pulled herself together and struck a frustrated pose and tone, re-enacting the incident. She stretched a threatening hand towards the edge of our yard’s wall, now clutching a blood-stained knife--as if the “coward” was there. ““Mister Bastard; Oyyyyy! Mister Bastard!’ I shouted.” I howled with laughter, not hearing the rest of her sentence but knowing that the “coward” had then disappeared after what I was sure must have been the politest insult he had ever received.

The fish-scaling operation and the bath-scolding story were interrupted by Mom’s occasional visits to the yard. As a general rule, my mother rarely checked on Saleheh. She preferred to toss orders at her disguised as questions. As a matter of principle, Saleheh refused to acknowledge my mother’s authority, no matter what form the order took--a fact that should not have come as a surprise to anyone, given Saleheh’s glorious profile of non-obedience.

After Saleheh lost her husband to the sea in the 1940s, she spent her teenage years a widow, both theoretically and practically a slave to the local *sheikh*. One day she slapped her master’s wife right in the face after getting into a quarrel with her. Realizing the offence was punishable by death, and knowing that my father--a government official and a senior customs officer--was the only authority her master dared not challenge, Saleheh sought asylum in my parents’ house. My father then “purchased her” by paying the sheikh Saleheh’s dues. It was the only way to establish the ownership that would allow my family to take her off the island. Saleheh’s ownership document still lies in my box of family heritage. The contract is written in Arabic, with two lines in Persian added by my father as an appendix where he officially transfers Saleheh from himself to my mother--willingly nullifying his moral and religiously sanctioned “right” to ever “possess” Saleheh sexually.

Once saved from her death sentence and removed from her family and homeland, Saleheh lived the rest of her 65 years of life in the smallest possible minority. “When we moved to Kermanshah in 1953, no one had ever seen or even heard of a black person before,” my parents recalled. “Children and even adults used to climb our courtyard’s walls and stop us in the street to see for themselves if ‘the creature’ was real!” By the time Saleheh was scaling fish in the yard, things had changed, but not dramatically. I was old enough to notice people’s stunned reactions. Even in the Shiraz of the late ‘60s, only a handful of people had seen a black person, and usually only on television. Until the Iran-Iraq war brought a large number of war-stricken families with unfamiliar looks and languages from Iran’s Western provinces in the early ‘80s, almost everyone was shocked to see Saleheh and hear her heavily accented, broken Persian.

When Saleheh first joined our family, there were four members: my parents; my 13-year-old half-sister, Maji (my father’s only daughter from his previous marriage); and my eldest full sister, Pari, who was only a few months old. As our family migrated and expanded, finally settling in Shiraz, its members moved out and back in again, but Saleheh was a constant--not a maid, and not quite family. She was not allowed to use the bathtub that came with our new house, but used the public bath instead. At the same time, whenever one of us children woke in the middle of the night, we went to Saleheh. We slipped under her blanket and tumbled into her soothing warmth, staying there until morning if we were lucky, or until the next kid came in if we were not.

On that particular bright, summer day Mom popped in several times to “ask” if Saleheh was done with the fish and if the mounds of fresh dill and coriander were dry enough to be chopped. Saleheh responded by grumbling just below Mom’s poor range of hearing. Saleheh would, at a moment *she* judged appropriate, move to a shady part of the yard with a clean tray for her cutting board and start chopping the mound of fresh herbs with a speed, precision and rhythm I can still see, hear and smell. Only then would she raise her voice to inform Mom of her progress, and only if she felt that doing so was absolutely imperative.

My mother was not among the minority of women who take great pleasure in preparing food for their families on a daily basis. Nor was she among the larger group of women who are obligated to cook routinely regardless of their feelings. My mother cooked selectively; whenever she felt like it, and majestically; on special occasions and for distinguished guests. When moved, she prepared visually artistic and sensually unforgettable dishes.

My mom believed--and told anyone who cared to listen--that her talents were wasted on household duties. She should instead have been sent to school to become a surgeon, like her brother. My mom’s dream of becoming a surgeon, however, was realized only in its most minimal sense. While in her early twenties, she learned how to give injections. In the ‘40s and ‘50s, when my father’s job as a customs officer required our ever-growing family to move across Iran’s South and South-western border cities, sometimes to the most remote and medically-deprived regions, my mom put this skill to good use by administering life-saving penicillin shots to sick neighbors.

Medicine related aspirations and injection practices aside, my mother’s real passion, the one that kept her out of the kitchen, was business. “Profit or loss, it doesn’t matter,” she once declared, “what counts is that you dare to do business.” And business she did. For many years after my family had finally settled down in Shiraz, my mom organized sewing, embroidering and artificial flower-making classes (the latter two skills used mostly to ornament bridal gowns and tiaras). These classes were held either in separate rented locations or inside the house, where they took up half of the living space in our already crowded home. In the most glorious period, when mom’s classes were advertised in movie theaters before screenings (there was no television back then), and on cotton-placards covering the width of many streets in town, her all-female students, trained by male teachers, numbered 30. Over the years, my mother’s teaching business evolved into a smaller but steadier buying and selling business: from selling the class-made products to small shops, to buying artificial flowers in Tehran and selling them to individuals in Shiraz, from obtaining imported perfumes and underwear, to selling them to neighbors and friends.

The two cooks in my home randomly bickered and occasionally got into serious arguments, but when Saleheh shouted, it was not because she was mad, but rather because Mom had partially lost her hearing in an accident on a business trip. Sometime in the early ‘60s, my mother had purchased a deserted shopping center in a rundown part of Bushehr. She rented it to a few shopkeepers and was in charge of collecting--sometimes forcibly--bi-monthly rents. On one of those trips, during the aircraft’s descent, a man sitting next to Mom had advised her to pinch her nostrils tightly and blow her nose hard in order to equalize the pressure in her ears. Mom had listened to the uninformed advice and burst an eardrum. Not an excessively high price, as far as Mom was concerned, for the enormous satisfaction of spending time out of the kitchen as a bread winner.

I did not learn to cook from watching my mom in the kitchen, the way some children do, or by hearing her talk of food over frying pans and boiling pots, day in and day out. Instead, I grew to appreciate good food and “real” cooking through the many ways that my mom did not commit herself to the art of cooking. I did not learn how to cook from my *maama* either, at least not consciously. Saleheh worked constantly: sweeping, cooking, cleaning, cooking, washing, cooking, carrying and cooking. The only thing I learned definitively from her, when she stood still enough for me to watch, was that Saleheh is the only person I have ever known whose eyes did not water while chopping onions. “People who jealous,” she explained, “eyes water when does onions.”

Chapter Two: Life in Transition: From Old House, to New

One might think that because I experienced revolution, war and exile in my twenties, I am entitled to use the term “upheaval” to describe that period of my life. Truthfully, I would rather use the term to describe my childhood. I was born and came of age in the ‘60s and ‘70s--a time of major transformation in both my homeland and my household. The industrialization and intensified modernization prompted by Iran’s rapid growth shaped economic and social developments that were felt and seen in the lifestyles and kitchens of every urban, middle-class Iranian family.

Throughout my childhood, my family’s economic status improved in step with the positive changes in Iran, rewarding my parents’ hard work with an increasingly comfortable and stable life-style.

Just a few years before I was born, my family had finally settled down in Shiraz in our first house, after spending a decade moving around Iran, following my father’s job. My parents had lived in ten different cities some bordering Iraq and Afghanistan, and had had nine children, six of whom survived beyond the age of three. By the time I was eight, my family had moved from a house with exterior kitchen and privy, to a fully modernized home. We went from a manual water pump to an electric one, and eventually hooked up to a municipal water pipeline system. We also upgraded from a charcoal-burning brick stove to propane gas and finally a natural gas range. Soon after I turned eight, the results of my father’s hard work enabled our family to afford a new house, a modern life and the advanced equipment that came with it.

At the center of all the changes that I witnessed during my childhood and adolescence, large and small, stood our kitchens and the food we made there. I am a child of *roghan nabaati*, vegetable oil. Each time a child fell ill without an obvious reason or burst into tears upon receiving a mild injury, an elder would mutter that they were “a child of vegetable oil.” The animal fat used as the cooking oil of choice in my mother’s generation and before continued to be perceived by many to have a higher nutritional value than its “tasteless, smell-less, useless” successor, hard vegetable oil. In fact, vegetable oil was so disreputable and unwelcome that a popular song cleverly rhymed the major brand, “*ghoo*” (meaning swan), with “*rihoo*” (meaning puny or frail). “*Roghan nabaati-e ghoo, makhsoos-e bachehh-ye rihoo!*” Swan vegetable oil, for sickly puny kids! Even many years after vegetable oil came to dominate the market, animal oil--also known as “yellow oil,” “Kermanshahi oil” or “the good oil”--was still used sparingly, often for dressing rice. That practice, too, was gradually abolished in our home; partly because animal oil was becoming less and less readily available, but also because its unpleasant smell provoked a collective outburst of protest from us *rihoo* children all. And it wasn’t until I was a teenager that liquid vegetable oil replaced hard vegetable oil in most kinds of cooking.

Life and Food in the Unnamed Alley

The first house my parents purchased in Shiraz in 1955 was located in a lower-middleclass neighborhood at the end of a short narrow alley that led to the long and slightly wider Hakim alley. Hakim, in turn, led to the eight-meter-wide Naader Street, which seemed like a highway compared to our tiny, nameless alley.

Food intended for children was usually carried on carts, perhaps to entice them to buy it. Ice cream was the year-round favorite, while unripe almonds soaked in salted water, with their furry skins washed off (*chaghaleh badoom*) and bright, green, sour plums (*gojeh-sabz*) and small, green, sour apples were the top choices for spring and summer. We would squeeze the green apples patiently until they were soft, and stuff them with salt, black pepper and dried mint and savor them for hours in a cozy corner. The squeezed apple was deformed alright, but an extremely tasty one-- sour, salty and aromatic.

“Hakim Alley was so overcrowded with little devils, no cab driver risked entering it at any time of the day or night--even if he was offered a triple fare--for fear of hitting a child and getting into trouble,” my older siblings still boast. The events that took place in Hakim Alley were described so often by my big brothers and sisters that I feel like I was an eyewitness.

Our old alley resembled a mobile food market operating noisily on a long, overcrowded playing field open to motor and bicycle traffic. Hakim Alley and all of its smaller, adjoining alleys each hosted about twenty homes, each housing an average of seven permanent residents and numerous frequent visitors. A good majority of these roughly 150 residents consisted of children and adolescents who hung around in the alley whenever they were not at school or in bed. Our family, in particular, functioned like a House of Commons because we had one representative for each of the alley’s age groups.

My eldest sister, Pari, who was eighteen by the time I was five, hung out with an all-female group who snuck cigarettes behind locked doors, snubbed the girls and boys who were just a bit younger and mothered or bossed around the youngest ones. My eldest brother, Hossein, was fifteen, and a member the boy’s soccer team, whose hobby was teasing and annoying the younger girls like my next eldest sister, Atefeh, thirteen at the time. These younger girls had their own volleyball and dodge ball teams, and competed in various bouts of tug-of-war and a tough game called “Rescue” in which players split into two teams of six each. The “hunters” had to capture the “prey” one by one and carry them to a designated area, where the prey would have to leave the game. The challenge for the prey team, in addition to avoiding capture, was to touch hands with a captured teammate and call out “rescue” before the hunters got them to the designated spot, freeing both prey teammates to once again run for their lives.

My third sister, Naubi, age ten was part of a multitasking group of boys and girls who busily engaged in hopscotch, sandman, freeze tag and jump rope. Finally, my other older brother, Mohsen, age seven was an enthusiastic member of the noisiest and nastiest group, all boys from seven to twelve. They played soccer and *haft-sang* –a primitive form of cricket that involved knocking down “*haft sang*”, or stack of “seven stones”, and running a designated distance before the opposing team had a chance to reassemble the stones. They also spoiled the girls’ hopscotch games, dared each other to try newly-acquired swear words and occasionally ran errands for the older boys. Mohsen always volunteered for any opportunity to raise hell. He was also partially responsible for the alley’s reputation as a vehicular danger zone. More than once, he darted out of the smaller alley and was grazed by a passing car, only to spring back onto his feet like a bouncing ball and run away for fear of being caught and punished by an older sibling. When my group, the youngest children were not playing pretend indoors, we were wandering off or getting into the older kids’ games. Sometimes we were reluctantly included, and other times cruelly rejected.

Whether exclusive or collective, our games and activities were the blend of kindness and meanness that seems to be such an integral part of growing up. Secret sweethearts sometimes ended up as life partners. Spontaneous allegations were randomly made against unfortunate families, like the family whose father was considered an old scamp and rumored to get drunk on Friday nights and fart in a rhythm while calling out his children's names, "My Laleh..., *fart-fart*, my Kaveh..., *fart-fart*" "as a way of entertaining his family," children said "because they are so poor." There were bad days, when a window was broken or a prized ball was ripped and all hell broke loose, and there were good days when sixty or so children united to rescue the neighborhood's dog and her puppies from the city officials' stray-dog-killing operation.

Watermelon War

No matter the day or the hour, our small alley was always alive with neighbors, vendors and peddlers of all sorts. In those days, many goods and services in our neighborhood were supplied by regular and seasonal peddlers, most of whom traveled on foot. They carried their products on their backs, balanced them on donkeys or pulled wheeled carts and wagons through the streets.

Peddlers sold the aromatic green herbs, *sabzi*, used in large quantities by most families on a daily basis for cooking and eating as a side dish. Armfuls of fresh, blue-green, feathery dill and musky coriander were punctuated by sharp wafts of mint and tarragon and the delicate, emerald tickle of basil, the high, clean whisper of watercress and baby leeks that were then purchased and taken inside to be cleaned, rinsed and sorted. They were then chopped and mixed by the deft hands of a mother, a sister or a *naneh*, to be used for different purposes. They might be fried for a shrimp or fish dish (*ghalyeh*) or a mixed-herb stew (*ghormeh sabzi*). Various types of *sabzi* were minced and mixed with rice in herb rice (*sabzi polow*) and cabbage-mixed rice (*kalam polow*). Abundant piles of *sabzi* were also chopped and sundried during the summer and fall for use in winter cooking. At its simplest, an assortment of seasonal *sabzi*, freshly sorted, washed and fluffed on a nice platter along with radish and scallions was often served with lunch and dinner throughout the year, as long as a pair of those deft hands was willing.

In addition to selling food, mainly fruits and green vegetables, peddlers provided services with the desperate determination and persistence of a modern day Jehovah's Witness. There were junk buyers, a job predominantly performed by the working class Jewish minority in Shiraz, who traveled by foot. "*Kola, mola, hoooo*," they chanted "We buy jackets, pants, suits, knives, bowls, plates, books; we buy used watches, radios, chairs, carpets." We also had the *namaki*, the salt man, who traded salt in exchange for old bread. Bread, the stuff of life, was never thrown in the garbage. That would have been an ungrateful, disrespectful and wasteful act. Stale bread was collected by the *namaki* to be processed and fed to stall animals. There were also cart-toting knife grinders and even peddlers offering entertainment like hand-driven merry-go-round and seasonal gypsy musicians and fortunetellers. Whether you were purchasing food or fun, bargaining was as much a part of each transaction as honking the horn was an inseparable part of driving.

In summer, peddlers hawked stacks of white mulberries, sour cherries, apricots, honeydews and watermelons--chanting temptations like, "*Bebor-o-bebar hendooneh*," (cut and take a watermelon). Generous, confident vendors would let you see and taste the red sweetness of a watermelon before asking for payment, but such offers were not always made, which meant that

you must employ special knowledge or skill to distinguish between a good watermelon and a bad one.

Finding the best watermelon takes keen eyesight and careful hearing. You flip the melon in the palm of one hand a few times, tapping the surface in different places with a finger. If the melon produces a hollow sound and your finger bounces back, it will be ripe and sweet. If it gives off a solid, bass sound, it's no good. A good watermelon, by Iranian standards and definition, is a bright, vibrant red inside, sweet in taste and fragrance. Perhaps most importantly, it is firm and crisp enough that when you take a bite, a juicy rush of intense flavor invades your entire mouth. I still employ this flipping technique to select a good watermelon, and more often than not get the best that the Montreal market has to offer—however inferior that may be compared to the watermelons I remember.

I was playing in the alley one day when a conversation between a peddler on a donkey and several young women grew heated and loud, attracting spectators. The shouts of everyone involved and the testimony of witnesses who later helped reconstruct the story in some detail revealed that the peddler was accusing a young woman of having stolen one of his watermelons. He was convinced that one of the women--who was wearing a traditional, multi-layered Ghashghayi skirt (similar to those of the Azari)--had hidden a watermelon beneath its long, loose fabric. The peddler had barely mentioned looking "there" for the proof when a rage-stricken young male member of the woman's family attacked him with the force of a lightning bolt. The peddler, obviously no match for the furious young man, quickly retreated behind the jostling crowd.

While I didn't witness the physical confrontation between the two, I heard the flow of swear words and threats well up from the roar of the crowd, and the scene registered in my six-year-old mind as the ultimate violence.

"I'm going to suck your brain out of your nose, you sonofabitch," the young man screamed, looking everywhere with bulging, bloodshot eyes for the peddler --his switch blade slicing the air. "You mother-fucker, I'm going to spread your guts before your eyes and skin you alive."

I dashed towards our house, tears running down my chalk-white face. I ran with trembling knees and a pumping heart, screaming hysterically, "blood... sword...blood... sword..." then passed out in the middle of our courtyard. I woke up to the familiar, soothing voices of my mom and elder sister and my younger brother's amused smirk. They made me sip water from a glass with a gold ring settled at the bottom. I remember feeling important and grown-up to be receiving an adult's shock-therapy treatment, but even with the gold-touched water I was distressed for days.

It took me longer, much longer, to understand that the young man's outrage had less to do with the accusation than the suggestion that the peddler might attempt to look under the woman's skirt or even touch some part of that forbidden area—an unthinkable violation of the laws of female chastity (*naamoos*). As for my certainty that I had seen blood on the street, everyone agreed that a watermelon must have broken open and spilled its flesh on the ground in the midst of the turmoil. This could well have been the case, although I would like to think of myself as more creative and imaginative than that!

Magic Box of a Kitchen

Life inside our Hakim alley house was defined by the minor discomforts and onerous chores that went hand-in-hand with that home's rudimentary equipment. With Dad away in southern ports, working to provide for the family, and Mom preoccupied with her sewing and embroidery classes, the household chores--including taking care of six children--were shouldered by Saleheh and my half sister, Maji. Human labor was so cheap and abundant that most middle-class families could easily afford domestic help, so we were also assisted by regular and irregular errand boys, a laundry lady and a gardener. Mom supervised Maji and Saleheh in important matters, such as the children's hygiene and what made it onto the shopping list, but when she could, she let them run the kitchen as they saw fit.

If you asked Maji or Saleheh, they would tell you that Mom was a tyrant. I was only three when 23-year-old Maji was married off against her will, so while I do not have any recollection of her life with us before her marriage, I can imagine she felt dominated, or at times, even overwhelmed by Mom's authority. But, I think it's fair to say that if my mother was tyrannical, it was in the manner of a "liberated woman", long before the concept made its way to our world.

Let me explain. Consider the year 1961, some twenty-five years into Reza Shah's forced unveiling of women as part of his modernization scheme and twenty years before Khomeini brought the veils back down as a part of the Islamization of the country. My mom, a relatively young mother of six, was dressed up and heading off to tend to one of her business-related matters. She was waiting for a cab when a young cyclist made a pass at her--not an unusual occurrence, as young men harassed young women on the streets in Iran as far back as anyone could remember. They only stopped after the Islamic Republic of Iran, established in 1979, started penalizing such behaviors with public flogging.

Mom was wearing a pair of high-heeled, stiletto-type shoes that seem designed specifically to prevent women from running. Undeterred, my mother chased after the lad, and, with uncanny coordination, grabbed his bike by the back of the seat with one hand while using the other to slide a shoe from one of her feet. She then drove the pointed heel into the man's head hard enough to make blood spray from the wound. She proceeded to hail a cab and, with the help of the driver, threw the bicycle into the trunk and the young man into the backseat. She took him to the nearest hospital and paid for the stitches--the poor fellow's price for his ignorant behavior.

It is no surprise that my blurred memories of life in the Hakim alley house are dominated by the preparation and happy consumption of food. Each meal seemed a brief, still moment to treasure between endless episodes of walking, tending, carrying, washing, canning, sun drying, peeling, frying and cooking. Each dish, rolling away in endless variety along the length of the clean, cotton *sofreh*, was so memorably delicious that even as a child, I never ceased to be amazed at how such fine food could come from such bare and basic facilities.

The house was a one-story building enclosed by high, thick walls. At one end of the property, about three steps off the ground stood the main building. It was comprised of one small and three large rooms and a rarely-used washroom that all opened onto a small, square, carpeted hall where we spread the *sofreh* and took our meals. The largest room was where mom held her classes, the small one was for visitors and the other two were shared by all nine of us to live and sleep in.

At the other end of the property and directly across from the living area was a *baariksazi*: a row of individual, adjoining rooms that received significantly less sunlight and included the kitchen, the room where we bathed, the charcoal room, the tool shed and the privy. In order to go from

the comfort of the living space to any of the basic but vital facilities in the *baariksazi* we had to walk twenty meters across the open area of the courtyard or *hayat*.

An internet search of the term *hayat* today might produce romantic descriptions of a Persian paradise with breath-taking pictures of the ancient cypress trees growing in the historical homes of the most affluent. While they were not typically miniature Gardens of Eden, the *hayat* was the heart of every home. Our yard was a sun-filled space enclosed by brick walls, where we gathered in the evenings on carpet-covered wooden beds or on bamboo mats spread on the ground. Adults would come there to soothe the aches from their daily chores or, in good weather, to joyfully welcome and entertain guests. The outdoor gatherings were often scented by breezes off a nearby jasmine shrub and the perfume of freshly washed tiles. Guests were served seasonal fruits from colorful bowls, and tea, accompanied by “dry sweets” (different types of cookies), “wet sweets”, (a variety of pastry-like or deep fried delicacies), and salted *aaail* (a luxuriant mix of pistachios, roasted seeds and peas, walnuts, hazelnuts and cashews.) On hot, summer nights we slept on the same beds and mats covered with mattresses.

The two borders of our tiled yard that did not meet buildings hosted long flowerbeds that cradled persimmon and sour orange (*naaranj*) trees. In the spring, my mom and sister spread sheets beneath the trees to collect sour orange blossoms (*bahaar-e naaranj*). They used them to make sherbet (a drink of sweetened, diluted fruit juice) and jams, or sundried and preserved them for the coming year to be mixed with loose, black tea. The fact that I have never liked *bahaar*-scented tea’s invasive fragrance does not prevent me from longing for those days of falling blossoms each time I open a neatly packed parcel of *bahaar* from my relatives in Shiraz.

In the center of the yard was a polygonal, concrete pond or *hoze* that stood about a meter off the ground and had a gutter running all around it. It was just big enough for me and Mohsen to “swim” in it on sultry, summer afternoons. Once or twice a week, the “*Aab-hozi*”--another kind of street peddler---emptied the pond, bucket by bucket, into the flowerbeds. He then washed and refilled it with clean water, so that the laundry lady, on her appointed days, could use the pond to rinse the clothes before hanging them in the sun to dry. That rinsing and hanging came at the end of a very long and tedious day of scrubbing loads of dirty pants, socks and sheets, piece by piece, in a big, iron basin installed on the top of a charcoal-burning brazier that kept the washing water warm.

“Those were easy years,” Pari recalls, “compared to a few years before, when we first settled in Shiraz. When we bought it, our house had water-pipes, but they were not yet linked to the city’s water system. Nobody’s was. We used a well that we had in the yard. In the very beginning, the well had a manual pump, but a few years later we installed an electric one, which made things a whole lot easier. The water was pumped out of the well into a water tank, which sat in the kitchen right next to the stove and adjacent to the bathroom. The position was ideal because the water received heat from the stove and was close to where hot water was needed and used most. The water tank was actually piped out into the kitchen sink, the bathroom, and the privy, which were just few meters away. Obviously, the closer the pipes were to the tank and the stove, the warmer the outgoing water.”

I suppose that explains why *taharat* (washing, as opposed to just wiping in the privy) in the winter was not for the faint of heart. Washing one’s own rear, with the use of hand and water, is among the first things you learn in your two-legged life as an Iranian and the very last cultural

trait you lose. I know perfectly assimilated Iranians in the Diaspora who remain helpless in only one place - public toilets with no access to private running water to practice *taharat*.

Our small, dark, comfortably warm kitchen in the Hakim alley house seemed to my young mind like a magic box from which my *naneh* Saleheh the magician pulled the most dazzling dishes. Heaps of greens, whites and pinks were brought into the box and transformed into edible delights in an incomprehensible way. Daily meals, along with the required utensils, were carried from the kitchen on big round trays all the way to the living space across the courtyard. Whatever remained after the meal made the trip back via the same route. The dishes appeared, as if from a puff of smoke, onto the empty stage of our *sofreh* and disappeared with a flash of hands. I was the youngest girl of a big family-- carefree and adorable, with few responsibilities-- yet attentive enough to the rhythm of my home to appreciate this everyday magic.

Our kitchen consisted of three essential pieces of equipment: a water tank that stood on the cast iron counter, a stove, and a sink--all of which were lined up against one wall under a flue. We also had a refrigerator—a rare possession in Shiraz-- but only because my family had moved it from our former home in the hot Khuzestan province. The fridge was treated as a luxury item, kept in the living place for the express purpose of making ice cubes to dispense to neighbors upon request. Later, we acquired a propane gas stove, which we placed next to the fridge in the living area and used only occasionally for light tasks such warming milk.

The hard-working stove in the Hakim alley home's kitchen was a thick, rectangular box made of bricks and clay built off the wall like a counter, at a convenient chest height. The brazier-like foundation was divided into three equal parts by two cemented bricks and was fired with charcoal right on the top, inside the box, in one or more of the partitions. The pots and pans were placed on top of the brick-stands over the fire, and a small kettle or teapot could be placed directly on the hot ashes. Stand-alone oil burners that could be easily and quickly adjusted were used for cooking small amounts of food or for taking the cooking into the yard. Heating up a meal or frying fish was achieved on the barely “portable” stove my parents referred to as “*galvanize*” that was basically a multi-plate base burner or coal stove.

One of the seasonal culinary events of my childhood that remains bright in my memory is waking up at 3:30 a.m. to the dizzying fragrance of freshly cooked lentil rice (*adas polow*) with juicy, fried onions and chicken, or any of the dozen kinds of mixed rice. I sat in front of a full spread of dishes and delicacies, surrounded by family with eyelids drooping. We ate quickly, finishing up before some mysterious deadline, and went back to bed just before dawn's light. Shortly afterward we got up to face a normal, albeit hungry day that was marked by yet another, even more elaborate and colorful spread at sunset. The evening *sofreh* swelled with a parade of dishes. First came mashed garlic mixed with cooked spinach and fresh yogurt, almond pudding and hot water and dates. Then, a wholesome, yet light main meal followed that might include any of the dozen kinds of *aash*, a thick mixture of cooked grains and herbs with or without meat, or *aab-ghoosht*, a spicy stew of meat, potatoes, onion, haricots, chickpeas and dried lime. This main meal was accompanied by hot-from-the-bakery flat bread and plenty of green *sabzi*. Dessert was a saffron rice pudding with cinnamon (*sholeh-zard*), or deep-fried dough covered with syrup and slivered pistachios formed in two different shapes (*zolbia and bamieh*).

The first meal of such a day is called *sahari*, literally “of dawn”, and the second is called *eftaar*. The occasion, as you may have guessed, was Ramadan--the Muslim fasting month and one of the few times in the course of the year when Islam popped up in our house.

In those days, Mom made all the children who had reached an appropriate age fast. They woke up to eat at dawn and then tried not to eat or drink again until sunset, at *eftaar*. I was not that age yet, and was not obligated to get up at dawn, but one would have to be in a coma not to wake up to the smell of drifting scents and the noises of rattling dishes and rumbling voices. Add to that the laughter of eight people and a prayer-chanting radio, and there was just too much excitement for us youngsters to miss. We were able to enjoy both *sahari* and *eftaar* without having to starve between the two meals like the adults did. Nevertheless, since the adults were not cooking and eating between the two meals, we smaller children had only leftovers to gnaw on all day. In our minds, this did not count as real food, so we were indeed fasting in our own way.

During the same period, my Mom made an effort to ensure that all the children learned and said their prayers five times a day. She sent us to a pious female friend who offered free, private religious tutoring. Her efforts succeeded only for a short while. They were doomed to fail, largely because she herself did not say prayers and fasted only irregularly. She loved observing Ramadan however, for the wonderful foods. The rituals of Ramadan, moved with us to the new house, but they eventually stopped. As we grew up, we grew out of the ideas behind them.

For my semi-traditional, semi-secular, middle-class parents and many families like ours, Islam “came around” a few times a year--casually, unapologetically and inconsequentially. That was long before Islam hijacked the 1979 revolution and invaded every aspect of some 50 million people’s personal, social and political lives. Outside Iran, in the Diaspora, well intentioned “culturally sensitive” people often assume that since we were born in a country perceived to be Muslim, we must be practicing Muslim. “This is pork!” they may warn in a restaurant, believing that we might die on the spot upon mistakenly eating a forbidden meat.

New Neighborhood, New Food Adventures

When my family moved to Shiraz to settle down in the late ‘50s, my father hoped that he would spend the remaining years of his career in its hospitably moderate climate. However, the household expenses, coupled with Mom’s business ventures forced him back into the solitude of hot, humid Bandarabaas for the benefit of a higher salary. In 1968, my mom decided that we should climb the social ladder and move uptown to a larger, newer and more modern house. By this time, my father had earned and saved enough money for Mom to pursue her ambitions and for him to benefit from the country’s robust economic development.

The neighborhood we moved into was so quiet and deserted, so seemingly kid-free, that it could have been alienating if not for the big, bright, brand new house waiting to be filled with curiosity and joy. Our house was located on a wide avenue called Hedayat, off Ghasr-edasht Street--one of the oldest streets in the city--in a relatively affluent neighborhood. Hedayat ran east and west, and was lined on both sides with townhouses behind rows of cypress trees and a *joob*, the narrow stream of water flowing through a trench that separated the sidewalk and the street.

Our neighbors were few in numbers because the houses were fairly large and scattered, and because none of their homes were as populated as ours. Thankfully, the street vendors and menders gave Hedayat a life of its own, albeit not a very vibrant one compared to the crowded Hakim Alley. It was in this part of the city that I saw women peddlers for the first time, save the gypsy women fortunetellers in our old neighborhood. There was old *naneh shiri* who brought milk (*shir*) to our door in the days before milk was pasteurized and sold in bottles. A middle-

aged woman, poor but cheerful, sold bath soap and rubber gloves while nomadic women walked their donkeys carrying goatskins of *doogh*.

Doogh is a popular, yogurt-based drink found in many parts of the Middle East. It is made by beating plain yogurt until soft and then diluting it with flat or carbonated water. In Iran, we often added salt, black pepper and dried mint for a cool drink that would, either rejuvenate you or make you drowsy depending on which version you chose. The *doogh* that the nomadic women brought to our doors, only in the spring, was processed in a traditional way and tasted completely unique. In the process of making butter from yogurt, the yogurt was beaten in goatskins until it was divided into a solid butter and liquid residuals, or *doogh* that was naturally carbonated through fermentation. Those afternoons when we sat eating rice and meat kebab for lunch while the *doogh* woman passed by, chanting, felt as lucky to me as finding a four-leaf clover.

While throughout my childhood I hated school, I could not wait to start the school in our new neighborhood, where I would be in second grade. It housed both elementary and junior high in the same building, and was one of the few coed schools in town. I stayed there for eight years and left only when I had to move on to the high school. I particularly liked my new school because it was only a six-minute walk from home, which meant that I was allowed to come and go on my own and experience the sweet taste of independence. I was also free to walk to the nearby stores after school and explore their unlimited world of new tastes and familiar flavors arranged in exotic pairings.

The food stores near schools typically carried and seductively displayed the kind of “fun foods” that weren’t available in the ordinary corner stores that dotted residential areas. Among these items were dried sour cherries (*albalu khoshkeh*); dried fruit rolls (*lavaashak*), and *kashk*, oh the darling *kashk*! This is a dairy by-product used in liquid and dry forms in many Iranian dishes which we particularly loved, and devoured, as a snack, rolled into small balls. The freshly made *kashk* of my childhood was shaped into huge, palm-sized balls and supplied to Shiraz-based stores in the spring by the migrating Ghashghayi tribes of the Fars province.

The balls were just firm enough to hold, yet soft enough that they melted under a gentle bite. “Too much *kashk* makes you sleepy and dull and dumb,” the adults, especially school officials would reprimand when they caught us with a *kashk*-painted, clown-white face. “They are not clean; you can see for yourselves there is even animal hair in them!” We did see, but could not care less.

Another hot spot close to my school was the small ice cream store named Fard (3). It was a tiny shop that could only seat ten people and was always full. The chubby, bald owner conducted most of his business through a slot in a mini cabin that opened onto the sidewalk where he served takeouts to students. Twice a day, at noon and in the evening, when school shifts ended and during class breaks, a flock of children swarmed the tiny window, shouting and climbing over each other to reach the shopkeeper’s hand. He made sure he had a good grip on our five *rial* coins before handing over to us the Iranian-style wafer-sandwich or cone of saffron ice cream or the cups of *faloodeh* that we ordered. *Faloodeh*, a famous Shirazi iced dessert, is made of frozen cornstarch in the shape of short, thin vermicelli noodles and is eaten with either lemon juice or flower syrup (*araqh*).

Fard also sold fresh carrot juice and another famous Shirazi drink, carrot juice and ice cream (*aab-havij bastani*)--essentially a big glass of carrot juice with two scoops of ice cream floating in it. This was the choice of my brother and I, his two most faithful customers, for many years

when Mohsen wanted to treat me out of his pocket money. I jabbed a long spoon into the glass, dunking the floating ice cream into the juice one moment and sneaking a taste the next. A sip of the tangy carrot juice was flush with chunks of heavy cream, and we stretched out the experience not wanting it to end. Those happy moments stirring glasses of aab-havij bastani remain so special to me that never again in my adult life in Shiraz did I want to consume this delicacy, for fear of altering those sacred memories.

My quest for the longest and most flavorful route home, testing this and tasting that, remained the primary motivation for attending school through my junior high years. I accompanied small and large groups of classmates and friends to the half-lit Café Lido a few blocks down from the school, where we fooled around or flirted depending on our talents and interests under the pretext of having coffee and Napoleon tart (*shirini napeloni*).

In addition to the nearby food stores in our new neighborhood, there were street vendors who sold snacks, finger food and fast food from makeshift stalls, stands and pushcarts, huddled at every busy intersection and street corner. Their juicy skewers of lamb liver were touted by adults as so “nutritious, good and healthy” that we could hardly develop a heart-felt liking for them. Freshly grilled kebabs tucked between layers of fresh *bazari* or *sangak* bread, nestled next to long stems of heavenly Iranian basil and hot broad beans served in small, disposable bowls exclusively in the winter.

My sharpest memory of street food embraces another winter taste unique to Shiraz--steaming turnip or *shalgham*. The most popular turnip stand in our new neighborhood, which we frequented often on cold days, was in front of Cinema Paramount. The turnip vendor installed himself and his wheeled cart in the middle of the wide sidewalk. He started at 4:00 in the afternoon, when the second school shift ended, and peddled until the end of the last movie showing, around midnight. The turnips were steamed in a gigantic pot that sat in a big hole in the cart above a portable, gas-burning stove. The vendor skillfully covered and uncovered the pot in a rhythm that allowed him to both adjust the cooking temperature and send the peppery steam wafting into the cold air among the pedestrians. The scent enveloped everyone that passed by, wrapping us in an inviting blanket of sudden warmth.

The colder it got, the less visible the vendor became, hidden by flock of customers pressing him. “*Shalgham-e daghe vallah; nakhordanesh gonahe*” he would cry, “By God, it’s so hot; it’s a sin not to try it!” He charged by the bowl, each filled with tender, egg-sized turnips topped with plenty of salt and powdered black pepper. It was torture, when walking home from high school alone, to resist the temptation to stop at the cart and treat myself to an on-the-spot bowl. Back then, flirting with girls and young women was practically a national pastime for men both young and old. That particular corner in front of the movie theater hosted gangs of restless boys who could get pretty excited, especially when an erotic movie was showing. At their least harmful, they whispered or hurled “*matalak*,” playful, lusty and, at times, insulting remarks at passing girls. We felt less intimidated traveling in groups, so my older sister and her friends would take me with them when they stopped for a bowl of *shalgham*. Even in larger numbers, we risked some nasty mouth burns as we nervously swallowed the hot turnips so as not to appear purposeless, thereby more prone to *matalak* and other forms of assault.

The turnips we made at home never tasted as delicious, especially if they were meant to cure a cold either as *aash-e shalgham*, a chicken soup of mixed turnips, spinach and grains, or on their own. My mother, a devotee of antibiotics like many Iranians, believed that turnips had an

abundance of these bacteria-busting compounds. She swore by their miraculous ability to cure colds and a long list of other ailments. The prescription was simple; eat a bowl of turnips and you will feel better.

Unique House Indeed

It strikes me how our new house remains more populated, in my mind, than the Hakim alley home--despite its considerably larger size. It may have to do with the ways that the more distant memories fade, but more likely it is because our new house was a modern, integrated place that embraced walking, talking, cooking, eating, washing and sleeping together within a single structure. The new home's design prompted a major lifestyle shift. Our days were no longer divided between the living area and the *baariksazi*. The kitchen was a bright, beautiful, spacious haven inside the house, as were the bathrooms and washrooms. We did not blindly approve of all the changes, but selectively incorporated some while modifying or rejecting others, such as our decision to abandon our indoor toilet and build an outhouse.

The new house was a large, two-story building with seven rooms that served no predetermined purpose. The neatly enclosed, tiny space under the stairway was immediately allocated to Saleheh, who was thrilled to have a space of her own. She always kept the dark room sparklingly clean and fully decorated with various pictures she cut from old magazine and newspapers. We rarely remembered to bend down in time when ducking through the short, metal doorway to pay her a visit, and Saleheh grew a permanent lump on her head from the same mistake.

Over the years, each room's function altered as it switched hands, except the one room whose purpose remained constant: the food storage room. It occupied the strange, windowless space on the second floor which was too big to be a linen closet and too small to be a room. Mom had shelves installed in it and kept it filled at all times with canned and bagged food supplies, as if there was an imminent threat of famine. (This was before the revolution and war made this a real possibility in Iran).

Our new home's two stories were topped by a third level: a large, asphalt roof enclosed by a meter-tall wall with a small storage area in one corner. That open roof space provided us with a vast, yet cozy place to sleep on summer nights, beneath a sky brimming with splendid stars that hovered mere fingertips away. Roof sleepers were free from the fear of gigantic, flying cockroaches crash-landing on them in the middle of the night because the beasts couldn't fly that high. The younger children would slide all the way down the roof stairway's handrail, braving the height for the fun of dangling in the air. The most mischievous would throw a water balloon from the rooftop down to the sidewalk below, right in front of a passerby, aiming precisely to soak but not to hurt.

Like most houses in Iran, ours was a north-south building. In Iranian urban architecture, the direction in which houses are oriented relative to sun exposure is of vital importance and significance, with a north-south layout being the rule and east-west the exception. Additionally, the courtyards in such houses always faced south so that the rooms where life commonly unfolded caught the most sun. Houses located on the opposite side of an east-west street were built in a "mirror-reflection" design, with those on the south side of the street opening directly to the sidewalk and those on the north side featuring yards between the street and the house. The

passionately held preference among Iranian expatriates for a south-facing house over an east or west facing one persists. The fact that we now live much higher up in the northern hemisphere where city structures, climate conditions and street layouts are essentially different from those back home makes little or no difference--the preference remains.

The new house in Shiraz was located on the southern side of Hedayat Street. A large, metal gate welcomed visitors into a small front yard (used as a car port) which led to the house. In the back of the house, at its south end, the building met a modest courtyard or *hayat* with a proportionally petite *hoze* surrounded by flowerbeds. The larger, brighter, more desirable bedrooms were all washed with southern sun through windows that opened onto balconies that overlooked the yard.

My parents soon extended the backyard, along with its *hoze* and flowerbeds, to almost triple its original size because our family had more extensive outdoor needs than the builder had not predicted. There were an array of summer visitors to be fed and lodged; big, stinky fish to clean and scale and many week-long tomato paste-making and lemon juice-extracting rituals to perform--not to mention wedding receptions for daughters and sons.

Our new yard was not perfumed by jasmine shrubs, as at the Hakim alley house. Instead, we had several fruit trees which could be depended on to produce succulent black cherries, tart green grapes, wild pomegranates and sour oranges. We picked the riches on a daily basis rarely allowing the fruits to accumulate enough to be gathered by an elder and served in a basket. The new, extended *hoze*--surrounded on three sides by flowerbeds--was a four-by-two meter pond about one meter deep, made of blue, ceramic tiles. When I was ten years old, I used to sit at its edge for hours in what must have looked like a pose of deep meditation as I patiently waited to spot a floating ant. Using a short stick or a dry leaf, I then rescued it from the surface of the water and joyfully watched it come back to life under the sunbeams on the yard's hot tiles.

By the time I was 25, the blue ceramic tiles of the *hoze* had slightly deteriorated, but I was still able to extract some joy out of it. I would invite my friend and her three-year-old son--along with my nephews, aged four and eight--to play water-splashing games all summer afternoon. Apparently the sweet memories of this simple time are not mine alone. After more than twenty years, my nephews still fondly recall the fruit salads served by "Auntie Afsaneh's pool."

The Hedayat house had apparently been custom-built by a professional home builder for himself, and then sold to us after some convincing. It was unique in many ways, and stood apart from all the similar-looking houses in its section of the city. We were told that the builder, a contractor with the National Iranian Oil Company, had built his golden-age dream house in Shiraz with the company's "most expensive, rare and top quality" materials, employing a "modern design vision." This builder was not, however, an architect.

