

Persian delights

Get a taste of the exotic with this delicately flavoured menu that's easy to make but big on the wow factor

Recipes and photographs SHAYMA SAADAT



“The beauty of Persian dishes lies in the way they are eaten – shared family-style. Persian food is so much more than kebobs and rice. The aroma of saffron makes an appearance in several dishes. These recipes are a homage to Mader, my paternal grandmother. She was the granddaughter of a Sufi saint from Khorasan – a province in Iran – where saffron grows in abundance. Nosh-e-jan! (Bon Appetit!)”

– Shayma Saadat, author of the award-winning heritage food blog, thespicespoon.com

MENU FOR 8

- * Noon-o-panir-o-sabzi
- * Mast-o-khair
- * Mirza ghasemi
- * Kuku sibzamini
- * Tahchin
- * Sholeh zard



Kuku sibzamini

Serves 8 ■ 30 minutes ■ EASY

Kuku sibzamini is a popular dish in Gilan, a province in Iran near the Caspian Sea. Kuku is an egg dish and sibzamini means 'apple of the earth' - which is the humble, versatile potato. Soft pieces of potatoes are held together with egg and eaten while hot and crispy. The addition of saffron raises this otherwise simple frittata-like dish to another level. Serve it with creamy yoghurt with lots of fresh herbs and coarse salt.

potatoes 1kg, quartered
eggs 8
baking powder 4 tsp
baking soda 3 tsp
salt 2 tsp
black pepper 2 tsp
turmeric powder 1 tsp
saffron threads 2 tsp, powdered
oil 8 tbsps

- Bring a large pot of water to the boil. Cook the potatoes in a pot of boiling, salted water for 10-15 minutes or until tender when pierced with a fork.
- When the potatoes are fork-tender, drain them, and when cool, remove the skin.
- Mash the potatoes with a masher till you see lumps (the potatoes should not be mashed till smooth). Set aside.
- In a separate bowl add eggs, baking powder, baking soda, salt, pepper, turmeric powder and saffron. Beat to combine. Add the egg mixture to potatoes and stir gently to combine. The mixture will be thick.
- Place a non-stick frying pan on medium-high heat and add oil. Drop tablespoons of the mixture into the frying pan. Fry for 30 seconds on each side till golden. Serve hot with thick yoghurt and fresh herbs.
- **PER SERVING** 195 kcal, protein 5.97g, carbs 15.48g, fat 12.53g, sat fat 1.62g, fibre 1.97g, salt 0.6g

Noon-o-panir-o-sabzi

Serves 8 ■ 5 minutes ■ EASY

Noon-o-panir-o-sabzi is a fresh, verdant Irani appetiser usually eaten with sangak, a Persian whole-wheat sourdough flatbread. However, you can use any flatbread of your choice. It is eaten in a communal manner - everyone breaks off some bread, adds a chunk of feta, tucks a sultana or two into it, along with some walnuts and layers herbs. Cranberries and cherries are not traditionally used, but along with the sultanas, they give the dish a tart kick. Noon-o-panir-o-sabzi is also delicious when layered with kuku sibzamini (see left for recipe).

pita bread 8
feta 400g, cut into chunks
sultanas 200g
cranberries or **cherries** 200g, dried (optional)
walnuts 200g
mixed herbs 2 handfuls (mint, tarragon, chives, thyme and coriander leaves)



THE GARNISH

olive oil 2 tsp
sweet smoked paprika a dash
dried mint 2 pinches

- Place all the ingredients on a large platter. Let each guest enjoy this appetiser by tearing off a piece of bread and layering it with a chunk of feta, a few sultanas and cranberries or cherries, a walnut or two and herbs of choice. Gently roll up and enjoy. Serve along with the garnish.

■ **PER SERVING** 495.33 kcal, protein 16.48g, carbs 63.90g, fat 21.23g, sat fat 6.63g, fibre 9.22g, salt 0.8g



eat in
entertaining



Mirza ghasemi

Serves 8 ■ 1 hour 30 minutes ■ EASY

Aunty Mehrnaz, a dear friend's mother, is from Gilan, a province in Northern Iran where this dish hails from. Instead of adding raw, beaten eggs to the aubergines, Aunty Mehrnaz innovatively adds fried eggs, so that the different textures of the dish can be enjoyed. With each bite you get the creaminess of the egg yolks melting into the velvety softness of the aubergines. Mirza ghasemi can be eaten with rice or a flatbread.

aubergine 4kg
olive oil 6 tbsp
garlic cloves 8, thinly sliced
turmeric 2 tsp, heaped
salt to taste
black pepper 2 tsp, heaped
tomatoes 6, medium, blanched and chopped
eggs 8, fried

■ Heat the oven to 200°C. Pierce each aubergine with a fork, arrange on a tray and roast for about 30-60 minutes, till they appear soft and wilted. Allow the aubergines to rest and reach room temperature, then scoop out the flesh and discard the skin.