I can still remember his sales pitch, perhaps because my mother repeated it many times to visiting relatives and friends as a way to explain the house's "quirks". "The foundation is so hard and durable, you cannot hammer a nail into any of the walls," he stated with pride, intending to highlight a *positive* feature. "Show me a door, a knob, a window-frame," he boasted "show me floor covering like this in the entire city and I will give you the house for free!"

The laminated staircase and vinyl-tiled floors which flowed from room to room in distinct patterns and colors were admittedly beautiful, but what the builder prided himself on most, next to the house's durability, was his vision. "I am giving away a treasure! You know why?" he whispered conspiratorially, "I have inside information that the city will have natural gas

distribution lines running in the streets in a couple of years. This house you're standing in already has gas plumbing installed!" He then gleefully spread out the oversized blueprint of the house's plumbing layout, showing my parents all the underground and inside-the-wall steel gas lines branching in all directions from the main, as if waiting anxiously to reach out to every room. "Once the gas flows through, all you have to do is hook up the main: no ugly external plumbing, no messy digging in the house! You will be so grateful to me!"

The builder was absolutely right. Due to its proximity to the oil refineries and gas fields, Shiraz was among the first cities to receive affordable and convenient natural gas from the National Iranian Gas Company. He was also right about the house being fully equipped with gas plumbing, except that all the pipe connections were wrapped with water-sealing teflon tape that allowed gas to leak freely, like a drip irrigation system, as soon as the gas began to flow. This led us to make a sad, untimely and unexpected renovation. A team of contractors, plumbers and workmen pick-axed the truly hard cement floor--sweating and swearing over each square foot--to reveal and repair the faulty plumbing. The builder could not have been more accurate when he said that the house was durable; so durable that it resembled a nuclear bunker. Even the plastic floor tiles were glued so securely that they refused to come off in one piece, if they came loose at all. And yes, they were unique too. We could not find anything like them in the entire city. As a result, rows of new, unmatched tiles crept around the house along the plumbing lines, serving as permanent scars.

Perhaps the builder's most grievous architectural error was the indoor toilet, which had been conveniently placed on the second floor next to the bedrooms--facing Mecca. There is no written law in Iran against installing a Mecca-facing toilet; it's just common sense to avoid doing so. One faces Mecca to say their daily prayers, not ease nature.

My parents had already purchased the house when they noticed this grave error, so there was not the slightest thing they could do about it at first, but the orientation was not the upstairs toilet's only problem. It soon proved to be victim of another, arguably more serious design flaw. It simply could not live up to the needs of the entire population of the house, let alone those of a never-ending army of visitors and guests. In what seemed like an emergency rescue mission, my parents hired workmen to build a temporary outdoor toilet, and later, a proper permanent one at the far end of the extended yard.

Unfortunately, the new toilet was built with external plumbing, which meant that we had to wash ourselves with scalding water in the summer and icy water in the winter. Within a few years we were all tempted to overlook the improper positioning of the indoor toilet and take advantage of its comfort in the middle of the night or for minor business, but it resisted us. The more we battled it with long sticks and hand pumps, the uglier the punishment, in the form of overflow. Eventually, this useless indoor toilet was completely abandoned, except by the occasional innocent guest unaware of its malfunction.

A Modern Kitchen to Feed Many Mouths

The Hakim alley house's small, magic box of a kitchen transformed into the spacious, bright, busy command center on Hedayat street that featured the advanced technology that went along with my family's new configuration and status. We now had a fridge, a gas-burning water heater and two stoves next to the built-in, stainless steel sink. Two rows of stylish, white cabinets stood

at attention over roomy countertops made of a material called thermo vinyl that proved to be extremely durable. These countertops were quickly filled with china sets and cookware, as well as a variety of appliances, including a blender, a lemon squeezer and a grill.

The house in the Hedayat street house was gradually equipped with a stunning array of modern amenities imported from Europe or manufactured by the newly-established Iranian industry. A washing machine, an air conditioner and our first black-and-white television set joined sofas, a dining set (reserved only for our chichi guests) and bedroom sets. Our family was not rich enough, or perhaps modern enough to be among the first in Iran to buy such luxury items as a dryer or a vacuum cleaner, but when it came to kitchenware, my mother was a pioneer. She bought one of the first chest freezers on the market, many years before frozen food made its way into Iranian households. We used the freezer to store large stocks of bread and leftovers for the poor who frequently came by. We also used it to preserve homemade frozen food and various mixed, chopped herbs. The microwave oven did not arrive in Iran until 1989. By the time it would have found its glorious place on our kitchen's shelf, I was no longer in residence. By then I was in Montreal trying to obtain a second-hand microwave at the Saturday garage sales, compliments of "economic downward mobility."

Our Hedayat street kitchen also featured a rare and novel character, namely my father. After his retirement, Dad finally moved to Shiraz to join us for good in 1969, when I was nine. My father was among the few who occupy an entire space on their own without ever dominating it. In the kitchen he would casually knot an apron around the waists of my mom or sisters while they washed dishes and meticulously tend the tea while singing a pop song--spontaneously replacing the lyrics with his own mocking ones. He spent hours on his feet cutting the flat bread he had just bought into equal, palm-sized pieces for the day's consumption. He used a pair of large, brass-handled scissors that had survived my mother's sewing classes to snip the thick, undone dough along the bread's margins into tiny bits for the pigeons.

"Mohammad, have you fed the pigeons?" *Ameh*--my father's eldest sister who loved him dearly--once asked. Upon hearing an affirmative answer, she babbled disbelievingly, "Well, I see they're still pacing up and down, so..."

"They're pigeons, for heaven's sake!" My dad snapped defensively. "Of course they pace. What do you expect them to do? Leave for the office?!"

A few years later, when Saleheh had left the family in the wake of a serious dispute with Mom and we had been pared down to a small family of four, every morning began with a closely-shaved, fresh-smelling, handsome Dad cheerfully rattling the kettle against the background of the seven o'clock radio news broadcast. The delightful scent of half-burnt *bazari* bread curled from the stove burner as he served my brother and me breakfast. At that early hour of the morning, Mohsen and I resembled a pair of meek sheep in a hurry to finish our milk, cheese and nuts, or butter and jam with tea. My father watched as we took our daily pocket money from where he had placed it on the kitchen countertop and sent us out the door on our way to school, all the time trying to the best of his ability, but failing miserably, to appear as uncaring, unloving and dismissive as he could.

During my adolescent years in the Hedayat street house, the headcount was as fluid as the tides. As one sister married and left or a brother went off to university in Tehran; another sister married and stayed on temporarily, accompanied by her husband and newborn while yet another sister went off to continue her studies in another city as the first went to live in a village and start her

career as a teacher, and so on and so forth. The meals were typically so big that our standard stove could not handle our daily pot of rice on any of its top burners, so we bought and installed a large, stand-alone gas burner for the routine, heavy duty cooking. That was a particularly appealing stove because its height allowed the cook to actually sit on a short stool right in front of it while frying loads of onions or preparing any kind of time consuming and attention demanding stew-like *khoresh*.

For many years, Maji--my eldest sister from my father's first marriage who married beneath her in every sense thanks to my parents, but still kept her spirits as high as the CN Tower--visited us every-other Friday with her three children. On those Fridays, we had plain rice and home-made kebab (*chelow-kabaab*). The menu was constant, nonnegotiable and considered by all to be a treat no matter how the kebab was made. Depending on the season, the cook's mood, or the news of the day, the kebab might be exquisitely charcoal-grilled in the back yard, prepared in the electric kebab maker or flattened in a pan and fried—yet somehow still called a kebab.

Another reason behind oversized pots and pans was that we hosted a constant stream of visitors from all over the country and beyond, who stayed for a few nights, to a couple of months and some for several years. You see, the decades of '40s and '50s had seen a gradual but steady enrichment of my family's culinary repertoire of traditions from Iran's Southern and Western cities. My parents' circle of friends and acquaintances expanded and diversified accordingly, and I grew to appreciate the effects of both phenomena during my own adolescence in the '70s and '80s.

Dad's friend's son from Bandarabaas lived with us throughout his high school years, while a female cousin from Tehran stayed a single summer to attend an art course. A gorgeous, male second cousin stayed a month to booze around at a safe distance from his parents. And my sister's university classmate came with her newborn baby from Botswana to live with us for six months until they could go back home. Many groups of visitors, like my aunts and uncles and their families from Bushehr, spent the summers with us in order to take advantage of the change in weather and to tend to their pains and problems in the well-equipped, reputable Shiraz hospitals. Some of my favorite guests were Dad's acquaintances from Dargahan, a tiny, free trade port on the island of Qeshm in the Persian Gulf.

Our Dargahani friends usually came to Shiraz in search of a good doctor. They always arrived laden with gifts including imported jeans and other clothes for each family member. They brought exotic, colorful foodstuffs: boxes of mangos that we unabashedly hoarded and varieties of dates not found in the Fars province, such as the dark, soft, slender *dayri*, crunchy, yellow unripe dates called *khaarak* and the syrup-soaked, slightly overripe *rutab*.

Another unique food item our Dargahani friends brought was a kind of miniature, dried shrimp barely bigger than a grain of rice once its tiny tail and legs had been brushed off. This was one of my mother's favorite choices when she wanted to prepare a hassle free yet homey lunch. She soaked the shrimp while chopping and frying onions. She then rinsed and added them to the stir fry with black pepper, turmeric and dried lemon powder before folding the delicious mixture into a pile of freshly-steamed rice. The hint of the sea drifting over the sidewalk from our kitchen window never failed to charm our neighbors.

Our Dargahani friends appeared just as exotic as the delicacies they brought. The men's clothing corresponded to the heat and humidity of their homeland. It consisted of white cotton *dishdaashehs* exactly like those of their neighboring Arab countries beneath white, cotton, knit

skullcaps like the zucchetto worn by the Pope. The women's wardrobe was both more complicated, and more elaborate. It included the traditional mask, the *borqa*—despite the heat and humidity of their homeland— with a bright, airy, knee-length headscarf wrapped at the neck like a shawl to leave their busy, henna-painted hands free. A colorful dress reached to their knees over beautiful, richly gold-embroidered trousers. Their henna-painted feet peeked from within comfortable sandals. Dargahani women were among the few rural minority groups whose traditional clothing saved them from the Islamic dress code imposed on all Iranian women shortly after the establishment of the Islamic regime in 1979.

The ebb and flow of visitors came and went, sometimes with barely enough time in between to wash the sheets and prepare the beds for the next group, and it was not uncommon for the sojourns to overlap. My Tehrani artist cousin made my father's friend from Dargahan sit as still as a statue for hours to draw his portrait, with an outcome that the model determined was nothing short of disastrous. At other times, my Bushehri aunt would stay just a few more months, out of the kindness of her heart, to baby-sit for my sister's classmate, the Botswanan, all the while employing a sign language only the two of them could understand.

Most of our guests that had travelled from other cities depended on my father and later, me and my siblings, for advice in the fine art of doctor shopping. Our Dargahani friends, in particular, relied entirely on my parents because they knew no one else in the region. Even the language they spoke, a variation of Persian, was not fully intelligible to the uninitiated.

All guests, regardless of their specific intentions, hoped for a comfortable stay in a welcoming home, which my parents provided through the serving and offering of food, or *paziraie*--the undisputable core of one's hospitality. I gradually came to understand that food is much more than something that joyfully fills your belly. Food is a tool so versatile that it can be used to ignore and insult or to convey affection and respect—a dual edge that makes it both a blessing, and a burden.

The meals we prepared in the kitchen and served in the living room on the long *sofreh* were always consumed by a noisy crowd, each two people carrying on a separate conversation. The standard fare was some mix of rice and meat for lunch and a lighter meal served with bread for dinner. The more favored the guests or the shorter their stay, the more colorful the *sofreh* with its side dishes and appetizers called *mokhalafaat*: *sabzi*, salad, condiments or *torshi* and mixed yogurt. Guests were invited to help themselves to the food, but were rarely left alone to have their meal in peace. Small and large dishes were rushed along the *sofreh*, shuffled around and passed from one hand to another. All the while, the cook or the hosts extended a plate of *sabzi*, or a bowl of *torshi*, or dumped a good portion of mixed rice on someone's plate without warning, urging, "Taste this one," "Eat up," "Don't you like it? Have more then." Scooping this and slipping that onto one's plate was not a practice reserved for guests; elders did it with the younger ones until they grew old enough to protest. We used to tease my aunt, much to her annoyance, because she always reached for a plump, boneless piece of meat in the stew, only to plunk it down onto the plates of the family's *boys*.

In the summer months, this gaiety was carried into the courtyard. In the evening, as soon as the sun had retreated to the rear part of the yard, we sprinkled water on its tiles and gathered around a table piled high with delights. Scarlet watermelon blushed next to cool lemon juice sherbet and slender, crunchy cucumbers. Plump, tender peaches and moist apricots seemed to dwarf the

small, sweet, pale-red cherries. I am convinced that fruits smelled much richer back home than they do anywhere else.

Ignoring the rare, unwanted visitor was easy: you simply did not make much fuss over the quantity and quality of food and *mokhalafaat* offered to them. In our house, the hospitality rules were not too complicated. Food was provided and offered with a smiling face in an unpretentious and relaxed manner, without much *ta'ruf* involved in the process. Iranians are not the only people who say things out of courtesy that they do not mean, but we have a specific name for it: *ta'ruf*.

Ta'ruf must involve at least two people, and acts like a dance of insistence and resistance that is intended to make the addressee feel welcome and wanted. *Ta'ruf* occurs when you greet someone using specific, stilted phrases; or when you ask a friend to stay over or offer them a ride when you may not truly wish for them to accept your offer. *Ta'ruf* can also be performed when you hold out a tray of sweets to your guest for the third time in half an hour. As a person with skilled *ta'ruf* manners at the receiving end, you are expected to say “no” several times before accepting the offer, whatever it might be. Problems can arise when you do not want to submit to the offer at all in the first place but your rejection is perceived merely as *ta'ruf*.

Since the offering of food is a central part of Iranian hospitality, food-related *ta'ruf*, despite being meant to please and welcome, can get downright annoying, especially for short-tempered people with little appreciation for cultural traits. Our Bushehri relatives would mock Shirazi people as excessive *ta'ruf* junkies whose participation was largely phony. Likewise, the stereotype believed by some of the capital-dwelling Tehranis suggested that the “small town people,” the *shahrestani* (everybody except them) used excessive *ta'ruf*, suggesting a quality of mixed warmth and simplicity.

All of this is sheer nonsense and intra-national prejudice. I have been in turns pleased, overwhelmed and perplexed at the homes of many Tehrani and non-Tehrani alike, both back home and in Montreal. Consider my assimilation-resistant brother-in-law, originally from Tehran, who is offended if he is not served some tea within the first ten minutes of his visit. He considers a host asking whether or not he would like some tea an indication of their reluctance to bother with making it and serving it to him. If you visited someone in Iran and they asked you upon arrival, “Would you like this or that?” or “What should I get you?” instead of simply going and getting you whatever they had at home, you could speculate to some degree of certainty that the person in question had been exposed to and influenced by some aspects of western culture.

At my brother-in-law's home, as well as the homes of my perfectly integrated Iranian friends from different cities in Iran, *ta'ruf* and *paziraie* manners are strongly retained, perhaps even enhanced. The stream of mixed nuts, peeled fruits, cheese and dip, ice cream and tea with homemade cake flows between lunch and dinner. More importantly, the hosts never sit down and relax once they have brought you a sample of everything in their fridge and on their shelves. They keep passing out a tray of this, holding out a bowl of that, all the while urging you to eat. Another aspect of the complex *ta'ruf* ritual requires the host to be extremely modest about their cooking skills, causing them to deflect any praise of the results.

I am not critical of *ta'ruf*, and definitely do not disapprove of *paziraie*. In fact, I would rather have food pressed upon me than have it be denied. No matter how engaging my host's tales or how entertaining the choice of music, I still feel neglected if I am offered a scrap of a snack in lieu of a proper dinner. As for the inter-generational, inter-cultural food manners, I suspect my

Canadian-raised nephew secretly enjoys being served a small plate full of peeled apple and orange, although he does not appreciate it when his dinner plate is invaded when his mother tries to land a fine chicken breast on it.

Doom and Gloom Inside Out

The years of family flux, abundant guests and scented kitchen were followed by the dim years of the 1980s in my household and homeland. The first year after the Islamic-revolution and the beginning of the Iran-Iraq war coincided with the loss of my father to cancer and a couple of my siblings to their emigration to Europe and Canada.

Saleheh had also left us permanently (or we had left her, to be more precise) at that point. Over the course of at least a decade after we moved into the Hedayat Street house, Saleheh had left in protest several times after disputes with Mom. Over those years, she managed to develop a network of families that would allow her to stay on as a live-in servant. Saleheh always claimed that she was a tenant or a guest in those houses, and while she moved several times in as many years, she always stayed close enough so that the children in our family could visit her regularly. Usually, Mom's temper would eventually abate, and one of us would fetch Saleheh back home after a few weeks or months.

Once my father had passed, the absence of his interventions and aura of respectful authority made the thought of returning to a life under the same roof with my mother almost unthinkable to her. The physical distance from our family gradually earned Saleheh something she had never owned before--her time. She started going to adult literacy courses at night (once she learned to sign her name as "Mrs. Abdi," she was satisfied with her accomplishments); and most importantly, she began to be paid for her labor--for the first time in her life.

Saleheh began working at temporary, seasonal, but stable and increasingly high-demand jobs. For almost all of the religious mourning ceremonies (be they for *Shitte* Imams or deceased relatives) and celebrations (paying off a vow or celebrating an Imam's birthday) held by Bushehri or other Shiraz southerners, Saleheh was hired to "sit on tea," as she put it. On several occasions I attended those memorial ceremonies and saw a beaming Saleheh at work. She sat on the carpeted kitchen floor of a house or salon among five or six simultaneously running samovars. She poured hot water into one kettle, added some black tea to a tea pot, watched the steeping and simmering processes, ordered someone to wash the glasses, poured tea into the glasses, ordered someone else to take the trays out to the crowd, all the while bragging about some incident in the past as she proudly took an unreserved drag of her cigarette--no sneaking behind the door of her room, as was the case at our house.

Watching Saleheh at work and witnessing her satisfaction helped me dismiss all of my regrets for the orderly kitchen and moderate, yet regular, meals that departed from our home along with Saleheh. No amount of contentment that Saleheh showed in her newly acquired independence, however, could overcome the guilt that I felt at not being able to give her a ride whenever she needed it, or not paying her a visit on every single cold and rainy night.

As her arthritis progressed, Saleheh was less welcome in the homes of strangers as a "tenant" and less wanted as an employee. For a few years after my father passed away and most of my siblings had left, I challenged Mom vigorously and desperately to bring Saleheh back home. Finally, I accomplished the deed myself, bringing her to our house one day after taking her to a

rheumatologist. Saleheh stayed with us another two years and shared the remains of our family's collective destiny.

The late '70s to early '80s were years of protest, struggle and hope followed by anger, anguish and despair for Iranians. A popular uprising toppled the Shah's monarchy, and the political repression embedded in it, but was immediately replaced with yet another autocracy--of the theocratic type this time around. The entire decade of 1980, which opened with the devastating, Iran-Iraq war, ushered in electricity and gasoline shortages, as well as rationed rice, cooking oil and eggs. Frustrated queues for the essential and the mundane alike seemed to sprout overnight.

Those were the years of the ruling mobs crying out, "Either a headscarf, or a knuckle to the head." Obviously, I chose the former option, only to receive chicken shit on top of it all. Thankfully, that only happened once, but it is a story that reveals much about the gloom and confusion of those years.

On an otherwise beautiful spring day in 1982, I made the humiliating trip to one of the newly established food-retail cooperatives, *ta'avoni*. These huge, godforsaken warehouses occasionally offered a limited amount of essential living items at "government-rated" low prices. One could usually find soap, tissue paper, biscuits and other items there that used to be stacked on supermarket shelves. The alternative was the black market—which few could afford.

I stood on the sidewalk for five hours with more than fifty other men and women waiting to get in too. I then passed through a curtain-separated inspection space where two "sisters" covered in black from head to toe passed their rude hands over me to make sure I was not carrying explosives or exposing any sexually provocative and thus forbidden traces of lipstick, perfume or strands of hair that might have escaped my headscarf. Having been approved as a deserving consumer of government-priced products, I finally got to the *ta'avoni* only to find that there was nothing useful left to buy. I was heading back home on an overcrowded bus which, in compliance with another Islamic rule of segregation, was divided into two sections, for "sisters" and "brothers". This was never a wise or fair regulation, because during shopping hours, women bus riders far outnumbered men. I squeezed into an aisle seat, utterly humiliated, frustrated and empty handed, when I noticed a middle-aged woman standing right above me, holding a struggling chicken tightly in her hands. She must have been returning from another queue, albeit triumphantly.

Chicken was no longer an affordable and abundant food staple to be found in the chicken shops' metal coops or on the supermarket shelves. Most people now had to wait in day-long lines to buy a rationed, live chicken and pay extra to have it killed before they could take it home to be plucked, cleaned, washed and cut before preparing it for cooking. The butchering was no longer done by the shopkeeper at the back of the store in a "professional" way; as he was now too busy running the long queue. However, if you were lucky you might spot an underpaid teacher or a laid-off worker hanging around with his knife, ready to lay the chicken by the *joob* and cut off its head for you at a small price.

Evidently, the woman on the bus had not found a killer or was unable to pay the extra money for the killing. The chicken, I presume, was under tremendous physical pressure, just like the rest of us, or so I reasoned when I felt a heavy, wet drop of something fall right on top of my headscarf. It took me a few seconds to realize where it had come from, and by then the woman was already hurriedly dabbing the shit from my head with the loose corner of her own headscarf, while juggling a now-screaming and flapping chicken and bashfully apologizing to the mute and

paralyzed mask my face had become. Looking back, I think that chicken was the only living soul on that bus that literally gave a shit about my predicament.

Chapter Three: Finding an Occasion to Eat: In and Out; Peace or War

Every occasion--sad or happy, official or casual, traditional or modern--had the potential to turn into an eating party. Even a visit to the grave at a cemetery was accompanied by the ritualistic food preparation and service. People in Shiraz gleefully ate scoops of snow topped with syrup when the weather permitted (about once a decade), and there was no shortage of eating opportunities, because we lived by two calendars with their inherent feasts--the Iranian solar calendar and the Islamic lunar one.

On *Norooz*, the deeply cherished Persian New Year, we celebrated by preparing an elaborate, special dish called mixed herb rice with fish (*sabzi-polow*) and eagerly nibbling the half-dozen types of sweets especially made for the occasion--usually at home, days in advance: baklava, chick-peas, coconut, rice cookies and my favorite, almond with honey (*sohan asali*). For twelve days we visited each and every family member and friend in the city that we were closely or remotely related to--each visit just long enough to renew our kinship ties and accept offerings of sweets, teas, fruits and mixed nuts (*aajil*). You could not refuse these offerings, even if you wanted to. Stomach pains and other discomforts were common during the holidays, and were considered a minimal price to pay for all the fun we had.

At the end of the *Norooz* festivities, on the 13th day or *sizdah-bedar*, literally “thirteen to out”, we followed tradition by going outdoors for a family picnic to play games, dance, ramp around and, of course, eat. The day started with a heavy and fancy breakfast, usually *aash* (a thick soup of various beans and herbs with or without meat) or *halim* (wheat meal with shredded lamb) and sangak bread. We bought the breakfast on our way out of the city, and then sought out a cozy spot in a green field by some pond or river that was not too crowded with other picnickers. Our search sometimes took over two hours in what we jokingly called *sizdah-dar-bedar*, “thirteen to ramble”. In such cases, we would pull over to have our *aash* or *halim* before they got too cold.

Lunch on those days always consisted of broad-bean mixed rice layered with large cubes of lamb or beef. I disliked the dish, and scornfully called it “*sizdah-bedar polow*”, as I never ate it on other occasions. The food was prepared at home, very early in the morning, and carried outdoors in a big pot along with everything else that would appear on the *sofreh*, replicating the way it would be served in the house. The end of lunch did not signal the end of the flow of food. We snacked continuously on roasted seeds, fruits and more broad beans boiled with their skin and topped with powdered thyme. When I was younger, I sat by the fire with the adults or listened to Daryoush’s melancholy songs on our battery-charged portable stereo. Once I became an adult, I ran kites or played dodge-ball. Just before heading back home around dusk, we spread out and feasted over a final *sofreh* filled with cold *kotlet* (the Iranian version of cutlet), flat bread, lettuce and the chutney-like *torshi*.

I always resented the ride back home from *sizdah-bedar*, which for me meant leaving behind the long New Year vacation at a speed of 60 km per hour to return to a dreadful pile of unfinished homework due the following morning. The task often occupied me through the night despite the knowledge that I could not possibly finish what I was assigned to do over thirteen days, not even with the help of my older siblings, who were in the same boat.

Years later in Montreal, I had a group of Iranian “old-timer” immigrant friends who spent their first summers in Canada camping throughout Quebec. “Other campers would set up their tents

and go out hiking, bird-watching or something else; we would set up our tent and start our barbeque, then eat and eat and eat,” one such friend recalled with much amusement, adding, “they must have been thinking that we were starving to death by the time we got there!”

Once the Iranian New Year festivities were over, we returned to the Islamic calendar for a good part of the year, at least for the purposes of eating and cooking. Those among the Muslim majority who wished to highlight the paying off of a vow, a charitable donation, or an achievement could pick a date from the Islamic calendar which coincided with a religious event to cook food to either share with friends and relatives or to distribute among family, friends and the poor.

With the birth and death/martyrdom of our twelve imams (including the absent one) and the prophet, and the commemoration of their wars, victories, migrations, and sisters’ or wives’ birthdates, there were at least forty such dates every year. We received small bowls of *aash* from one neighbor on *Ashura* day (the climax of *Shiite* Muslim mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Husain); a bowl of *sholeh-zard* or saffron rice pudding garnished with cinnamon and sliced almonds from a relative on the occasion of *Arbaien* (another mourning day related to the same Imam). For the first twenty years of my life, on the date marking the death of the Prophet Mohammad in the Islamic calendar, we cooked our own lamb and herb *aash* to give out as a way to pay off the vow my grandmother had once made in gratitude for my father’s health.

If you bought a house; if your child recovered from an illness; if a loved one on the other side of the planet got something you wished for them; all such occasions would call for thanking the Imam Hassan or Hossein or Zeynab or Fatemeh from whom you had initially requested an intervention. You could thank them by throwing a *sofreh-e nazri*, a wish or vow reception, which involved preparing half a dozen types of hors d’oeuvres, main and side dishes and desserts, then inviting your friends and relatives to join the party. Even if your wish had not been granted yet, you could still go ahead with a *sofreh-e nazri* as a down payment to your favorite imam. Just before the Islamic Revolution, when religion was still perceived to be a mere tradition and safely separated from all other aspects of one’s life, throwing a *sofreh-e nazri* had become fashionable among some groups of otherwise secular, modern and upper class women. The family of a newly-minted millionaire would show off their wealth and house to everyone they knew but whose paths they would not otherwise cross. They would randomly pick an imam, such as Roghayeh--who was supposed to have every meal and table dish done in the color green--and invite everyone to a reception in her honor.

I was once invited to such a reception where *hazrat-e* Roghayeh had given the host the opportunity not only to display her multi-stoned, green amethyst jewelry set, but also to show off by making an extra effort with her all-green dishes: herb soup (*aash-e sabzi*); mixed-herb rice (*sabzi polow*) with fish; egg and herb pancakes (*koo-koo sabzi*); green salad and mounds of raw, fresh *sabzi* all symmetrically arranged over a ten-meter length of green cloth that crept the length of two or three rooms.

Everyone sat around the *sofreh*, on exquisite, wall-to-wall carpeted floors as a professional female Quran reciter read a few Quranic passages--tactfully ending with *rowzeh* in order to allow the women to sob. *Rowzeh*, an integral part of *Shiite* mourning rituals, involves reciting a set of standard, tragic stories about the hardships suffered by the prophet and his family with the explicit intention of provoking weeping and wailing. The pious *Shiite* Muslims believe that this excessive show of emotion is rewarded in the after-life. Often, the depressing *rowzeh* songs

provided a pretext for people to reflect on their own personal losses and sorrows and eat their hearts out over them. And this is precisely what the all female audience gathered around *sofreh* did that day.

Abruptly, at the end of the *rowzeh*, once the heart-wrenching sobs had been stifled, hot food was rushed in and people started eating, talking and laughing just as heartily. The *sofreh* was then cleared and removed to make room for a handful of women to dance to *Baba-karam* (a cheeky Persian dance music), making erotic gestures with their shoulders, lips and eyebrows while addressing an imaginary sweetheart in their cheering, joking and giggling audience.

Our collective cooking and eating rituals were not by any means restricted to Islamic traditions. The cooking and serving of the same kinds of aash, especially *aash-e reshteh*, was very common when somebody you cared for was departing on a significant trip. That was called “*aash-e posht-e paa*,” figuratively meaning “send-off *aash*.” In addition, we had a whole set of Iranian calendar events waiting to be marked and celebrated near the end of the year. On the eve of the winter solstice, Iranians gather to celebrate *Yalda* and bring this longest night of the year to dawn by reciting Hafez or Sa’di poems, or listening to the stories of a wise grandparent. They do this while eating off-season fruits historically believed to invoke the divinities and secure the protection of the winter crop. I felt well fed on those nights, not on the spiritual foods of the poetry-reciting elders, but on the watermelon and pomegranates we had gone out of our way to find.

When people ran out of occasions to feast--official or otherwise--they grabbed a ready box or basket of spare utensils, packed a cooler full of sandwiches, fruits and other essentials and headed out to spontaneously create a reason to celebrate. Every original Shirazi family--every fun loving one that is--would picnic at least once a week, usually on Fridays. A lot of people owned or knew some friend or relative who owned a private piece of land in the suburbs, typically enclosed by short, mud walls and featuring a few fruit trees and a small pond. It was called a *baagh* or *baagh-che*, a small orchard (4), and qualified as the best possible camping spot. Not having one of those *baaghs*, or not even having a car did not prevent the bulk of Shirazi families from picnicking anyway, if only for a few hours on a Thursday evening—*sofreh* was spread over a patch of the landscaped median that separated the uptown boulevards. Alam and Motahari Boulevards were two such “picnic” locations in the mid ‘80s, when the population of Shiraz was close to one million. Clusters of dark-clothed adults and brightly colored children planted themselves on the grassy boulevard strips, cracking roasted watermelon seeds and sipping tea poured from their thermoses while cars whizzed by on both sides. Picnickers maneuvered between the illegally parked cars and freely crossed the boulevard to hail a cab or fetch another *kotlet* sandwich out of their trunks.

As non-original Shirazis, the only picnics my family had were the all-day, *sizdah-bedar* at the end of the *Norooz* holiday period. By the time I was old enough to drive my brother’s car, I had made my own outing arrangements with my girlfriends throughout the year. That was just around the time leading up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution, when I had barely managed to get my high school diploma. Studying to take the *Konkoor*, the highly competitive National University Entrance Examination for Graduate Studies, was beyond the realm of my imagination or even intention. In addition, I was too busy with anti-shah street demonstrations to bother with my educational prospects. For the next couple of years, however, I took a more active role in refusing to apply to any university with the pretence of not wishing to submit to the new regime’s rules and regulations.

The spring and summer of 1978 were the last opportunities my generation of young women in Iran had to be unconventional and yet relatively safe. All six of my girlfriends, some enrolled at Shiraz University, would join me in dressing up and dining out. In a hurried six months we savored all the existing restaurants and buffets in the city, collecting some of the most memorable moments of our friendship along the way--as if we knew they were some of our last opportunities to be together and carefree.

This adventure was not without its price. We did our best to dismiss the commonplace, lewd remarks (*matalak*) from wayward males and their rude sizing-up of each member of our group. By the time we ran out of good restaurants, we had lost half of the group's members to marriage, migration or other engagements. Sadly, we disbanded, trying to find some consolation in the fact that by the end of the spring of 1979 (the short-lived "Spring of Freedom"), public harassment had become a state sponsored affair, and the joys of our outings would have been far outweighed by the trials of being harassed. By then, the Islamic State was already initiating its ideological agenda--the Islamizing of the country. Revolutionary anti-immorality squads or *komiteh* began to raid shopping centers and other hangouts, assaulting and arresting people on charges of "immoral behavior" as a convenient and efficient way to impose the new Islamic codes of conduct.

Fortunately for us, the state-sponsored public harassment was gender blind. We were no longer intimidated by young boys hanging out in the streets because they, too, were targeted by the *komiteh*. My girlfriends and I began hanging out in pairs in such places as the Alam and Motehari intersection, lured by the wealth of food vendors in that spot catering to the hundreds of picnicking families. Alas, the Islamic regime still perceived us as threats.

In what was then the Northwestern district of the city, *Falakeh Alam*--later renamed *Falakeh Daneshjoo*, or Student Square-- the largest low-profile hangout in Shiraz was centered, around a pond of about 20 meters in diameter, with fountains that occasionally spouted water. The only building fronting the square was an ugly, nine-story cube designated as a dorm for male Shiraz University students after all the universities re-opened in 1983.⁽⁵⁾ When the large pond was dry, those boys used it as a soccer field.

On both sides of the boulevard that led to the main square were several junk food shops whose main clients were these young bachelors, and whose product competed with the barely edible dorm foods. Kiosks sold drinks, cigarettes, newspapers and cold cut sandwiches. More appealing than those shops (and their customers, one of whom I ended up marrying, nonetheless) were the hosts of nearby snack food vendors. They ran their pushcarts, stalls and makeshift grills from the late hours of the afternoon until midnight, filling the air with a curious haze of frying samosa and sausages on top of the familiar scents of roasting corn and anticipation.

On two sides of the square, off the edge of the sidewalk and facing the central, open space, food vendors stood a few meters apart to form two half curves. The *balaali*, the corn-seller, did the most business. He roasted corn on the cob over his charcoal-burning brazier, carefully lining the cobs in even rows and using a piece of cardboard to fan the flames--adjusting the temperature with a precision one would think possible only with the turning of the knob of an electric range. Once roasted to your liking, he briefly dipped the cobs into a jar of salted, hot water with a loud sizzle and handed over the heavenly treat. The small, chewy, soggy grains were mildly sweet at the core and tasty and salty on the outside. The street vendors no longer hawked their products; all you could hear now was a subdued hum hovering over the square and its surrounding streets.

Clusters of people, escaping their tiny apartments, sat on the boulevard medians, reaching all the way from the main boulevard up to “*tapeh television*,” TV Hill. The top of the hill housed the television station that overlooked the city. A clot of food vendors surrounded the small, circular space on top of the hill, selling Shiraz exclusive sour *aash-e kaardeh*, made with a wild herb by the same name found only in the Fars province. They also sold yogurt-saturated, thinly-sliced shallots and freshly shelled walnuts stacked in pyramid-shaped batches called *faal-gerdoo*.

Every once in a while the sight of an unmistakable, slow moving, yellow 4WD-- with its dark, green stripes--sent chills down our spines. The *komiteh* patrols always included at least four, fully-bearded and decidedly guerilla-looking male guards hunting their human prey. Their female colleagues, covered in black from head to toe, rode in the back of the cars and were invisible to passersby until they were commanded, I assume, to get out and fall upon a herd of females. Although these “Zeynab’s sisters” were not nearly as scary as their male counterparts, we called them “Belphégor” after the threatening demon whose villainous intentions could be made clear with a single look.

It didn’t matter if I was driving, walking or standing; at the slightest shadow of the *komiteh* truck I always reacted--like Pavlov’s dog--by pulling the top of my head scarf down on my forehead to cover any exposed strands of hair. My fear of the *komiteh* and of *paasdaar* was deep-seeded, despite the fact that the only direct assault I had received from them was a fat spit in the face in passing. The *Paasdaaraan* or members of the Revolutionary Guard Corps should not be confused with the *komiteh-chi* (the members of *Komiteh*). The former were the regime’s designated “police” force; while the latter was its “army”. This, of course, is a gross simplification of a highly sophisticated, multi-layered and ever-evolving repressive machine, but it serves to explain that the *paasdaaraan* were not charged with confiscating anti-revolutionary property, flogging drunks, hanging traffickers or arresting a “mal-covered” women. Those tasks were considered the holy duty of the moral police--the *komiteh*; and, once the war was over, of the *Basiji* forces as well.

Falakeh Daneshjoo was dark at night except for the dots of lanterns or gaslights dangling from the vendors’ stalls and kiosks, and a glow from the windows of the dorm building when the power was up and running. The affluent houses around the square or off the two boulevards leading to it, cast no light, perhaps because doing so would attract unwanted attention. I always noticed when I drove north on Alam boulevard up the hill towards TV Hill, that the people were sitting on the boulevard median with the bright stars as their only light. More often than not they were there because of a blackout, not in spite of it.

Malicious rumor had it that Shiraz did not receive its “fair” share of Iraqi missile strikes compared to other large cities like Isfahan or Tabriz. While we may have escaped the shelling, no city escaped the economic stagnation that resulted in frequent and serious energy shortages. Indeed, no individual escaped that deep, drilling sound of air-raid siren. Blackouts on hot, summer nights brought many apartment dwellers to the streets, especially those who were displaced because of the war. People would gather for a few hours on the balding grass of the uptown boulevard medians for a breath of fresh air snatched between gusts of traffic exhaust, and the threatening patrols of the *komiteh*. They managed somehow to create their own light with a short fit of illegally loud laughter, a mouthful of roasted corn or a moment of hand-holding.

Leaving One Home for Another

In the first few years after the revolution, the life drained from our kitchen as it was gradually deprived of its natural heartbeat. We cooked and ate, but we did so by sheer instinct, almost out of a sense of duty. My memories of those years are pale from the lack of tastes, textures and smells. Sadly, our kitchen lived long enough to witness my stroke-stricken mother needing a helping hand to even cut a slice of watermelon for herself. She was too weak now to squabble with the almost-crippled Saleheh, who spent most of her time reclining in the former guest dining room off the kitchen. She could hear Mom nagging, but, as before, only mumbled back. The cheerless kitchen seemed listless without its two cooks who now needed to be fed themselves. Mom lived to see Saleheh leave for good, just a year prior to my own migration west.

When I left Iran in 1989, a decade into the Islamic Revolution, I was leaving behind an economically, socially and politically troubled homeland as well as an idle life and household. Fortunately, my departure meant a return to family. I joined my immediately older brother and sister, already settled in Montreal, in a refreshingly new home with its own colorful kitchen life. We were soon joined, one after another, by other siblings and their families. By the time our second house in Shiraz was demolished and replaced by an apartment building, all of its former residents were either dead or reborn abroad. There are many people and places in Iran I cannot tell you about because I never got to know them before I left the country. There are many others whose stories I can share because I carry them within me.

Book II: Three Meals a Day – and Much More

In looking back at the bright side of my past while embracing my current daily joys, all I see is good food and vigorous cooking. Next to every platter, I hear an anecdote and behind each story, I recall a taste. Having three meals each day is customary for Iranians, especially those living in Iran. We eat all three meals like royalty even when we are closer to paupers.

I could not fathom entertaining an invited visitor without preparing and serving at least one full, colorful meal. A popular Persian expression goes “There is warmth at our house, if not wealth; there is God’s light at a house which has warmth.” I cannot promise any such light, but I most certainly hope that all who sit at my *sofreh* find warmth, if not wealth.

Chapter One: *Kaleh-pacheh* for Breakfast (Served with Tea and Bread)

Like *aash* (a thick soup of beans and herbs, with or without meat) and *halim* (wheat meal with shredded lamb), *Kaleh-pacheh* is a traditional Iranian breakfast that requires far too much preparation to be included in a daily meal. The typical Iranian breakfast usually consists of flat bread, tea, butter and a variety of fruit jams, including quince, black cherry, carrot, apple and strawberry, served with a selection of white and feta cheeses, walnuts, milk and scrambled or boiled eggs.

When viewed cross-culturally and from a vegetarian perspective, *kaleh-pacheh* may not be *the* most shameful, unethical and aesthetically disgusting animal product that humans choose to eat, but it most certainly makes it onto the list. If you fancy Scottish *haggis* (sheep's liver and lungs boiled in its stomach) or Greek *kokoretsi* (stuffed sheep's intestine), or Jewish *petcha* (calf's feet), then I'm sure you will love Iranian *kaleh-pacheh*. The dish is a smorgasbord of the most unlikely animal offal: all parts of the head, feet and tripe of a sheep or lamb cooked together to make a thin soup.

Kaleh-pacheh, or *kalepch* as some have affectionately nicknamed it, is a bold culinary statement that defies any attempt at disguise. It is not for those who need to distance themselves from the animal in their meals. We Iranians don't try to transform cows into beef or pigs into pork. Neither do we conceal the source of our meat products by neatly packing them beneath cellophane and lifting them from supermarket shelves. No, we get our meat from the local butcher's shop, where the skinned animal is cleaved lengthwise in two parts and hung upside down from a hook in a giant refrigerator. Every other edible animal part--from fillets, kidneys and shoulders, to tails, fat and bone--are either displayed behind a glass counter for the "haves" to choose from, or in the case of less desirable parts, covered and stored in a back fridge for the "have-nots" who typically can't afford a choice.

The bold terminology insures that there is no danger of mistaking *kaleh-pacheh* for some mysteriously refined dish. In Persian, *kaleh* means "head" and *pacheh* means "feet". There are other terms for both "head" and "feet"--*sar* for head and *paa* for feet--so one might wonder why we don't call the dish *sar-paa*, like the Pakistanis' Urdu name for a similar breakfast dish, *siri-paya*. In truth, *kaleh* and *pacheh* are much cruder terms than *sar* and *paa*, and they do not evoke human body parts as the terms *sar* and *paa* do. So calling the dish *kaleh-pacheh* allows us to distinguish ourselves from cannibals while at the same time celebrating our predatory roots.

Every *kaleh-pacheh* devotee has their favorite taste sensations. I love the soft, squashy brain, but not as much as I enjoy the tender and grainy tongue. I'm not crazy about the face, ears and stomach. Some say the tongue is for the average eater, while the eyeballs should be left to professionals. I can attest to this. Do not try to pierce the slippery eyeball with a fork. Instead, scoop it up and pop it into your mouth whole. Bon appétit!

When I was young, those who liked offal not only proudly used each organ's real names, they also theorized about their qualities and functions. Eating brain at a young age supposedly made you a brainy person--indisputable science compared to the half-serious suggestion that a child's passion for a certain animal's organ was linked to their future career. One might say "Mohsen will become a heart surgeon," upon learning that he liked chicken's heart. With the promise of

such a bright future, great quantities of heart were fetched for him and forked onto his plate. This almost always assured that Mohsen quit liking the heart all together.

Matters don't get any more elegant when it comes to the preparation and cooking of the dish. It is almost always prepared professionally by specialty restaurants called *kaleh-pazi* or "head-cookery," because it is too difficult, time-consuming and malodorous to be prepared at home. The situation is different for expatriate *kalepch* -devotees, who have little choice but to prepare it themselves. Let me take you now to the *kaleh-pazi* where the dish is being prepared.

The most difficult part is the cleaning stage. The feet are thoroughly "waxed," to remove all the hair and leave the skin. The head is skinned and then banged against a hard surface to shake out worms living inside the nostrils. All the parts are thoroughly washed, including the stomach, which consists of tripe (*siraabi*) and abomasum (*shirdaan*).

Once clean, all the parts are brought to a boil in a big pot, topped off with lots of water. The boiled water must be discarded at least twice before the parts are covered with fresh, cold water for a final cooking procedure. Under normal circumstances, the only vegetables and spices added to the water are a couple big onions, a few cloves of garlic, one teaspoon of turmeric and pinches of salt and black pepper. Depending on one's sensitivity to the foul smell and the location in which the dish is being prepared, some people use cinnamon or a combination of other fragrant herbs like thyme, bay leaves and sage. After bringing this third batch of water to a boil, the pot is loosely covered, the heat is slightly reduced and the mixture is cooked for at least five to six hours--until the feet and stomach are completely tender, the face falls off the bony part of the head and the head itself can easily be broken open to remove the tongue, eyes and other parts. At this final stage, the thin, pale-yellow broth should be barely covering the solid ingredients.

In an ideal world, *kaleh-pacheh* is eaten steaming hot, fresh from the *kaleh-pazi* as an early breakfast, either on the spot or, less favorably but more frequently, as take out for the whole family. The tasty broth may be added to each animal part when they are served separately, at a restaurant, for instance. Some people like to slurp the stock from a bowl or dip their bread into it. *Kaleh pacheh* is often sprinkled with fresh or bottled lime juice, especially when not too many flavor-moderating spices and vegetables have been added to the cooking water. For the younger, trendier groups of *kalepch* lovers, lime tea is taken after the meal, in an effort to reverse or reduce the negative effects of the dish's high cholesterol. *Kaleh-pacheh* and Iranian flat bread (*sangak* or *barbari*) make a complete breakfast that knocks you down for a few hours before energizing you enough to go without another meal for a full day.

A final note on the taste of *kaleh-pacheh*, in case you've never tried it before. Personally, I have a love/hate relationship with the dish. As a child, I earned the nickname "*kaleh*-killer" from my dad because apparently, each time we had it for breakfast, I bugged the people sitting close to me to scrape my favorite parts into small pieces and then wolfed them down before they had a chance to get their own fair share. In my family, siblings never ever squabbled over the savory parts of a platter, be it tongue or the crunchy *tah-digh* of rice or just enough Shirazi salad to accompany one more *kotlet*. We left those jewels for the most favored or desperate among us. I must have been a real pain in the neck then to be labeled a *kaleh*-killer. Fortunately for others, for a good several years afterwards, the smell of the meal turned me off of it completely. I fell back in love with it in my early twenties, only to reject it once again during my life in the Diaspora. However, I find it exhilarating to describe.

Back in the early '70s, before the rush of Iranian emigration resulting from the 1979 Islamic Revolution, there was a *kaleh-pacheh* joke going around that targeted Iranians living abroad. The joke, allegedly based on more than one true incident, ran like this: There is this Iranian man living in a tiny apartment in London. One day his neighbor, living in the apartment below, notices with horror some blood dripping from the bathroom ceiling. Convinced a murder has occurred, she immediately calls the cops, who in turn show up at the Iranian guy's door only to discover that he has slaughtered a sheep in his bathtub to quench his uncontrollable craving for *kaleh-pacheh*, which is otherwise not to be found anywhere in London. The point of the story was not how likely the incident might have been or how badly the pal must have wanted *kaleh-pacheh*, or even how on earth he was going to transform the mess into an edible meal. The moral of the story was that desiring *kaleh-pacheh* in *kharej*, and going about satisfying that desire, was considered a culturally inappropriate, even barbaric act that must be avoided at any cost. No one would have predicted that in less than two decades, the Iranian Diaspora of some three million would have found their *kaleh-pazi* readily available in Los Angeles and Toronto and other cosmopolitan cities.

If you don't live in a cosmopolitan city outside of Iran, the preparation of *kaleh-pacheh* is still left up to you. Take the Prague-residing, *kalepch*-devotee friend who, disappointed with the Algerian version of *kalepch* cuisine, has not only taken the cooking operation out to his garage, but has come to an important discovery: adding a teaspoon of dried lovage (6), which apparently grows in his garden all year long, works like a charm in absorbing the fetid odor, thereby warding off otherwise offended and complaining neighbors.

It was not until I had settled in Canada in the '90s that I understood the immigrant's side of the whole *kaleh-pacheh* dilemma. In 1998, just before the infamous Montreal ice storm, a group of us (three couples, all Iranian) attended a public New Year's party in a downtown hotel. We danced, wine and dined the night away--readily embracing the Western-Christian festivities. Around 3:30 in the morning, when we were getting ready to head back home, my cousin, who had travelled from Toronto for the holidays, was suddenly hit by a massive urge for *kaleh-pacheh*. He asked us, his hosts, if there was a *kaleh-pacheh* restaurant in Montreal, and we realized that we had no idea. His alcohol-fueled desperate desire for *kaleh-pacheh* drove him straight to the hotel's receptionist, whom he asked--as naturally as if he were speaking in English--"*injaa maghazeh kale-pacheh-ie kojast?*"

"Pardon me?" the confused receptionist politely inquired.

My cousin pleaded with her, "*Kaleh-pacheh. Kaleh-pacheh? Don't you even know what kaleh-pacheh is?!*", throwing his arms in the air in frustration and shaking his head. We finally dragged him away, some of us carrying the lingering thought of having *kaleh-pacheh* at the perfect time. For someone familiar with *kaleh-pacheh* culture, my cousin's drunken search was actually perfectly timed. The *kaleh pazi* cook starts the procedure in the evening and slow-cooks the animal parts until dawn. Some cooks soak the head and feet for eight hours and discard the water before starting to cook it in fresh water--an alternative to discarding the boiled water. Usually by 3:30 in the morning the meal is served, or taken out, and the shop is closed for the day by seven or eight o'clock. *Kaleh-pacheh* marks the end of a full night. Before calling a close to a very late evening, the most proper thing to do is to treat oneself to a tempting, hot meal of *kaleh-pacheh* on the way home. The dish can also mark the beginning of an extraordinary day, such as when you are leaving on a trip. *Kaleh-pacheh* goes hand-in-hand with odd, early morning hours when you can barely keep your eyes open. Homemade *kaleh-pacheh*, *kaleh-*

pacheh for dinner and warmed up frozen *kaleh-pacheh* are all anomalies and cultural deviances, if you ask me.

While my cousin's overwhelming craving at dawn on the New Year in Montreal was a perfectly legitimate one, we did not know then that there were several Iranian restaurants in town that would have been willing to accommodate him. They regularly served *kaleh-pacheh* for breakfast. On that particular night we came home, once again embracing two cultures simultaneously but having neither one at hand.

Simply Tea

For as long as he lived, my father was the tea expert in our household--the one who meticulously oversaw the steaming process and occasionally served the routine morning and after-lunch teas, but only to family members or a visitor that also happened to be a very close and dear relative. Serving visitors tea was typically the job of a younger female member of the family. My dad's self-appointed position was partly inspired by the fact that he was a tea aficionado--a talent of which all his friends and relatives were well aware. Wherever he went, whether the stay was short or long, he was served tea within moments of his arrival.

If he was offered a cup at a temperature lower than scalding hot, my father would take the "insult" quite humorously by quaffing the tea in one gulp and rising to his feet to leave the table while saying, loudly and clearly, "Peace with the Prophet and the descendants of the Prophet" (an Arabic salutation that one recites when drinking a nice, cooling iced sherbet). If he was served tea with even the slightest trace of white bubbles on its surface (an indication that the water was added to the tea before coming to a full boil), or if any portion of the tea leaves still floated on the surface (another indication that the tea was not given enough brewing time), he would offer another witty remark like, "This was a fully-poor, freshly-boiled, well-stewed tea!"

We all enjoyed and welcomed his expertise, sometimes taking advantage of it. Once, when I was about fourteen, we had just finished lunch and I was darting back and forth between the kitchen and living room, helping to bring in the dishes for Saleheh to wash. My dad, in the middle of a heated conversation, heard the kettle's water coming to a boil and asked me to make the tea. I went to the kitchen with the best of intentions and stood over the boiling kettle, staring at the dry, curled tea leaves in the teapot ready to be steeped. Suddenly, I decided against it. I went back to the living room and politely interrupted my dad. "Dad! The kettle refuses to let me pour it into the teapot," I said, innocently. "It says, 'Go get your dad, I submit only to him!'" Everyone chuckled, looking in Dad's direction and not knowing what to expect. Without hesitation, he picked up my game and feigned a surprised, angry expression. "She is lying through her teeth, the little devil!" he protested to our audience, "These are not the kettle's true words!" Then he immediately rose and headed to tend to the screaming kettle, amidst everyone's joyous laughter.

Tea is an essential part of breakfast that can even serve as breakfast on its own. Everyone's day begins with tea, regardless of how poor, rich, lonely, or busy they are or what age, gender or religious category they belong to. This is true in Iran, at least, where tea is the national beverage and certain nonnegotiable rules about the preparation and the drinking of tea must be respected.

These nonnegotiable tea rules include the following:

Real tea is black tea. Green, white, yellow and oolong teas are to be experimented with, but must never replace black tea.

Preparing tea involves the steeping and simmering (*dam kardan* or steaming) of loose, processed tea leaves. Teabags are quick fixes, and good only when you are feeling too down to treat yourself properly, or when you are obligated to serve an unwanted visitor.

Tea is sipped from small, delicate glasses called *estekan* that allow one to see its translucent mahogany color while relishing its flavor. *Estekan* come in many shapes, but the most authentic is the gold-rimmed *kamar-baarik* with a curve in the middle, its name calling to mind a fine, “slim-waist” woman. Drinking tea from simple whiskey glasses is permitted for Iranian exiles without access to the proper glassware, and drinking it from large, standard glasses is also allowed for down-to-earth, self-confessed tea addicts, but drinking tea from a cup or a mug is for other cultures.

There are some secondary tea rules as well that vary according to different regions, households and tastes. These rules may be stretched and bent to some extent. There is a famous, dare-to-drink saying to the effect that tea must be *labriz*, brimful, *labsooz*, lip-burning, and *labdooz*, lip-sewing or astringent. The “brimful” part is harmless, of course, provided you are not too clumsy, but a lip-burning beverage can obviously be dangerous. While it is true that “some like it hot,” like my father did, it is also common to pour hot tea and let it cool a bit before drinking it. Adding cold water to the tea is usually reserved for kids, and iced tea is a completely foreign concept.

In Iran’s teahouses (*chai-khaneh*) and rural areas it is very common to pour the tea from the *estekan* into its accompanying saucer (*nalbeki*), then slurp it from the saucer through a lump of hard sugar held in the mouth. The practice might have sprung from attempts to adjust the tea’s temperature, or perhaps it gained popularity purely for the fun factor, but it seems to have been abandoned in the Diaspora—probably due to the aesthetics of slurping in public. As for the “astringent” part of the saying, I am positive that not everyone agrees with it. Tea made in the teapot is strong in taste and dark in color, so that when one pours it into the *estekan* the kettle’s water can be used to dilute the tea to various degrees according to the drinker’s taste.

The next of these secondary tea rules is that sugar-sweetened tea is only taken in the morning with breakfast. Tea enjoyed throughout the day and night is taken plain accompanied by cookies and sweets or with sugar cubes on the side (*dishlameh*). My eldest sister visited me from Iran just recently, and was disappointed to find me sweetening my after-lunch tea with sugar cubes. “Why use sugar *cubes* if you want to dissolve it in your tea?!” she wondered, “A cube’s grains are supposed to dissolve in your mouth and mix with the unsweetened tea, you know.” I had no logical explanation to give for my lapse.

Another secondary tea rule is that you always serve your visitors fresh tea, more than once, in a tray — held patiently at a convenient height, without a saucer only if the *estekan* has a handle. Both loose sugar and sugar cubes have their place on the tray, while small sweets might be added for the second round.

There is one final rule that falls somewhere between nonnegotiable and secondary: only a pure, black tea or a fragrant mix of such teas must be consumed and served. Scented teas and additives are typically used only on certain occasions and for specific reasons. Adding dried, sour orange blossom or *bahaar-e naaranj* is popular, especially in Shiraz where the tree is found

in almost every garden. Various other dried flowers and herbs can be added to black tea for different reasons. For example, dried chamomile, thyme and saffron are added for their medicinal quality and lively color. Cinnamon and ginger are favored in cold climates, while lime tea is used to reverse or reduce the negative effects of high-cholesterol dishes like *kaleh-pacheh*. One cannot just add any kind of herb, flower or spice to Iranian tea. If, in the pretence of serving real, Iranian tea one were to soak a fistful of Lipton teabags in a large teapot and add a few cardamom seeds to make it smell exotic, they would not be fooling anyone.

Preparing a decent tea, Iranian-style, is a simple yet delicate task that requires time and attention. The alchemy begins by crafting a blend of Iranian or imported tea, usually Indian Darjeeling and Asam black teas, to achieve the best flavor, color and taste. The water is brought to a boil in an enameled kettle, then some is added to the tea leaves in a china teapot. Some people rinse the tea leaves first by swirling the boiling water around the pot and pouring it out once. Others warm the teapot and *estekan* in this way as well.

Once boiling water has been added to the tea, turn the heat low and return the kettle to the stove, placing the teapot right on top of the kettle and allowing it to sit amidst the steam for ten to fifteen minutes. The idea is to keep the teapot's temperature steady until the tea leaves have properly settled at the bottom. This can also be done by keeping the teapot close to the direct source of heat, or by taking it away and covering it with an eiderdown for a few minutes. The first alternative requires more attention and skill, so as not to spoil the tea by bringing it to a boil. A samovar is not essential to make a traditional tea, because a kettle and a pot do exactly the same job. We had an electric samovar in Iran that gathered dust in our storage room, and while I have seen many more in the Diaspora, they tend to be hand-made affairs with gold-plating that serve only as decorative items.

The amount of tea used per serving and the length of the steaming stage are both crucial in determining the quality of the final product. Too short a steaming process does not allow the release of the desired theine (a substance in tea, similar to the caffeine of coffee) in the black tea, while too long a process evokes the release of tannin, which makes the tea bitter. Tea tastes its best when it is sipped immediately after being freshly-steamed (*taazeh dam*), not, as my father used to tease, "freshly boiled".

Bread: The Stuff of Life and Life Itself

Because Iranian bread is always flat, we do not call it "flatbread" but simply bread, *naan* or *noon*. Different types of bread, always made from wheat flour, are distinguished by shape (oval, round or triangle), size, thickness, baking procedure, texture and taste. In Persian, *naan* also means "food" linguistically speaking--the stuff of life. Not all, but most meals are accompanied by bread, and a breakfast without bread is not a breakfast at all!

During my childhood and adolescence in Shiraz, before the uprising of the late 1970s, the only regular queue I had seen and stood in was the one for purchasing daily bread--the most affordable, inflation-resistant and essential food item. Bread was baked three times a day before each of the main meals in the bakeries (the *naanvaayi*). No matter what type of bread or what time of day, the delicious aroma wafting from the bakeries never failed to charm the stomach. Most households, at least those with servants, bought hot-out-of-the-oven bread each day for that day's consumption.

The typical *tanur* (also called *tandur*, *tandar* and *tandir* in other parts of Asia and the Middle East) in Iran's urban bakeries is a large, deep, dome-shaped oven that projects from the wall of each small bakery. It is made of clay and traditionally fired to a high heat by charcoal or wood. A bakery began its daily operations only after the *tanur* was brought to a certain temperature, and could keep on operating at the same speed and quality only if the *tanur* was kept at a constant heat. Evidently, this task became much easier when Mazut, and much later gasoline, replaced charcoal and wood as the *tanurs'* fuel.

The *tanur* was so hot that if you were at the head of the bakery's line, you could feel the heat flowing off the blazing *tanur* so forcefully that its reflection could be seen in the baker's sweating forehead as he bent and stretched his hand deep inside to stick a loaf to the inner wall of the dome. The size and shape of *tanurs* varied for baking different types of bread, as did the tools used to insert and remove loaves. Sangak bread is made in large *tanurs* with curved surfaces covered in small river stones (*sang*). A paddle-shaped tool is used to flatten the dough and insert the loaf, while a long-handled stick is used to pull out the baked bread.

Inside the bakery, a handful of men in stained, white aprons each engaged in their own specialized link in the bread-making chain. The dough-maker (*khamir-gir*) mixed the flour, water, yeast and salt, then kneaded it using the heels of his hand before letting it rest. The ball-maker (*chooneh-gir*) shaped the slightly-risen dough into small, precise balls of equal shape, size and weight called *chooneh*. Every fifty *chooneh* or so, the ball-maker would weigh one, just to ensure that his skillful and experienced hands were accurate. The ball maker, or a third man called the bread-maker (the *noon-pahn-kon*), rolled the balls on a flour-dusted counter into 10 or 12-inch ovals using a rolling pin and the tips of his fingers along the edges. Then another person, usually a young boy without title or special skills, made a quick zigzag line of holes in the loaves with his roulette.

The main baker, or *shaater*, stuck the loaves inside the *tanur* and sometimes removed them as well (other times, an assistant handled the removal). The *shaater* stretched and further shaped the loaf on a slightly curved, stiff pad that he then used to slap the loaf right against the inside of the *tanur's* wall. Before his eyes, the loaf puffed to the appropriate thickness as the cooking dough slowly lost its grip on the wall. The *shaater* danced in front of the roaring *tanur*, tending to each and every loaf, waiting for the perfect moment to hook each with his poke just before it fell from its own weight. The nicely baked, crispy breads emerged from the *tanur* one by one and were each whisked separately to a nearby counter to avoid having their heat soften the other breads. From there, the last working man, the cashier, took the breads and threw them on a wide counter that separated the store from the customers. He counted the breads and handed them out to each customer after taking their money. The cashier was usually the owner of the bakery, and wore regular clothes instead of a stained, white apron like the others.

Of all the tasks and positions involved in the process of bread making and baking, that of the *shaater* was considered the most significant; akin to a restaurant chef. For one thing, the *shaater* was among the very few positions that make it onto the list of professional titles in Iran--perhaps the only one among blue-collar jobs.

Bakeries were closed only for the national holidays dedicated to the mourning of an imam or prophet. In fact, extremely pious Muslims tended to avoid cooking at their homes on those days all together. "Today is not a day to bake," they would say, as if the strong association between baking or cooking and a celebration of life was evident. On those rare occasions when a bakery

was going to shut down for the day, the city required its owner to bake twice as many breads the previous day to provide people with an adequate supply.

The vibrant bustle of life inside the bakeries extended well beyond its doors. On the sidewalk, there were always long queues of people in their most casual clothes--even pajamas and slippers depending on the time of the year and the part of the city--each holding a bag or a cotton *sofreh* in which to wrap the breads and preserve their heat. Holding a warm loaf close to the body provided a pleasant, cozy comfort, and few simple pleasures could beat tearing off a fresh chunk to eat on your way home from the bakery.

Before the Islamic Revolution, two separate lines stretched along the sidewalk on opposite sides of a bakery: an express line for those wanting only one loaf; and a regular line for everyone else. Once the Islamic government established its rules of segregation, we still had two separate main lines, but now each of these lines was also split in two--one for men and the other for women--making the sidewalk traffic even more chaotic than before.

The length of the wait depended on many factors. If you were too early and the *tanur* was not yet hot enough, you had to wait longer. Visits to bakeries that made their bread in batches (like *barbari*) and not continuously (like *sangak*) required more precise timing in order to arrive at the right moment. One could usually count on a fifteen to twenty-minute wait in a bread line.

Standing in a bread line was not a prestigious task, and certainly not an entertaining one--pre or post revolution--but it was a constant, essential job that rotated among many household members. Typically the bread lines were occupied by young boys between the ages of six and sixteen, when they were most likely to bend to the will of the family; male middle-aged heads of the family; female middle-aged heads of the family (with or without a child) and somebody in one or more of the above categories who also served as a maid or an errand boy. It was very unlikely to see an obviously wealthy or professional man or woman of any age in the bread line. It was equally improbable to see a girl or young woman of any social standing in the bread line, unless they dressed down for the occasion or covered up with a light *chador*. Standing in the all-female, post-revolutionary bread lines where everybody was forced to dress down and cover up was admittedly a less cumbersome task for young girls and women--particularly because everyone, including amorous cat-callers, suddenly had bigger problems to worry about.

The bakery closest to our new house in Shiraz sold a type of bread called *bazari*, which is specific to Shiraz. *Bazari* bread is similar in baking style and taste to the nationally-known *taftoon* bread, but it is made of a less finely-ground, white flour and produces a thinner loaf with smaller holes. *Taftoon*, in turn, is much like Indian “*naan*.” Our neighborhood also had a specialized bakery for *sangak*--bread made of brown flour and shaped into a triangle. *Sangak* is notably larger than the other types of bread-- large enough to feed a few people-- and it is occasionally topped with poppy or sesame seeds. When handed to you in the bread line, *sangak* may still contain one or two pebbles, hot enough to burn eager hands.

Shiraz did not have the other two main types of Iranian breads: *lavaash* and *barbari*. *Lavaash* is the thinnest and softest of the four types, made of unleavened dough in round or oval shapes. *Barbari* is almost as thick and fluffy as *sangak*, but made in a regular *tanur* in an oval shape. To compensate for the bread we were missing, Shiraz produced another unique kind, called *mashhadi*. Contrary to what the name suggests, this bread had nothing to do with the city of Mashhad. In fact, the owners, workers and founders were Afghans, who had fled their war-ravaged country beginning in the early '70s. Apparently, they imported their hometown bread-

baking tradition, and I can only speculate that they called it *mashhadi* because many Afghans referred to themselves as Mashhadi as protection against widespread discrimination. The fairly thick *mashhadi* bread was baked in a unique type of *tanur* that sat on the ground or had been dug out of the ground.

As a rule, all three types of leavened, bakery-made Iranian breads (*taftoon*, *barbari* and *sangak*) were delicious for a day, then began to taste stale. *Mashhadi* bread was delectable while hot, but lost its freshness within a few hours. Any type of bread, including *mashhadi*, could be frozen fresh and it would regain its freshness for a few hours upon reheating.

The prices of different types of bread in Iran generally reflected their bulk. If *sangak* was twice as expensive as *lavaash*, it was also twice as big or thick. More importantly, the price of bread was, and continues to be, very low in relation to all other essential food items.

During the eight-year Iran-Iraq war, when the country underwent its most devastating economic period and gasoline and many essential goods were rationed, the ruling Islamic government was wise enough to make bread a target of significant subsidies--which prevented a rise in its price. Consequently, the quality of bread dropped just as significantly, to the extent that people began forgetting how real bread tasted. During the post war era--a time the government referred to as reconstruction (*saazandegi*) --the quality and price of bread fluctuated dramatically, then settled somewhere in the middle. Regular bakeries sold awful *sangak* for one *Toomaan* (T) while a single bakery made excellent *sangak* for 20T. Later, acceptable *sangak* could be bought at 10T. Today, the government continues to grant partial subsidies to bread. As a result, while the prices of most commodities continue to skyrocket, bread remains the item most immune to inflation. I have been told that, by the mid 2000s, one *sangak* ran 100T and a smaller, lighter *taftoon* cost 60T. Twenty T. would buy five or six very thin, light *lavaash*. During the same period, a small pack of crackers was 250T, and lamb was 7000T per kilo.

The *bazari* bakery in our neighborhood was owned by my best friend's father and was run by her older, over-protective brothers. That bakery, like a hundred of its kind scattered throughout the city, went through the gradual and inevitable process of modernization and mechanization, much to the disappointment of older generations that loved traditional, hand-made bread--a generation that I have increasingly come to realize I belong to. For many years, machine-made and baked bread, *naan-e machini*, had to stand its ground against people who labeled it "photocopy bread" before it was finally accepted. Today, a large majority of bakeries in Shiraz produce their various types of bread by machine and only require one or two men to run and supervise the operation. On a nostalgic note, the old *bazari* bakery is the only survivor of twenty-five years of demolition, reconstruction, development and renovation in my home town.

"If it wasn't for the Azam family's bakery," my sister, Naubi, exclaimed, after returning from a trip to Iran, "I would have never recognized our old neighborhood!"

Egg Wrap under Palm Tree

In the spring of 1980, I spent ten days in a small town in the Fars province, called Laar. I was visiting my eldest sister, who was living there temporarily to teach English to high school students. The tall, talkative old landlady who had rented one room in her big house to my sister was called *Maadar-e* Fazlollah (meaning Fazlollah's mother). She made me an unforgettably unique and delicious breakfast from an egg and some bread she baked on a small *taaveh*--a flat,

sometimes slightly curved, round iron griddle. By the time my sister left for work each morning, *Maadar-e* Fazlollah had already made her quick and sloppy run of daily sweeping around the house. She then settled on a short stool in front of a stand-alone oil burner, topped by her *taaveh*, in the middle of her large, walled yard under a four-story-tall palm tree.

She placed a small round of dough in the middle of the hot *taaveh* and swiftly flattened it with her bare fingers. She then broke an egg onto the baking bread. A few seconds later she tucked the two sides of the bread tightly together, turned the wrap over for a few more seconds, and removed it from the *taaveh*. It took only a couple of minutes (and 85 years of experience) to produce the delicious wrap, with the thin bread and scrambled egg artfully blended together.

Maadar-e Fazlollah called the dish *ni-na-noo*, but judging from her imaginative mind and creative tales, she might have made up the name and the dish on the spot. I never ate that food in Iran again, nor did I ever hear its name.

I remember *ni-na-noo* so well and long for it because such a creative use of bread is fairly rare in Iranian cuisine. When bread is not taken alone as a snack, it is used to scoop food or make *terit*, or *telit* (soaking small pieces of bread in the liquid of a specific dish, such as *aab-goosht*, or *doogh*). I wish I had thought to ask *Maadar-e* Fazlollah if she added seasonings to the dish, because the taste of the ensemble was so richly balanced that it haunts me to this day.

In Iranian cities and big towns, the highly skilled, professional task of Iranian bread-making is an exclusively male endeavor. In the villages, only women bake bread--mostly for their families' consumption, but occasionally as a meager source of income. A woman might bake the daily bread in a small hole of a *tanur* dug into the ground, and fired by dried brush, wood or charcoal. She uses the same techniques and tools used by urban bakeries to produce different types of breads. Ten years prior to the *ni-na-noo* experience, I stayed with the same sister (Pari) teaching the same subject in another small town in the nearby province of Sepidan (a village with an extremely cold climate, unlike the unbearably hot Laar). I was ten at the time, and I remember that her landlady, whose name I fail to recall (probably because she did not make me breakfast), used to get together with other neighbors to bake piles of small, round, fluffy bread in her *tanur* and sell it to her teacher tenants.

Village women also used round *taaveh* (like that of *Maadar-e* Fazlollah) to make extremely delicate, light, thin breads generically called *taaveh* bread. *Taaveh* bread, made of unleavened dough, became dry and crispy soon after being baked but did not go stale quickly. It was a good standby during hard times when food was scarce and daily baking was impossible. You could crunch the dry bread as a cracker or dunk it in milk or broth. Sprinkling a little water on the loaves quickly transforms them into a soft and delicious treat. In Shiraz, we used to buy *taaveh* breads in the hundreds, from village women peddling in the downtown bazaar, and keep them in a cool place as a savory indulgence. They were as inexpensive as common types of bread, but not readily available. I loved the crispy form as a midnight snack, and imagined myself a prowling mouse gnawing on a giant round of *taaveh* bread, listening to its crackle in the still dark of the food storage room.

All types of bread, from the paper-thin *taaveh* and soft *lavaash* to the crunchy *taftoon* and spongy *sangak*, make excellent breakfast fare. There are no written or unwritten rules about which bread goes with what food, but *sangak* and *barbari* are great for scooping morning *aash* or *kaleh-pacheh*. Any of the other kinds work for forming small wraps of cheese, butter and scrambled eggs. While all types of bread are appropriate for breakfast, there are a few kinds that

are suitable *only* for breakfast, like *naan e shirmal* or “bread made with milk”. This is made by adding milk, eggs and some sugar to the main bread’s ingredients. Sugar bread (*naan-e ghandi*) is another example, although in my opinion it belongs in the pastry category.

Iranians in the Diaspora bemoan the dearth of bread choices, and reluctantly try to replace old favorites with other Middle Eastern flatbreads; only to finally settle for pita bread. Pita is the most abundant kind of flatbread found in Iranian supermarkets and the most commonly adopted bread in Iranian households in exile for good reason. With the help of a “pinch of pardon,” as the poet, Sohrab Sepehri puts it, pita is the closest to Iranian flatbread--light, not intrusively spicy or rich; inexpensive and readily available. Professional Iranian bakeries continue to crop up in large North American cities, but no matter how good their breads might be, they are doomed to be inferior to those of our memories.

Chapter Two: *Ghalyeh* and Rice for Lunch

Lunch is the main meal in Iran. Before I left in 1981 almost everyone returned home for a couple of hours around noon to have a fairly heavy meal and a brief siesta before returning to work. Most government employees finished their day around 2:00 p.m., which meant eating a still-warm meal at a smaller *sofreh*, sometimes alone, once all the school children were fed and gone.

Most lunches consist of rice (plain, white *chelow* or mixed *polow*) and a meat stew or *khoresh*. *Chelow* must always accompany *khoresh*, but *polow*--layered with cooked or fried grains and herbs, vegetables, prunes or fruits—can serve as a complete dish as long as it is accompanied by appetizers and side dishes; condiments, salad and raw, fresh herbs. It's both fascinating and inspiring, the way these two essential Iranian dishes of rice and meat-stew are used to produce a dizzying array of tastes. All types of *khoresh* (and all other dishes that involve boiling as opposed to frying or grilling) are started in the same way, using four ingredients: cooking oil, fried onions, turmeric and all-spice (*advieh*) (7).

Thinly sliced, white onions are stir-fried in cooking oil until golden brown and translucent. Onions prepared this way are called *piaz-daagh*, and the semi-dry, crunchy version is used as a garnish or on its own as a fine delicacy. When lamb, beef, veal or chicken is used as the stew base, it's chopped and added to the fried onions along with powdered turmeric and all-spice. The mix is fried some more before water is added, the pot is covered, and the whole dish is left to simmer for about half an hour before the next stage.

A *khoresh*'s color, aroma and taste depend on the compliment (*ghaatogh*) one prepares separately (often fries) and adds to the meat base later on. A variety of vegetables, fruits, prunes, grains and even nuts can be added to produce a wide range of *khoreshes* and *polows*. The choice depends on the region, season, availability and family's desires.

In addition to the ever-present turmeric, salt and all-spice, each *khoresh* and its distinctive *ghaatogh* may require other spices, such as tomato paste or saffron, which further diversify the stew's look, flavor and aroma. In his definitive Persian cookbook, Daryabandari lists 41 types of *polow* and more than 70 types of *khoresh* (8). Iranian cookbooks published in the Diaspora go even further, proving that in choosing ingredients for your *ghaatog*, the sky is the limit.

Some of the most popular *polows* include those mixed with fresh culinary herbs (*sabzi polow*), green beans and tomatoes (*estamboli polow*), cherries (*albaloo polow*), lentils (*adas polow*), dill and broad beans (*baghali polow*) and saffron and yogurt (*tah-chin*). As for *khoresh*, my favorites are *ghormeh sabzi*, the signature dish of any Iranian's kitchen, featuring a fried mix of coriander, leek, spinach, fenugreek and red kidney beans, the meatless *daal-adas*, made with a special kind of red lentil, eggplant and tomato (*khoresh-e bademjaan*), okra (*khoresh-e bamieh*), green bean and tomato (*khoresh-e loubia sabz*), *kangar*, a rare, prickly artichoke found in southern areas of Iran in the spring, and split beans (*khoresh-e ghaymeh*). This last stew, which is made and served at both weddings and funerals, is a dish that brings to mind the connection between life and death celebrated in the Persian proverb that compares the "sacrificial lamb" butchered at both weddings and funerals to the benevolent scapegoat. Both become victims in happy and sad times.

Iranian food is normally mildly seasoned, with no overwhelmingly dominant aroma or flavor. In a typical Iranian dish, such as most *khoresh* types, a gentle sour is preferable to a sweet or spicy hot. Therefore, in addition to small quantities of salt and powdered black pepper, you will often use lime juice, verjuice (extracted from unripe, green grapes) or dried lime powder for seasoning. Most *khoresh* types are yellow-reddish, or green. The dark brown, sweet-sour *fesenjaan*, made of chicken, walnuts and pomegranate paste, is among the exceptions.

Each *khoresh* has its own unique and revealing fragrance, which derives from the chosen seasoning and spice palette. While the sweet and energizing smells of fried onion and turmeric emanate from all *khoreshes*, a trained nose can also detect the trace of fried eggplants, or the faint aroma of cumin in a split-bean (*khoresh-e ghaymeh*). Similarly, the scent of mint in celery *khoresh* distinguishes it quite clearly from the delicious aroma of parsley, scallion, coriander and fenugreek used for *ghormeh sabzi*.

I have seen people making *khoresh* with items that resemble jam bases (peach, carrot and apple). I suspect they are delicious, although I have not tried them because I have been busy experimenting with my own trend--meatless *khoresh*. I follow the traditional *khoresh* recipes and omit the meat or chicken component, sometimes using grains as a substitute. Eggplant and zucchini *khoresh* with split beans instead of veal, mixed with vegetable juice to thicken the syrup is amazingly good. This idea is not entirely mine. I knew more than one family back home that used to make memorably delicious, meatless potato *khoresh* or dill and black-eyed cowpea *polow*. Their culinary choices were dictated by poverty, however, not by a desire to experiment or a vegetarian philosophy.

***Ghalyeh*, the Darling of the South**

Ghalyeh--a thick, dark green fish or shrimp stew (for lack of a better word) is not a *khoresh*. I have heard people refer to *ghalyeh* as “fish *khoresh*” or “something like *ghormeh sabzi*,” but it is, in fact, an unusually spicy and greasy dish unique to the Southern cities of Bushehr and Bandarabbas, and the Western province of Khuzestan. *Ghalyeh* might not be very popular among most Iranians, but it is a dish dear to my heart because it celebrates my family heritage and--modesty aside--I’m quite an old hand at it.

When we were still a crowded household in Shiraz during the early ‘70s, everyone agreed that *ghalyeh* was best when made and eaten in its birthplace, Bushehr. Mom and Saleheh both occasionally made *ghalyeh* and rice for lunch, but despite their southern Iranian heritage, they never risked making *ghalyeh* for our Bushehri relatives. There was a risk that no matter how good it might turn out it would be deemed tasteless and diluted by laid-back Shirazi standards.

Even when Mali *khanoom* [\(9\)](#), my dad’s Bushehri second cousin who was known for her prize-winning *ghalyeh*, made the dish in our home at our request, she was not entirely happy with the result. The rest of the household concurred. We did not enjoy it the way we did when gathered around her *sofreh* in Bushehr, although no one failed to wholeheartedly praise her excellent cooking skills. Making a good *ghalyeh* seemed to require more than expertise. It depended on a list of variables that included the type and freshness of the fish or shrimp you managed to find, the size of coriander and fenugreek bunches you ventured to buy from the bazaar, the amount of cooking oil, garlic and powdered chili pepper you dared to add, the authenticity of the tamarind you used, even the location and climate. In an ideal world, one drips sweat into their bowl of

ghalyeh while squatting around a crowded sofreh in Bushehr as a noisy air conditioner wages war with the heat. *Ghalyeh* is the type of dish that loses its culinary integrity the further it gets from its birthplace. I can only imagine what Mali *khanoom* might think of my made-in-Montreal *ghalyeh*, savored at minus 20 °C among friends who don't know any better.

Few people in the southern provinces acknowledged the fact that their cuisine was influenced by the neighboring Arabic and Indian cultures. They believed that it was solely their distinct climate that made their cuisine, even their personalities, unique. The link between Bushehr's hot, humid climate and their prohibitively spicy-hot food was clear. Such food acted as a stimulant, raising the body's temperature to prompt sweating, which in turn cooled the skin. Peppery food was also believed to increase one's appetite in weather that was otherwise too hot to eat in.

As for the regular and rather excessive consumption of garlic common among Iranians who live along the Northern and Southern coasts of the Caspian Sea and Persian Gulf, many believe that the humid climate makes their bodies crave it, as it cures ailments associated with the growth of bacteria and molds in humidity. More importantly, the humidity masks garlic's harsh odors on the breath and body. Each time we travelled to the Caspian shore we feasted on delicious, garlic-saturated foods, from the first meal on the road up until the last feast. We relished the half-cooked chunks of garlic in *sir-torshi* condiments and wolfed down stuffed fish and garlic-*polow* without smelling a hint of the powerful plant. When we took the Chalous route to return to Tehran, however, at the precise moment we exited the Kandavan tunnel, the reek of garlic would flood the car--a nasty reminder of the smell seeping from our bodies that we would endure for days to come. If someone with no knowledge of our trip asked, "So, did you have a nice time in the Caspian?" we knew it was a polite indication that we smelled of garlic.

Bushehri families used to settle in Shiraz during the summer, and many of these seasonal migrants would rent a space in an empty school, or a room or two in a stranger's house. Their Shirazi landlords would often decide that the cloying stench of garlic that lingered after their departure was not worth the extra income.

When Mali *khanoom*'s son married a girl from the city of Rasht (the capital of a northwestern province of Gilan) and brought her to live with his family in Bushehr, the entire family was pleased to note that the young woman was used to the copious amounts of garlic in their *ghalyeh*. The excessively hot chili proved the biggest challenge during the first few months of her married life, until she got used to it.

It is not hard to imagine the amount of compassion and concession it must have taken that young woman to abandon her preference for northern fish and reconcile to her new faith as a southern fish advocate. The passionately-held convictions about the superiority of their fish among those living along the stretches of the Caspian Sea in the north, and the Persian Gulf and Oman Sea in the south are exceeded only by their national pride. There is a decades-long rivalry between northern and southern residents surrounding the merits of the Caspian white fish, Caspian salmon, bream, and sturgeon from the north and the rays, catfish, grunts, nemipterids and carangids from the south. To be noted here that the variety of fish in the Caspian sea are unique to that huge, enclosed body of water, while those in the southern sea are rare, yet can be found in other parts of the world.

Naturally, those living in proximity to northern or southern cities are attracted to the types of fish more readily available to them. While whitefish might be popular in Tehran, Tabriz or Mashhad,

the dwellers of those cities would have had little exposure to the potent and rich taste of southern fish. “Each flower has its own smell,” a Persian proverb wisely mediates, and *ghalyeh* is a southern and southwestern dish made exclusively with different types of southern fish.

In spite of its difficult and elaborate preparation, *ghalyeh* is nevertheless the first dish I learned to cook, mainly to impress my Shirazi high school friends at our monthly get-togethers. I mastered the skills when I came to Montreal, and have continued making *ghalyeh* for the past twenty years. During my first week in Montreal, my siblings asked me to cook *ghalyeh*--perhaps because they longed for a traditional dish, or maybe because they wished to make me feel like an expert in an otherwise “no-clue” zone. Whatever the reason, I was so eager to bring them the tastes and feelings of home that I made all of us sick with an overdose of fried garlic and hot peppers. Our throats burned and our hearts beat like drums for days afterwards.

On the Making and Eating of *Ghalyeh*

I learned how to make *ghalyeh* from a man in my family named Essi. He was many things, including a master in the art of seafood and spontaneous cooking, and his taste and skills reflected Bushehri cuisine. The back door and kitchen window of his house opened up to a narrow alley. For more than a decade I was drawn to that door and window by the haunting fragrance of perfectly made *kateh* rice emanating a sense of order and tranquility that I missed in my own home. I treasured the surge of recognition and welcome that awaited me behind that door, no matter when I knocked or who opened it. Essi’s light-filled home was a magnet for novel experiences, from the excitement of a cat giving birth to six kittens in a closet to the potent air of mixed cologne and fresh cigarette smoke that tumbled down the stairs from Essi’s room. Sunlight pushed through the top half of their old, wooden door, sending a luminous shaft of dust particles onto their aluminum dining table in the hallway. At other times, bluish light overflowed from their yard and streamed through the windows into the two rooms on the main floor--softening the details on their worn-out carpets. I never discovered whether the source of that mesmerizing, blue light was the indigo-dyed sheets hung to dry in the yard or their ceramic-tiled *hoze* reflecting the Shiraz summer evening glow. I was madly in love with that house and still shiver at its memory.

Essi’s version of *ghalyeh*, which I followed faithfully and rigorously over the years, was tame but delicious--true to the original and yet appreciated even by those with untrained tastes. He taught me how to make shrimp *ghalyeh*, the preparation of which is quite similar to fish *ghalyeh*. Shrimp *ghalyeh* tastes better than fish *ghalyeh* in my opinion, and is easier to make, especially outside Iran where the right types of fish for *ghalyeh* are not readily available.