■ Mash the aubergine flesh with a potato masher. In a large frying pan add olive oil, garlic and turmeric and place on a medium flame. Sauté the garlic for 2-3 minutes. Add aubergine flesh and turn the heat to medium-high. Sauté till the liquid from the aubergines begins to evaporate. Add salt and pepper.

Make a well in the middle, add tomatoes and gently stir.

■ Add the fried eggs and mix to combine. Using a spatula, chop the eggs into small pieces, incorporating them into the aubergines and tomatoes. Serve with rice or flatbread of your choice.

■ PER SERVING 273.50 kcals, protein 6.60g, carbs 13.58g, fat 17.58g, sat fat 3.53g, fibre 10.98g, salt 0.1g

Tahchin

Serves 8 ■ 1 hour 30 minutes + marinating ■ A LITTLE EFFORT

This beautiful Persian-style rice timbale will be the centrepiece of your table at any gathering. Beneath that tahdig — the delicious crispy crust which forms the crown of this dish — are layers of pillowy soft rice and chicken infused with the musky aroma of saffron.

THE CHICKEN

full-fat plain yoghurt 500g
onion 1, medium, finely diced
turmeric powder 1/2 tsp
ground saffron 2 tsp mixed with 3 tsp
hot water
salt 2 tsp
black pepper 1/2 tsp, freshly ground
boneless chicken 1.5kg, cut into 3-4cm pieces

THE RICE

basmati rice 1kg
sea salt 5 tsp

THE TAHDIG

full-fat plain yoghurt 1.2kg
eggs 4, whole
egg yolks 4
ground saffron 2 tsp mixed with 3 tsp
hot water
sea salt 3 tsp
black pepper 1/2 tsp, freshly ground
almonds 2 handfuls, slivered
golden raisins 2 handfuls, chopped
unsalted pistachios 2 handfuls, chopped

■ To marinate the chicken, add the yoghurt, onion, turmeric, saffron liquid, salt and pepper in a medium bowl; stir well to combine. Stir in the chicken. Cover and refrigerate at least 2 hours, but preferably overnight. (*This can be prepared up to 24 hours in advance.*)

■ Wash and drain the rice 4-6 times in cold water until the water is no longer cloudy. Soak the rice in 2 litres of cold water for at least 1 hour or up to 12 hours.

■ In a medium saucepan, bring 4 litres of water to a boil. Stir in the rice and salt and cook, uncovered, for

8-12 minutes. To test for doneness, remove a grain of rice. If it breaks easily between your forefinger and thumb, it is done (be sure not to overcook). Drain the rice into a sieve, shaking out excess water (do not rinse).

■ Place the rice back into the saucepan. Place a folded tea towel or paper towel on top of the pan (to prevent steam from escaping) and cover the pan with the lid. Place the pan over low heat. Turn off the heat after 5 minutes (the rice will continue to cook in its own steam). Allow the rice to rest for 15 minutes. Using a serving spoon or teacup saucer, gently transfer the rice to a container. Set the rice aside (covered, in the refrigerator, if not using immediately).

■ To poach the chicken, add 100ml of water in a medium pot. Bring the water to a boil and add the chicken pieces and marinade. Bring the liquid up to a low boil. Reduce the heat, cover the pot, and simmer the chicken until it is tender and no longer pink inside, about 10 minutes. Set the chicken and cooking liquid aside.

■ To prepare the tahdig, whisk together the yoghurt, eggs, egg yolks, saffron liquid, salt and pepper in a medium bowl. Gently stir in half of the cooked rice. The mixture should be very thick.

■ Preheat the oven to 180°C. Butter a round 2-quart ovenproof dish (preferably see-through) with a lid. Transfer the rice and yoghurt mixture into the baking dish. Using your hands, gently form a layer along the bottom and as far up the sides of the baking dish as possible. Layer one-half of the cooked chicken in the dish. Layer one-half of the remaining cooked rice on top of the chicken. Repeat with the remaining chicken and rice. Press down the top layer of rice with your hands and drizzle with any of the remaining cooking liquid from the chicken.