Ghalyeh-maygoo, made with shrimp, is begun the night before by placing a big handful of tamarind (the fruit pulp) in a small colander and soaking it in a bowl of lukewarm water. The tamarind used for *ghalyeh* should have a dominantly sour, not sweet taste like most varieties of Indian or Filipino tamarind. One must wake up early in the morning if they plan to have their *ghalyeh* for lunch. Like so many Iranian dishes, this one needs to be cooked slowly.

After the tamarind has soaked overnight, several mixes must be prepared, ideally in the following order. Try not to occupy yourself with one task while tending to the other. Precision and passion always make for a richer *ghalyeh*.

1) Take 1.50 kg of fresh or frozen and defrosted shrimp. Remove the head, shell, tail and sand vein, if still attached, then wash in a large colander and sprinkle with two full tablespoons of salt. Shake well, letting the shrimp absorb the salt. You will need to rinse them briefly before adding them to your main pot. The trick is not to rinse all the salt off because this releases salt to the stock.

2) Take at least one, medium garlic bulb (10-11 cloves), peel and place it in any hard and smooth type of mortar (made of iron or stone, for instance). Add one tablespoon of turmeric and one tablespoon of powdered chili pepper. Pound and grind the mix with the pestle until you get a dark yellow, pungent paste. Don't be discouraged by the fleeing cloves that slip from under your pounding pestle. The more they are crushed, the easier the pounding and mixing will get.

3) Finely chop six bunches of fresh coriander and one bunch of fresh fenugreek. You will probably have a lot of trouble finding fresh fenugreek if you live in Montreal or another city in North America, so 2-3 tablespoon of dried fenugreek will work in a pinch, but you need to soak it in a small colander for a few minutes before adding it to the pot.

4) Take five medium white onions and chop them into small squares (in a "diamond-chop," as opposed to the length-wise slices you would make for a stew-like *khoresh*). In a big pan, heat a good amount of liquid vegetable oil over medium-high heat and add the onions so that they are submerged in the hot oil. The onions, and later the herbs, will soak up all the oil already in the pot. This gives you an idea of how much oil goes into this dish. Turn the heat down and settle in to monitor the process. There's no need to stir as often as one would for sautéed onions; stir only a couple of times swiftly and gently, as if looking for something underneath the shrinking onions. The goal is to get a homogenous and glittering golden fried onion, not too dark and burned, nor too pale and raw. This is the right moment to add the rest of the ingredients, and a poor time to take a break because the hot oil will continue cooking and transforming the onions for at least another five minutes after they are removed from the heat--requiring the pot to be moved off the heat well before the onions look ready.

Once the onions are ready, add chopped coriander and fenugreek and fry them some more. Add the herbs at the same time only if both are fresh; otherwise, add dry fenugreek near the end of the frying process. The herbs will absorb the oil almost immediately, and health-minded cooks will briefly feel better on seeing a reduction in excessive oil (but that will not last). Do not add any oil, but keep frying the herbs. For how long? It's hard to tell. Just make sure that all the vitamins are dead – when the bright green color of the herbs has faded away. The herbs turn lighter in the cooking process, but the finished *ghalyeh* should still be a dark green. By now, the air has filled with the dizzying smell of fenugreek, a sure sign that things are going well.

Before the herbs get really dark, add the garlic-chili-turmeric paste and fry for a few more minutes. The garlic component can turn bitter by over-frying, so keep it brief. Stir constantly to ensure a perfectly harmonious mix. Initially, a surge of savory fragrance evaporating from the fried paste might actually knock you down. Extract the tamarind's juice by mildly squeezing it through the colander, then add the briefly rinsed shrimp and one full glass of tamarind juice and enough warm water to just top the mix. Cover and turn the heat down. There are two options for thickening the stock: a) peel one small potato, chop it into sugar-cube sized chunks and add it to the pot along with the shrimp and water, or b) twenty minutes before serving time, dissolve one teaspoon of flour into half a glass of the *ghalyeh* juice and add it back to the pot.

You should let your *ghalyeh* slow cook for at least two hours before serving it. Lift the lid occasionally to ensure that it is not bubbling over at any point during the long process. In the beginning, the broth and the solids are separated and the sour, salty and hot are not evenly distributed. However, as the dish cooks, the mix is gradually transformed into a harmonious, thick stew. The herbs gradually release the oil, and the scent and flavors meld until a few millimeters of oil reappear on the surface by serving time. Wait one hour before you first taste your *ghalyeh*. If it is too spicy-hot, it's too late to do anything about it! You can, however, add water or tamarind juice to adjust the seasoning according to your taste. The effect you are looking for is pleasant rather than acidic sour.

You have no idea how far the tempting smell of a well-cooked *ghalyeh* is capable of travelling--down the hallway, out the window and off into neighborhood, making people's mouths water, heads reel and bowels growl. One and only one other food fragrance can beat this smell, and that is the scent of steam-cooked rice. The two of them together can induce a trance!

To make fish *ghalyeh*, you start and proceed in the same way. At the stage when you would add shrimp, tamarind juice and water, add only the liquid components and slow cook for an hour before adding your fish. Fish can fall apart if cooked for too long. The only other difference is that with a fish *ghalyeh*, you should always choose the flour option (not the potato one) to thicken the broth. If you are outside of Iran, a first timer, or not too crazy about experimenting with exotic dishes, you might use fish steaks or neatly-cut cubes of any type of fish that is not too tender, such as king fish or salmon. The most authentic fish *ghalyeh* is made with the head and tail removed, bone-in "*ghobaad*" or "*sang-e sar*." Some use "*shir*" for a less bony and more convenient dish. I think I outgrew *ghalyeh-maahi* partly because each time we had it for lunch I had to bother somebody to rid my portion of fish bones for me before I could attack my plate. Even then, half the time I would turn to my mother, moaning in panic, and she would interrupt her lunch abruptly and dig into my wide-open mouth with her bare hands to remove a tiny piece of fish bone from my throat. I don't remember anyone else at the *sofreh* ever panicking, but depending on the severity of the operation and how deep Mom's fingers had to fish down my throat, it was easy to lose my appetite.

In a time span of ten years--between the period when fish bones would stick in my throat and when I was wise enough to prefer shrimp *ghalyeh* over fish *ghalyeh* and old enough to enjoy preparing it myself--a significant *ghalyeh*-related event deeply impacted my hometown.

The War-Stricken and Their Vegetable Markets in Shiraz

When the war between Iran and Iraq broke out in September 1980, tens of thousands of inhabitants of the Southwestern province of Khuzestan were forced to leave their homes. Many of these families settled in Shiraz, temporarily, or permanently (10). A few months into the war, the face of my city changed dramatically to reflect the presence of this war-stricken population (*jang-zadeha*). We saw the occasional Abadan license plate behind traffic lights or group of loud, tanned, well-dressed young boys gathered at a shopping mall attempting to establish their new territory and ward off alienation. Middle-class women with dark skin, tattooed chins and head wraps like Saleheh's *maghna* offered to vacuum stranger's homes or accepted leftover food--first reluctantly, then confidently. Student dormitories, vacant thanks to the Cultural Revolution, were now used by the government to "house" the bulk of homeless *jang-zadeha*. These residences now featured flooded toilets and clotheslines of laundry strung across

balconies. Intense, new food smells and flocks of children filled the corridors, along with heart-breaking stories of loss and resilience.

Even if you were blind and numb to their physical and emotional presence, the evidence of the *jang-zadeha* living among us was displayed in other obvious ways all across the city. The *jang-zadeha* were heavily engaged in the supply (preparation and sale) of foodstuff, first to their own displaced population, and then, as they became familiar with Shirazi cuisine, to the city at large. They showed up as roadside vendors scattered throughout the busy quarters of Shiraz. The Cinema Sa'di intersection, a commercial, crowded spot close to several dormitories, was packed with makeshift stands. Some sold Abadani-style samosa --not that there was such a thing as a Shirazi samosa--while others sold neatly arranged and wrapped stems of fresh coriander, mint, parsley and fenugreek. These fresh, raw herbs were in high demand because they were more varied than what we typically had in Shiraz. They were also presented in cleaned, sorted bunches, unlike the way we were used to buying them--mixed and loose--from fruit shops. Some of the female vendors were Arabic-speaking and had never been out of Khoramshahr before. They would convey the price in sign-language, but if the transaction came down to bargaining and haggling, they would give up and accept whatever was offered.

As the war intensified, and the invasion of Iranian cities by Iraqi forces advanced into 1981, the *jang-zadeh* population increased in Shiraz and the number of street vendors and the foodstuffs they offered grew and diversified. *Jang-zadeh* traders turned a spacious corner of the largest and busiest square in downtown Shiraz, *Falakeh* Shahrdaari, which had previously been used as a private parking lot, into an open vegetable market. This "market" was adjacent to a central city bus terminal and across the street from several government buildings, including a branch of the Ministry of Justice and the Education Board. It was also close to the central post office, a big mosque and the main commercial center, *Bazaar-e Vakil*. In those days, I used to drop by the post office at least once a week to mail a sweater, a picture, or a bag of mixed nuts to my two siblings abroad. Without fail, my post office trips ended with a stroll through the market; not because I needed to buy something, but because I was fascinated and excited by its energetic atmosphere.

From dawn until dusk, dozens of *jang-zadeh* vendors gathered there to sell fruits, vegetables and a variety of sabzi from their cardboard box stalls, out of the back of their jalopy pickups, or from ragged barrels and cloth spreads. They sold local and imported produce, loudly calling out their products and prices --louder than I was used to hearing in a bazaar, as if out of frustration. They also sold small quantities of fish, but only in the early hours of summer days, since they had no permanent stalls or temporary roofs to protect their merchandise from the sun and the rain.

All day long, hundreds of people crowded the unruly rows of stalls and pushcarts among the traffic noise, fumes and frenzy--some to bargain and buy, some just to wander and watch. As the day wore on, things got quieter and messier as the less fortunate dropped in to buy half-priced, half-rotten fruits and wilted greens. At some point, the city officials decided that the site was a scar on the heart of downtown, or as another version had it, they benevolently found a more appropriate place for the vendors. Whatever the incentive, the open market was shut down and, after a few months, the *jang-zadeha* took up a new space --more appropriate perhaps, but far less accessible.

The *jang-zadeha* open market was pushed back near the southern margin of the city and transformed into a fish market. For years before this, Shirazi consumers had to look far to find

their seafood. There were a few fish stores that imported a narrow range of so called “fresh” fish from Bushehr once or twice a week. When seafood was on our family’s menu, my father would go to these stores all seven days of the week for the “catch of the day.” More often than not, he returned disappointed and empty-handed, complaining that “the cotton-tasting *shir* is all these Shirazis eat!” The other source of seafood was the state-run company affiliated with the Iranian Fisheries Corporation, Shilat, which remains the exclusive exporter of Iran’s caviar and sturgeon to the world market. In its prosperous days, the one and only branch of Shilat in Shiraz offered frozen shrimp and a small variety of defrosted, and therefore, undesirable fish. After the revolution and war, Shilat, like all other big companies in Iran, went through stagnation and inflation. The demand for seafood products in Shiraz, mainly fish and shrimp, rose steadily with the influx of *jang-zadeha*. The rule of supply and demand created a new chain of petty traders loading their pickup trucks with fish and vegetables from wholesalers and fishermen in Bushehr and selling them to Ahvazi, Khoramshahri, or Abadani men and women who would then offer them to the larger population at the newly-established Shiraz fish market (11).

The relocated *jang-zadeha* market was a temporary warehouse (more like a huge tent) the size of a football field, partially enclosed by two walls and a ceiling. Three or four aisles separated long rows of waist-high metal surfaces which displayed the fish. About ten different types of fish, all fairly alike to the untrained eye, were neatly lined in rows--tails inward and dead-eyed gazes to the aisle side. Their glossy, silver bodies glittered in hues of blue, red or white. The highest quality, most expensive types included the flat-bodied, palm-sized *halva-sefid* (called *zobaidi* by the Khuzestani and used for frying); the pretty, slender, round-bodied *raashgoo* and *shurideh* (for stuffing and frying); the *ghobaad*, and the not-so-pretty, arch-backed *sang-e sar* (for cooking in *ghalyeh*).

Less expensive and less desired were the *khaaroo*, meaning full of *khaar* or bone; *halva siah* and *halva sorkh* (or *sorkhoo*). The *shir*—believed to have fewer bones--balanced on the border of desirability, but was not inexpensive. In those days, an average fish was more expensive than an average piece of meat. Large and medium-sized, fresh shrimp--pricey luxury items--were imported and rarely sold in fish markets.

The top section of the warehouse featured stands topped with small mountains of bunched and wrapped *sabzi*. You could barely see the head of the vendor bobbing behind the breathtaking greens splashed with the reds of fresh radishes and whites of green onion bulbs. Other exclusively west-south foodstuff found its way to the market: special, large limes; different types of tamarind and all-spice; powdered red peppers and dried chili peppers hanging from their stems on a long, dangling string atop the seller’s head; garlic en masse; *daal* lentils and different varieties of southern dates, including clusters of the yellow, biting *khaarak* that my family used to receive as gifts from our Dargahani friends.

Over time, Shirazi people inspired by a Khuzestani friend or neighbor and eager to experiment with an authentic stuffed fish or *ghalyeh* dish would make the trip to the *jang-zadeha* fish market. The cultural gap was closing as Shirazis began to be considered Southern allies in the North-South fish rivalry.

My fondest memories of the fish market have an autumn backdrop. The abundance of herbs and the thickness of their fragrance, the warmth of the stall holders’ looks and gestures--even the foul-smelling fish reminded me of the few precious trips I had made to Bushehr with my brother, Mohsen. We walked for hours along the shore, stopping to watch, with awe, that fraction of a

second when the flaming sun on the horizon touched down and sank into the sea with an almost audible “jzzzzz.....” I never heard that sound again, even when I sat beside Mohsen until dusk on Wasaga Beach in Ontario. We did shop together for *ghalyeh* ingredients in Montreal’s Jean-Talon Market, though--many, many times.

“Fish is sprawling still,” a vendor would sing in a trembling voice, “come bro, smell home!” That fish had, after all, swum in the same sea that the *jang-zadeha* now longed for. The Shiraz fish market might have come as close to home for them as they could possibly get. Khuzestani sellers had the place to themselves, and they received more serious customers than before. One would have no business “passing by” the fish market, as was the case with the *Falakeh* Shahrdaari open market. One went there with a purpose.

The art of bargaining involved more than haggling over price. One had to appear to be a savvy buyer, capable of spotting a rip-off vendor who might take them for an outsider and try to fool them into buying a stale fish from the previous load or no-good fish in bulk. I would always go to the fish market with Essi, in his Paykan (the first Iranian automobile) and we would fly above and beyond this whole game. I marveled at Essi’s effortless way of bonding with virtually any vendor he chose. He would speak in his Bushehri accent for the benefit of the stall holders (and for our own benefit as well) and rarely trusted them to clean or even scale his fish. This made it clear that he knew what he was doing. The vendors’ confusion came when he not only refused to bargain, but overpaid them for no better reason than the knowledge that his money meant more to them than it did to him. Essi taught me not only how to tell a fresh fish by lifting the gills and looking for the right shade of red, but how to do it in a brief glance that would not offend the fish seller with any implied accusation.

I still make *ghalyeh* in the same exact way I have for years. I consume it less often though, now that my cholesterol-conscious mind has colored the dish as dangerous. As an Arabic proverb says, “in describing the joy, I go halfway to enjoying the thing,” and describing good *ghalyeh* is, in itself, a savory experience.

After the Iran-Iraq war, several *jang-zadeh* families occupied several rooms in my aunt’s house in Bushehr. It was an old, southern-style house with several rooms built around a small, rectangular yard with a pond-like *hoze* in the middle and more rooms with corridors on their front sides looking into the yard from the second and third stories. Ordinarily, the semi-rundown rooms were rented out for a small fee, but after the war, several Khuzestani families with no place to go convinced my aunt to let them stay there free of charge. My aunt had a generous heart, but she was also a control freak--the most lovable one I’ve ever met. The *jang-zadeh* occupants turned a deaf ear to the complaints and orders she screamed, but in an effort to make up to my aunt for all the laundry loads they did, all the noise their kids made and all the hassle they created around her, the Khuzestani families sometimes worked up their nerve and sent a child to her room with a plateful of their favorite dish. Once, when I was visiting my aunt, I came home to find a deserted platter of uneaten food sitting by the entrance.

“This is how they make *ghalyeh-maahi*” my furious *ameh* said, repressing a smile and waving off the dish with disgust, “with tomato paste, for the love of God!” She shuffled, back bent until her chest almost met her knees and mumbled: “They say it’s *ghalyeh*! Ghalyeh my ass! See such a bunch I am living with? For God’s sake... with tomato paste!” I have yet to interview my Khuzestani friends to find out if the oozing mixture of tomato paste and ground fish I witnessed back then was a personal or a regional variation of *ghalyeh*.

Plain Rice or Chelow

One of the facts of life that we all have to deal with, no matter where we're born and raised, is that high quality rice cooked Iranian style is simply unbeatable. Whether it is mixed *polow*, or plain, white *chelow*-- soaked and drained, or not drained (as in *kateh* or *dami*), the unique steam-cooking of Iranian-style rice results in a perfection of slender, fluffy grains with a heavenly taste and fragrance. The best quality Iranian rice is fragrant even in its dry form, like basmati, its closest relative. Rice should be raked with the fingers and rinsed at least three or four times until the water runs clear before leaving it to soak overnight in a bowl of lukewarm salted water.

Let us assume we want to serve rice with *ghalyeh* for lunch. When you have all the components of *ghalyeh* in the pot and have covered the lid to let it simmer, you need to get busy with the rice (It should be around 11:00 a.m. now, and lunch is served at 1:00 p.m.)

1) Bring about three liters of water to a rolling boil in a four or five liter pot. Pour off the salted water from the top of your rice bowl and add the rice to your boiling pot. It is essential that the grains are boiled in plenty of water in order to have enough space to expand. Have a large, fine-meshed colander ready in your kitchen sink and wait at least 5-10 minutes--until you see bubbles re-emerging on the surface of the pot water. Do not stir more than once or twice and do not turn the heat down.

Cooking over one of those flat-surfaced, electric burners presents a serious challenge. One needs cumulative heat in order to bring the water to a boil, but these burners are absurdly autonomous and turn themselves off momentarily every few seconds, interrupting the cooking process. Whoever designed these burners has never cooked rice in their life, I am certain of it.

2) The rice grains should be floating in the boiling water when you become alert and attentive to your cooking again. How fine your final *chelow* turns out depends largely on when you remove it from the heat to drain it for the next step. The right moment is when a rice grain is cooked at the core (try one by biting into it), but is not overdone or soft. Drain the rice; rinse it with cold water only if when biting into the grain, you tasted too much salt. Otherwise a good shake of the colander will loosen the grains. Wash the starch from the pot and put it back on the top of the stove. When your pot is completely dry, heat two tablespoons of cooking oil in it at medium heat before heaping your rice into it.

Now, the crunchy bottom layer of rice formed at the bottom of the pot is called *tah-dig*, literary meaning "bottom of the pot"-- a by-product much loved by Iranians and their foods' fans. If you proceed the way I just explained you will have rice *tah-dig*. However, before mounting the rice back into the pot, you could cover the bottom with tender types of flatbread, or round slices of potatoes or even a mixture of roundly sliced potatoes and tomatoes and get other, arguably more delicious types of *tah-dig*. Making a crisp, tasty and appetizing golden *tah-dig* requires an extra spoon of oil at the bottom of the pot, sometimes a pinch of saffron, a non-stick pan, right temperature and definitely some practice. For now, let us continue with the rice.

3) In a separate bowl, mix a bit of water and two more tablespoons of heated oil and sprinkle this on top of your rice mound to help keep the grains separate. Make a hole in the middle of the mound with the handle of your spoon and cover the pot with the lid.

A perfectly steamed rice begins when the pot lid is wrapped in a clean kitchen cloth or towel and is replaced once enough steam has built up inside. It's easy to tell whether there's enough steam

if the pot has a glass lid, but no one had such a thing back home in Shiraz, so cooks there employed different techniques. Some peeked into the pot by half-lifting the lid several times before they judged enough steam had been accumulated. Others could hear the pops and pings of steam building inside the pot by bringing their ear close to it. Some tapped the pot on the side or top to feel if it had reached the right temperature. Saleheh would just confidently remove the lid of the sauna-like pot, and wrap it briskly in a clean kitchen cloth before putting it back on and turning the gas to a bare minimum. She could discern the right moment as if by magic. My technique is this: I wait until I think I hear that enough steam has built inside the pot, then I bring my face close to the pot--almost hugging it to prevent too much steam from escaping--and peek in to make sure I heard correctly. If my eyeglasses fog both immediately and completely, I cover the lid with an eiderdown and turn the heat down before treating myself to a smoke.

I had a Canadian couple friends in Montreal who had a professional food critic's taste, enthusiasm and budget for dining out. They were particularly savvy about ethnic foods, and knew more about Iranian restaurants in Montreal than I ever did. A good *chelow* was at the top of their list of favorites. Their passion was so intense that at some point they decided to learn the art of rice cooking, first by following recipes and, when this failed, by pressing me for the "secrets" and the "tricks."

I think they would have been satisfied with what they made if they'd stopped dropping by our house at lunch time.

"I can never make the grains so fluffy," one would complain with a compliment.

"What did you do with it? Is it the same Royal rice you told us to buy?" the other would accuse. I could appreciate the difficulty they had in making *tah-dig*, but for a long time I couldn't understand why their *chelow* never turned out right. The facts finally revealed themselves; they had all the talent, practice and perseverance they needed, but steam cooking was a technique--a *concept*--that they were not accustomed to. Their rice either turned out too raw or "live" (*zendeh*), or too soft and overcooked. The rice that has been drained and put back into the pot is not finished cooking, and must still have a mild resistance when bitten into. It's the steaming that allows the grains to expand and brings out their scent. Boiling it for too long or too short, and not giving it enough steaming time will not only ruin its look and texture, but will also diminish its smell.

If there is a golden rule in Iranian cuisine, it is that food requires slow cooking. Whether it is letting *khoresh*, aash and other stew-like dishes (*khoraak*) sit or 'settle in' (*jaa oftaadan*); or steaming rice or brewing tea (*dam keshidan*), time and patience are two of the most crucial ingredients. It is during that seemingly idle time that a dish is born—when the mixture of ingredients is gradually transformed into a full flavored, aromatic and well melded food. If an Iranian dish has been prepared and cooked rapidly, say in an hour or less, you can be sure that it has gone through some kind of culinary modification to respond to the needs of modern life. A traditional food rapidly prepared does not allow all the flavors to blend and does not look, taste and feel as rich as it should.

One of my most awe-inspiring discoveries, upon settling in Montreal, was that foods cook faster in low altitudes. It was right up there with the first time I looked out at a boundless, all-encompassing, polar horizon. I was amazed to discover how bringing the kettle or rice water to a boil seemed to take forever, while red meat cooked in no time and split-beans went mushy after

minutes. However, even here in Montreal, one still needs to allow sufficient time, albeit a shorter period, for all ingredients and their flavors to blend smoothly.

Traditional, Iranian-style food preparation requires care and attention as well as time, and some decisions are more crucial than others, such as the moment you should remove your fried onions from the heat to preserve their golden color or the moment you should turn the heat down under the steamed rice so that you don't burn the *tah-dig* or get smoked rice. One must keep at least half an eye on their dish, in case it needs another stir or less heat so that at the slightest scent of smoke springing from the rice pot a small onion can be peeled and tucked into the rice mound to absorb the smell. You cannot leave home for two hours and come back to a nicely matured *ghalyeh* and *chelow*--this is slow cooking without the slow cooker.

When rice is not soaked and drained, it is cooked in water, oil and salt until the water is fully absorbed, at which point the lid is covered with a cloth for the vital steam-cooking process. Saleheh once instructed that the rice be topped with "thiz much" water, sticking out her index finger and marking a knuckle with her thumb. When I first tried making *kateh*, I was shocked to note that I had never looked at her finger closely enough to know how much "thiz much" was. The rice that results from this type of cooking is called *kateh* when it is plain, and *dami* when mixed or layered with meat, herbs or fruits. *Kateh* requires less preparation and cooking time, which makes it the method people use on a day-to-day basis. It is also the method that usually results in softer and stickier rice. When high quality rice is prepared in the *kateh* method, it is almost impossible to lose its scent, no matter how clumsy a cook may be. Making *kateh* is particularly popular in Iran's Northern provinces, and is distinguished by the fact that the starch is not washed off completely, producing a sticky, puffy, and aromatic rice.

Before I first travelled to the Caspian, I would never have considered having cold or hot *kateh* for breakfast with jam, much less with garlic, as is the custom in northern Iran. I knew that the finest varieties of Iranian rice--*champa*, *dom-siah*, *sadri*, *haraaz*, *rasmi*, *taarem* and *doodi*--were produced in the Gilan and Mazandran provinces, but it was not until I travelled there that I fully understood the people's love for and dependency on rice.

I was driving with my husband towards Tamishan in the early afternoon hours of an August day, enjoying the magnificent scenery and salty, humid air when I suddenly felt hungry, despite the fact that we had just had our lunch of fish served with *kateh*. I caught myself rising up on the car's seat to catch a better sniff of the air, eyes half closed and inhaling deeply to release one sigh of pleasure after another. We were passing by a rice field that may as well have been a gigantic pot of *kateh*--the scent of the soon-to-be-harvested rice combined with the heat and humidity to perfume the entire landscape.

In other parts of the country, *kateh* might not be a preferable cooking method for aesthetic reasons, but it is certainly regarded as more convenient and relatively carefree compared to drained rice. It is possible to make a drained-looking *kateh* too, which is what I do, following in the footsteps of my older brother who is "the best rice maker in the world" according to his Canadian-born and raised children. I initially learned to make *kateh* when I was still living in Iran, although I never made it for myself while I lived there. The women in our house made *kateh* only occasionally, when one of us had the stomach flu or a lingering cold. I didn't bother learning to make drained rice, because that was made routinely-- I took it for granted. I later modified the original *kateh* "recipe" based on the rice varieties I can find and use here in

Montreal. I was accustomed to making adjustments—it is what each and every cook in Iran had to do, especially during the Iran-Iraq war.

During the Iran-Iraq war, families had to make do and improvise with the various types of the lowest quality imported rice rationed out to them. But even before and after the war years, only the most affluent could have the best quality rice - produced in the Northern parts of our country - on a regular basis. The cooks in our house used to pick over the rationed, local rice for hours, complaining that by the time they were finished, not much was left. Innovative techniques and extra effort were required to make a presentable *chelow* and *polow* out of undesirable rice. This is how the cook in our family made *kateh*.

1) Wash your rice in a pot thoroughly; the more thorough, the less sticky it will be. Don't wash it too much if you are making it for medicinal reasons, such as to help with common cold or relieve a stomach cramp. Rice starch plays a role in remedy and is a good source of energy. Two cups of water for two cups of rice is good for most types of Basmati. Cover the pot with the lid and turn the heat to its highest setting. Once the mix is brought to a boil, remove the lid and turn the heat down to medium. You have two choices now, depending on whether or not you care about having a good, crunchy *tah-dig* with your *kateh*:

2) Let all the water be absorbed and evaporated, empty the rice in a bowl, wash the excess starch from your pot, heat a bit of oil in it, mound your rice back into the pot and form it into a small pyramid. Then, cover it immediately with a cloth-covered lid and turn the heat to low for at least 45 minutes--you will have as nice a *tah-dig* with this *kateh* as with drained rice.

3) With the traditional method of *kateh*-making you do all of the above but skip the transfer. Once the water has completely disappeared, you mound the rice in the middle into a pyramid and cover it while you still have plenty of steam inside. Unless you are using a non-stick pot, however, your *tah-dig* is unlikely to turn crunchy and golden in the latter method, simply because the rice at the bottom of your pot will still be too moist by the time you cover it with the lid, and also because it will not be spread directly against the hot oil.

It is difficult to make a good *tah-dig* in stainless steel cookware. I once received a set of healthy, hazard-free stainless steel cookware and made the mistake of throwing all my old, non-stick cookware away. Making fried onion (*piaaz-daag*) in the stainless steel frying pan proved so futile that I bought a new, non-stick one. The new set of cookware has meant that my *tah-dig* sometimes come out lovely, other times okay and occasionally, awful--an uncertainty that has added a new element of challenge and excitement to mealtimes.

My husband often stands behind me, rubbing his palms together in joyful anticipation while I give the pot's bottom a good shower under cold, running water with the covered lid still tightly in place. The loud sizzling inside the pot is music to our ears. That is when I let the pot rest uncovered for a minute before poking the *tah-dig* loose. The art of making a delicious *tah-dig* lies in it not being too greasy, or too dry. "Crunchy" and "golden" are the key words here, with excess water making it too soft, too little heat making it pale and too much heat making it brown. Getting it right calls for a celebration, even if you've been doing it for many, many years. Hearing my husband's praising words of "*Bah, bah, bah, bah ...*" a few evenings each week is our own call to celebration.

When the *tah-dig* is loose enough you can serve the rice by covering the pot with a round dish, holding it tightly in place and inverting the two together. The entire mound ends up on your

serving plate with the tah-dig on top. “Well-presented” rice in a more formal setting is usually served by spooning the rice into a round or oval-shaped serving platter in a neatly mounted pyramid while the *tah-dig* goes on a separate plate. The top portion of the rice mound in the pot is considered the most desirable, aesthetically speaking, so some people spoon this portion onto a spare plate first and use it to top the rest of the rice on the main serving platter. Adding a row of saffron-mixed rice on the very top of *chelow* or mixed *polow* is considered a must at every social gathering, or in any Iranian restaurant. My eldest sister, Maji, visiting us in Montreal, however, was convinced that what the Iranian restaurants decorated their *chelow* with was so rich in color and so plentiful that it had to be food coloring. In any case, the *chelow* that accompanies *ghalyeh* needs no decoration, and saffron’s potent smell detracts from the impact of this particular dish.

As much as I would like to think of myself as an advocate for innovation and creativity in cooking and culinary habits, I am beginning to see how strongly I feel about deviating from certain culinary rules. When I was newly arrived in Montreal and attending my first English as a Second Language course at the YWCA, our teacher divided us into small groups and asked us to design and solve some cross-word puzzles. Everyone in my group was an immigrant or refugee from a Middle Eastern or South Asian country, except one man who was French Canadian. When the time came for him to present a riddle, he asked, “What is it that you cannot cook without?”

“Is it fire?”

“Water?”

“Pot?”

“Salt?”

The rest of the group snapped out answers one after the other, and to each the man replied with a firm, “No.”

“Meat?”

“Vegetable?”

“Oil?”

We tried more reluctantly, more desperately as he shook his head at each suggestion. “Give us some clue,” we demanded.

“It is four letters, and it is absolutely a must for cooking.”

“Fire!”

“Oh, I know... heat!”

“It is a tool, a piece of equipment,” he said.

“Stove? But that’s five letters.”

Disappointed at our collective idiocy and bouncing his eyebrows up for emphasis, he finally announced, “It is an oven!”

“OVEN?!” we protested, so loudly that our teacher almost jumped off her chair, as if woken from a dream. How could it be an oven? An oven is not essential for cooking, in fact I had never eaten a dish prepared in an oven in my 29 years, save for a few “western” foods at some

friend's homes. My fellow classmates and I were feeling cheated and misguided while our Canadian classmate was, I suppose, surprised and puzzled by what an oblivious bunch of sore losers we were. With our limited English, we all felt powerless to put forth a proper argument.

It took me several years of living, cooking and eating in Montreal--and several academic courses in the anthropology of food--to appreciate the depth of the culinary cultural differences we were expressing and struggling with that day in our English as a Second Language class. Back home, there was no use for the oven, even for baking cakes, which were usually prepared in an electric cake-maker. Like every other family I knew, the oven part of our four-burner stove in Shiraz was used to store oversized trays and underused saucepans and was cleaned once a year at *Norooz*. The wonders of cooking in an oven and the many ways it saved and enriched my life were revealed slowly but steadily during the years that followed.

My wall oven from the '60s, still as good as new, is now my favorite appliance in my kitchen, and I continue experimenting with the old and new dishes; roasting not only salmon and chicken breast, but zucchini and eggplants for my stew, or magically drying herbs and chopped vegetables for *torshi*. Despite the deep affection and respect I have developed for the oven, there are certain limitations to its functions--namely when it comes to making *chelow*. Contrary to some westernized cook-books, a *chelow* cannot be made in the oven. In fact, rice prepared in an oven relinquishes the title "Iranian-style" because it is deprived of the unique, steam-cooked texture, look, fragrance and mouth- feel. There's only so much an oven can do.

The Many Moods of *Halva*

When someone was gravely ill or old enough to spur talk of being overdue for passing on, my dad would report on their condition in his usual lighthearted and witty manner by saying, "Smells like their *halva*'s cooking." For years I laughed at this joke, because although I had been served *halva* at many funerals, I did not associate it with death in a strong or exclusive sense. I still don't, but I think what made Dad's joke funny was that death in those years seemed a distant thing that happened to others; we had yet to inhale the scent of *halva* being cooked for any of our loved ones.

Halva-aardi, a dark brown, sweet confection made of wheat flour, is typically served with dates and tea at most funeral services--passed on a plate with a fork or spoon placed at the side for people to help themselves. At a more organized and modern funeral service, *halva* is offered in bite-sized portions set in rows on a big tray, wrapped in a piece of flat bread or placed on a wafer or paper lining.

The more unexpected, untimely and sorrowful the death, the less likely one was to feel like eating their *halva*. People were loath to eat a youngster's *halva*, and they certainly dreaded eating that of their own child. However, because the eating of *halva* at a funeral was the signal for Muslims to say a certain prayer (*faataheh*) asking God to bless the deceased's soul, refusing *halva* was considered disrespectful. I have dutifully forced down the most strange-looking and tasting *halva* in the most unlikely settings amongst tear-washed faces and mourning cries in mosques, at the houses of the deceased's relatives or in the treeless, earth-ocher cemeteries when people revisited the gravesites on the third and seventh day after burial.

Ironically, cemeteries grew more and more colorful with flowers, pictures and decorative items as the youth killed in the Iran-Iraq war began to be buried there. The families of those executed

by the Islamic regime for political or faith-related reasons were not permitted to mark their loss in any visible way. When offered halva in such situations, some people were bold enough to hold one hand against the plate in a gesture of refusal while reassuring the server with a whisper, “I’ll say *faataheh* anyway, thanks!” I, on the other hand, always preferred to just down my portion as reassurance that I was reciting a prayer to which I actually didn’t even know the words. I believe I started associating *halva* with death, and stopped laughing at Dad’s joke, when I smelled it being cooked in our house for my father’s funeral service. The scent of that *halva* wandered through the spaces he left behind in a way that really hurt.

Flour *halva* or *halva-aardi* was one of my mother’s specialties, and she made it frequently as a dessert—the second of its two functions. As a Bushehri family, however, we had (and still have) this dessert only with *ghalyeh* or other types of seafood. The *halva* my mom made was flawless each and every time; chocolate brown, noticeably sweet and finger-rolled (*anghosht-pich*) so that it was just solid enough to roll around a finger without dripping.

My dad had another halva-related double-entendre, “Masoomeh’s *halva* is soooo good to eat,” as if it had been made for her funeral. My mother would pretend to take offence, only to break into a smile two seconds later. Lucky for him, my dad did not live to eat Mom’s *halva* in the way he implied. Mom’s skill was doubly noted because her consistency in making high-quality *halva* was a rarity.

Making *halva* is easy in theory, but can be tricky in practice. In theory, you pour one cup of vegetable oil and wheat flour into a shallow pan or deep-frying pot and stir over medium heat until it turns a light brown and emits the unique smell of frying flour (the smell my dad used to refer to). It takes a lot of stirring to get to this color, and you might need to add more oil to the mix. Next, you add sugar dissolved in one cup of mixed rosewater and water—a step that releases a sudden surge of hot steam that can scald the unprepared. The mix is stirred frantically until it’s time to remove the pot from the heat. The thickness, texture and color of *halva* indicate its taste and quality. When removed from the heat, *halva* should be a homogeneous, brown paste a bit thicker than honey. It will continue to thicken until it is cold enough to eat.

The color, in particular, is of great importance. A very dark brown could signal burned flour and an awful taste, while a very light brown is considered raw and aesthetically unpleasant. The majority of Iranians add a pinch of saffron to the rose water and sugar mix to get both a better fragrance and an easily-achieved, nice color, but among Bushehris, this is considered cheating. No saffron is needed; just keep an eye on your pot and factor in the fact that immediately after adding the liquid mix to the pot, the paste gets a few degrees darker. It comes with practice and a bit of luck. Whenever asked about the precise measurements of the ingredients, my sister Atefeh, a *halva*-expert, says, “You look and judge; it’s visual (*cheshmi*).” The truth is that making a perfect *halva* can be so accidental that some people associate a truly tasty and nicely behaved *halva* made for a dead person to be an indication of the deceased’s likable character or good will.

The taste of *halva* is largely determined by the amount of sugar used, which is easy to adjust, to some degree. “*Halwa*,” an Arabic word that means “sweet” should, by definition be very sweet. “Sweet as *halva*,” someone might say by way of a compliment. I once entered a common kitchen crowded with women busily at work making halva while chattering, chuckling and making sexually suggestive jokes. They were reminding one another of a woman who had once mistakenly added salt instead of sugar to her *halva*. Nudging another with an elbow, one woman

teased, “Imagine how horny she must have been, making *halva* briny!” I later learned that these women, whose merchant husbands frequently travelled to Dubai, presumed that they tended to make salty foods, sub-consciously, when they missed their husband’s bed.

I’m not sure of the specific logic behind having *halva* as a dessert after *ghalyeh*, but its sweetness--paired with a nicely brewed tea--certainly mediates the spicy-hot kick of the *ghalyeh*, completing and reinforcing the unique qualities of the dish. *Halva* is eaten in small quantities and typically saved for a few days after its preparation to serve as an energizing snack taken with after-lunch tea. A well-made *halva* served in a plain, white, china dish is so appetizing that it doesn’t need to be decorated with crushed pistachios and almonds, just as the *chelow* accompanying *ghalyeh* does not need any saffron make-up. In these cases, plain is pretty.

Chapter Three: *Aash* and *Kotlet* for Supper

It would be impossible to describe the culturally-specific ritual of preparing and eating an Iranian-style supper without imagining myself somewhere in Iran. To me, supper is a remote translation of *shaam*--the last meal of the day or “night”--even more so than *nahaar*, or lunch suggests “mid-day.”

The most accurate interpretation of the specific nature of *shaam* came from Maji. After returning to Shiraz from her two-month stay with us in Montreal, she tried to give her children and grandchildren a sense of what she saw as a hectic and chaotic life abroad. She described our eating habits as all mixed up.

“They don’t have time to eat a proper *nahaar* (lunch); so they eat *nahaar* as *shaam*. Afsaneh makes rice around six or seven in the afternoon when they are too full to have *shaam* at night. That’s why they either go to bed early, or on an empty stomach!” In fact, some families that have settled abroad stick to the Iranian late-supper schedule either because they cannot kick the habit of having a heavy evening repast, or because women’s jobs outside home does not allow them to prepare and serve an early, elaborate Iranian-style meal as supper.

The order of things in Iran is different, of course, and although I lived almost two-thirds of my life in Shiraz, I still catch myself feeling stunned when I encounter the difference. I once called my cousin in Iran, heedlessly, at 11:00 in the evening their time, saying, “Oh, I’m sorry! Did I wake you up?”

“No way!” my cousin’s cheerful voice replied. “We just walked in; the boys were about to have their tea.” The boys mentioned were aged seven and ten, and the next day was a school day.

The last meal of the day then, second only to lunch in importance, is supper, or *shaam*. Unless there are plans for a dinner party, *shaam* consists of a light dish served with flat bread. This dish may include any variety of *aash*; stuffed vegetables and stuffed grape leaf bites of *dolmeh*; an endless variety of round, flat croquettes made of eggs, milk and cooked potato, or eggs and chopped herbs (*koo-koo*); ground meat and onion (*shaami*); macaroni with ground beef sauce; deep-fried shrimp; stir-fried chicken or fish; omelets; cheese and *sabzi* or grated cucumber in yogurt depending on mood and budget. Flat bread is not to be omitted under any circumstances, even with potato-based meals. Most supper dishes require frying, except for *aash*.

Kotlet, which is arguably an Iranian version of a cutlet, is a perfect candidate for supper and is often prepared along with *aash-e reshteh* (conveniently, if not accurately translated as “noodle soup”). The two complement each other to create a rich supper that is popular with Iranians throughout Iran and beyond. Both *kotlet* and *aash-e reshteh* also happen to be dishes that have their own specific significance and character. *Kotlet* almost always has a place in a picnic basket, just as *aash-e reshteh* is chosen as a “vow dish”--cooked and distributed to make a wish come true.

The Persian term for cooking is *aashpazi*, composed of the words *aash* and *pazi*. According to Daryabandari, *aash* paired with a stew-like *khoreshteh* has historically been what Iranians ate for the foundation of their meal. Today’s *aash* is, in fact, *baa*--a liquid version of the original consisting of all or most of the ingredients used to make different kinds of *khoreshteh* and *chelow* or *polow*, all in one pot.

As reluctant as I am to use the term “soup” to describe *aash*, for fear of undermining its significant position within Iranian cuisine and culture, I nevertheless find a comparison between the two the most efficient way to describe the dish to new appetites. To this end, *aash* could be said to be an “honorable soup”--rich, thick and laborious to prepare. Depending on the type of *aash*, it is made of specific varieties of herbs, vegetables, fruits, grains and dairy products; with or without beef or lamb. If one were to list the types in each of the above-noted categories and combine them systematically, the list of potential *aash* creations would be as thick and dense as a phone book, but this is not how it works. While there is plenty of room for creativity when making *aash*, one cannot just mix any food items and expect the concoction to result in a passable dish. In reality, there are no more than several dozen types of *aash*. Daryabandari lists forty-three, some of which would sound completely new and quite exciting to most readers.

As with most Iranian dishes, certain types of *aash* are so region specific that even those that are popular nationwide still vary according to the cooking styles in various provinces and cities, not to mention within families. Cucumber *aash*, for example, is famous only among the Malayer in the Hamadan province, while milk *aash* is specific to the Khorasan province. On the other hand, *aash-e reshteh*--typically made with fresh herbs, three types of beans, Iranian noodles and a thick whey called *kashk*--is known to all Iranians inside and outside the country despite looking and tasting quite unfamiliar when produced by a bevy of different cooks. Vinegar can be used instead of *kashk*, giving it a pleasantly acrid taste, or peeled and chopped tomatoes may be added to give it a reddish hue, as is customary in the Azarbaijan province.

Most types of *aash* are fairly simple to prepare and are routinely cooked as a side-dish or the main meal for lunch or dinner, especially during long, cold, winter nights. Restaurant-made *aash*, like heads and hooves soup, is sometimes prepared in the very early morning hours to be served as an eat-in or take-out breakfast. Then there is what some would unfavorably refer to as “sick-*aash*.” This type of *aash* is made at home with little or no spices and without garnish but with a selection of herbs and vegetables believed to have soothing, medicinal qualities. Turnip, pumpkin, spinach and coriander mixed with chicken broth and beans tastes gratifyingly delicious and still works like magic to remedy a cold.

Some types of *aash* (the most popular ones in fact) could be quite elaborate, requiring a lot of preparation time and a considerable degree of diligence in the tending garnishing stages. These types of *aash* are usually made collectively and shared with neighbors, friends and the poor on specific occasions such as when a vow has been made (*aash-e nazri*), or a happy event is being celebrated.

From as far back as I can remember until I lost my father when I was twenty, we had one such vow *aash* ritual at home. Ours was an herbed *aash* that featured lamb and beans. It was made each year on the day that marks the passing of the Prophet Mohammad in the Islamic calendar (on 28th of Safar), some 1,400 years ago.

The vow was originally made between God and my grandmother (my father’s mother) when my father, who was also named Mohammad, got seriously ill when he was nine. Grandma promised God that she would make *aash* every year, for as long as my father lived, in return for his full recovery--not anticipating, I suppose, that she might not be around long enough to pay off her vow. Upon marrying my dad, my mother took the vow upon herself as an act of affection and duty. For 40 years of their married life, my mom supervised as my dad took much delight in the process of making gigantic pots of *aash* and distributing it among the poor and not-so-poor with

the help of a crew of paid cooks, assistants and unpaid family members or friends acting as drivers and dispatchers.

The preparation would start a week in advance with the booking of a professional cook, specializing in *aash*-making, and the launching of the shopping-cleaning-washing cycle. Some years, my father would buy a sheep for the cook to butcher at home, thereby making the best possible use of its parts. Other years, he would just buy the necessary meat and bone to be sorted by the cook. Whether it was to kill the beast or just sort and chop bought meat, the cook would settle down in the yard and wield his blade with a skill that always struck us as extremely impressive. He had many other jobs to do. He hosed down our two pots, specifically reserved for the occasion, one of which I could sit in until I was fourteen. He washed and soaked the beans, minced the already picked and washed herbs, peeled and sliced a mound of onion without using any kind of cutting board--all the while sipping his tea and taking bites of the food the adults offered him.

It was not until after dusk that the cook actually started cooking. He stayed up all night to tend to the *aash* while almost everyone else slept for a few hours. Everything about the event electrified me so much that I couldn't sleep properly for several nights before it. When I was a bit older, I was particularly mesmerized by the night when the cooking was moved outdoors to the rear, dark end of our yard over two stand-alone, gas burners. In those years, Mohsen and I always kept the cook company until dawn as he smoked the night away under the yellow lamp that dangled from a temporary extension cord over his cooking pots. That was around the time the two of us discovered the unique pleasure of talking through the night and got into the habit of doing this from time to time. On those *aash*-cooking nights, once we wore out the cook's patience and left him alone, Mohsen fooled me into revealing my "deepest, darkest secret," only to use it the next day to blackmail me into running his errands--often for weeks to come. Later on, we would read books and discuss them over platters of sunny-side-up eggs that we carried from our kitchens in Shiraz or Montreal, in the middle of the night, to one of our rooms.

By 4:00 a.m., as daylight deepened and the *aash* was ready to be served, the cook hit the road with a sizable casserole of *aash* for himself, letting the array of my father's fans--friends and relatives--take over the serving and distribution. *Aash* was then carried inside in large containers to rows of china and glass bowls of different shapes and sizes lined up on the kitchen countertop. These were then filled, decorated with fried onions and sent out to different destinations before people had their breakfast.

One thing that made the yearly *aash*-cooking adventure all the more exciting was the fact that its timing kept changing slightly over the years, prompting us to remember or refer to each as "the year that the 28th of Safar on an October day and we had the *aash* cooking on a school day," or "when we had to cook it indoors." (12). My father used to recount an *aash* story that we never grew tired of. Once, when he was a young boy living in Bushehr, he was distributing the *aash* made in his honor at 5:00 a.m. on a "cold, February day" (which could not have been any colder than +10°C).

He knocked on the door of an old woman living a few alleys away several times before he heard the woman limping down the tall stairs that lead to the entrance. Inquiring who it was, she complained loudly in rhyme, "Such biting a cold, so ailing the old, what do I need an *aash* for?" To this date, each time any of my family faces a "blessing in disguise," they recall and recite this line with much amusement and affection.

During my teenage years, the collective *aash* distribution that followed the long night of cooking was noisy, messy, fun, exhausting and--at times--chaotic. *Aash* bowls filled tactfully just below the brim were carried on foot or in cars; individually or in groups of three or four set on a tray. The empty bowls were always rapidly washed, dried, returned and reused for the next dispatch.

Young and old, each family member had a list of their friends to be served early morning *aash*. However they did not necessarily know their addresses and even if they did, it always proved impossible to coordinate sending all *aash* bowls for the same neighborhood in one trip. The more prestigious friends and older relatives were to be given the nicest bowls, ideally the white chinaware decorated with a red rose design--a requirement that added to the hassle and confusion. At this final stage of the *aash* ritual, I usually got the role of delivery girl, which I found quite boring as soon as I finished my own list of friends. My older brothers or sisters, however, were given a more rewarding role. They sat next to my dad in the back of a pickup truck along with a large pot of *aash*, a ladle and several melamine bowls. The driver was instructed to stop at construction sites, orphanages, mosques or anywhere else where a delicious and unexpected breakfast was most likely to be appreciated.

Upon delivering stomach-warming bowls of *aash* to houses in those early morning hours, I never received any complaint like the one uttered by the poor, old woman in Bushehr. What I did receive was the washed bowl and with it a good-will wish of "May your request be granted!" A pleasant tip of sorts was often placed in the empty bowl to emphasize the good wish. That tip often included a branch of fragrant, curly, pink roses, unromantically called Mohammadi, a small bunch of violets or marvels-of-Peru, or a fistful of jasmine flowers hurriedly plucked up from the yard's flowerbed. When no flowers were in season or in the garden, a single scented, leathery, green leaf of the sour-orange tree did the job just as delicately.

Even with all the *aash* we gave away, we still had enough left over to feed ourselves three times a day for the next few days. That was undoubtedly the least exciting part of the whole ceremony. To be sure, we never made this particular type of *aash* during the year that followed. It just so happened that my grandmother had designated lamb and herb *aash* as her vow-*aash*. If she had chosen *aash-e reshteh*, for instance, we might have been happier with the endless leftovers. Or who knows, we might have abandoned making *aash-e reshteh* during the year as well.

In 1981, my father died of cancer, depriving us all of his boundless love, unspoken care and refreshing wit. When the illness was still minor enough to be the source of jokes, he would say that death would probably find him because no *aash* had been made for him at home that past year--a vow had been broken and he was going to pay for it with his dear life. Starting in the mid-1970s, as the turbulent pre-revolutionary winds intensified across the country, our pot of *aash*--along with all the rituals that surrounded making it--shrank in size, significance and joy. For several years, on the vow day, we cooked a much smaller amount of the same type of *aash* in the kitchen on the regular stove with the help of only a couple of relatives. The last year that my father was still alive, however, the upheaval of the Iran-Iraq war made my mom decide to abandon the *aash*-cooking altogether and instead donate the equivalent of its expense to a charity in Bushehr--a wise decision, one might say, yet one that my father submitted to reluctantly and my mother regretted silently afterwards.

On the Making of *Aash-e Reshteh*

Of all the types of *aash*, *aash-e reshteh*, or “noodle soup,” in particular, is so popular that it’s not only made routinely as a family meal, it has also been chosen as the *aash* to mark more than one special occasion. One would spend a whole day preparing, cooking and distributing *aash-e reshteh* to “send-off” a family member on a long or important trip. Traditionally, *aash-e reshteh* is also made and served at the Iranian Fire Festival (*chaharshanbeh soori*) get-together--the festivity held on the eve of the last Wednesday before the Persian New Year. Revelers in Iran celebrate by jumping over bonfires in the streets while the Islamic state stands by fuming but powerless to do anything about it. Those of us outside of Iran, however, rarely manage the bonfire part of the night due to our cities’ fire regulations, but some of us at least observe the *aash-e reshteh* part. These days, many Iranian cities have seen *aash-e reshteh* travel from the home to the street corner, joining the long list of popular street foods served through window slots in disposable bowls.

The first significant thing about this *aash* is that it’s made without meat—a detail that makes its popularity a bit of a mystery in a culinary tradition that values meat so highly. Secondly, *aash-e reshteh* contains two purely Iranian food products, *reshteh* and *kashk*, both of which are difficult to find outside Iran. We in the Diaspora keep pressing not only our Iranian food stores, but other friendly, Middle-Eastern ones to supply these two items so that we can continue to make this wonderful *aash*.

Reshteh is a noodle made from wheat flour. This flour is first mixed with water and made into a paste, then cut into thin, flat strips and sundried. No cooking is involved. Once completely dry, these unique-tasting noodles are transformed into fragile, whitish strips with rectangular cross sections to be used in a few other Iranian dishes besides *aash*. I have not seen *reshteh* anywhere outside of Iran except in Iranian stores; neither have I seen its name mentioned as a member of the noodle family in culinary sources.

The nomads in Iran used to make butter by beating yogurt in goatskins. Once the butter was separated, the residual liquid made a delicious dairy drink called *doogh*-- a popular summer hit and favorite with rice and kebab. When *doogh* was dried and mixed with lots of salt, it became yet another dairy product called *kashk* that could be preserved for a long time as a nourishing source of protein, much welcome during times of food scarcity. Today, *kashk* is used in liquid form, either hot or cold, not only for *aash-e reshteh* but in many other Iranian foods and garnishes. It is also made into small, solid balls for a school children’s snack.

Kashk, often conveniently translated as “whey,” has no real English equivalent and is generally unfamiliar to non-Iranians in Montreal. I can say with certainty, however, that it is well known among custom officers here thanks to a funny story from back in the 90s. A friend’s parents, an old couple from Iran with very limited English, had arrived to visit their son when they were stopped at the airport’s customs line and asked in English, “Do you have cash? Cash? Cash?” The officer repeated the key word a few times for emphasis--as intelligibly as he could.

The couple exchange glances, and then silently agree to declare their possessions honestly. They nod firmly, dash to all their handbags and suitcases, and dig through them one by one while rambling, “I told you not to hide them... look here, look there...” After fifteen minutes, the couple breathlessly and triumphantly present the officer with a plastic bag full of solid balls of *kashk*. *Is this Iranian currency?* The officer must have wondered, but when he asked what the hell was going on, he learned all about the name and nature of this Iranian dairy product.

As for the remaining ingredients, a “typical” *aash-e reshteh* contains three types of grains, chickpeas, black or red kidney beans and lentils in equal amounts, as well as several fistfuls of coarsely chopped parsley, coriander, chives or scallions and lots of fresh spinach. Spinach is the key green for this *aash* and could replace all of the other herbs and still make a decent-tasting *aash-e reshteh*. Ignore recipes that suggest dill. Its dominant taste and fragrance are not suitable for *aash-e reshteh*. Onions, garlic and dried, powdered mint are other essentials; as are cooking oil, salt, black pepper and turmeric. Some cooks dissolve a couple tablespoons of flour in water and add it to the *aash* near the end in order to add starch and thicken its juice, but I find this unnecessary if the *aash* is allowed enough time to meld and settle. Here is how to get started cooking it.

1) If you intend to serve *aash-e reshteh* in the evening of the same day you have served *ghalyeh* and rice for lunch, you will need to prepare several other bowls (besides soaked rice and tamarind) before going to bed the previous night. Ideally, both chickpeas and black or red kidney beans should be soaked in separate bowls of lukewarm water overnight. Soaking helps speed up the cooking process of these hard beans, but this is not the main reason we soak them. Chickpeas and similar hard beans have major nutritional value, but as we all know they have equally significant gas-producing potential. Soaking and changing the water several times before starting to boil these beans diminishes the troublesome and embarrassing consequences of their consumption. If soaking overnight is not a possibility, you can get the same results by bringing the water to a boil and discarding it at least twice before letting the beans cook. Boil all your beans in separate pots (as they have different cooking times) with a pinch of salt, and cook them well, since undercooking is another contributing factor in giving you gas.

2) While the beans are being cooked, get started with your fried onions or *piaz-daagh*. You will need at least three big onions to make two different styles of fried-onions. Thinly slice two of the onions and stir-fry them in a big pot containing hot oil until translucent, as we do for *khoreshteh*. Set aside the other onion—we will be using that for a garnish. Once the onions are nearly browned, add three cloves of peeled, chopped garlic, and keep three more for later. Stir-fry the mix for a minute or two, add turmeric and black pepper and fry some more. The base of your *aash* is ready.

3) Add the chopped herbs to the pot along with the well-cooked (but not too soft) beans and whatever water is left in their pots. A part of the salt you need for your *aash* is provided by the beans, and the *kashk* will also add its own salt, so it’s best to adjust according to taste closer to the end of the cooking process. Add a couple of glasses of hot water if you did not get much extra water from the beans’ pots and cook over medium heat for about one hour. Peek into the pot several times to stir gently.

4) Once the *aash* looks well melded and harmonious, you can add your Iranian noodles, *reshteh*, to the surface of your pot, one by one. Try not to break them, and avoid crowding them in the pot as they will stick together if mounted on top of each other. By now, you should have just enough water in your pot for the noodles to absorb, but not much more. Once the noodles are added, reduce the heat to low and do not stir. In five to ten minutes the oozing *aash* is ready to be garnished and served. Some cooks dissolve two or three tablespoons of *kashk* in hot water and add it to the *aash* at this stage, while others use *kashk* only on top of the serving bowl. It really depends on how big a fan of *kashk* one is, and how much of it one would like to have in the *aash*.

Visual Delight

A bowl of *aash-e reshteh* that's garnished and ready to be served not only smells delicious, it is also truly photogenic. Visual delight is a cornerstone of Iranian cuisine and tends to be considered throughout the food preparation and cooking process rather than as an added element or an after-thought. As a general rule, garnishing a dish is not nearly as important as preparing it with care and handling the cooking and serving processes skillfully and delicately in order to maintain proper form and the ideal balance between taste, color and aroma.

When stir-frying onions as the base of any kind of *khoresh*, for example, they should be sliced thinly and equal in size—just as all the *kotlet* placed in a dish should be about the same size. Similarly, the hundreds of fried meatballs, mixed with herbs and cabbage to go in cabbage-mixed rice (*kalam-polow*), should be of equal size and not much larger than a cherry seed. This promotion of harmony between a food's components is clear in the Persian saying, "Forming meatballs in unequal sizes is indicative of one's inability to tell a friend from an enemy."

Finely minced herbs meld best in any kind of mixed rice or stew, just as small, tight pockets of stuffed grape leaves (*dolmeh*) taste more delicious than ones that have been clumsily wrapped. This preoccupation with chopping, mincing and rolling everything so finely might be seen by some as a conspiracy to keep women busy, but it has the added effect of making food particularly flavorful and beautiful. By the time a meal is ready to be served, it is usually gorgeous enough as-is but in the case of *aash*, a little touching-up simply makes it look as appealing as it tastes.

Different types of *aash* require different garnishes, although fried onions are a common ingredient in many. To garnish *aash-e-rehsteh*, the thick, liquid *kashk* is first poured evenly over the *aash*, providing a creamy-white backdrop. The *aash-e reshteh* is then topped with powdered dry mint leaves that have been fried in oil for two minutes, which adds a dark, green, shiny splash at the center. Finally, crispy-fried onion and garlic are strewn in rows or spots, depending on the artist's taste. The fried onions spread on top of a bowl of *aash-e reshteh* (or any other type of *aash*) should be delicate, crunchy and golden. Onions prepared this way are transformed into an incomparable delicacy. Some of my most splendid memories of our annual *aash*-cooking ritual back in Shiraz revolve around the fried onions the cook would make and set aside before the *aash* was ready. By 4:00 a.m. he had a huge, round, brass tray piled high with crisp, gold *piaz-daagh*, the fragrance of which was already making its way through the entire house. For every fistful I took from the tray to garnish a bowl, I munched two—I couldn't get enough of the moist heavenly snack. Making this style of fried onion requires extra labor, practice, patience and oil, but the effort is certainly worth it.

Slice onions extra thin in equal lengths and fry them in a lot of hot oil in a frying pan. The trick is low heat and small batches. Each thin slice of onion should be separate from any other in the cooking oil, almost swimming in it.

Keep tossing and flipping them and after a while you will note that they are turning crisp and golden instead of going soft and translucent. Once done, remove them from the heat and spread them on two layers of paper towel. As the towel absorbs the excess oil, the onions get even crispier and can be preserved for weeks if kept in a sealed container in the refrigerator.

Kotlet and the World of Food Smells

In 1995, while I was studying at York University in Toronto, I lived on campus in a fully furnished apartment in Assiniboine--one of the concrete, high-rise buildings allocated to graduate students. That was the happiest community living I have ever experienced in Canada, to this very day. I was feeling accomplished and extremely excited about my studies in the Department of Anthropology and appreciating my over-paid Research Assistant position.

I was savoring the sweet taste of independence for the first time in my long 34 years without having to cope with its downsides because Mohsen was now driving in from Montreal regularly to tend to my emotional and shopping needs. Unlike all of the other apartments I inhabited in Montreal before and after that year, my York apartment was free from inconsiderate and intrusive 3:00 a.m. rock 'n' roll, love-making uproar, and innocent but equally disturbing snoring and vacuum-cleaning noise. My small window on the eighth floor opened to a parking lot and seemed to frame a tangibly bright future. I was finally at peace after leaving our sound proof home in Shiraz some six years earlier.

So satisfied was I with my new living conditions that for the first couple of months, I managed to completely ignore the noxious food odors that rushed me at the most unexpected times and places: the acrid stench of burned cooking oil and roasted beef wafting down at 1:00 a.m. or the stink of soya and garlic pushing up through the heat ducts in the early morning. Apparently, studying hard made all students hungry. The sensory clash between my own cravings and some of the foods I smelled could be intense.

Unlike in a typically malodorous apartment building, the Assiniboine's multicultural food smells did not overtake its elevators and hallways. Odors seemed to traverse directly from one apartment to another. That tormenting reminder that "life is not perfect" was in the air that I had to breathe and there was no way out of it. It was not like an unpleasant sight that could be blocked by a curtain, or an annoying noise that could be thwarted by plugged ears—it was suddenly there, hanging and clinging to each breath. I'm sure my neighbors didn't particularly enjoy the smell of cigarette smoke mixed with fried cabbage and turmeric that travelled from my doors and windows either. The strong link between scent and emotion really fascinated me. Immersed in the curious environment of research, hypotheses and the formulation of socio-cultural questions, I would often wonder why there wasn't a field like Food Smell Behavioral Science in which I might study how food odors behave or misbehave.

Back home, the scent of freshly fried *kotlet* was a true delight. Someone walking the sidewalks of most Shirazi neighborhoods could tell with a reasonable degree of certainty what was being cooked in each house. The smells lingered for most of the day given the long hours of cooking. To prepare a meat-based stew for lunch at 12:30 p.m., Saleheh started cooking at 8:00 am.

Food smells were especially identifiable in certain middle-class neighborhoods, where the townhouses were relatively large and far apart. Each home's kitchen window generated its own unique food trace that would then drift out to the sidewalk. I can recall the numerous times I walked past those windows, sometimes slowing down to inhale the delicate aroma of an entrancing *kalam-polow* (rice mixed with fried cabbage, onion, fresh herbs and ground meat) that trailed after me for a few seconds right up to the next door--just long enough to let my nose adjust to a new smell. Then I would rush past another house while holding my breath to escape the stomach-turning gag of sheep tail fat (*donbeh*) in *aab-ghoosh*, a thick mixed-beans and meat soup.

In a highly affluent neighborhood, these smell-speculation games were not as simple because cooking was done at the far recesses of the house behind miles of yards and gardens. In the poor or overpopulated neighborhoods, the scents crowded each other out. I never lived in an apartment building in Shiraz, and didn't know anyone who did, so I cannot tell you how it would feel to live amidst the trapped odors of Iranian cuisine. Of all the meals in my memory's repertoire, *kotlet* stands very tall, thanks to its sensory qualities. I have not been able to figure out what exactly gives *kotlet* its persistent and penetrating smell.

To make *kotlet*, you mix grated, boiled potatoes and raw onions with ground beef, eggs and the usual turmeric, salt and black pepper. The mix needs to be kneaded very well until it becomes a pasty mass. Billiard ball-sized portions are taken from the mass and flattened in the palm (or on a hard surface, but in the shape of a palm), using breadcrumbs to ease the process of flattening and frying. The palm-shaped patty is then placed in a frying pan containing hot oil. Once one side is brownish, it is turned gently for the other side to brown. It is done in a few minutes. *Kotlet* can be served hot or warm with flat bread for supper, but cold *kotlet* is just as delicious when made into a sandwich with sabzi, sliced tomatoes and pickles to be taken to work or on a picnic.

Kotlet produces a pleasant odor while frying that creeps behind every closed door and clings to clothes for at least a day. It even sneaks into the cook's underwear. The smell sticks, and I am reluctant to admit, eventually stinks. This quality is border-blind; that is to say, the smell of *kotlet* lingers on in Montreal just the way it used to back home when other odors, such as cigarette smoke, did not seem to stick at all in Iran.

At a Montreal film festival, I was once standing among a crowd in a university hall, waiting for the doors to open, when I suddenly detected the smell of *kotlet* coming from afar. Hesitant but curious, I followed the smell like a sniffing dog and arrived in front of my own, dear, Iranian friend who--as if reading my mind--started to complain about how she had to feed every child and adult at home before heading out to enjoy a cultural event on her own. At a potluck, it was always easy to tell who brought the *kotlet*, even if they had changed out of their cooking clothes.

I know for a fact that *kotlet* smelled just as strong back home, but I suppose we simply didn't care enough to take precautions or make remarks. *Kotlet* was firmly in the category of foods that, once its fragrance was revealed, it had to be shared with or at least offered to the people around you. As a matter of principle and instinct, you would take a plate of freshly fried *kotlet* to a pregnant neighbor, regardless of your relationship with her or her likings, just in case she might have smelled it and felt like having it.

Noisy Night Watchman and Hungry Burglar

Our house on Hedayat Street was in the kind of neighborhood where each kitchen's open window made its own statement. It was located on the southern side of the street off the sidewalk, which meant that like our neighbors, the kitchen windows opened over the sidewalk. The two square, barred windows were situated directly above our stoves, having been designed to act like hoods during the pleasant months of spring and fall when we could pull their shutters open and forgo the electric exhaust fan/hoods with the drops of oil dangling from their mesh. The row of townhouses across from us on the northern side of the street had their yards adjacent to the sidewalk, and their kitchens were located at the other end of the house. If one wished to be

entertained by the tempting scents of foods, and the noises of clinking dishes, chattering arguments and whatever radio station the cook had chosen, they must walk on our side of the sidewalk; which was exactly what Om-kal-Hossein, our self-proclaimed night watchman, used to do.

Om-kal-Hossein found his calling shortly after the turbulent months of revolution, thanks to the community-organization and unifying aura that dominated society for a short while. During this brief period--from a few months before the overthrow of the shah in January, 1979 to a few months afterwards and before the IRI established itself firmly and fully by April 1980--a new phenomenon emerged in many Shiraz communities. From late night until dawn, small and large groups of young men got together around a fire at the cross section of their neighborhoods. Their mission was to "stand guard" against any kind of disturbance they perceived to be a threat to their then common revolution--by royalists, fundamentalists, or opportunistic thieves. They were similar in their function to Neighborhood Watch groups, except that there was no organized official body of law enforcement to which to report the perceived offences.

These groups, along with their agenda, dissipated as the pro-Islamist youth of different communities gradually joined the government-sponsored and armed *Komiteh* (Revolutionary Committees), and the anti-regime youth of leftist and nationalist fractions were arrested, imprisoned and executed. Within a couple of months, hundreds of mosque-based *Komiteh* started to operate throughout different cities. Within the next few years, *komiteh* groups were progressively centralized, expanded and empowered to act as the domestic guardians of the Islamic Republic's interests and values, more often than not imposing those values--from street assaults and arrests to raids of people's homes in search of immoral behavior and the confiscation of property. It was not until 1991 that the *Komiteh* merged with the official police force and slightly relaxed the public harassment dimensions of its operations.

During those early, post-revolutionary months and years people felt the absence of a well-established police force like the one they had come to terms with under the Shah. Instead, people faced the *komiteh*--a disorderly, inexperienced and potentially predatory new disciplinary law enforcement body that many felt lacked the minimum public security to even protect their property. Under such circumstances, some communities started to assign this task to individual "night watchmen," whom they hired from within their own neighborhoods. The night watchman was a spontaneous concept in Shiraz, created by communities on a per need basis and tolerated by city officials precisely because it neither helped nor hindered their job. The night watchman was a symbolic, almost comical figure that created peace of mind for some people.

No one in our neighborhood, however, appointed Om-kal-Hossein to any position. He was basically a needy man disguised as a night watchman. He was about 50 years old and slightly overweight, panting for breath as he walked. He wore ragged clothes and had matted hair, and carried a symbolically threatening stick and a whistle around his neck like a soccer referee. Starting around 10 p.m., he would begin his tour; pacing three or four streets up and down--always on the side of the street to which the kitchen windows opened up.

"Om-kal-Hossein, oyyy... Om-kal-Hossein, ayyy..." he shouted in his hoarse voice, blowing into his whistle every once in a while with the pretense of scaring off potential intruders. I never got used to the shocking effect of his whistle, and for that reason alone could not bring myself to like him. If this shrill announcement went unacknowledged, Om-kal-Hossein would then improvise according to his needs. He would modify his usual lines to remind us what day of the

month it was, calling to mind that it was close to when his meager “salary” was voluntarily paid by most residents. More routinely, however, he complemented us on our cooking skills.

“Bah... bah... bah, what a delicious-smelling *kotlet*! Om-kal-Hossein, oyyy... a mouth-watering smell. Bravo to the cook!” With *kotlet* in particular, there was no way to ignore Om-kal-Hossein, because everyone knew that fresh or old, those remnants of *kotlet* dangling in the air and drifting out to the sidewalk could kill a hungry man. Pari used to save a couple of *kotlets* when we had it for *shaam*, just in case there were none left over by the time Om-kal-Hossein showed up.

The heavenly fragrance of *kotlet* being fried was so haunting and tempting, it seems, that not even a burglar could be denied. One night during the last months of the Shah’s martial law in the summer of 1978, a few months before the revolution, our household of over ten people--including my eldest brother, who had returned from England to remarry his British wife in the Iranian-Muslim style in order to honor my parents’ wishes--were all gathered in the TV room to watch a popular Iranian series. It was around 8:00 p.m. and the *kotlet* mix was ready and sitting on the kitchen shelf, awaiting the end of the show. The small mountain of flip-flops at the doorway was a clear indication of where everybody was. At some point in the middle of the show, Mohsen (age 18 at the time) ran upstairs to fetch something when he noticed a young man walking in the hallway.

“Hi,” Mohsen greeted him politely, assuming that the man must be the guest of someone else in the house. The man mumbled his own greeting, but instead of behaving normally, he picked up his pace and headed for the balcony. We heard Mohsen shouting “Thief! Thief!” and the household erupted in a frenzy. To cut a long story short, my brother stopped the burglar and we all dragged him downstairs. After some interrogation and a brief body search it turned out that he had not had a chance to take anything. He started by denying that he was a burglar; then proceeded to explain why he was one; sobbing, apologizing and begging to be released. The question was what to do with him?

The younger family members were for letting the burglar go, but my father didn’t want to appear too lenient despite having no desire to hand the man over to the police in that revolutionary time. “Wait until 9:30 p.m. when the curfew starts, and then let him go!” my father’s cousin said, excitedly. “The soldiers will shoot him dead for you in no time!” No one was amused, and everybody, including the burglar, protested in panic. Someone in the crowd came up with another suggestion, I suspect as a way to get both my dad and the burglar off the hook.

“Why don’t you go see Essi, Dad, and see what he thinks?” My dad welcomed the suggestion and took off with his cousin. It would take ten minutes to walk to and from Essi’s house, in addition to the consultation time, so everyone waited, chatted and recounted the story while the burglar--feeling a bit safer in the absence of my dad and his cousin--squatted in a corner of the hallway on the tiled floor and waited for his fate to be decided by the mysterious Essi.

Meanwhile, Pari went back to the kitchen and started frying *kotlet*, since the TV show was over anyway. The aroma was as good as ever, and someone noticed that the young man must be badly craving food, given the trauma he had just been through. Hesitantly, Mom put a few *kotlets* on a plate atop a tray, along with *bazari* bread and some *sabzi* and water, and sent it to the man in the hallway. Soon enough, the burglar was hurriedly wolfing down huge morsels of *kotlet* wrapped in flat bread, chasing each down his gullet with his thumb and a gulp of water as if there was no tomorrow.

I will never forget the look on my father's face when he entered the hallway and the burglar—his mouth full--leapt up in horror and apology. "What the hell?" my furious father protested, looking all around but not knowing who to blame. "You're being hospitable, entertaining the bastard now?! You, you son of a dog!" Lucky for him, the sentence Essi had just issued was unconditional release--which came as no surprise to anyone but the grateful burglar.

Years later, only a month after I had joined my sister and brother on the first floor of a townhouse they had rented in Verdun, Montreal, we were robbed of all of our electrical appliances and gadgets. When the police arrived to fill out the forms, I was in the middle of cooking and thought it only appropriate to offer them a plate of something, especially since the kitchen was in the hallway and included the table on which they were writing their report. Even before the cops' polite decline, "Thanks Ma'am, we're not supposed to when on duty," embarrassed looks from my siblings told me that I probably shouldn't have made the offer. I created and handled many more embarrassing moments in the coming years, but on that particular occasion I remember thinking to myself, *May God bless my soul! It was easier to get friendly with a thief back home than it is to get friendly with a cop here.*

Kotlet, the Greasy Companion

Perhaps one of the reasons *kotlet* makes such a big impact on the nose is the fact that it is usually made in abundance, and takes over an hour just for the frying time. *Kotlet* is typically a crowd's meal. One wouldn't go to the trouble of shaping and frying ten *kotlets*, for instance, to feed three or four people for *shaam*. Even if you are a small family of four, double or triple the sufficient number is made and the extras are saved in the fridge--a good reason to stay up late, for a cold *kotlet* midnight snack. Warm *chelow* served with cold or reheated *kotlet* is one of my favourite leftovers.

More significantly perhaps, *kotlet* falls somewhere between an elaborate, home-made food and a delicious fast food for people of all walks of life, and is-always linked to community, intimacy and fun. It is the food one always chooses as a companion to a family picnic, or for a meal on-the-road. On a half day picnic, we used to take a container full of cold *kotlets*, along with separately wrapped bags of flat bread, *sabzi*, sliced tomatoes, torshi, and washed lettuce. We resisted sneaking into the *kotlet's* container until lunch time, when we made and ate enough *kotlet* sandwiches to be full for two days. Once back home, though, pleasantly worn out and amazingly still hungry, we dug into the leftover *kotlet*. *Kotlet* is also the food of choice on back-breaking days. If it's moving day and you're stranded in a sea of unpacked boxes and all the fatigue and excitement that go with them, only one food will do: the hassle-free yet authentically homey *kotlet* along with all the side dishes. Pizza just doesn't measure up on such occasions. I have more than one picture of us in yet another bare apartment building or house in Montreal; painting ceilings, washing windows or just stretching out on the wood floors with the remainders of a *kotlet* lunch somewhere in the frame.

When Saleheh was still living with us and she wanted to cook *kotlet* for *shaam*, she used to do it all on her own. She would cover one large part of the countertop with neat rows of equally-sized *kotlets* on newspapers, and then start placing them--three or four at a time--in a frying pan containing a generous amount of hot oil. The more traditional and cooperative way of preparing *kotlet* is for one person to shape the paste and another to tend to the frying pan. However, if you don't happen to have a helping hand or are a multi-tasking expert, you would flatten the *kotlets*

in your palm and slip them directly into the frying pan while simultaneously shaping more *kotlets* and turning the ones cooking in the pan until they are ready to be removed. Because *kotlet* is supposed to be shaped in the palm, the size and shape of a *kotlet* presumably reveal's the size and shape of the cook's palm, with small to medium-sized *kotlets* being more desirable than large ones, thanks to stereotypes of female beauty and the aesthetics of culinary art.

Kotlet in the Making

Mix half a kilogram of ground beef, five medium to large-sized boiled and grated potatoes, two eggs, one medium-sized, raw, grated onion, salt, powdered black pepper and turmeric. The most important combination in a *kotlet* mix is the proportion of ground meat to cooked potatoes, which depends on a lot of factors, from budget to taste. Slightly more meat than potatoes is the standard, and results in a crispier *kotlet*. Having said that, more potatoes and less meat in a *kotlet* mix does not necessarily make it less delicious, although it does make the shaping and frying process more manageable. I used to love the *kotlet*-in-baguette sandwiches that we bought from fast-food joints on our way to movies or on our way home at the end of a long shopping day. Those contained as little as a pinch of meat and they were deep-fried in order to cook faster, which also made them greasier than usual.

The elasticity and dominant taste of potatoes, combined with their yellow color indicated too much turmeric in those *kotlets*—just one of the many warnings heaped on us by adults in their effort to keep us away from this “junk food.” Also on the list was the alleged filthiness of restaurant kitchens. To me and my friends, however, those sandwiches tasted wonderful, much like the charcoal-grilled skewer kebab we bought from *kebabi* that came wrapped in one big *bazari* bread and nestled in heavenly smelling big-leafed, long-stemmed basil leaves that were rumored to have been washed in the muddy water of the *joob* in front of the store. I would have tried washing my *sabzi* in the *joob* if it meant that they would come out tasting as delicious as they did straight from the *kebabi*.

Saleheh used to start by thoroughly kneading the *kotlet* mix, squeezing out any potato lumps that had escaped the grater and tossing out any chunks of onion skin that had managed to sneak in. She then formed a homogenous, football-sized mass and let it set for at least an hour. Before shaping her palm-sized batches, she formed a clumsy patty as a tester and fried it on both sides. If it was too fragile and did not hold long enough to be fried in one piece, it meant that the mix contained too many grated onions. As a solution, she would add one or two eggs to the mix, and knead it well all over again.

Once she was sure that the mix would behave, she would take small pieces from the mass and turn each portion out onto a bread-crumbed surface until it was perfectly round--about the size of a billiard ball--and no longer sticky. She would then flatten each ball in her palm, or on the breaded surface but in the shape of her palm. If a *kotlet* patty appeared even slightly too large, she pinched its pointed head off and reshaped it briskly to make it uniform. Most Shirazis I know use all-purpose flour as a coating to round and then flatten *kotlets*, and while it is also possible to skip flour or breadcrumbs entirely for a significantly tenderer *kotlet*, the frying process can be positively unwieldy without a helpful dusting of something to ease the process

Although I use flour to make *kotlets* here in my Montreal kitchen, I have a fantasy about breadcrumb-covered *kotlet* being distinctly lofty, grainy-textured and more delicious. I would

rather keep it as a fantasy, however, since I have a hard time not burning the breadcrumbs during the frying process. Saleheh used to make her own breadcrumbs on the spot by pounding the undesirable parts of flat bread that she had saved and dried over the past week in an iron mortar, then sifting off the coarser particles in a metal sieve in order to use the relatively fine, but pleasantly grainy particles.

Once Saleheh had crafted around forty individual patties in the shape and size of her palm, she would start dropping them, one-by-one, into the sputtering oil from a cautiously low height--leaving enough room between the *kotlets* in the frying pan to move them around easily. Once the edges on one side browned, she would turn it and brown the other side--always turning them only once. The familiar, savory haze began to blow off the frying pan as soon as the first batch was fried. Crisp *kotlets* were then removed from the frying pan and placed in a flat dish but never covered with another layer while they were still very hot. My memories of Saleheh shaping and frying *kotlet* are so clear because as a child, I liked hanging around her so that she would let me make a baby *kotlet* for myself--from shaping and frying it to fussing over keeping it unbroken and finally finding it among the other *kotlets* at *sofreh* and marveling at my creation before popping it in my mouth. As I grew up, the size of my handcrafted *kotlets* increased to the point that mine seemed larger than all of the other *kotlets* on the platter, so I stopped making one altogether. I would like to attribute the large size of those *kotlets* to a temporary loss of interest in cooking, rather than to my overgrown palm.

In order to produce a tender and crisp, yet cooked-to-the core *kotlet* with a nice, balanced hue of brown and gold, it must be fried in plenty of oil. “*Kotlet* eats up oil,” cooks always assure, so in the process of mass frying *kotlet* one must keep a good stock of oil handy to refill the frying pan every once in a while. The fried *kotlets* can be placed on a paper towel to extract excess oil, and rest assured there will be plenty, but never try to squeeze the oil out of warm *kotlets*, as they will lose their crispy texture. The *kotlet* of my fondest memories, however, was intentionally, tremendously and shamelessly greasy.

Kotlet simply could not be fried to perfection in a small amount of oil, and there was no reason to do so except for financial restraints or because you had run out of cooking oil. Making *kotlet* with a disproportionate measure of ingredients--more precisely with too little ground meat and too many boiled potatoes --was a common mistake, forgivable when made in a home’s kitchen and conceivable but not forgivable when coming from sandwich joints. But there was no excuse for making dry, juiceless *kotlets* fried in a stingy amount of oil.

Back home and back then, greasy foods in general were not a “problem” that needed to be solved. Quite the contrary, greasy foods were (and still are, to a lesser extent) much valued. They were somewhat associated with wealth, much in the same way that chubbiness suggested well-being. Someone to be pitied might get described as “thin like a walking corpse,” while young women moving up the economic ladder or entering into a happy marriage were complemented for putting on “a layer of flesh” or “getting some water under their skin.” Plump was pretty, by traditional standards of female beauty and health, and young men developing slight double chins and bulging bellies would jokingly boast about their bodily “gains” by linking them to their financial and social accomplishments. “I have spent good money on this,” my second cousin once joked while tapping on his slightly projected stomach. During my first visit to Iran five years after I had left it, I noted that almost all my relatives had gained enough weight to prompt my concern, especially since I knew for a fact that they were not all enjoying

improved living conditions. In response to my distress, my niece pointed out that her figure is covered by her baggy *manteau*; so why worry?

Perhaps fat was perceived as essential fuel for maintaining an industrious lifestyle, which most people had, but whatever the reason the habit and taste for greasy food was simply too well established and condoned to be sacrificed for “scientifically proven” concerns or alternative diets. The most passionate description of greasy food that I have heard came from someone who wanted to downplay a host’s cooking skills by implying that all she had done to a dish was to make it greasy, (which would apparently make up for all the shortcomings in the meal’s flavor, spice and look). “Add cooking oil to your father’s pooh and it will taste delicious! So, big deal!” Although hard to prove, the point could be very well taken.

It remains a mystery to me, however, how the regular consumption of greasy, high-fat foods doesn’t harm people back home the way it does here in the Diaspora. While I keep hearing about people in Iran dying of heart attacks due to stress, I rarely hear about anyone expiring from high cholesterol levels (and this is only partly due to the fact that they do not check their levels in the first place). A popular theory among a small group of fat-loving Iranians with nagging, cholesterol-conscious minds is that their cholesterol levels are naturally higher than those of other races and nationalities. “So don’t be alarmed when Canadian doctors tell you that you have ‘high cholesterol’,” they maintain, as if high cholesterol was a conspiracy or the human brain, in particular, needed fat-driven calories.

The truth of the matter is simple: the regular consumption of fatty and greasy foods does not harm the bulk of Iranians in Iran because it is grounded within a certain system of dietary beliefs and practices, within a certain cosmology. Mainstream Iranians believe that it is not just a certain component of a food that dictates its goodness or harm to you, but rather the overall condition of your diet—including where and when you eat and the people you eat with—that determine foods’ benefits to both your body and soul. It is a holistic combination of biology, environment and psychology that can work for, or against you.

Balance is the key to a wholesome and worthwhile meal, and maintaining that balance is all one should strive to do. The elements that comprise the overall meal should ideally complement and compensate for each other to create a nutritious, hearty and delicious experience. That is why we always have *halva* with fish, for instance, or an acidic substance such as lime powder, lime juice or vinegar with greasy foods like *kaleh-pacheh*. To balance a greasy food like *kotlet*, it is crucial to include an ingredient that works marvels in washing off and breaking down excess fat--vinegar, which can be found in *torshi* and salad. Ask any *torshi*-loving Iranian why they always choose it with *kotlet* and chances are they will tell you that it is because it just goes with it. Ask any Shirazi why they drink so much pure vinegar and chances are they will tell you that it is because Shiraz has particularly hard water, and vinegar helps dissolve and wash off calcium build-up in your body the same way that it does in pipes or on stainless steel.

Torshi and Mokhalafaat

“Iranians eat rotten fruit,” my professor of Cultural Studies at college once stated boldly, when referring to *torshi*--as if the dish was some kind of ritual that certain subjects of anthropological studies had to endure. I doubt he knew about the lengthy and elaborate process by which fruits are made “rotten” to provide this piquant and extremely popular appetizer.