■ Butter a sheet of aluminum foil. Tightly wrap the foil, buttered side down, around the top of the baking dish. Place the lid on top. Bake for 1 hour. You will see the tahdig forming and turning a dark golden colour.

■ After the baking dish is removed from the oven, allow it to rest, covered, for 5 minutes. Then place it in a large roasting pan and add enough cold water in the roasting pan to come about 3cm up the outer sides of the baking dish. (This will help loosen the tahdig from the bottom of the dish)

■ After 5 minutes, wearing your oven mitts, invert the tahchin onto the centre of a serving dish. (If you find that it sticks when you try to invert it, don't worry; just put it back in the roasting pan and let it rest in the water a bit longer) Garnish with the slivered almonds, pistachios and raisins. Serve

with mast-o-khair (see recipe on p 92) on the side.

■ PER SERVING 567.33 kcals, protein 42.91g, carbs 76.50g, fat 6.82g, sat fat 2.13g, fibre 1.03g, salt 1.1g





Mast-o-khair

Serves 8 ■ 30 minutes ■ EASY ■ V

With its dried rose petals, mast-o-khair is Iran's pretty version of a cool, creamy raita. You could even use rose petal powder. It can be served as an appetiser with crusty country bread or to complement a main vegetarian or meat dish. Pull out your finest bottle of olive oil to lacquer this with.

full-fat yoghurt 1kg
cucumbers 2, large, peeled, deseeded and diced
walnuts 100g, chopped
garlic cloves 2, minced
dried mint 2 tbsp + extra for garnish
salt to taste
rose petals 2 handfuls, dried (optional)
extra virgin olive oil to drizzle

■ In a large bowl, add yoghurt, cucumber, walnuts, garlic, mint and salt. Stir well to combine. Transfer the mixture to a serving dish. Lightly sprinkle with dried mint and dried rose petals (if using). Drizzle with extra virgin olive oil.

■ When preparing this recipe in advance, do not add cucumbers to the yoghurt. Keep the diced cucumber and the yoghurt mixture in separate

containers, covered, in the refrigerator. Drain the cucumbers in a sieve prior to stirring the solids into the yoghurt mixture.

■ PER SERVING 339.75 kJ, protein 10.93g, carbs 7.30g, fat 30.90g, sat fat 12.15g, fibre 1.25g, salt none



Sholeh zard

Serves 8 ■ 1 hour 45 minutes ■ EASY ■ V ■ D

Sholeh zard is a vegan rice pudding traditionally served as a dish for nazri - a religious vow of offerings of charity food to the needy. The beauty of this dish lies in the intense flavour of saffron which runs through it. As you add the saffron-infused water to the rice, the colour transforms from white to vermilion-like alchemy! Served with a generous dusting of cinnamon and crushed pistachios, it rounds off a meal beautifully.

basmati rice 400g
water 3l + 1l hot water
unsalted butter 100g
sugar 500g
almonds 100g, slivered
saffron threads 3 tsp, ground, dissolved in 4 tbsp **water**
rose water 80ml

cinnamon 2 tsp, to dust
unsalted pistachios 2 handfuls, crushed

■ Wash the rice in 3 litres of cold water till the milky water begins to run clear, and soak for at least 1 hour or maximum 24 hours. Thereafter, place the rice in a large, heavy-bottomed pan with water and bring to a boil. Cover with lid and turn heat to low. Allow rice to cook for 30 minutes. The grains should appear short and broken.

■ Add butter, sugar, almonds and the saffron water to the rice. Stir gently over a low flame, from the bottom up, to ensure that the rice is not sticking to the base of the pan.

■ When the ingredients are incorporated and the rice turns a vermillion colour, replace the lid and allow to cook for 15-20 more minutes. When ready, the rice should have a soft, velvety consistency and not look congealed. If it is, slowly loosen it with some hot water. Take off the burner, add rose water and stir gently.

■ Refrigerate for at least 5 hours or overnight. Serve cold or at room temperature with a dusting of cinnamon and crushed pistachios.

■ PER SERVING 387.50 kJ, protein 4.60g, carbs 69.88g, fat 11.28g, sat fat 4.85g, fibre 1.58g, salt none



TASTE TEAM COMMENT

This recipe is easy to follow and has simple ingredients that are easily available. I added raisins, roasted in butter, to the dish. The rice grains looked a little congealed at the bottom. The next time, I will spread it out and allow it to cool on a tray before refrigerating it. This is a rich recipe that can be a perfect dessert at the end of a simple, delicious meal. It tastes delicious both hot or cold!

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