Torshi, or *torsu* as it is called in Balkan and Middle Eastern cuisine, is basically diced fruits, vegetables and herbs marinated in vinegar and spices to be eaten with food in small portions as an appetizer and counterbalance to the greasy components of a meal. *Torshi* is distinct from other sauce-based condiments, salt-solution pickles and sweet or hot-tasting relishes--all of which are more widely known outside Iran. The distinction has to do mainly, but not solely, with the fact that vinegar is the dominant taste, as the name *torsh*, or sour, suggests. Another distinguishing ingredient used in all types of *torshi* is the all-spice mix, *advieh-e torshi*, whose intense flavour and potent aroma is due primarily to ground coriander and nigella seeds. Other essential players are turmeric, powdered black and chilli peppers and salt. Depending on regional culinary customs (even beliefs) some might add rose petals and other perfumed ingredients such as cardamom, cumin and cinnamon.

The variation in types of *torshi*--their texture, colour and taste--is related to the vegetables and fruits used to make them, as well as to the method with which they are chopped and mixed. For example, eggplant and shallot *torshi* consists of cooked and coarsely chopped eggplants and thinly-sliced shallots, while onion *torshi* consists only of peeled, baby onions. Similarly, what is commonly called "mixed *torshi*" might consist of a variety of coarsely chopped vegetables like cauliflower florets, carrots, celery, cabbage and garlic. My favourite is another mix called *liteh* or *hafte-bijar*, or "seven-tone", which is basically a labour intensive combination of a wide range of herbs and vegetables: chopped parsley, coriander, mint, tarragon, basil, eggplant, cauliflower, carrots, cabbage, garlic and white radish.

Torshi can also be made out of a selection of fruits, although never mixed with the vegetable variety because the fruit-based *torshi* pleases a different category of senses. Standard candidates for fruit *torshi* are apples, a mix of apples and pears, grapes, mangos, even dates and limes. There is a much longer list of potential participants, basically any fruit that one might fancy seeing transformed in shape and taste, including persimmons, pineapples and kiwis.

Back home, no one I knew ever bought *torshi* from a store. Homemade *torshi* was as common as homemade jam, and some families made *torshi* at home completely from scratch, beginning by making vinegar out of sweet grapes and apples. When a family made *torshi*, they made enough of it to provide a year's supply to close relatives and friends. My sister, Maji, married to a purely Shirazi family, was among those domestic, large-scale *torshi* suppliers.

It took all of the women in her husband's extended family several weeks of individual work to gradually prepare all the ingredients and spices that the men of the household had helped buy from the market and carried inside. Nigella and coriander seeds had to be crushed and mixed, revealing their intense, smoky aroma. Dried shallot slices had to be soaked, cleaned and dried again. Herbs were picked, washed, chopped and fluffed out on clean sheets in the sun to dry. Vegetables also had to be chopped and dried first, or else they would really go rotten, as my professor had suggested. The operation was carried out all over the house, from yard to hallway to kitchen, using every single pot, colander and tray in the household.

Finally, my sister and a few of the capable women in her husband's family got together for a weekend to complete the *torshi*-making *ritual*. They filled the air with pungent, haunting trails of vinegar, shallots and tarragon among dozens of other aromatic herbs and spices. Eventually, wide-mouthed, glass jars of various sizes with plastic lids were thoroughly washed and filled with *torshi* then topped with vinegar, with an inch left at the top for expansion. Metal lids were to be avoided in order to prevent rust.

These operations were all ideally done on nice, sunny days in the early fall when seasonal vegetables and herbs were still plentiful and the summer heat no longer threatened to spoil *torshi*. The very last stage involved storing the jars in a cold, dry place for at least two months--checking on them a few times in between to add more vinegar as the herbs and vegetables absorbed the liquid. Just in time for winter, we all received our share of freshly-made *torshi*, which we savoured with our lunches and suppers for the entire year--first sparingly, to ensure it would last, and then generously as we approached the next *torshi*-making season.

Of all the homemade food products of my youth that I now buy in cans, *torshi* remains the only one I refuse to purchase from the market. We now buy jam, lemon juice, tomato sauce and pomegranate paste from the Iranian supermarkets in Montreal. We have even come close to forgetting that stuffed grape leaves (*dolmeh*) should be made with freshly picked leaves briefly tenderized in hot water, hurriedly reaching for the jars of pickled leaves on the supermarket shelf. My brother-in-law and I continue to supply our families with their moderate *torshi* needs, thanks to the all-spice and other exotic ingredients we manage to smuggle into Canada. My brother-in-law, in particular, lets his creativity run wild with *torshi*. He does not throw away any vegetables or fruit leftovers, making use of all their edible and inedible parts alike. When we get together for a meal, he occasionally pulls a small jar of *torshi* out of his secret laboratory-like basement, pours some in a bowl and places it on the table like an ace card, challenging everyone to a guessing game. He nibbles his food and peers at us in amusement as we taste and smell but fail to identify all of the ingredients. With a mischievous smile on his face, he might give away a sample jar at the end of the guessing game, but never reveals its secrets.

In Montreal, homemade *torshi* tastes as good as it did in Iran, if not better, and making it is even easier. Here, we can make it whenever we find some free time, since most vegetables are available year round and we rarely get *torshi*-spoiling hot weather. The only trick is to learn to dry herbs and vegetables despite the lack of counter space and amid our frequently humid weather. I use oven to cook and dry eggplants or simply to dry herbs and other raw vegetables and fruits at the lowest possible temperature--propping its door open slightly and keeping an attentive watch to make sure that nothing cooks or burns. The result is a very successful and long-lasting *torshi*.

At any full and happy *sofreh*, several side dishes should be present to complement the main dish, especially at supper time and most certainly with *kotlet*. One or two small bowls of *torshi*--ideally of different types--are as crucial as two plates or baskets piled high with an assortment of seasonal, fresh herbs, radishes and scallions. A bowl of red vinegar might perch on the side of a big dish of lettuce near a variety of mixed yogurt.

Although only a few appetizers and side-dishes specifically complement a *kotlet* supper, a complete list of possible, delicious Iranian *mokhalafaat* would be a very exciting, diverse and long one. Locally grown and marinated olives, (*zeytoon parvardeh*) and eggplant casserole (*mirza ghassemi*) are popular in Northern provinces. There is the fried spinach with eggs and onions (*nargesi*) of Isfahan and a wide range of soups and salads, *salad-e olivieh*, made with chicken, eggs, peas, dill-pickles, potatoes and mayonnaise. A Canadian classmate, born to an Iranian mother and Iraqi father, had believed that *salad-e olivieh* was her grandmother's invention until I made some and took it to a potluck party, explaining that it was indeed a Russian salad many Iranians take credit for.

Sabzi to Eat

“*Sabz*” refers to the color “green” in Persian, with *sabzi* suggesting any type of edible, green herb. If you go to a fruit and vegetable store in any Iranian city and ask for “*sabzi* to eat,” or “*sabzi* for *aash*,” or “*sabzi* for *ghormeh*,” or “*sabzi* for *koo-koo*,” the shopkeeper will rapidly move among the stalls heaped with different types of fresh herbs, grab a bunch, wrap them all in a newspaper or plastic bag and hand you the specific assortment for the particular purpose you mentioned. Dill or thyme, for instance, are never picked for *sabzi* to eat, no matter which Iranian city you are shopping in, while coriander might be included in this category in some cities and excluded in others. On the other hand, certain herbs such as parsley serve multiple functions and are often included in all of the above categories. *Sabzi* to eat is always enjoyed plain and whole, without chopping or mixing in any kind of seasoning.

Sabzi to eat, therefore, is relatively consistent across the country, with small regional variations and much larger taste diversities and individual preferences. The most frequently available types of *sabzi*, seasonally speaking, are parsley, watercress (baby leek) and mint. Basil and tarragon are hugely popular, but available only during the summer, whereas the more strong-smelling types of herbs such as oregano or purslane (*khorsefeh*) are not universally liked.

In most households, including the one I used to live in back in Shiraz, an assortment of seasonal *sabzi* is served on a daily basis or twice a day, depending on the meal. With particular dishes like mixed rice and most supper items, *sabzi* is considered a must, while plain rice served with the stew could go without *sabzi*. Radishes and scallions are complementary vegetables, but not as essential as the herbs themselves, and for certain dishes like *aash* or *aab-ghoosht* (a thick, spicy stew of lamb, potatoes, onions, haricots, chickpeas and dried lime), raw onions replace scallions. Back home, someone was constantly plucking *sabzi*, whether an unoccupied elder, paid help, an exploitable visitor or the cook herself. I realize now how gender-specific the task was. Some men helped with kitchen chores such as washing dishes, and certain cooking tasks like cleaning bones and cutting meat were exclusively a man’s job in many households. I have absolutely no recollection of a man sitting behind a mound of *sabzi* and plucking it all by himself, however. Finally, cleaning very large amount of *sabzi* was a job for occasional housemaids who worked for well-off families.

I settled for the mint, parsley and coriander available from markets year-round until I was blessed with a backyard in Montreal that had room for a long, narrow herb garden that produced a daily harvest all summer long. Potted basil, found in Montreal and other Canadian markets, is to my exiled taste an overgrown, perfumed herb resembling nothing remotely close to Iranian basil, whose delicate smell and taste has the strangest ability to fill my heart with joy each time I squat by my herb garden to pick and taste it on the spot.

Here in Montreal, I buy other market-grown herbs only when I am in a good mood, or when I have a visitor whom I wish to impress, for despite all the passion I feel towards it I find the routine preparation of *sabzi* too laborious. Back in Shiraz, the most aromatic and finest type of mint was imported to our city from Kazeroon, a small southern town. I remember once, when my mom was visiting my older brother in London in the early 1980s, she called us to report how thrilled she was to have found Kazeroon-grown mint in a neighboring flea market.

Recently, I took a newly-arrived, young Iranian woman on a tour of local grocery stores. We were talking and laughing when she came to a halt at the herbs section. Juggling her purchases, she announced that she was looking for basil, *rayhan*. I held out a potted-basil and before I had a

chance to explain that it was a different type, I noticed tears welling up in her beautiful, expertly-lined eyes. “Missed home all of a sudden!” she confessed with a broad smile, tears now running down her face. Whether triggered by nostalgia for familiar-looking scenes or caused by the disappointment of foreign-smelling basil, her spontaneous tears shook me immeasurably--to my own surprise.

Lettuce and Vinegar

Shirazis have a love affair with lettuce. The ‘70s did not offer much diversity in this vegetable; we had only one type, which could best be described as being of the romaine variety--tall, with rigid leaves that were tightly packed together. The leaves were more delicate than those of romaine, and their green a bit lighter, but similar in the way the inner leaves lost their intensity of color.

A Shirazi *sofreh* spread for *kotlet* includes whole heads of lettuce that have been washed thoroughly and placed on a tray or dish next to one or two bowls of red vinegar. Individual leaves are then broken off, folded several times, dipped into the common vinegar bowl and cheerfully devoured. An equally popular companion of lettuce made for vinegar lovers with a preference for sweet as opposed to sour is oxymel (*serkeh-anghabin*). This is a mixture of water, vinegar and sugar boiled down to create more-sweet-than-sour syrup. Both dips are taken with lettuce anytime before, during or after the meal. Both sweet and sour versions are also served as stand-alone snacks, and the experienced observer can spot someone’s taste based on the tell-tale, chalky lips caused by a build-up of vinegar.

Shirazi Salad

What is renown among Iranians everywhere as “Shirazi salad” is, in fact, a common and popular green salad everywhere in Iran. It is simply considered more authentic when made by a Shirazi or consumed in Shiraz. It only takes three vegetables to make it: tomatoes and cucumbers in equal quantities and peeled onions in half that amount. Whether or not cucumbers should be peeled is a hotly debated issue among the self-proclaimed “original” Shirazis I know. Everything—excluding the bitter butts of the cucumbers--is finely chopped. If the vegetable chunks are dice-sized or larger, the salad is not considered Shirazi; the pieces must be much smaller. When I was a teenager, I used to concentrate on chopping small, equal-sized chunks of cucumbers, tomatoes and onions in my palms, as we never used cutting boards. My focus was so intense that I often forgot to remove my knife from the bowl before bringing it to the *sofreh*. My father, upon reaching into the bowl of salad to scoop some onto his plate, would shake his head in disappointment and say, “How foolish of some people to put a spoon in their salad bowl instead of a knife! Don’t you think, Afsoon?”

To season Shirazi salad, you sprinkle a pinch or two of dried powdered mint on the salad, then pour several spoons of verjuice in a cup. Lime juice can replace verjuice in exceptional circumstances, such as in the Diaspora where verjuice is not readily available. Salt and powdered black pepper are added to the juice and stirred well before being mixed in with the salad. Ask if everyone likes olive oil--which is not a very common or popular ingredient everywhere in Iran--and if so, you can add some to your seasoning. The salad should be seasoned no more than one hour prior to serving.

Shirazi salad is refreshing and pretty, and should border on the sour side. This salad particularly suits green mixed-rice types and most other supper menu items, including *kotlet* and all types of croquette.

Yogurt Mixes

My father never let us have yogurt if vinegar or lime juice were being served at the same meal. He, along with a host of other Iranians, believed that combining the two elements caused an imbalance in the body's temperament that produced symptoms similar to a sharp drop in blood pressure. Despite his concern, we did eat yogurt and acidic seasonings at the same time, all the time; just not openly. As a standard rule, for a supper like *kotlet* the side-dishes present at the *sofreh* included either *torshi* with salad or--less frequently--yogurt mixes. If both dishes were present-- when we were entertaining guests-- we were supposed to choose one or the other.

The most popular yogurt mixes include grated cucumbers in yogurt with salt, black pepper and dry, powdered mint (*maast-o-khiar*); steam-cooked spinach mashed with garlic and mixed with yogurt and seasoned with salt and pepper, (*maast-o-esfenaaj* also called *bourani-esfenaaj*) and minuscule, diced shallots marinated in yogurt for at least 48 hours before serving (*maast-o-moosir*). All of the above mixes are extremely tasty dips that are often eaten as a "mazeh" or chaser with hard liquor, or consumed without alcohol as an evening snack with bread or crackers. Obviously, variations in each type of mix are as numerous as individual families and tastes. A yogurt and cucumber mix is a summer favorite to which people might add raisins, walnuts, small pieces of dried bread, water, mint or rose water--to mention just a few of the possibilities.

Chapter Four: *Araghi-yaat* (Herb and Flower Extracts) and *Aragh* (Iranian Vodka)

There are two completely different types of drinks that bear the name *aragh*. In its literal sense, *aragh* means both “perspiration” and “condensation” in Persian, with the latter describing all kinds of distilled liquids--alcoholic or otherwise. The hard liquor produced as a result of the distillation of raisins and dates is one variation of the term *aragh* in Iran and a number of Eastern Mediterranean and African countries. Meanwhile, a wide range of flowers and herbs are distilled in Iran, mainly but not solely in the province of Fars, to produce an aromatic soft-drink commonly referred to in the plural, as *araghi-yaat*.

A Potion Called *Araghi-yaat*

When I was coming of age in the early ‘70s, the Shah’s notorious Organization of State Security Intelligence, the SAVAK (the group’s acronym in Persian) was rumored to utilize a disgusting and horrifying form of torture that involved sodomizing a prisoner with an empty, glass bottle of Pepsi-Cola or Canada-Dry--always asking them first which one they preferred. The implication was that the interrogators would pretend to be offering the prisoner a beverage; knowing that the choice was between the unrelenting torture of the cylindrical Pepsi-Cola bottle or the brief respite offered by the Canada-Dry bottle, which tapered in the middle. I remember the Pepsi-SAVAK jokes about a tough Shirazi who is taken to the torture chamber on a hot day and asked if he prefers a bottle of Pepsi-Cola or Canada-Dry. The man, cool and confident, responds, “Give me a bowl of sweetbrier *aragh* instead, may God bless you!”

The moral of the joke is that we Iranians love satire and have a long history of mocking our way through hard times and oppressive regimes. People in Shiraz did typically drink herb/flower *aragh* from a ceramic bowl, either mildly diluted with water and sweetened like a sherbet, or undiluted and served in a heavy, calmingly blue bowl. They were served in ice cream stores, as well as in *araghi-yaati* (soft-drink pubs that exclusively sold and served a wide variety of *araghi-yaat*). Developing a liking for *araghi-yaat* requires some cultural taste training, as does developing a taste for most foods and beverages--in this case a longer training perhaps, even for natives. Once you develop a taste for it, however, you will fall for *aragh* so badly that it seems nothing else could quench your thirst and fatigue in the middle of a hot, summer day.

With the exception of rosewater, none of the other flower and herb extracts are used in mainstream recipes, as their taste and flavor do not withstand the high heat required in cooking. In fact, only a few types of *araghi-yaat* are used in an alternative form, to flavor an ice desert called *faloodeh*. Every ice cream store in Shiraz offered a number of Shiraz-specialty coolers, namely mixed ice cream and carrot juice and *faloodeh*--an iced dessert and street snack made of frozen cornstarch. Like Shirazi salad, Shirazi *faloodeh* has won nationwide popularity. In the case of *faloodeh*, it seems Shirazis have partially retained its exclusivity by flavoring it differently. Everywhere else in Iran, Shirazi *faloodeh* was flavored with lime juice and sometimes mixed with saffron while being made. In its birth place, *faloodeh* was usually plain white and served in glasses or disposable cups; flavored with either lime juice or an aromatic variety of *aragh* poured into the cup from small, glass drizzlers that sat in every ice cream store.

The most renowned, exclusive soft-drink pub that sold the best quality and widest variety of *araghi-yaat* was called Vakil. It was located next to the Bazaar Vakil’s south entrance, across

from Saray Moshir, an historic caravansary built in the 1870s that was reconstructed before the revolution and turned into a beautiful collection of handicraft exhibits and cozy tea houses. Vakil is, in my mind, a cold, albeit attractive, location--perhaps because its products were meant to cool one down or perhaps, more metaphorically, because it was surrounded by herbal groceries (*attaari*) and failed miserably to compete with the sensations they radiated. The neighboring herbal groceries displayed a rainbow of spices, teas and herbs in waist-high gunny sacks placed all along the bazaar so their charm and perfume could seep through the entire area. Vakil sold and served a range of transparent liquids that, as aromatic and flavorful as they were, had travelled too far from their birthplace in Shiraz to retain and reflect the dazzling beauty of the orchards they were drawn from, or measure up to the warmly-colored contents of the neighboring herbal groceries.

Elevated three steps off the ground, the Vakil *araghi-yaati* was a relatively large space with a wide, glass entrance door behind which stood a chest-high, beige, marble counter where the thick-muscled, polite and pious owner installed himself to take orders and money. You could tell that he was a pious Muslim by the way he avoided eye-contact with women, and less indicatively from the Quranic inscriptions in calligraphy that he had framed and hung on the wall that faced the entrance. Behind him, one could see portions of a kitchen or storage area, where all-male waiters roamed about preparing and serving the orders.

The in-store seating was bright enough with natural light, but further lit by white, fluorescent tube lamps that ran all the way across two walls, stopping only at the third, which was fully covered with a huge mirror. A dozen metal folding chairs were installed against the fluorescent-lighted walls behind a few unmatched tables that were too short to rest the bowls or glasses on. Customers could take a long pull right off their large glass of *aragh* while standing outside the entrance, or they could face themselves in the mirror while sipping their bowl of *aragh*. The choices we had at Vakil went way beyond sitting inside or outside, drinking from a bowl or a glass and having a small or large serving. The real question was which *aragh* to drink, for it is not only a refreshing soft drink, but a potion to adjust your temperament or a medicine to soothe the throat, reduce fever, ease joint pain, give vigor or serenity--all that and much more, if you are a believer.

Hot, Cold and Equilibrium

The dualism between mind and body is often reflected in the biomedical arena through distinctions made between physical health and emotional well-being, but the same duality does not exist in traditional Iranian cosmologies. Put simply, for the majority of Iranians there is a strong link between environmental factors, emotions and the body. Many people believe that maintaining a balance or equilibrium between and among all the above factors is the key to the proper functioning of an interconnected mind and body—a state that medical anthropologist and nutritionist, Lynn Harbottle, cleverly calls “well’th” (health + wellbeing= well’th) [\(13\)](#).

According to Harbottle, historically popular health beliefs in Iran originated from Galenic-Islamic medical principles elaborated on by Ibn Sina from Arabic, Greek, Latin and Indian philosophies [\(14\)](#). Within this system, individual *temperament* is believed to be derived from a distinctive *balance* of four essential humours; each of which has distinct properties: blood (hot and moist), red bile or bilious (hot and dry), phlegm or serous (cold and moist) and black bile or atrabilious (cold and dry).

While the four-humour philosophy formulated by Ibn Sina during the third and fourth centuries has weathered the test of time, the specific properties he once identified and associated with each “humour” are no longer referred to, except perhaps in obsolete herbal groceries in small Iranian towns. Interestingly enough, however, the notion of *garm* (hot) and *sard* (cold) has survived among many Iranians--well enough to have made the long, overseas trips with millions of Iranian émigrés to Europe, North America and elsewhere.

“Hot” and “cold” qualities refer not to thermal temperatures, but to certain innate attributes or “properties” associated with foods, medicines and body conditions. Many people believe that the human body functions best when the overall foods we eat are balanced in relation to their *hot/cold* qualities. By the same token, different illnesses are believed to be caused by an imbalance in the *hot/cold* equilibrium. Such illnesses are then prevented or cured by eating various foods with opposing qualities. Garlic, for instance, is generally believed to be *hot*, while fish is *cold* (no national consensus on which food items or ingredients are *hot* or *cold*, mind you). In this case, the garlic and fish combination in *ghalyeh* makes perfect sense, as the two ingredients counterbalance the potentially negative effects of one another.

Let us say that when frying your herbs to make *ghalyeh*, you used excessive garlic to make it even tastier. Let us also say that for dessert, not only did you have *halva* but lots of dates with your tea, followed by yellow melon--all of which are *hot* substances. In such a scenario, one might find themselves experiencing the side effects of too much heat; namely a sore throat, an agitated heartbeat, acne or a fever. To prevent this from happening, one might eat a lot of watermelon or another cooling fruit.

According to the traditional and popular beliefs in Iran, daily health maintenance can be achieved through equilibrium, and there are several factors that influence such equilibrium. For instance, it is generally believed that different people have different bases depending on their gender, age, life stage or inherited characteristics. Women have a *cold* base, which makes them prone to *coldness* symptoms like gastro disorders, dizziness and too much water in the mouth. Men have a *hot* base, while children and the elderly are supposedly more susceptible to *cold* ailments as well.

Another factor: sickness can make people more vulnerable and prone to imbalances. For instance, catching a cold (a common cold not an intrinsic one) is believed to make us more susceptible to *hotness* symptoms. That is why for the duration of a cold we are advised not only to avoid spicy and fried foods and shift instead to neutral *kateh* and simple and plainer versions of *aash*, but also to drink lots of fruit juice--particularly sweet lemon--an amazing *cooler*. Antibiotics and almost all other biochemical medicines, to my knowledge, are considered too *hot*, which is why patients are encouraged to eat and drink lots of vegetables and fruits with their juices when on medication.

Throughout my teenage years, once a month when I was laid low by abdominal pains with my menstrual period, I was given a small glass of extremely *hot* saffron, brewed just like loose tea. In addition to the ground saffron that we kept with the other spices, my mother always kept a separate bottle of uncrushed, dried saffron flower stamens. This was to be brewed in a special, little china teapot used for this purpose only. Sometimes a piece of pure crystallized sugar (*nabaat*) was dissolved in the hot saffron drink to further intensify its *hotness*. I remember taking so much secret delight in those unique-tasting brewed saffron, not because it reduced my

pain necessarily, but because it painted my lips with a bright, thick orange when I was not yet allowed to use lipstick.

I have no idea why menstrual pain was associated with *coldness*, or why *hot* substances were believed to subdue it. I do know that the matter was taken fairly seriously, not only in my family but in many others like mine who did not otherwise always consciously observe *hot/cold* principles. For the first couple of years of monthly cycles, when I was not yet accustomed to my new body, one week per month I found myself under the watchful supervision of my older sisters or mother when we sat around the *sofreh* for a meal. Atefeh in particular, whom I was very fond of (still am), always kept a tight watch. I was thirteen and she was twenty. If I reached for a bowl of *torshi*, I would suddenly feel the weight of her piercing stare, her rigid posture demanding my response without publicizing the matter or embarrassing me. The firm arch of her raised eyebrows was a loud and clear reminder that vinegar is poisonous at this time of the month—as was Shirazi salad with lots of lime juice and cucumbers and tomatoes or fried cabbage and yogurt.

At first, I was so uncertain about permissible food items that I had an eye on her at meals as if an irresistible movie were being screened on her face. It took me a while to learn that whatever was bad for *cold* was good for the period pain. It took a bit longer to realize that if I had both pains simultaneously, I was having really bad luck, and longer still to discover that taking too much saffron, dates and *nabaat* during my period effectively leads me to one illness or another.

When we fail to maintain a balance through a regular and controlled *hot/cold* diet, and an illness strikes, then medicinal items are introduced as a means of treatment—biomedicine for serious illnesses and botanical or herbal medicines for minor ailments. People all over the world turn to “alternative” medicine, particularly in desperate instances of very grave illnesses or when mainstream options fail to live up to their promises. A physician in Iran may not send you off to the herbal grocery for borage tea as a tranquilizer, but chances are they would not object to you having some in addition to the prescription drugs they recommend. A good doctor tends to advise their patient about the types of foods they should seek out and avoid. During my first few years in Montreal, each time I visited a doctor, I waited patiently until they finished scribbling a prescription before I asked the key question: “What should I eat?” to which they always replied, with a bewildered look, that I should have whatever I liked.

Araghi-yaat stands somewhere between diet and medicine; between preventive and active treatment as well as traditional and modern practice, in addition to serving as a cooling soft-drink.

On one of the walls of the *araghi-yaati* in Shiraz, behind its thick-muscled, eye-contact-avoiding owner, a hand-written, laminated chart had been hung to guide undecided customers through the process of choosing an *aragh* (I have included a recreation of this guide in the Appendix). All I knew back then was that the more beneficial it was meant to be, the harsher an *aragh* tasted. Mint, for instance, might be charming in a fresh *sabzi* assortment, but your stomach had to be highly upset to submit to drinking one full cup of mint *aragh* after each meal. I never studied this guide back then, mainly because I was rarely in need of a “special-effect” *araghi-yaat*. Like many, I chose among a few of the most commonplace types with a vague knowledge of their *hot/cold* nature. *Shaatareh* and chicory were the least fragrant or expensive choices with cooling effects, usually taken undiluted or mildly diluted as a tasty soft-drink. Sweetbrier, however, was

richer in every sense with an energizing *hotness* effect. The rest, I assume, were for serious drinkers.

I am intrigued by the fact that only a handful of these medicinal *araghi-yaat* were popular enough to be exported to other Iranian cities back then, and to Iranian stores abroad now. More often, the seeds, leaves, roots, berries or flowers themselves are dried, brewed and drunk as herbal medicine. Liquorice, for instance, has many followers as the ultimate treatment for digestive malfunction and cold symptoms, and is almost always used in powder form. Many Iranian national fans of herbal medicine take much pride in reminding everyone around them that cough syrups sold in North American pharmacies are made of our *shirin-bayan*.

The *hot/cold* properties of each herb or flower are distinct from their healing potential, I suppose. I never could convince my visiting sister to drink aloe-vera gel in the absence of thyme powder or extracts, even if she was convinced of its natural anti-arthritis benefits. We did not have aloe-vera back home; so how could she know if it is *hot* or *cold* in nature!? We don't replace *aash-e reshteh* with beef noodle soup, why should we replace thyme powder with aloe-vera gel?

The City of Gardens

In the summer of 1997, when Maji was visiting Montreal for the first time, we used to go out of our way to take her on sight-seeing trips in and around the city, which she usually commented on less than affectionately, being more interested in shopping for her grandchildren than touring the Olympic stadium. As the months of June and July arrived, I gradually discovered that what impressed her the most was a spectacle we took for granted after almost two decades of residing in Canada: lush, green fields; huge, concrete planters and hanging baskets filled with flowers along the city's boulevards and beautiful, at times exquisite gardening in virtually all front yards.

She was fascinated by the richness of the flowerbeds and the colorful spectrum of shrubs, bushes and trees rushing by in a green blur as we travelled by car in the Montreal downtown and suburbs. She marveled at the "flower-crazy" Montreal women that were the constant gardeners in most neighborhoods. She could not understand why the natural, bright and beautiful dandelions were categorized as "weeds" that sent everyone walking on their knees to viciously dig up their roots--only to plant other types of flowers in their place. She was puzzled by the fact that we drove for hours, fussing over finding a location that we deemed "a picnic area," when every corner and median was green enough to qualify by Shirazi standards.

"So much rain, so much water, no doubt yields all of this greenery," she often remarked with a tinge of envy. "God has been more generous to you even in that!" All this coming from a person born and raised in Shiraz--the city of flowers, gardens, poetry and wine--the contradiction would make sense only to someone who appreciates how much less generous God has been to people in Shiraz in so many other ways.

The flower and fruit gardens in Shiraz manage to thrive despite an annual average rainfall of between 14 and 18 inches that falls entirely in the months of November through March. Perhaps abundance is a relative term as well, and that is why we used to call Shiraz the city of flowers and nightingales before seeing North American cities. Perhaps it was because God was stingy with our share of water that we treasured each and every rainfall, cheerfully running through the drops when we were young and finding its tapping on the roof heartwarming and romantic when we were older. Perhaps it was precisely because of a shortage of rainfall that we so cherished

each spring petal and every locally-grown summer fruit. Aprils (*ordibehesht*) in Shiraz were heavenly; with long days of warm, radiant sun and the surprisingly cool shade of the rejuvenated trees. Streets and alleys were crowded with the potent scent of sour orange blossoms floating through backyards and gardens. Blue dusks and cool evenings intoxicated us with an unidentifiable yet familiar mixture of flower scents that tenderized our soul, as if we were under the influence of a pleasantly strong cocktail.

It was during the months of April and May that I often walked past *Baagh-e Safa* (the “pure heart” garden), a garden that housed the old distillery workshops and fulfilled the *araghi-yaat* needs of the city. *Baagh-e Safa* remains, to date, the main supplier of floral and herbal extracts for retailers and individual customers alike and one of the main sources of literature about the process. As the consumption of *araghi-yaat* became increasingly popular, other Iranian cities came to produce different types of it. But just as the highest quality saffron comes from Mashhad, and the best rosewater is exported from Ghamsar, the finest floral and herbal extracts were produced in Shiraz’s *Baagh-e Safa*.

From Flower Petals to Aromatic Drinks

The Shiraz that my older siblings recall is so much smaller than the one I remember, thanks to the rapid industrialization and modernization that the city underwent from their childhood, to mine. The Shiraz of the late ‘50s was a small town with the majestic *Narangestan-e Ghavam* (Sour-orange Grove) at its heart. To the north of the Dry River, which ran west and east was *Baagh-e Eram*, which sat in close vicinity to *Baagh-e Naari* (Pomegranate Garden), *Baagh-e Safa* (Serenity Garden) and--further east near the mausoleum of Sa’di--*Baagh-e Delgosha* (Heart’s ease Garden). Both Safa and Delgosha were, and continue to be, relatively secluded gardens, although Delgosha is better known, given its display of historic art. Eram Garden, on the other hand, is the pride of any Shirazi tour guide and a fine example of Qajar architecture. Eram is a fabulous, royal villa in the middle of a vast and beautifully landscaped field that features a long pond leading to the main building. Tiled, rose-edged walking paths wind under the nets of dancing shade cast by palm, cypress, pine, and sour orange and persimmon trees. Most of the country’s epic movies and every Shiraz-produced television show had at least one shot of Eram Garden, sometimes with the suggestion that it was some rich man’s backyard.

The southwestern Shirazi suburbs of the late ‘50s were clusters of small, private orchards plotted along a field that later became Ghasr-edasht Street. *Baagh-e Afif-abaad* and *Baagh-e Khalili* were the two most significant gardens among this cluster, and are the only ones that have been partially preserved to date. Shiraz vineyards and wineries were located much further west, some thirty kilometers away from the city, in the shadow of the mountain and waterfalls of the beautiful village of Ghalaat.

In the ‘60s, Pari (aged 12) cycled about five kilometers from our old house located in the Nader district to where we moved eight years later, between the Dry River and Ghasr-edasht, on Hedayat Street. She remembers crossing through rows of wheat fields. Slightly over a decade later, when I was about 15, the two houses were connected by heavily-trafficked streets and the Dry River was a part of the inner city. By then, not only had *Baagh-e Safa* been integrated into an upper-middle class, thinly populated neighborhood, it had been squeezed into a regular sized garden to make room for several alleys, shops and cottages. These cottages now besieged the garden and availed themselves of its charm and scented breeze.

During final exams in June, the sidewalks of that entire area, including those in our neighborhood, were crowded with high school students from sunset through the early morning hours. Young boys, and occasionally girls, held their text books or notes in their hands and paced up and down a designated length of fifty meters or so, looking down to read, then up to the sky to absorb the information--rapidly mumbling formulas or poetry with fierce intensity. Walking seemed to facilitate the memorization of one's subject matter, while the quiet sidewalks provided the space that a yard or house lacked.

The *Baagh-e Safa* I'd remembered as a child, had yielded its breadth and riches to the surrounding area. The garden's moderate, metal entrance gate was located in a now-asphalted alley that ran west and east--parallel to the Dry River--and was named Baagh-e Safa Alley. That was before every single street, avenue, square and back alley was renamed to honor the revolution's martyrs and other presumed glories and accomplishments--Azadi (freedom), Esteghlal (independence) and, of course, numerous Imam Khomeinis.

The alley itself was long, narrow and treeless; lined on one side with about ten cottages whose adjoining front-yard walls withheld hundreds of pine trees, with tall trunks and lofty branches, which chattered in the wind and peek over the garden's walls. While I never saw the interior of those houses, I knew that besides sharing the pine trees with *Baagh-e Safa*, many had also preserved the garden's original graveled roads that now coiled through their compounds. I was fascinated by those old cottages because they had once been part and parcel of the captivating transformation of flowers and herbs into aromatic, potable liquids.

The evocative fragrance of flowers that saturated the air, like moisture on a rainy day, was the first thing one noticed about *Baagh-e Safa*. Plastic buckets lined the gravel entry road, signaling visitors that this was a working garden. On the right side of the road, where the main distillery operation took place, mounds of pink sweetbrier petals, blue chicory petals and occasionally white sour orange blossoms sat next to more shapeless stacks of brown and dark-green palm leaves, pussy willow branches and a dozen other species of leaves and roots. Most if not all had travelled in pick-up trucks from different flower and fruit gardens all over the city to Baagh-e Safa for processing. The flowers were picked each day at dawn, when the petals were still heavy with dew and rich with fragrance.

Further ahead in the open workshop area, several gigantic metal pots sat slightly off the ground above gas burners. *Baagh-e Safa* has not submitted to any major technological changes in its operation--no industrial distillation towers or spirit-producing stills--the pots are coarsely welded and tightly covered with cast-iron caps that look like warriors' helmets. Each pot is first filled with water and one type of flower petal or herb, and then brought to a boil. Once the water starts to vaporize, the heat is kept at a constant low temperature that allows for the accumulation of steam, which is the next step in the distillation process.

About two meters down from the level of the boiling pots is a three-by-five meter pool surrounded by knee-high fences where cold water is piped in by a dozen of in-going and out-coming tubes and pipes and hoses, like a gravely ill patient in the Intensive Care Unit. The steam produced in the boiling pots is directed to another set of vessels submerged in this pool in order to cool it down enough to revert to its liquid form. Upon cooling, this new liquid is led through a third set of tubes to its final destination in labelled containers.

Tall, plastic buckets with stop valves installed in the bottom are lined up on a long platform with the number and name of their occupant *araghs*—the plastic just transparent enough to showcase

a range of hues, from the yellow of sour orange and mild orange of citron to the pale green of mint.

In those days, I paid little attention to the science of the operation; being more preoccupied by its aroma and charm. Little did I know that my distillery knowledge would dramatically increase in a couple of years when many families I knew would employ the same basic methods but replace flower petals with raisins and add some fermentation material in order to operate fatally illegal, home distilleries under the reign of the Islamic Republic.

Aragh or Iranian Vodka

In This Blind Alley (Ahmad Shaamlou, July 1979) [\(15\)](#)

*They smell your breath
lest you have said: I love you,
They smell your heart:
These are strange times, my dear.*

*They flog love
at the roadblock.
Let's hide love in the closet.*

*In this crooked blind alley, as the chill descends,
they feed fires
with logs of song and poetry.
Hazard not a thought:
These are strange times, my dear.*

*The man who knocks at your door in the dead of the night
has come to kill the lamp.
Let's hide light in the closet.*

*There, butchers
are posted in passageways
with bloody chopping blocks and cleavers:
These are strange times, my dear.*

*They chop smiles off lips,
and songs off the mouth:
Let's hide joy in the closet.*

*Canaries barbecued
on the flames of lilies and jasmines:*

These are strange times, my dear.

*Satan, drunk on victory,
squats at the feast of our undoing.*

Let's hide God in the closet.

These were strange times indeed, when everyone started chewing dry, loose tea or mint gum before leaving a party for fear that “butchers posted at the passageways” might detect the smell of alcohol on their breath. In the blink of an eye, drinking was transformed from a largely outdoor pastime to a sinful offense to be hidden in the closet alongside a parade of other personal and civil liberties.

At night, the revolutionary moral police, who typically consisted of full-bearded, foul-mouthed teenagers and young men brandishing Uzis, walkie-talkies and a heady, new-found authority, barricaded major streets to stop cars for inspection--looking for “vice” and “immoral behavior.” They raided houses in search of mixed-sex mingling, music, dance, alcohol and any other perceived immorality. They dragged people from their homes in the dead of the night, stuck them in their vans and detained them--sometimes for days--before starting to question and punish them.

According to the revitalized, draconian Islamic Penal Code, the sale, consumption or possession of alcoholic drinks--even in the privacy of one's home--was now a serious crime punishable by fines, jail and/or fifty to seventy lashes in public. Failure to wear the *hijab* or otherwise violating the dress code or having sexual relations outside of marriage were also identified as punishable crimes. Same-sex relationships, adultery, rape and murder were punished by execution, with public hanging or stoning to death, in the case of adultery, being the favored methods. Flogging (*hadd*), while not fatal on its own, could cause enough internal bleeding and kidney infections to result in death years later. We came to witness people actually being hanged for the repeated offense of drinking alcoholic beverages. Street assaults, home raids, illegitimate arrests, speedy prosecutions and massive executions were at the peak of frequency, severity and violence from 1979 to 1982 when the new government did its utmost to repress any kind of political and social resistance. Throughout the thirty-year reign of the Islamic regime, the government's grip on people's “moralities” tightened or relaxed depending on specific political circumstances; but the grip was never lost.

One night, in the autumn of 1981, Essi was giving me a ride back home from a party on his own way back from another gathering. No alcoholic beverages were served at the party I had attended, but plenty had been consumed at his party if one were to correctly read his good mood and slightly flushed face. It was around 11:00 p.m. and Ghasr-edasht Street stretched long, dim and deserted ahead of us. Suddenly, the sight of a green-striped, yellow 4WD truck parked by the road about half a kilometer farther ahead sent a chill down my spine. As the figures of three uniformed *komiteh-chi* carrying visibly long guns came into focus, I felt my blood run cold all the way down to my toes. I was 21 and Essi, 48--too wide an age difference to raise suspicion of “unlawful” sexual relations even among the sex-maniac moral police. I brought my fingers to the top of my headscarf to pull it further down and shrank into my seat. Essi sat up straight in his seat and started rolling down his window, almost enthusiastically. Before we came to a full halt

right in front of one of the armed boys, a cool breeze hit me and I remember thanking God for being on the dark side of the car, because I knew that utter panic was painted all over my face.

I sensed the square, full-bearded figure of a *komiteh-chi* bending down to the driver's level through the fully open window. Over the clamor of my drumming heart, I heard Essi's calm and confident voice "This is Dr. Mosanen," he shot firmly "how I can help you?" Almost immediately the intruder's presence seemed less ominous.

"Have a good night, brother! Doctor!" the *komiteh-chi* said, standing back up and tapping on our car's roof to signal free passage. Essi sped away smoothly and steadily. For the remainder of the journey I sat back in complete silence as adrenaline flew through my veins. Essi was silent too, except for a few curses through his teeth. He smiled his bittersweet smile when I gave him a sidelong glance. Like everything else I learned from Essi, that night's lesson was a spontaneous and pragmatic one that became carved in my mind forever. The right blend of innate confidence and exaggerated authority, added to a dose of amiability and a pinch of luck could disarm and intimidate even those hostile watchdogs. Of course not all *komiteh-chi* were so young and easily intimidated and certainly not everyone managed to muster the qualities Essi possessed and had to make use of more than once.

In the years that followed, the state's agents polished their assaulting and harassing skills as the ordinary people on the other side of the battlefield continued to refine their powers of resistance and defiance. For one thing, people did not stop drinking booze just because it was banned. They simply smuggled it from abroad, or made it in the basements of their homes and hid it in their closets.

On the Rocks with Dust

My relatives who are long enough in the tooth to recall, in their sober memories, the culture of drinking in Iran at the turn of the twentieth century speak of only one type of alcoholic drink--*aragh-sagi* or *dog-aragh*. *Aragh* is the generic name used to refer to all types of local vodka or hard liquor, but the homemade *aragh-sagi* was the least consistent and expensive, hence the most available and popular. It is truly *hard* liquor, with sometimes over 50% alcohol content, and it is often distilled from raisins.

Like many homemade products, *aragh-sagi* has risen and fallen on the waves of social upheaval that rocked contemporary Iran. It was the first and only type of hard liquor my father's generation knew, but it declined in popularity sometime in the '50s after several, large-scale manufacturers started to produce a range of Iranian vodka and later beers and wine under the government's regulations. It must have teetered on the verge of extinction when imported hard liquors became widely available and comfortably affordable in the '70s, but homemade *aragh-sagi* made a huge comeback in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which shut down all other viable avenues for the consumption of alcoholic beverages. For the entire twentieth century, *aragh-sagi* was manufactured, sold and even served--mostly, but not exclusively--by religious minorities unaffected by the fact that alcohol is prohibited in Islam, by tradition if not by law. In Shiraz, Jewish merchants, a sizable community in our city, dominated the business, whereas in Tehran, Iranian-Armenians owned most of the shops that served alcoholic beverages.

My father's generation had seemingly countless memories of their exclusively-male trips to different *baagh* (gardens) or small, privately owned and enclosed orchards on the outskirts of

Shiraz. These locations offered “the three things a noble man should have,” as an old, popular song had it: “*Yaar* (mistress), *sharaab* (wine) and *kabaab*.” The mistress part was never elaborated on, and *sharaab* was only used to rhyme with kebab, since, in reality, wine was replaced with aragh. And finally, the charcoal-grilled skewers of kebab were not to be missed under any circumstances at such an outing. Patrons assembled at the garden’s center stage, the *bonegah*, where a circular area was raised above the ground under the thickest and oldest maple and cypress trees. Under the dome of the trees and their cool shade, they sat or reclined on the carpeted floor of the *bonegah* beneath the dome of cool shade provided by the trees, enjoying their *aragh* and everything else that went with it, which differed depending on the group’s composition.

In multi-family *baagh* trips, of which I have some blurry memories, the drinkers’ corner was heaped with a range of foods to please all tastes and a selection of chasers (*mazeh*) that included a variety of yogurt mixes, most notably grated cucumbers in yogurt with salt, black pepper and dry, powdered mint and minuscule-diced shallots marinated in yogurt. Charcoal-grilled lamb’s liver was and continues to be another renowned *aragh* chaser, as is a delicious dish called *khoraq-e loobia*, kidney beans cooked in tomato juice, fried onions and lemon juice. Chaser was usually made in small quantities, preciously guarded and leisurely consumed by the drinkers in small portions.

“Hey, this is supposed to be my *mazeh*, damn it,” you might hear a father yelling at a child tucking into the bowl of yogurt mix with a sizable round of flat bread, “it’s not the dirt you’re trying to shovel!”

A distant relative of mine named Shapour was a kind, ugly, funny man with the potential to become a homeless drunk and a tremendous talent for composing foolish lyrics and profane songs. He had earned most of the above qualities after retiring from a teaching position upon inheriting a large sum of money that condemned him to the life of a millionaire. Shapour had a *tonbac*, a goblet-shaped hand drum with one drumhead, quite similar to the Egyptian *darbuka*. The *tonbac* is an essential musical instrument in traditional Persian music. Each time he got even slightly tipsy, Shapour would pull out his little *tonbac* and reminisce about his old *baagh* days regaling us with amusing details of the times he had gotten blind drunk.

He told of how they had bought their *aragh* in cardboard boxes with internal dividers that made space for a dozen small, crooked, long-necked bottles of *panj-siri*, each of which contained two standard shots (*chatvals*).

Traditional, Iranian-style *aragh* is plain and typically taken undiluted, with or without ice. No flavor is added, unlike the similar *araks* made in more than a dozen Eastern, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern countries. Most people would agree that it takes a lot of chaser to down the extremely harsh, bitter, hazy *aragh-sagi*; according to a popular proverb, however, “a tough guy’s chaser is dust” (*mazeh looti khakeh*). He takes nothing at all with his *aragh*; just a gulp followed by a head jerk to defeat the taste. He never squirms.

Shapour had quite a different philosophy on the subject of drinking *aragh* without a chaser. “That’s all bullshit!” he would say. “It’s like a thug going to the barber and asking for a dry shave ‘cause he’s under the impression that only sissies use foam. Then after taking a good dose of the blade’s scratches and cuts, he begs the barber to put some foam on his goddamned face. It’s exactly the same with *aragh*. You take it *sec*, or dry, without *mazeh*, you’ll get a hole in

your belly's bottom in less than a year; then you're too screwed up to drink again for the rest of your life! Your choice, start off being a sissy, or end up a pussy."

According to Shapour, despite its reputation as being the best chaser, grated cucumber and yogurt was good only for occasional drinkers. "A professional drinker," he boasted, "always takes his *aragh* with a protein-rich food to reverse or minimize damage to the kidneys, hence prolonging the joy of drinking. That's why you eat grilled meat kebab or lamb's liver, or make do with the bean dish if you're not rich enough to have a kebab each time you want to drink your nightly portion of *aragh*."

Decades later, a very rich Shapour, living in an extravagant house with his wife and two grown children, had evidently avoided a hole in his stomach and could now afford not only the best kebab to accompany each of his drinking sessions every night, but also the formidably expensive and illegally exported whiskey and brandy. In spite of his luxurious life, he still seemed to long for his good old *baagh* times. Each time he reached for his *tonbac* to entertain us with his spontaneous, foolish songs, he reminded us that live music had been a central part of their *baagh* trips. He claimed that at least two of the then-famous women singers had started their careers by giving private concerts in Shiraz gardens. Shapour bragged about his scandalous adventures with the delight of a physicist lecturing on his lifetime research achievements. Only Shapour's accomplishments were amusing and so much fun to listen to.

"*Baagh* did not have any lighting, you see? So, everybody was supposed to wrap it up before dark. Once, there was this big party with local musicians and at one point I am having the time of my life, enjoying my *aragh* and all the chicks going through my pockets and God knows where," he giggled, his bulging eyes wandering around to spot his wife. "Next, the whole wood is dark and eerie. It's only me and two of my pals slumped right under the *baagh*'s wall. The two of them were trying to push me up the wall 'cause the main gate was locked or somethin'." He took his time, laughing hard and envisioning himself tottering, sliding and rising just to fall again. "Imagine the sons of bitches think I can actually climb up the wall. Anyhow, the next thing I know it's daylight again and bloody cold, too." Topping off his shot glass and raising it to no one in particular, he bent his head down all the way to his chest and burped, "*be-salaamati*" (to good health), and paused a few moments to find an impressive conclusion. "Imagine the entire night all alone in the middle of nowhere in some damn *baagh*. At the very least, the vultures could have eaten me!"

"Oh, I wish they had!" his wife interrupted from behind her kitchen's counter, feigning an angry face and inspiring a collective burst of laughter.

From the period when my father's generation drank their *aragh-sagi* in the *baagh* of the '50s, to the time when they drank the same dog-breed *aragh* secretly at home during the '80s, the types and brands of alcoholic beverages manufactured in Iran diversified dramatically while their consumption increased, and to a great extent, became socially acceptable. As early as the late '50s, the Etehadieh family began to produce alcoholic beverages and gradually, their brand expanded and dominated the business up to the years leading to the prohibition of alcohol in 1979. In fact, in the early '60s, the home made *aragh-sagi*'s popularity declined as a fairly wide range of Iranian vodka began to be mass produced. From Etehadieh and Balsam to Special 55, the best quality, raisin-distilled Iranian vodka was manufactured in Mianeh in Northern Iran.

For the last ten years prior to the revolution, production of a variety of local wines and beers flourished as well. Pakdis wine, produced in Rezaieh, was the only large-scale brand according

to my research, but there were dozens of different types of wines produced in small batches all over Iran which were known by the region they were produced in, or by the blend and variety of ingredients they were made with. We had Kholar wine from Kholar's vineyards near Shiraz, and Shahani Red wine--made from a plump, purple grape by the same name in Ghazvin, in the North. As for the local beers, Shams and Majidieh were the two most famous brands.

I would be damned, in the unlikely event that I have not been already during the course of the previous chapters, if I did not point out the antiquity of alcohol consumption and its significance in ancient Persian culture. Any non-Iranian who has spent more than ten hours in our company, either in person or through the pages of a book or an online chat forum, will learn that an impressive list of objects and events--from forks, to ties, to Valentine's Day--seem to have originated in ancient Persia. It seems the more repressed we are by an Islamic autocracy or marginalized and humiliated by an inhospitable host society, the more conscious we become of our two-and-half millennia of civilization.

Iranian people were closely familiar with and highly appreciative of the culture of drinking long before they were slowly but steadily forced to convert to Islam back in the 7th Century. Iranians of different strata have continued drinking their way through the centuries, and historians of ancient Persia tell us that as early as the Safavid dynasty, many emperors spent much of their time drinking when they were not busy killing their enemies (16). Meanwhile, archeologists who have excavated the remains of beer brewing and wine shelves dating back to 5,500 years ago in Iran's northwestern villages, assure us that drinking was not solely the prerogative of the rich and the rulers, but rather the pastime of the masses as well (17). It is worth mentioning that despite the fact that Islam prohibits drinking alcoholic beverages, it was Muslim scientists--mainly of Persian origin--who first invented the distillation process. Zakaria Razi, the Iranian pioneer physicist and scientist of the medieval era (856-925), discovered medicinal or methyl alcohol.

Alcoholic beverages and wine in particular, have had a remarkable presence in Persian art and poetry as far back as recorded history. Most of our world-renown and admired poets--including Khayyam, Hafez, Sa'di and Mowlavi (known in the English-speaking world as Rumi)--wrote hundreds of thousands of verses in celebration of love and wine--referred to as *mai* or *baadeh*.

They composed poetry that glorified intoxication, sometimes while intoxicated themselves, and they just as heartily condemned hypocritical, self-assigned guardians of morality--the *komiteh* of their times, I presume. Some literary critics, philosophers of Sufism and experts of Mysticism believe that the drunkenness described in these types of poetry is not literal; but rather a metaphor comparing the state of ecstatic union between God and oneself to drunkenness. Similarly, the frequent use of wine and *saaghi* (translated as "cupbearer"), is argued to serve as a symbolic medium for reaching the ultimate desirable state of that union. Accurate as these interpretations may be, our literary heritage still speaks volumes to the truth that good wine and the presumed ecstasy derived from drinking it has long been admired and yearned for in Persian art and literature.

Omar Khayyam--11th century poet, philosopher and scientist--is another widely-read Iranian poet whose quatrains (*Rubaiyat*) are very well known in the English-speaking world:

*Khayyam, if you are intoxicated with wine, enjoy!
If you are seated with a lover of thine, enjoy!
In the end, the Void the whole world employ
Imagine thou art not, while waiting in line, enjoy* (translated by Shahriari) [\(18\)](#)

*In spring if a houri-like sweetheart
Gives me a cup of wine on the edge of a green cornfield,
Though to the vulgar this would be blasphemy,
If I mentioned any other Paradise, I'd be worse than a dog* (translated by Karim Emami) [\(19\)](#)

*Without wine I shall not bear being alive,
Without wine I shall not hold my body along.
I am slave of the moment whence
Saaghi offers one more, but I resign.*

During the 13th century, poet of poets, Hafez Shirazi, composed his Love Poems (*Ghazaliyat*), which were later included in his collection of works called *Divan*—a legacy living on in the traditions and hearts of many Iranians. Hafez homage to the wine is beautifully depicted in this poem:

*Cupbearer, it is morning, fill my cup with wine.
Make haste, the heavenly sphere knows no delay.
Before this transient world is ruined and destroyed,
ruin me with a beaker of rose-tinted wine.
The sun of the wine dawns in the east of the goblet.
Pursue life's pleasure, abandon dreams,
and the day when the wheel makes pitchers of my clay,
take care to fill my skull with wine!
We are not men for piety, penance and preaching
but rather give us a sermon in praise of a cup of clear wine.
Wine-worship is a noble task, O Hafiz;
rise and advance firmly to your noble task.* (translated by Bernard Lewis) [\(20\)](#)

Rumi; a poet, jurist and Sufi mystic of the 13th century; is another admirer of wine whose masterpieces have travelled far beyond his time and culture. His words have the remarkable ability to create a buzz through their simple recitation. Unfortunately, but perhaps naturally, his rhythm and vision are often lost in translation.

loud music/ drunken parties/ and wild dance/one hand holding/a cup of wine/one hand caressing your hair/ then dancing in orbital circle I can sing better than any nightingale/ but because of this city's freaks/I seal my lips/while my heart weeps... (Translated by Nader Khalil) [\(21\)](#)

After Rumi, hundreds of poets contributed to our remarkably rich literature all the way through the contemporary and modern era. It is beyond my intention and capacity to trace or even highlight the significance of wine and drinking in Persian culture as manifested through our centuries-old literary works. This rather long, historical parenthesis simply demonstrates that drinking has been at the heart of our poetic subject matter starting from time immemorial right up to Shaamlou, and beyond.

When I was little, my father used to drink his *aragh* openly only when he had his male friends or relatives over, or when the family was attending a big party, like a wedding. If he wished to have brews out of the blues, he would go out to one of the taverns in our neighborhood, which were mostly owned and run by the Iranian Armenians or Jewish Shirazis, and were generally referred to as *pialeh-foroshi* (shot-glass stores). During the '60s there were only a limited number of public places in Shiraz to drink and dine as a family or group of friends. Cabarets and cafes were the exclusive privilege of Tehran. Sometime in the mid '70s, Cabaret Bacara opened in Shiraz, but it could never match the popularity of Tehran's cabarets.

In Tehran, and much later in a few other Iranian cities, what was referred to as a "café" was, in fact, a café-bar—the perfect place to date, dine, drink and by the mid '70s, dance. The types and classes of various café-bars differed as much as the population itself. The much cited Cafe Naderi was distinguished for being (even now) the intellectuals' hangout. Uptown café-bars served warm food to their tranquil, middleclass customers against a backdrop of canned or live western or Persian pop music. Those located in the South of Tehran provided their common--and at times, thuggish—clients and their temporary female companions food, drinks and occasionally live entertainment, such as belly dancing.

Cabarets, on the other hand, were upscale entertainment spots that served food and alcoholic beverages to a richer stratum of society. They also tended to be more family-oriented. Shokofeh-No, or New Blossoms, was among the most popular, and the fact that it was located in the capital's red-light district of Shahr-e No, New Town, did not decrease its popularity--especially since it always hosted the most famous Iranian and Western pop singers. The uptown cabarets, some of which had a dancing stage, included Cabaret Moulin Rouge, Cabaret Atlantic (owned by the husband of famed Iranian belly-dancer, Jamileh), Cabaret Miami, Cabaret Vanak, Bacara, and many more.

Lalehzar Street, a once trendy neighborhood which was considered working class by the '70s, was jammed with café-bars, cabarets, restaurants, movie houses, theaters, shops, street vendors and a steady flux of bustling people--young and old, men and women. Lalehzar movie houses were the first to screen both silent and talking movies in Iran, and Lalehzar's unique theaters--an

Iranian version of Broadway for the masses--gave birth to some of the most prominent Iranian actors and actresses. Lalehzar cabarets and café-bars had their own special clientele whom they entertained with stand-up comedians, less nationally- renowned singers and sexy, Persian dancers who revealed only the slightest delights with their skilled twirling.

It would be wildly dismissive to speak of Tehran's café-bars, particularly the ones on Lalehzar, and not mention the *jaahel* sub-culture, less favorably referred to as *laat*. The strict translations of the terms are "ignorant" and "thug" respectively, but a *jaahel* in the briefest sense can be described as a non-violent hooligan living by the street codes of the working-class he has come to dominate (22). Known as notorious drinkers, *jaahels* were the most loyal customers of the café-bars--the sort who had their aragh with "dust." They usually came from deeply religious families and therefore were probably also the primary visitors of the mosque that was located right across the street from Lalehzar café. *Jaahels* lived by their own code of honor; manliness and ethics, or *marefat*--a code that prevented them from using their usual coarse language in mixed company or ever intruding on an unknown female, despite their reputation for being excessive womanizers. The same code also bound them to die, if necessary, for a fellow *jaahel* in a fight, let's say over a dirty look someone gave his favorite female singer, or a prostitute under his protection.

You could spot a *jaahel* by the way he walked and talked and, most notably, by the way he dressed--black suits, white shirts unbuttoned half way down the chest, black fedoras perched on one side of the head and a cotton handkerchief held in the hand or hung loosely around the neck. The handkerchief must have had multiple functions, but the one known to the general public was its use in the *jaahel's* dance.

In this distinct style of dance, the thick-mustached and deadly-serious *jaahel* or "*daash mashti*" as they were generically referred to, spun slowly, and bent down as if suffering from back pain. He popped his shoulders up one at a time with his arms thrown wide and shook the handkerchief in rhythm, all the time staring down at the floor with a knotted brow and tight lips in a threatening snarl. They danced individually or collectively, most popularly to the tune of *Babakaram*, or some other, vulgar Persian dance music. One had to actually listen to the lyrics of the music the *jaahel* was dancing to so contemplatively in order to appreciate the absurdity of his motions.

Tirom, tirom, O God/I wanna go, O God/ Come on bro, O God/ into the baagh, O God/ adas-polo, O God/ eat'n bug out, O God. [tune changes]

Daash, daash; daash, daash; daash that is me/ some puppy seed that is me / lawn sprinkler that is me / tonbac lover that is me / duck trapper that is me [tune changes]

Ouch, Ouch, Ouch./ My dear howww are you?/ how exact are you dear?/ you weren't like this before/ you weren't depressed before/ Ouch. Ouch. Ouch.

I never saw *jaahel* dancing live, just as I never visited a nightclub in Tehran. I only saw them on television shows or in *Jaahel* movies--an important and popular genre of Iranian film that magnified *jaahel*-related stereotypes and characteristics through almost identical plots. Although not a fan of *jaahels* or *jaahel* movies, I had seen enough *jaahels* dance to appreciate it when my girlfriend mimicked them at the all-girl parties we had when we were teenagers. She would put on a black suit and hat and draw herself a solid black mustache with an eye liner. Then she danced her own version of the *jaahel* dance, which included popping up her waist and touching

between her legs where her presumed testicles would be, as if she were scaling them. Her ability to maintain a deadly serious look was a gift, considering that she was delivering the performance to an audience stricken by outbursts of laughter so violent that they were holding their stomachs and rolling on the floor.

Tehran's red-light district was bulldozed and all cabarets were shut down immediately after the Islamic Revolution. Most cafés continued to operate, but their vice components--music, drinks, mingling and fun--were chopped off. They carried on as shadows of their former selves. The *Jaahel* went underground in the Shah's last year, and disappeared entirely after the revolution. Some believe that the most vigilante *jaahels* were transformed into Revolutionary Guards called *paasdaaraan*, or other aggressive agents of the new government, with some even finding their way into the new judicial system. However, the image of the *jaahel* I've tucked in the dustiest recesses of my memory is of a Daash Akol-type. Daash Akol, the symbolic predecessor of the *jaahel*, is the protagonist of a famous short story written by Sadegh Hedayat in the '30s. He appears as the ultimate embodiment of the Iranian macho man--part honorable romantic and fully pig-headed, enjoying public respect in 19th century Shiraz.

The Shiraz of the late '60s did not have any Tehran-style cabarets or café-bars, but a considerable number of restaurants in Shiraz served alcoholic beverages. My family's sole collective outings were to *chelow-kabaabi*, which never served any kind of alcohol. That explains, in part, why my dad's only simple route to a drink was in a tavern, which was neither a café-bar, nor a cabaret, but somewhere decent to drink and eat. An old friend of mine, an architect from Tehran, once told me quite seriously that old Tehran's city structure was specifically designed to place a tavern next to a *barbari*-bread bakery, next to a skewer-liver shop in each and every neighborhood. Convenience and custom allowed one to buy their succulent, heavenly-smelling lamb livers and pull them off the skewers between hot layers of *barbari* bread fresh from the *tanur* while sipping *aragh*--sometimes seated on the hood of one's car parked in front of the tavern.

The taverns we had in Shiraz varied in layout, ambiance and clientele, just as café-bars and cabarets did. In reality, there was no clear-cut distinction between a café-bar and a tavern. They differed only in their purpose. If you simply wanted a drink, you went to a tavern. If you wanted to socialize or be entertained while you drank, you headed for the café-bar.

A tavern in our neighborhood, called Khorak, was like a French bistro. It served simple homey fare and delicious sandwiches --*kotlet*, lamb brain, herb pancake and most notably a kidney bean dish (*khoraq-e loobia*). It sold and served not only *aragh*, but other Islam-unfriendly products such as ham and pork cold cuts. Food was served or sold for takeout from a chest-high, glass-paneled refrigerator that ran the length of two walls. The finest and most expensive food items were displayed in the sidewalk-facing window of the store, from a nicely decorated plate of *olivieh* salad to a gourmet lamb brain dish. Bottles of Iranian vodka, imported hard liquor and a variety of beers stood against the walls behind the counter. People took long pulls from their bottles of beer while standing; or sipped or chugged their shots of *aragh* while leaning against the counter or sitting on one of a few available stools.

Not all taverns were as spacious and modern as Khorak, although almost all sold the same variety of cold snacks, side-dishes and chasers with their hard liquor. The more traditional taverns were typically cozy, little places with a few round tables covered by garish tablecloths surrounded by inexpensive, aluminum folding chairs or brightly-colored plastic shell chairs.

These places were crowded with irrelevant decorative objects from candle jars to jewelry to artificial flowers and pottery that sat on the shelves beneath or next to the framed pictures that hung on the walls. Sometimes, Persian music was played to fill the empty air of a slow day or soften the buzz of the customers.

On those rare occasions when my father visited a tavern, he would try to come home a bit later than usual to avoid Mom. In his slightly inebriated state, he much proffered to spend time with one of his children, to share a story, a dream or part of his appeased soul. I loved the way my father's misty eyes glittered with tenderness when he got his innocent buzz on. He never stood to pray at night when he had been drinking, out of respect for his God. Nor did he ever drink during the entire fasting month of Ramadan and the mourning month of Muharam. In fact, during these two months all the liquor stores covered their display windows and entrances out of respect for Islamic principles. During those periods, my father was not the only one left with no choice but to cut back on their drinking and make other concessions to their limited religiosity.

When my brothers were old enough to share an occasional shot of Iranian vodka with my father, they would still pretend to be doing so on the sly. My mother did not approve of alcoholic beverages, although her objection was not a moral one. She attributed her dislike to health-related concerns. "It is so *hot*," she scolded, referring to vodka's innate attributes. "*Hot* as fire! It burns all your guts down."

Dad concurred. He had his own reasons for condemning drinking: "You spend money to drink rubbish so that you can go insane. That's three stupid things all in one act!" He, for one, never went "insane," nor did he spend too much money on it, but condemning it was his way of remaining on Mom's good side. He sometimes had to explain the obvious to her as well, though. "It is not water, you know," he said, "you're supposed to get drunk; otherwise, what's the point?"

I think my mom's objection to my father's drinking, in addition to her issues with vodka's "heat" had to do with him having too much fun at too little expense.. She was not entirely against drinking, in principle. For instance, when she wanted to treat and impress special family friends, she would have no qualms serving them imported, prestigious, expensive liquors like whisky or brandy with their meal.

I have no memory of wine or beer being consumed in our household when I was young. It was only after all kinds of alcoholic beverages were banned in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution that my eldest brother, Hossein, joined countless others by researching, experimenting, and finally, producing homemade wine, beer and *aragh*—a process that was bound to be improved and expanded upon over the coming decades.

Prohibition Unfolds, and Fails

At the peak of the revolutionary crisis, between February 10th when the revolutionaries took over government buildings and institutions and the monarchy officially toppled, to June of the same year when the new Islamized constitution was imposed/passed, the street assaults and abuses were directed most harshly at the most vulnerable social groups; with religious minorities at the top of the list. For instance, sometime in 1979, Khomeini singled out the Baha'i as a target for active harassment by issuing a *fatwa* to the effect that all religious minorities except the Baha'i should be treated well. Street mobs did not have to wait for legal sanction to make the

gravest and most shameless assaults on this peaceful community, who have been the flagrant subject of animosity in Iran since the birth of the faith in the 19th century.

In Shiraz, a large number of Baha'i lived in a ghetto-like setting near the Sa'di mausoleum. Their homes and businesses were among the earliest targets of arson and looting in the midst of the revolutionary chaos. Soon after the establishment of the Islamic Republic, the house of Bab in Shiraz, a major Baha'i shrine, was demolished and Baha'i community members were the victims of a mass execution--a sincere effort to eradicate the faith along with its people, thanks to Khomeini's *fatwa* (23).

The Iranian Baha'i were the first target of Islamic fundamentalism and remain, to date, the community most unapologetically and inhumanely treated by the government. In those early revolutionary days and weeks, however, all religious minorities were harassed indiscriminately. The Jewish community felt extremely intimidated and threatened during the pre-revolution demonstrations and post-revolutionary months. So did other religious minorities, such as the Armenians, who had a kind of monopoly over the production and sale of Islam-unfriendly products, most notably, alcoholic beverages.

At that time of unrest, all bistros, taverns and liquor stores in the entire city were shuttered, irrespective of the owner's faith—that is, if they had survived the initial looting and vandalism by revolutionary mobs. It just so happened that the majority of liquor-serving cafés and shops were owned and run by Christian and Jewish Iranians.

Interestingly enough, according to the Islamic law or *sharia* embedded within our constitution in February 1979, non-Muslims are allowed to consume alcoholic beverages in the privacy of their homes, but are subject to severe punishment if they manufacture, sell or traffic it. In reality, a Jewish colleague of Essi's supplied *aragh* to a small circle of his friends for at least a decade and got away with it, while the house of another Jewish family we knew was raided and the whole family assaulted for serving wine as a part of a private Kiddush ritual. In one occasion, an Iranian diplomat visiting a European country and attending a formal lunch insisted that no alcohol be on the table even for their European counterparts (24).

The post revolutionary judicial courts-included a new, separate entity called the Islamic Revolutionary Courts, which ran parallel to and independent of the traditional courts dealing with civil and criminal offenses. The Islamic courts were headed by clerics who acted as the judges and prosecutors, handing down decisions on a number of offenses, including immoral acts such as drinking and violating the Islamic dress code. In reality, the "offenses" themselves were wide open to interpretation, which made their verdicts quite arbitrary. These courts were feared by the people, but not fiercely enough considering that *aragh* consumption did not end once it was outlawed. It simply went underground, along with music, forbidden videos and mixed-gender parties. In fact, declaring alcoholic drinks a vice made them even more attractive to many people who had not been serious fans before. The solution to the sudden ban on alcoholic beverages was for many families, like mine, to home brew it.

Soon after the prohibition of alcohol went into effect, a brand of non-alcoholic beer called *ma'ol-sha'ir* found its way to the Iranian market and rapidly became so popular that every supermarket and store carried it. A major reason for the popularity of *ma'ol-sha'ir* was that it served, unwittingly, as the perfect foundation for brewing homemade alcoholic beer. Here is the story of how my thirty year- old brother, Hossein, began the operation in our house. It is a disaster story, and very educational.

He bought two-dozen bottles of *ma'ol-sha'ir* and poured them all into the large bucket that Saleheh used to wash our clothes. Using his chemical expertise, he added some sugar and pitched in a small amount of yeast that Dad had bought from our local bakery. The yeast, my brother explained, would help convert the sugar contained in the *ma'ol-sha'ir* into ethylic alcohol. The operation reminded me a little bit of making *vow-aash*, except that at the end of this “cooking” procedure we did not have enough sealable bottles to fill with the “wort,” or unfermented beer. Hossein improvised, pouring the whole batch into one large barrel that Mom used for preserving home-extracted lemon juice over the winter. To help the fermentation process and generate the desired amount of carbon dioxide in the beer-to-be, he added some more sugar to the glass barrel before sealing it as tightly as he could.

It was a hot summer night, and, as usual, we had some visitors from Bushehr sleeping in the yard--thankfully at a safe distance from the barrel, which had been placed under the ledge of the window frame and against a wall to protect it from the direct heat of the sun. I, along with a couple of other siblings, was sleeping on the balcony right above the container, and everybody else was either in a room or on the rooftop. Around three in the morning, the malicious barrel exploded with a horrible sound, shards of its thick, dark-green glass scattering across the floor as the strong smell of urine was released into the air. The initial shock and confusion caused by the sound soon turned to concern for our guests' safety; then to regret for the wasted beer that was not to be, to blame foisted on one person or another, and finally to giggling and laughter over the midnight accident. Only when the light in our neighbors' yard came on did we realize that those who had not been awakened by the explosive sound had now been roused by the commotion we were making.

Hossein had left Iran by the time he became an expert in beer-brewing, but many others who stayed on gradually learned how to brew a perfectly sound batch and bottle it as innocent cases of *ma'ol-sha'ir*, using the original crown seal, bottle capper and a hammer to perfectly re-seal the bottles and “safely” carry them in their car trunks on their vacation trips to the Caspian. By the time the Komiteh had discovered this ruse, and began actually opening each bottle of *ma'ol-sha'ir* and smelling it when they stopped cars for a “vice inspection”, people had developed a more novel strategy. A friend of mine used to tell us, with the pride of an 18th century warrior recounting his exploits in battle, how he had managed to safely pass his stock of beer through the “bastard's inspection roadblock” to the Caspian by injecting his home-brew beer into emptied cans of *ma'ol-sha'ir* through a tiny hole he made in the bottom of each can, which he then meticulously covered using an old soldering gun he had obtained for this purpose.

Practice certainly does make perfect, as it did in the case of the illegal brewing that took place in the larders and basements of Iran, but such experimentation can also kill the practitioner. During the first months of alcohol prohibition, the stories of desperate drunks in dire need of their fix drinking diluted methyl alcohol and dying as a result were being told everywhere. There were even more common stories; those about people becoming blind or suffering severe internal damage as the result of drinking unsafe home-brews.

A warning was issued through the invisible grapevine of underground alcohol consumers that some bootleggers added sleeping pills to their *aragh* to create tranquilizing effects. The demand for homemade *aragh-sagi* soared once again, along with a search for reliable manufacturing sources.

My uncle, a teetotaler and an innovative and retired engineer, found it an exciting pastime to allocate his entire basement to distillation pots, gadgets and equipment that produced admirable *aragh* for his friends. His son, a conscription officer at the time, used to tell us with much amusement how he went to a fruit and vegetable bazaar to buy two tons of grapes for his father's supply of feedstock while wearing his army uniform and pretending it was for his garrison's consumption. Those without the necessary means and know-how to become self-sufficient drinkers learned over time to become savvy alcohol consumers. The alcohol meter, for instance, made its first appearance in a lot of household toolkits, to insure that the *aragh* bought from local unknown producers was at least not flammable.

Captured on the Rooftops of Athens

The first time I tasted *aragh*—a secret, home-brewed *aragh-sagi* extracted from raisins--was shortly after I was of legal age, ironically, at a time when *aragh* was still illegal. The second time I crossed paths with raisin-distilled *aragh* was several decades later when my husband, Babak, and I were in Greece. We were thrilled to discover a small bottle in a corner store, winking nostalgically from behind the counter. That neighborhood in Athens was filled with familiar sights, like the branches of sour orange trees, *naaranj*, peeking over the walls of people's yards and the delicate fragrance of jasmine bushes that lined the sidewalks--melting our hearts with each deep breath we took.

I had heard from other Iranian expatriates that the closest hard liquor to Iranian *aragh-sagi* was the Italian *grappa* or the Greek *ozue* and *zivania*. I had also heard that even those brands were fragrant vodkas, so they did not taste exactly the same as our unflavored version. Nonetheless, the *ozue* we spotted at the corner store that day promised a taste close to home, and we took the inexpensive and invaluable bottle to the private rooftop of our bed and breakfast and drank it to the last drop under the October moon. We sipped the booze and cherished a meal of fond memories, marinated mackerel, heavenly olives and fresh bread we had fetched from the market. We sat around the weathered, terrace table until the crisp, cold air of midnight hoisted us up--heads heavy with *ozue*--and sent us back to our bedroom.

I woke the next morning to a pounding headache and cramping stomach and remained sick the entire day, perhaps due to the combination of an unfamiliar raisin extract and an overdose of wistful memories. In any case, my first shot of *ozue* convinced me that no drink in the world would ever measure up to the *aragh-sagi* I had tasted after the revolution – the one that tasted like daring and defiance.

“It was the spring of 1989,” Babak said, starting his tale with the usual accusation, “I have told you this story before; you have forgotten! Anyway, Ramin and I were driving to my place from his; taking with us a bottle of *aragh* he had saved to drink as we talked the night through, as we sometimes did. It was around five in the afternoon and the last thing we were prepared to face was a roadblock right ahead of us, with cars backed up for at least two blocks. Just by instinct, I backed up, made a quick turn and drove in the opposite direction. Sure enough, the sons of bitches spotted us and one of their 4WDs thundered after us, whistling sirens as the men inside pointed their Uzis out the window at us. I pulled over and two of them stomped towards us in their military boots. We got out and received the usual treatment... you know, hands on the trunk, a million questions and insults. Then, to their bloody delight, they discovered the three-

quarters full container of *aragh* sleeping under a cover, waiting to be awakened with the bastard's kiss."

"Shoot!" I exclaimed.

"Yeh, exactly! That's what we felt, but here is where the smartass in Ramin kicks in. He tells the 'brothers' who're harassing us that he will 'take care of them,' if they let us go.

"Is that so?" the brother in question responds in a high-pitched voice, absolutely pleased with himself and the situation. 'Bribe me, ha? I will drag you to the *komiteh*, to the court, to wherever it takes and show you filthy drunks exactly what it will cost you to engage in this type of criminal activity.' And that's exactly what he did!"

"You never told me this story before," I interrupted. "How could I have forgotten that?"

"I don't know," Babak shrugged. "So the next thing we know we are in the nearby *komiteh*--one of those grand houses in Shemiran that they confiscated after the revolution. Nobody talked to us for the next twenty-four hours; they just locked us in a bare room and at 4 a.m. the next day, a *komiteh-chi* walked in with a phone in his hand.

"If you have parents, call 'em up right away. They can bail you out. Ask them to bring in their house deeds. Your court trial won't be until Sunday.'

Court? We thought. *This shit is getting more and more real by the minute.* Ramin's father was not in town and that's why we had the bottle to ourselves in the first place. So I called mine and the old man came all the way up and left the deeds. We were just glad to be off the hook.

"Gosh, did you have a real court trial? What happened to the bottle?"

"Oh, that's what you're worried about?" Babak teased.

"Well, you're sitting right before me, so you must have survived execution, and I have never traced any lashing marks on you."

"Right, right..." he chugged his drink and squinted at me with a soft smile, trying to prolong the suspense. "Well, they confiscated the bottle as criminal evidence and on Sunday we show up where we are told to at the *Vozara komiteh*, right off *Vozara Street*. The real story is what happened *before* our trial started. That's the part I think I have told you before, maybe?"

"Well tell me again!" I urged, exasperated.

"Okay, listen to this. We are pacing the yard at *Vozara* waiting for our turn when we see this mountain, and I mean a mountain of hard-liquor bottles piled high on one side of the yard facing the main street. A miserable, thuggish, middle-aged man--guarded by at least half a dozen armed *paasdaar*--was taking the bottles one at a time and breaking them against the cement. Chivas Regal, *bang!* Jack Daniels, *bang!* Bacardi, *bang!* Smirnoff, *bang!* It was the most heart-breaking scene I have ever witnessed in my entire life, I am telling you!" he released a heavy sigh at the memory, rubbing his skull before going on.

"They had seized at least two full truck loads of high-quality hard liquor, wine and beer being smuggled into the country from Turkey. What we were witnessing was the smuggler carrying out the sentence he had been served before receiving his real punishment. He had to smash the full load right in the middle of the *Komiteh's* yard, all by himself for some reason. Maybe the moral guardians did not want to touch the 'impure' thing, or maybe this was understood to be a

good punishment, I don't know. Their only collaboration in this was to whack the smuggler across the head or poke him in the ribs or the back with the end of their Uzis each time he slowed down. It worked like a charm. He was flinching and wiggling, drenched in sweat, but fast--pouring out his liquors, and his heart, I imagine. So much liquid spilled onto the ground that it soon became a narrow stream floating down the *komiteh's* yard into the sidewalk's gutter."

"You're exaggerating!" I scoffed.

"By God, I am not!" he continued with renewed excitement. "Once all the glass bottles had been smashed, it was the beer cans' turn. All types in a variety of sizes and colors I had never seen before. The smuggler yanked the pull-tabs off the cans one-by-one and poured the beer onto the ground, tossing the empty cans over his head and letting them clatter down the slope. You should have seen the street's gutter when the beer foam had accumulated to the point of spilling over the edge onto the sidewalk and street. And the smell of it all; a bitter, musty stench. A mind-blowing scene, now that I think about it."

I was leaning forward on the edge of my unmatched terrace chair, as close as possible to the flow of the story. I covered my wide-open mouth with my free hand and wished I could pinch my nose shut against the alcohol fumes I was almost breathing from the gutter and sidewalks.

"Tehran must be the only city in the world, probably in the whole history of human kind where booze once flowed in its gutters," Babak commented, and I nodded after considering it with amusement. "At first, it was only the people inside the *komiteh's* compound awaiting their turn in court--the immoral sinners--watching the spectacle. Everybody, and I mean everybody was mumbling profanities under their breath and cursing the low-life, ungrateful maniacs for wasting 'God's blessing.'" We both burst into loud laughter. Then, more and more pedestrians stopped in shock to watch, some crying over the split *aragh* and others taking a vicious joy from it."

"Can you imagine how much money it must have been worth?"

"Oh, an exorbitant sum, for sure. Back then, imported hard liquor was extremely rare and expensive because it had such a limited number of narrow entrances into the country. Embassy employees and flight crews were rumored to use their inspection-free cargo to sell some of the hard liquors they brought into the country. That, plus a few careless bootleggers who did manage to make it through, unlike the miserable one we were watching. Later on, of course, the government grew wiser and stopped wasting their time punishing the petty smugglers."

We both knew that by the mid-2000s, imported hard liquor was a flourishing black market and its consumption was no longer a luxury only a few could afford. According to many accounts, the militant arm of the regime, the Revolutionary Guard or *Sepah-e Paasdaaraan* had a monopoly on the smuggling operation in addition to having complete ownership of the country's major infrastructure projects.

I was already half-drunk at this telling, but sober enough to remember that Babak had left his own story unfinished. "You're not going to accuse me of having forgotten your story again, right? Because you still haven't told me the rest of it."

"Oh, that..." he said, shaking himself into another level of memory. "Were we prosecuted? No, of course not. At some point close to the end of the smashing show, somebody led us into the building to this shithole of a courtroom with its *Haaj-Agha* (25)--a *mullah* in his early '40s with a white turban, playing judge and prosecutor. He was slim and calm, sitting behind a pathetic primary school desk and doing his best to look authoritative. Sitting next to him at full attention

was a very young man, a crippled war veteran in a wheelchair serving as the courtroom secretary. He flipped through a bunch of papers he had on his lap and scribbled on a notepad the whole time. That was it: the two of us, versus the two of them.

“In less than five minutes, the *Haaj-Agha* issued his verdict; ‘Two years in prison, each!’

“We jumped off our chairs simultaneously, echoing him in a petrified panic, ‘Two years in prison? For God’s sakes *Haaj-aghaaaa!* What have we done? Have mercy, for a lousy half bottle that we did not even drink? *Haaj-Agha?*’ We took turns pleading with him, talking over each other in our distress. He assured us that we would not be sitting here with him ‘chatting’ if we had been captured drunk, and then lit into us with a barrage of questions. Where did we get it? From Ramin’s father’s storage. Where was the so-called-father now? Abroad. What had we intended to do with it? Perhaps drink it,... but... but, only to see how it tastes. He scowled at us, shaking his head in disgust.

“In a desperate attempt to change the subject, I asked *Haaj-Agha* a question. If the punishment for a half bottle of aragh was two years in prison, what was the punishment for the smuggler out in the yard? You know what he said in response?”

“A few life sentences, I guess?”

“Wrong! Our penalty was much graver than his because he is a no-good, semi-literate thug while we were educated, well-off *engineers*, God forbid, of this country. After what felt like a few centuries, he abruptly announced the reduced sentence.

“‘Okay then, one hundred-thousand *Toomaans* each if you don’t want to serve the prison term.’

“We shoved back our chairs as fiercely as before, shouting, ‘One hundred thousand? You must be joking, *Haaj-Agha*. Where are we supposed to get such money from? *Haaj-Agha*, please...’”

“I can’t believe you bargained with him over the amount of money!” I interjected, throwing myself back in the terrace chair in protest.

“You bet we did,” Babak said, throwing himself back in his own chair. “It was a huge amount of money, for God’s sake--five, six months worth of my salary!”

“And?”

“Well, we kept bargaining it down. His *mullah* ego was at war with his judiciary authority; he threatened us in one instance and offered fatherly advice in another. Didn’t we know celibacy was a sinful state? Why didn’t we marry and become responsible human beings so as to rid ourselves of immoralities such as drinking? We argued that we didn’t have money to get married, and how would we ever get married if he took one hundred-thousand from each of us.”

“Oh, you didn’t say that!”

Babak shook his head approvingly and laughed hard. He suddenly stopped to add, softly, “He was not a bad man, you know. We were lucky.”

“How lucky?”

“Very. At some point he had had enough and ended the bargaining. ‘Five thousand for both,’ he declared firmly ‘or you’re taken to the detention center straight away!’ That was the end of it, and a good deal at that. In fact, a much better deal than what we could have struck with our *komiteh-chi* capturer, had he been the bribe-taking type.”

Aragh Domesticated

In the social class I was raised, no female relative in my mother's generation drank, irrespective of the degree of their religiosity or the type of roof they lived under. In my grandmother's generation, many were devout Muslims and did not even tolerate drinking in their presence. Their level of devotion was never to be put to the test. Before the Revolution, men did not raise their glasses to cheer an elderly woman out of the same respect that made them refrain from drinking on religious occasions. To the Islamic regime's credit, however, these same women conspired with their male counterparts to incorporate drinking into their daily lives for fear that a savage regime was more pressing and imminent than the disappointment of the Merciful Allah in the next life.

I remember vividly the first time I caught a favorite, elderly relative submitting to the new, unspoken rules of incorporating alcohol into the kitchen. *Maadar-e-Mehdi*, Essi's adopted aunt who was living with them, was a lovable, witty and spirited eighty-year-old who devoutly attended religious sermons or *rowzeh* (26), and carried her small prayer mat under her chador everywhere she went.

In such *rowzeh* gatherings, women settled themselves on a wall-to-wall, carpeted floor to listen to hours-long sermons delivered by a *mullah* from a gloomily decorated pulpit in a room separated from the men. The *mullah* (or *mullahs*)—wrapped in their long robes--enlightened their audience on a number of issues, from the proper way of performing *taharat* to how the under-aged soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq war were awarded by joining the *houris* of paradise to a recounting of the vices the West was imposing on our youth. For *Maadar-e-Mehdi*, the conclusion, or wailing, where the *mullah* chanted tragic stories of martyred imams with the explicit intention of provoking and permitting weeping was the best part. No matter what the *mullahs* preached, *Maadar-e-Mehdi* always returned home with puffy, red eyes--leaving behind whatever it was that made her sob so sincerely for so many years.

She suffered from all kinds of illnesses, but efficiently ignored them by making herself busy in the kitchen and tending to the adults in the house as if they were school-aged children. Like most women of her age and class, *Maadar-e-Mehdi* had never gone to school to learn how to read or write the Quran verses she had repeated her entire life. And like many women of her generation she had a mind brimming with poems, whose authors she did not necessarily know. She threw out whatever parts of a poem she could recall, spontaneously and casually as she roamed about the house in her clean, tasteful headscarf and uplifting smile. Passionately mumbling a Faez poem in her thick, Bushehri accent while welcoming me into her house was her way of complementing me on a red dress I had chosen to wear.

I am an aged lover, weary /the one with red dress goes there by me /she sure killed me in, nearly.

A few years into the change of the regime, I was helping her pile the dishes by the kitchen sink one night after a group of visitors had left their house, when I noticed that she was washing certain types of dishes in a strange way. I kept peeking at her as I went back and forth between the kitchen and the dining room. She briefly smelled each glass and put some in a back row. Then she picked them up, one-by-one, and ran them horizontally under the running water three times before starting to actually use the dish washing liquid and sponge to wash and then rinse them. All this time she mumbled something under her breath.

“What are you doing?” I inquired, as naturally as I could muster.

“Oh, nothing,” she said, dismissively, with a nervous grin. “Log of hell!” she improvised, pointing with raised eyebrows at the empty glasses that had held vodka. Detecting confusion on my face, she went on to explain the obvious, “*Tahaar, tahaar!*” she whispered (“purify” is what she meant). In Islam, certain things including urine, dead bodies, alcohol, blood and dogs (according to puritan hardcore Muslims) are considered impure or *najes*. This is a contentious, undesirable, yet partly reversible state. Touching something impure can make one impure, thus unqualified to perform one’s Islamic duties, such as daily prayer.

Najes, impure, is not to be confused with another Islamic concept, *haraam*, forbidden, which refers to acts that are not merely abhorrent, but also sinful. Any kind of physical contact between unrelated members of the opposite sex is considered *haraam*, but neither of the parties would be considered *najes*. Simply put, *haraam* is theoretically punishable in the next world while touching something *najes* is merely disagreeable (27). Alcoholic drinks are *najes*, drinking them is *haraam*.

Fortunately, some of these *najes* elements and objects could be made pure, or *taher*, through a simple yet specific type of rinsing. While *Maadar-e Mehdi* could not prevent people from drinking the ultimate *najes* liquid, she could purify the guilty glasses. She would not in her wildest dreams imagine embracing so much *haraam* or touching so many *najes* products had it not been for the purpose of eradicating the traces of illegal vodka consumption at home. I knew better than to bring up the details of the subject anymore, much less argue the logic of it all. From then on, whenever I was around to help her, I just casually mentioned, “I am putting the logs on this side, look!” She approved happily by nodding several times in silence.

Maadar-e Mehdi’s complicity with the now regular drinking sessions at home went beyond purifying the shot glasses. Each time Essi’s colleague delivered a plastic, five-liter barrel of homemade aragh, *Maadar-e Mehdi* took charge of hiding it in the kitchen’s larder amid two-dozen bottles and barrels of half-full pastes, herb and flower *araghi-yaat*, *torshi* and lime juice. Every once in a while, depending on what she had heard in rowzeh or on the radio, she would start shuffling the contents of her larder to conceal the “logs” further down in the darkness. Sometimes she even used her kitchen’s funnel to pour *aragh* from the plastic barrel into different types and sizes of glass containers--scattering them among the kitchen cabinets. Consequently, at some point, *Maadar-e Mehdi* became a reluctant “*saaghi*,” or cupbearer, since everyone had to ask her where to find the aragh when it was needed. I know that it was an enormous sacrifice for her to put the “logs” adjacent to her innocent jars of jams and condiments, without being able to purify everything. But then again, that was the way life had turned out for her; she was hiding love in the larder.

Epilogue: The Cyber Kitchen

Summer 2009

I was sitting on a bench right in the middle of Place du Canada, my chin dropped to my chest and my hand loosely holding a bottle of water, absorbing the warmth of midday July sunbeams and the Persian revolutionary song that blared from two gigantic loudspeakers. The Iranian flag covered the width of the Macdonald Monument standing five meters tall under a stone canopy. Further down, under the monument, large, cotton placards read “Hunger Strike,” and “*Liberez Les Prisonniers Politiques en Iran.*”

Twenty of us, all Iranian-Canadians, clad in black T-shirts, were at this traditional political rally site in downtown Montreal on our second day of a hunger strike. We harbored a sacred hope of bringing the plight of Iranian freedom fighters to the world’s attention. Occasionally, I looked up to speculate on what our fellow citizen-journalists were up to under a canopy we had set up in a shady corner of the open area as our “press-room.” Other times, I glanced at the edge of the square where it met the sidewalk to snap a mental picture of my fellow strikers handing out flyers to the politely indifferent pedestrians. One striker had been making thousands of wristbands out of green ribbons and meditatively writing “Freedom for Iran” in calligraphy on each one, while others distributed the ribbons, at times even helping tie a knot on a passerby’s wrist.

Curious fellow Montrealers stopped to study the laminated pictures of the protesters wounded and killed in Iran that we had hung on green banners on the nearby trees. Sometimes my ears perked up as my friend explained to a student why we had chosen to starve publicly as a way to protest what was happening in Iran—speaking with such articulation and passion that it stunned me and the student alike. Perhaps it was the impact of those mental pictures that my friends were describing or the sheer presence of hundreds of supporters--perhaps it was the hunger itself that was taking me to a pleasant and elevated state of mind. Whatever the reason, at that particular moment on July 25, I felt that I was able to momentarily emerge from the encapsulating wave of news from Iran and look inside myself with relative serenity and peace; to gather myself enough to ponder what it all meant to me.

On June 12, 2009, life as I knew it came to a complete halt for about two full months, and was forever transformed thereafter. The disputed presidential election on June 12 had me and thousands of other Iranian expatriates glued to the Internet, to news stations and to telephones as we absorbed news of the people’s uprising in Iran with an intensity and emotional involvement I had never experienced before, not even when I was in the midst of protestors shouting against the Shah’s dictatorship so long ago. For a long time, I could not perform more than the routine tasks of daily life. I could barely sleep and eat. I stopped working on my book for over eight months as something extraordinary unfolded back home and my sense of belonging was transformed and redefined.

On Election Day, we were all stunned to hear and read about a massive election fraud--a “coup d’état,” as the opposition called it, declaring that Mir-Hossein Mousavi--the pro-reform candidate running against Ahmadinejad, the ultra-hardliner incumbent--had been defeated. We watched millions of angry protestors flood the streets of major Iranian cities, shouting, “Where is my vote?” and “Death to the dictator!” They were shot and beaten right before our eyes on

computer and television screens. They were arrested and tortured, yet they took to the streets again, bloodied and bruised, and fiercer than before. We watched as all foreign journalists were thrown out of the country and hundreds of Iranian journalists, human rights activists and peaceful demonstrators were imprisoned within the first week. We kept watching for months to come, because people in Iran risked their lives to film the atrocities, brutalities and the crackdown that the armed forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran--“plainclothes” and otherwise--committed en masse, streaming those video clips for the world to see.

That is precisely when and where I started to reconnect with an array of bright, beautiful, sophisticated young men and women through the social networking rivers that were coursing from my wounded homeland. The colloquial language was foreign to me, but their despair at being cheated of such a fundamental right broke my heart, and their courage shook me to the core. I felt their pain as the batons rained down, and understood their desire for freedom.

I had not been holding my breath for the outcome of Iran’s pre-election euphoria, hope and festivity. I never invested in the possibility of a reformist government within an Islamic Republic, and I had not been holding my breath for a democratic and fair election. Truthfully, I didn’t even closely follow whether or not people actually cared to have a hardliner, or a conservative, or a reformist as their president. I had failed to realize the terrible hope planted in the hearts of the Iranian youth--70% of a population of over 70 million. I had not noticed how intensely they despised Ahmadinejad, and how desperately they believed Mousavi could bring about economic and social changes within the system.

I learned about these issues when I saw the pictures of a generation I had almost forgotten about: a young man holding his head with a green wrist-banded hand and weeping in despair; a young woman shouting in anger and flashing a fearless fist at the riot police less than two meters away. I had not realized what it took for a young Iranian to dare to dream, but once I witnessed that dream being devastated, I could not turn away.

Under the July sun at Place du Canada, with a head full of hope and dread for Iranians back home and a steady, empty stomach, I listened to Namjoo’s beautiful song, *Come Along*, calling for unity. I looked at the posters around me and reflected on how Iranians had risen up against injustice and oppression (for the third time in a single century) with so much determination, dignity, resilience, maturity and bravery that the entire free world had taken their hats off to them. I took pride in being Iranian more strongly than I had ever imagined possible. I also realized that in holding candlelight vigils, marching Montreal streets, signing petitions and staging hunger strikes, we were creating a story of our own as a community in the Diaspora, and as individual expatriates [\(28\)](#).

In the weeks that followed our hunger strike in Montreal, as the crackdown and imprisonment intensified in Iran, we kept watchful eyes on home; read and wrote more reports, news and blog entries, and pleaded with the United Nations to send an envoy to investigate the atrocities in Iranian prisons--to absolutely no avail. During those weeks, massive rallies endorsed by numerous prominent international figures, artists, intellectuals, Nobel Prize laureates and ordinary citizens of the world were held all over the globe. On one occasion, events were held in 110 cities, simultaneously. An ever-growing body of what was later referred to as “inspired art” was created by Iranian and non-Iranian artists alike. It featured video clips, music, lyrics, posters, cartoons and even dances that celebrated the green movement of Iranian youth in search of freedom and democracy. By the end of the summer of 2009, what had started as widespread

protests against rigged presidential elections expanded and transformed into what many referred to as a civil rights movement.

“How could I ever go back to writing a culinary memoir?” I asked myself this many times as the momentum spiralled and the knowledge that I was living in a historic moment made my personal past trivial and irrelevant, even to me. Little did I know that the rope I clung to in order to reconnect with my homeland would soon open a new chapter in my life and inspire me in immeasurable ways.

For three consecutive weeks following Election Day, there were several million of us sitting in one single room somewhere in cyberspace, exchanging news of the unrest in Iran--some fighting against the tear gas, blades and bullets of baton-whirling security guards in addition to the government's technological efforts to filter and block Internet traffic; others racing against time to cover the developments and reach out to turbulent Iran. Google started its Persian translator engine a few weeks into Iran's uprising, which the media was referring to as a “Twitter Revolution.” Up to that point I had refused to get involved in any of the social networking sites. I was, in fact, quite illiterate about the phenomenon. Within a few hours of the breakout of massive protests in major Iranian cities on June 12, 2009, I was signing up with all of them; “tweeting” for eight to ten hours a day with several windows open on my desktop, trying to get my hands on every link I could and reading every scrap that came my way. I watched as many amateur video clips taken on cell phones as my heart could take, and ‘chatted’ with people I didn't know, from all over the world.

In the midst of this social media and networking craze, I accidentally came across a forum named FriendFeed, which I later learned was the most popular online social network in Asia, with an average of one million visitors per month. As I stumbled through my self-taught, crash-course in cyberspace networking technologies, I realized FriendFeed was probably the one cyber location I could comfortably settle into. It provided a space for real time interactions with individual subscribers and their blogs, or other online sources, simultaneously. Unlike Twitter, which had a word limit per entry, FriendFeed allowed interactive messaging similar to chat rooms, and had the capacity to provide a URL for each entry that could then be shared elsewhere. Meanwhile, unlike the epidemically popular Facebook, whose raison d'être--it seemed to me--was to build a pool of existing acquaintances in order to expand networking circles for self-promotion or other purposes, FriendFeed more closely resembled a secret society where most, if not all users, had pseudonyms and disguised identities.

I started to “subscribe” to people based solely on their input; guessing at their perspectives and characters from the “feeds” they shared and the articles, music, pictures and comments they posted under other users' feeds. I could only see the feeds of users whose accounts were public, but in order for my feeds to be seen, I needed people to “sub me back,” as the jargon had it. Almost a year into my membership with FriendFeed, I read as my cyber friends teased a new arrival about the same concerns I had once had with advice like, “It's like mafia here, you gotta know people; hang around, butter up cool guys, you know... post real hot stuff... what can I tell you? Not easy to survive around here, hahaha.”

Having registered in the all Iranian and Persian-speaking section of FriendFeed, I had initially (and quite naively) assumed that I would be at home. It turned out that my situation was similar

to that of a new immigrant in a new country: I needed to learn the language, the culture and the order of things before even thinking about belonging. Right from the outset I was active, posting the news, pictures and links of what was going on at our end, on “the other side of the oceans.” (29) I sometimes translated short articles, such as the one that gave useful tips on how to fight back against the anti-riot police, and posted them on my page, or provided a synopsis of encouraging reports and analyses that appeared in the *New York Times* and other sympathetic sources. In addition to relentlessly posting my own feeds, I did not shy away from commenting on other people’s feeds, and even more frequently, I hit the “like” button on the feeds I found interesting, heart warming or heartbreaking. That was another way of having my name listed under certain feeds. No matter how much effort I made, however, nobody seemed to notice me. Only a few people subscribed me back, I got very few “likes” and zero comments.

“Why won’t anyone talk to me?” I finally asked in a feed, “Do I sound suspicious; like a government spy or something?”

The answer to this question came a week or two later from a kind-hearted young man: “Don’t take it personally, it’s probably because you speak a little strangely, like a foreigner; plus, having an avatar sometimes helps in finding friends.” True, I had yet to create a personalized avatar, but the language!?! I was writing in Persian for heaven’s sake. In fact, I secretly congratulated myself on the ease in which I remembered the correct spelling, punctuation and grammar. I had even downloaded Persian fonts so that I did not have to write in Pingilish (using the Latin alphabet to write Persian or Farsi words) as many users did. What was foreign about my language then? The answer to *that* question had been marching right before my eyes the whole time I was surfing FriendFeed; I had just been turning a blind eye to it.

Yes, I had failed miserably at getting half the expressions being used; and the techno-idioms, signs, faces and code-like letters that accompanied each and every phrase and sentence remained a mystery to me. Writing “correctly” was no longer fashionable. To be more precise, “correct” had been redefined and the language, especially of the youth, had evolved dramatically while I had been out of touch for quite some time.

“Wonderful!” I thought to myself, sarcastically. “Here I am an audible minority again.” In Canada, my fair complexion often camouflages my status as a “visible minority,” but as soon as I open my mouth, my heavy Persian accent gives me away. So my accent had once again tripped me up in cyberspace, ironically, with other Iranians and while I was not even speaking. Luckily, however, after a year at FriendFeed, or “fer-fer” as Iranian users have affectionately nicknamed it, I had learned the language--overcoming my cyber-accent and mastering more cultural nuances than I have in English after twenty years of living in Canada.

Once I got over my disappointment, I willingly asked many stupid questions, including the ones that revealed what a “luddite” I was—like, “What do you mean ‘what type of messenger’ do I have?” and “What is a podcast?” I sent many direct messages, made a few enemies and won many more friends--even some hearts. I learned quickly because I loved being among so many people with exactly the same concerns and issues about Iranian politics. No matter what corner of the cyber-room they occupied or in what time zone they lived, they became a family of sorts.

I was among a highly politicized, suspicious, cross-global community that found themselves deeply divided across their allegiances. For a short while, monarchist, pro-Mujahidin, leftist and green reformists were all united against pro-regime users--from educated Islamic fundamentalists in Western universities to loud, dirty-mouthed *basiji* thugs in Iran. Silent cyberspace police also

maintained a heavy internet presence, and all knew that their efficient espionage was not to be put to the test. It came as no surprise that different opposition groups gradually started to reveal bitter hostility towards each other. Long-suffering expatriate monarchists coached the movement away from reform and towards a complete overthrow of the regime from their seats in Los Angeles or Europe, while pro-Mujahidin exiles surfaced briefly to sabotage the protests according to their own agendas. Extreme patriotism easily translated into anti-Arab/Muslim sentiments that surfaced more frequently and with deeper roots than I would like to admit, even among the educated and so-called intellectuals.

I soon felt at ease, because the familiar Iranian codes of conduct and rules of hospitality were also widely applied within my cyberspace home. We treated those commenting under our feed like guests, with respect and tolerance--saving the profanities for direct (private) messages. We maintained complete control over our feeds and remained attentive. Unless you are an extraordinarily popular individual dragging along a thousand subscribers, you never abandon a fresh feed; instead, you acknowledge and respond to each comment, even if it's only with a simple smiling face. In addition, you respond to people not only politely but shrewdly and tactfully - in appropriate time intervals, so as to keep your feed on top of the page therefore prolonging its visibility as much as possible. You may mimic boasting, but may never brag openly, especially if you are among high ranking fer-fer users. Most important of all, as an ordinary user, you always obey the rules of reciprocity, meaning you give likes and comments and dig your friends' feeds if you want your feeds to be liked, commented on and dug.

The uprising was destined to be transformed, and, to much disappointment, to fade away. What started that summer, however, is irreversible because of the way it shook the very foundation of a rootless regime and took away the legitimacy of its dictatorial leadership. Equally compelling is the manner in which the events of the green summer abolished a wall that for thirty years had separated Iranians living in Iran as "insiders" and those in exile "outsiders"; loyalists and deserters, or as the other side of the coin had it, complicit conservatives and "real" opposition. Being on FriendFeed during those historic moments, I was not only witnessing the fall of that dividing wall, but also played a part in tearing it down.

By November 2009, political feeds were visibly declining in number on FriendFeed's main page, or were restricted to different opposition parties getting at each other's throats. But by then I was hooked strongly enough not to be willing or able to walk away. On the contrary, I was just warming up to it, accomplishing the status to receive "affinity-likes" (*maralami*); that is, when people press the like button for your feed, not necessarily because they care so much about the contents of your feed, but because they feel obliged, or because they like the feed's owner in principle! By then, I had built real ties with real people in this virtual world and I was having the time of my life. I had over a hundred friends (some with multiple identities, no doubt), whose absence worried me, whose music posts I saved to listen to at night, whose decision to close an account, thereby removing a chunk of memories, ruined my day; whose breadth of knowledge impressed and benefited me; whose pictures of "Shiraz at night," "Shirazi *faloodeh*," and "Shiraz blossoms," I cherished and showed to my family; and whose wicked sense of humour pleased and entertained me immeasurably. One night I actually dreamed that I was back in Tehran, with a few hundred young men and women at a crowded intersection of the city. We were all holding our avatars up in the air, and everybody was excitedly rushing through the crowd to identify their fer-fer friends. I think it was a potluck party of some type, since a lot of food was circulating! When I join any Iran-related demonstration and rally now, I always,

always, think to myself: “Any one of these people could be living here in Montreal! Which one!?”

When the unrest relaxed, the heavy mood of disappointment and depression also faded away, owing to the vigorous youth of the majority of the users in Iran (30). At that point, I started to notice the other types of feeds that were well-received most among ordinary users. Those feeds included, anything hinting at the real identity of the users and their real pragmatic lives: pictures of one’s children or one’s childhood, or parts of one’s face; birthday and engagement announcements never failed to get at least half of subscribers’ likes and comments. Pictures of pets (ideally belonging to the feed’s owner) were also popular as were poems accompanied by matching pictures, and postings of various Iranian and non-Iranian music.

Thanks to my pets, which were adored by my friends and scored the highest number of likes in my profile each time I put a picture of them up on the page, I stayed relevant for quite some time. But at some point, as if in a blink of an eye, I miraculously snapped myself to attention, noting that I had the most appealing talent of all: Cooking! Geez, how had I missed the fact that nothing came close to Food Feeds in terms of popularity? I was, after all, among “the ever-starving bunch of fer-fer food lovers” as Reza, a spirited young man who frequently displayed his impressive culinary skills once put it.

That is when I joined forces with a young woman living in Iran to create a room called *ghaza-kadeh* (food house) as a forum for sharing recipes and pictures of the meals we cooked on a daily basis. As with any social networking site, FriendFeed has a focus room for every imaginable topic. There were already a few food-related private and public rooms—a fact that posed no barrier to creating another, just as a city with several restaurants will not prevent another from opening up. I like to imagine our Food House as a cozy little corner in the basement of fer-fer, where the two of us have complete control.

The first rule we set for the room was, “food talk only; no politics!” I was pleasantly surprised to note how respectful of this rule the participants turned out to be. We had a pro-regime user posting pictures of his Iranian noodle soup (*aash-reshteh*) and drawing praise for his tasteful garnishing skills. A hardcore monarchist man, living somewhere in Europe, from whom I had learned the most mind blowing swear words, when he was in “dialogue” with pro regime users, and at times with pro reform users too, offered another pleasant surprise. Several times I had come close to “blocking” him for his offensive attitude, but instead, I simply avoided him like the plague. Knowing I was “green,” he had kept his distance from me, trying very hard not to insult “the lady” he must have figured me to be. Now, here he was offering “like” for almost every dish I “served.” He even gently teased me, his way of offering a compliment. Yes, Nader Khan and I were actually exchanging recipes and pleasantries publicly and privately, followed by excessive words of *ta’ruf*. Is there anything food cannot do!?

Through the Food House, I learned that Iranian 22-year-olds still go out of their way to treat themselves with *kalepch* (the nickname for *Kaleh-pacheh* or “heads and hooves” soup); and that some still cook it in their garages in Prague using a wild lovage to make the smell less offensive. I discovered that it is not lime juice, but verjuice that is used as a dressing on Shirazi-salad, thanks to my Shirazi friends who corrected the recipe I posted. When I asked them if the Vakil *araghi-yaat* selling store still existed near Saray Moshir, they said they did not know but would gladly send me a box by DHL if I was dying for a taste of it--reassuring me that the sweet taste of eglantine roses and hospitality persist in Shiraz.

Our Food House feeds receive visitors with respect and tolerance, as if we are entertaining them at our *sofreh* or table. It doesn't matter that nobody can taste or smell the displayed meals; you praise the cook for delicious-looking meals by pressing the "like" button and posting a comment—even if it's as brief as, "*bah, bah...*" In fact, you do so even if you do not find the dish particularly appealing or appetizing, just as you would in real life. Cooks probably give more attention to garnishing and visual delight when serving online, but one never brags about their dish or their cooking skills. On the contrary, one might apologize for not presenting it properly and remind the commentator how elementary their skills are compared to *her* beautiful dishes. We have a few brave men who are regular contributors and although they do not follow the unwritten modesty rules as closely as female cooks, they do not let our teasing them for posting a picture of "Ristaurante Pizza" (frozen in a package) keep them from participating. We also have an increasing number of single university students--boys and girls inside and outside Iran who seem to take tremendous joy in viewing the colourful, homey meals. I always regret not being able to literally feed them.

Since starting our Food House room, I have caught myself going to great lengths to make an elaborate *kashk-bademjaan* (thick whey called *kashk* over eggplants, accompanied by fried garlic, onions and ground meat), on a day when I would have settled for soup or spaghetti. I find myself shopping for cabbage-rice mixed herbs and Shirazi salad ingredients to go with the dish in an effort to impress two of my best fer-fer Shirazi friends.

My digital camera now rests on my kitchen shelf, for I now document whatever I do in the kitchen. I have even posted pictures of my small, bright kitchen opening to reachable branches of purple jasmine in the spring and have been asked, "What is cooking on the stove in that big pot?" Call it the solution to a midlife crisis, but I love being called "chef" or Julia Child by my Food House guests. I find great pleasure in the fact that several times my dishes have made it to the very top of the "best of the week feeds": A single picture of grapevine wraps, alongside e gorgeous looking tomato and pepper wraps, accompanied by recipes won me 111 likes, breaking my record (of my cat's picture) by far. I posted two mouth-watering pictures of chicken, vegetables, and corn on the cob being grilled over flashing, red charcoals under visibly delicious-smelling smoke and the feed gained 93 likes in less than twenty-four hours. Another time I posted a set of pictures which I had taken during the process of making samosa out of *lavaash* bread: from cutting thin layers of the bread to shaping them in triangle wraps, to frying them in a pan, and finally arranging the samosa in a dish decorated with fresh basils picked from my vegetable garden. That feed was "dug" by my friends for a full week, resulting in 140 likes, and close to hundred comments. My husband does not mind being fed richer, more diverse meals at a tasteful, colourful table. He even knows the names of most of my fer-fer family, and encourages me to make foods that they might not have seen for a while.

When life the way I knew it came to a halt one summer, I stopped writing about food because I found myself at the threshold of a new experience, I discovered a new world. When I started cooking again, it was to run between my kitchen and the computer screen to write about food and to share meals with friends all over the world.

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Appendix: Table of Araghi-yaat (flower& herbal essences)

Type of Araghi-yaat	Nature	Health Benefit	Usage Instructions
1 Thyme (<i>aavishan</i>)	Hot	Anti blood-clotting, disinfectant, anti-fungi, prevents hair-loss, enhances vision, anti-epilepsy, anti- joint-related ailments	Taken after food Half a cup mixed with one glass of water
2 Anisette (<i>zenyan</i>)	Hot	Nourishing, disinfectant, helps with drug addiction withdrawal, tremors, heart disease and indigestion.	Taken after food One cup for people with <i>hot</i> bases
3 Sweet fennel (<i>marzeh</i>)	Hot	Improves sexual vigour, cures paralysis, anti-indigestion, gastritis, and tapeworm.	One glass at bedtime
4 Sour Orange Blossom (<i>bahaar-e naorange</i>)	Hot	Strengthens heart and nerves, tranquilizer, cures insomnia.	One glass at bedtime
5 Sweetbrier (<i>nastaran</i>)	Hot	Strengthens heart and nerves, cures kidney pain, provide Vitamin B.	One glass as sharbat, anytime
6 Mint (<i>na'naa</i>)	Hot	Anti-gas, cures upset stomach, indigestion, diarrhea, and nausea, improves nerves.	One cup after food
7 Rosewater (<i>golaab</i>)	Hot	Strengthens nerves	As sharbat
8 Borage (<i>gaav-zabaan</i>)	Hot	Exhilarating, nourishing, tranquilizer	With <i>nabaat</i>
9 'Forty-herbs' (<i>chel-giyah</i>)	Hot	Strengthens gastro, helps digestion, stress reliever	One cup after food
10 Citron (<i>toranf</i>)	Hot	Cures diarrhea, and indigestion, clears blood, strengthens heart and liver	With half a glass of water, morning and night
11 Palm pods (<i>Tarooneh</i>)	Hot	Potent tranquilizer, stress reliever, anti-rheumatoid and joint-related ailments	Half a glass at bedtime
12 Dill (<i>shevid</i>)	Hot	Cures high cholesterol	Morning
13 Fenugreek (<i>shaambelileh</i>)	Hot	Lowers blood sugar level	One glass per day
14 Liquorice (<i>shirin-bayan</i>)	Hot	Cough-suppressant, eases stomach ulcer and chest congestion.	Half a glass per day
15 Cumin (<i>zireh</i>)	Hot	Fights against overweighting	One glass per day with lemon
16 Fennel (<i>raazlانه</i>)	Hot	Increases mother's milk	One glass per day
17 Chicory (<i>kasni</i>)	Cold	Strengthens gastro, stops fever, clears blood, anti-jaundice, anti-spleen-inflammation	One glass, morning
18 <i>Kialak</i> (a fruit similar to the fruit of lotos tree, in shape and size)	Cold	Regulates blood pressure, anti nervous breakdown, anti-colic, anti-itch, acne and skin disease, weight control	One cup, morning and night before food
19 Willow (<i>bid</i>)	Cold	Definite relief for chronic fevers and anti-jaundice .	With half a glass of water, anytime
20 Plane tree (<i>chenaar</i>)	Cold	Fever-relief, anti-asthma, helps gain weight	Anytime
21 'Camel-bone' (<i>khar-e shotor</i>)	Cold	Eliminates kidney stone	Anytime in lieu of water
22 Pussy-willow (<i>bidmeshk</i>)	Cold	Strengthens heart and nerves, laxative, tranquilizer, enhances sleeping	As sharbat
23 <i>Shatareh</i> (a type of herb)	Cold	Clears blood, stimulates appetite, anti-jaundice, anti-bilious, anti-bile, anti- gastro worm.	Morning and night
24 'Walnuts-florets' (<i>gol-e gerdo</i>)	Hot	Lowers blood sugar level	One glass per day

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I am indebted and grateful to many people who have helped this book forward in its winding, six-year journey.

I would like to express my gratitude to my longtime professor and dear friend Haideh Moghissi, and my colleague and friend Janet Dench — who upon reading a partial, earlier draft of this book gave me a boost of encouragement strong enough to keep me going for years to come — I appreciate their insightful advice and continuous support. I am particularly grateful to Haideh for never ceasing to inquire about my progress.

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In reconstructing the details of life in Shiraz and other Iranian cities from '40s to the '60s, I had to dig into the memories of people close to me, taking up their time, asking them many questions and favors: I am grateful to all my sisters and brother for being who they are. Special love and thanks to Atefeh for her cooking tips and colorful *sofreh*; to Pari for eagerly sharing her memories of the old times, and for always taking an interest in my works; and to Naubi for generously lending her time and ideas about the book's contents and cover. Millions of thanks to my family and friend, Daryoush Haghgooyan and Azam Esmaili, for filling me with details of bread baking, to Hosein Milani for his insightful tips on the culture of drinking in Tehran, to Goli Emami for her honest and most useful feedback, and to my dear fellow old home-towner, Vahid Dastpak, for coming up with several captivating drawings based on my memoir, when publishing an illustrated version of the book was a possibility.

Two talented artists and dear friends, Mehrab Moghadasian and Hosein Milani, spent several hours of communications and two full (and fun) working days with me to give this book and its website a pleasing face. I am very grateful to both — I will always remember those shooting sessions fondly.

I am indebted, beyond any adverb, to Google and all those who help make it a truly vast and viable source of information. I also found a lot of very useful information in Najaf Daryabandari's comprehensive cookbook written in Persian about food and cooking traditions in Iran (*Ketaab-e Mostataab-e Ashpazi*), and I deeply appreciate this wonderful book.

Special coded thanks, with lots of winking, smiling and kissing emoticons, to my virtual friends in FriendFeed, for enriching my life and book immeasurably.

This line is reserved to thank so many other, unnamed individuals who took an interest in my book, or gave me input and last-minute helping hand.

And I owe the heaviest load of gratitude to my partner in life, Babak Safa, for having faith in me, for giving me a reason to cook, for standing beside me all the way, for inspiring and helping me in every way imaginable. Without him this book simply would not have existed.

Shortcomings are, of course, my own.

About the Author

Dear reader,

I am delighted to invite you to visit my book's website at asipabiteamouthful.com. Meanwhile, here is a snapshot of my background and the world you have already become familiar with through my culinary memoir.

I was born in Iran and lived in my hometown Shiraz until the age of 29, when I emigrated to Montreal, Canada, in 1989. The year I graduated from high school in Shiraz coincided with the victory of the Islamic Revolution, followed by an eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. I spent the decade of the 1980s withholding pursuit of personal goals and, along with the majority of Iranians, lived a highly oppressive life while the country was undergoing major social, political and economic upheaval — a period I have reflected on extensively in my culinary memoir. As soon as I arrived in Montreal, I enrolled at Dawson College on a part-time basis, while taking English and French courses elsewhere as well as a correspondence course in journalism and short story writing. By 1997, I had completed my MA degree in anthropology from York University in Toronto. Just before doing that, I went back to Iran briefly and married my husband, who joined me in Toronto in 1997, only to accompany me back to Montreal where we settled down in a close physical and emotional vicinity to other members of my family, who numbered ten by then.

For the past 15 years, I have been working as a freelance researcher, a project coordinator, a trainer and a writer at two separate yet interconnected spheres — with various Non-Government Organizations and academic departments in the areas of social policy, refugee advocacy and minority rights, particularly gender dimension of refugee and settlement issues. Over the course of my career, I have published a number of journal articles, conference proceedings and book chapters. Academic writing, however, never entirely quenched my thirst for writing. In fact, my passion for creative life-writing dates back to my teenage years when I used to write short, humorous “screenplays” based on eventful conversations my family had over lunch or dinner. For the first few years of my arrival in Montreal, too, I often turned the moments of my homesickness or the otherwise humiliating experience of working as a “flyer girl” into a column or a piece in the Montreal-based Persian language bi-weekly, *Paivand*.

In the fallout of the Iranian post-election uprising in 2009, all I could do besides marching in solidarity with freedom fighters in Iran, signing petitions and reading the news from Iran was to write, mainly in social media forums, listservs, my professional blog at Concordia's Life Stories, and a bit later, on my personal blog. *A Sip, A Bite, A Mouthful* is my first book-length manuscript, but I believe it would be fair to say that writing has been my most intimate companion ever since I was capable of putting pen to paper.

I live in a house on West Island in Montreal's suburbs with my husband, our dog, Whiskey, and a mind full of memories. I often work from home, where I can conveniently walk between my home office and kitchen and where I can moderate conference calls while stirring a saucepan of stew over the slow-burning stove.

My blog, the happier half of my book!

On June 2011, when I had finished writing this book and done my fair share of publisher shopping and had successfully hooked up with a literary agent, the dire need to write came back to haunt me. That is when I started my personal blog, mycaldron.com, with the intention of sharing what I produced and experienced in real life on a daily basis: foods I cooked, flowers and vegetables I planted in summer, pictures I took, music I listened to, articles I read and translated and cultural events I attended.

I never designed my blog to be a complementary aspect to the book when I first embarked on launching it, but much to my delight it turned into a living, ongoing sequel to my book. I did want my blog to underline the colorful and happy moments of life, so I tried to overlook grim events and cook more often instead! Also, while blogging over the past year, I sometimes caught myself reflecting on a story or anecdote that I had briefly mentioned in the book with renewed energy and new tools, namely visual aids. As a result, the book became an inspirational source for the blog and vice versa.

So far I have included about 80 recipes on my blog, accompanied with at least one picture for each. So, you may be intrigued to see how a well-settled *ghalyeh* or nicely fried onions for garnish look like now that you know the whole story behind them. For those readers less interested in details of recipes and more in the context, stories and characters, I think the blog still has a lot of pleasant surprises, such as audio of some of the people you already know, pictures of our green movement related to the hunger strike in Montreal, of my flower and vegetable patches, a lot of text entries on current socio-political issues in Iran and Canada and more memories and anecdotes.

Sometimes when I enjoy reading a book, I feel I know the author well enough to want to go and knock on her door for a chat. I think it is just fantastic that we have the technological means to almost do so. My blog certainly is the closest thing to my home and I am always there to receive you with a smile and a cup of tea.

Contact with me online:

Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AfsaneHojabri>

Smashwords: <https://www.smashwords.com/profile/view/afsanehhojabri>

My blog: <http://mycaldron.com/>

My website: <http://asipabiteamouthful.com/>

Endnotes

- [1.](#) Slavery was prohibited in Iran long before my parents' time, during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911. It was officially banned by Reza Shah Pahlavi during the 1930s. However, until the mid 1950s, neither Reza Shah nor his son, the Shah, were able to assume full control over a few Southern Iranian islands to enforce many of the country's constitutional laws, including the emancipation of slaves brought in from Africa and other countries. The history of slavery in modern Iran is not recorded, and most Iranians are either unaware of it or deny its existence under the Pahlavi dynasty. Salehah could very well have been among the last few slaves in the entire country.
- [2.](#) *Naa-mard* means "one who is not a man" or one whose behavior is unmanly; it is used as an insult to address men, and sometimes women, who lack dignity, courage and loyalty. The common translation of the term as "coward" in English does not carry the same weight and meaning.
- [3.](#) It took me three years to realize that the name was not "Fasrad" as I thought. Fard, written in calligraphy with a long, horizontal stroke through the letter "F" could be read as "Fas."
- [4.](#) These were different from the historical and astonishingly beautiful gardens and vineyards that Shiraz is so famous for. Those gardens, such as Baagh-e Eram, Afifbaad, Delghosha, Safa, Ghavam and Jahan-namaa are government or public owned and visited mostly by tourists.
- [5.](#) Following the establishment of the Islamic regime and as one of the major initiatives aiming for the Islamization of the country at an ideological level and particularly in the higher education arena, the state launched a 'Cultural Revolution,' which included a forceful and violent closing of all universities from 1980 to 1983.
- [6.](#) Lovage, also called "love parsley," is a hardy perennial herb not dissimilar to celery.
- [7.](#) *Advieh*, or all-spice, is a mixture of potently aromatic, flavored grains and buds that most people buy as opposed to making it themselves and can include saffron, cinnamon, rose buds, coriander, cardamom, black pepper and, in some cases, the intense and distinct-tasting ground nigella seeds.
- [8.](#) Daryabandari, N and F. Raastkar (2000 [1379]), *Ketaab-e Mostataab-e Ashpazi: Az sir ta piaz*, Tehran: Karnameh.
- [9.](#) *Khanoom* (Ms.) is often used with a woman's first name, to grant due respect.
- [10.](#) To my knowledge and based on the research I have done, there is no statistical information about the estimated number of people who were displaced as a result of the Iran-Iraq war; neither is there any documentation publicly available that defines the patterns of displacement, cities of residence, or means of livelihood.
- [11.](#) I do not know, due to the lack of relevant resources, the extent to which such an operation was government supervised or assisted.
- [12.](#) The Islamic calendar is used in Muslim countries as well as by Muslims everywhere else, including Iran, to determine the proper day on which specific Islam-related events occurred. This is a lunar calendar with 12 lunar months in a year of approximately 354 days. Because the lunar year is about 11 days shorter than the solar year, which is the basis on the official Iranian

calendar, Islamic holydays--although celebrated on fixed dates in their own calendar--shift by 11 days each successive solar year. Source: Wikipedia.

13. Harbottle, Lynn. "Bastard' Chicken or ghormeh-sabzi? Iranian women guarding the health of the migrant family." In Consumption Matters: The production and experience of consumption. Edgell, Stephen, Hetherington, Kevin and Warde, Alan, Eds. 1996: 204-226.

14. Commonly known in English by his Latinized name Avicenna (c. 980-1037), he was a Persian polymath and foremost physician and philosopher of his time. He was also an astronomer, chemist, geologist, logician, mathematician, physicist, poet and teacher. Ibn Sina wrote almost 450 treatises on a wide range of subjects, of which around 240 have survived. Source: Wikipedia.

15. Translated by Ahmad Karimi-Hakkak. Among the many translations this beautiful poem has had, I find Hakkak's the most poetic and accurate. I have therefore used his here while taking the liberty of replacing only a few words with what I find to be more revealing of the poem's spirit (closet/larder; lamp/light; dead/noon). Nahid Mozaffari and A.K Hakkak, "The PEN Anthology of Contemporary Iranian Literature" 2005: 372.

16. The Safavid are considered to be the most powerful ruling dynasty since the Arab conquest, which ruled Iran for more than two centuries (1501-1722). They are the ones who established the school of Shi'i Islam in Iran, thereby providing a ground for the development of a distinct religious identity within the otherwise Sunni Islamic world.

17. Mc Govern, Shpigel online: <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,5136778,00.html>

18. <http://www.okonlife.com/poems/page1.htm>

19. "The Wine of Nishapur", 1988 Paris

20. <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/H/Hafiz/Cupbeareriti.htm>

21. http://www.blissbat.net/rambles/rumi_compare.html Gazal 441, Poetic Translation.

22. 'The Ayatollah Begs to Differ: The Paradox Of Modern Iran', Hooman Majd, 2008: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=95029424#95011731>.

23. Michael M.J. Fischer, Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution.1980:227

24. <http://www2.potsdam.edu/hansondj/IntheNews/Etc/1124913408.html>

25. *Haaj Agha* refers to a man (*agha*) who has performed Hajj rituals and is traditionally used as a term of respectful address among certain Iranian social classes (merchants and working class); after the Revolution, all clerics of some status were addressed as such.

26. *Rowzeh* is a Shia-specific mourning ritual held during the holy month of Muharam. Thanks to the Islamic Revolution, however, all types of religious sermons are referred to as rowzeh regardless of when and where they are observed.

27. It would take a *marja' taghlid*, or a high-ranking cleric as the "Source of Emulation" to determine precisely what items are impure and/or forbidden under which circumstances, according to whose interpretation. My brief introductory notes here are informed largely by my personal experience and observations while living in Iran.

28. I will have captured some of these voices in the form of a half hour radio documentary entitled "Stories of Iranian-Montrealers about Iran's post-election uprising" which aired near the

end of the fall 2009 on CKUT 90.3 FM and which is now posted permanently on CitizenShift at <http://citizenshift.org/node/28150> and CURA Montreal Life Stories at <http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/radio-works>

[29](#). Some of the related article and pictures that I posted can be viewed here: Baez: <http://bit.ly/x1pUo> <http://ff.im/4teSN>; Bon Jove et al.: http://www.mydamnchannel.com/Don_Was/Stand_By_Me/StandByMewithIntro_2168.aspx; Maritto's fashion show: <http://www.persianhub.org/interesting-pictures/181180-green-italian-fashion-show.html>

[30](#). This is the same type of vigour and spirit that makes 24-year-old Sahar who calls *roo-poosh* (meaning Islamic *manteau*) “*zoor-poosh*” (meaning forced-wear), and *roo-sari* (meaning headscarf), “*too-sari*” (meaning knuckle to the head) complain about the summer heat; and then immediately adding “Well, don't worry we are enjoying free sauna instead,” followed by a half dozen smiling faces.