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PROSPECT BOOKS

Persian *Tahdig*: A Canvas for Culinary Imagination, Innovation, and Artistry

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Persian *tahdig*: the most coveted treat at a Persian meal – the jewel of Persian cooking, or the holy grail of Persian cooking, or the *pièce de résistance* of Persian cooking – is the delicious, buttery, golden, crunchy layer formed at the bottom of the rice pot (Figure 1). For many, however, *tahdig* is much more.

Tahdig is often fought over by family members and guests during meals. It can be life-altering for some first timers, spark fierce competition among Persian home cooks, and disappear seconds after it appears on the dinner table. *Tahdig* has been praised by lovers of Persian food around the world in such eminent newspapers as the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Guardian*, and the *New York Times*; detailed in such culinary guides as *Cooks Illustrated*, *BBC Good Food*, *Saveur*, and *Bon Appetit*; discussed on National Public Radio (NPR) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) programmes; seen on such TV networks as Netflix and the Food Network; and studied in international academic forums like the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery.

Literally translated, the Persian word *tahdig* (in Persian: گویدنت) means ‘bottom of the pot’. The classic process of making *tahdig* involves long-grain rice going through the stages of being soaked in salted water for several hours, up to a day; parcooked in salted boiling water for several minutes; drained and rinsed with cold water; and then slowly steamed in a buttered pot over low heat, covered tightly, for the hour or two it takes the *tahdig* to form at the bottom of the pot.

In more recent years, though, *tahdig* has become much more than the crunchy layer of rice at the bottom of the pot. Persian cooks – both home and commercial cooks – have

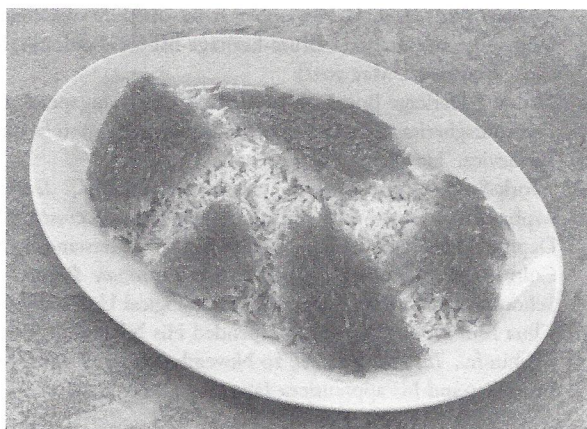


Figure 1. Pieces of *tahdig* served on the same platter as the rest of the rice from the pot. All illustrated dishes prepared and photographed by the author.

introduced imaginative practices into the process of making *tahdig*. These creative approaches range anywhere from more efficient ways of cooking other elements of the meal (meat and vegetables), integrated with the *tahdig* in the bottom of the same pot, to using more pliable versions of *tahdig* as a bread substitute to make a range of sandwiches, to using the *tahdig* layer to create beautiful edible food art. This paper discusses some of these conscious and imaginative practices.

Historical Background

Some of the earliest references to *tahdig* in Persian cookery date back to the mid-1800s. A translation of an early Persian cookbook, published as a pamphlet in India in 1939, refers to *tahdig* preparation.¹ A recent academic article finds the existence of the word *tahdig* as early as 1848, in the language of Persian people living by the Caspian Sea, where high-quality rice is grown.²

Information in these references is consistent with other historical narratives about the origination of *tahdig* and its entry into Persian cookery. *Tahdig* had been present on the royal menus of the fourth and fifth kings of Iran's Qajar Dynasty who ruled the Persian Empire in the 1800s. According to these stories, the servants who worked in the king's residence had their meals using the leftovers after the chef had served the king's table. One day, the servants started arguing loudly over who would get the crunchy rice at the bottom of the pot. When the chef was asked about the commotion, the story of the crunchy rice eventually reached the king, and he ordered that some of it be brought to him. The king enjoyed eating this crunchy, flavourful rice, and ordered that this be served to him in the future as an appetizer before the regular rice that accompanied the main course.³ These narratives have been confirmed in scholarly works documenting the social life of the period: by the late nineteenth century, *tahdig* had become part of the diet of high-ranking and well-to-do families in Iran.⁴

Two of the earliest cookbooks intended for Iranian urban housewives, written in Persian and published in the early 1900s, include explicit instructions for making *tahdig*. The first of these cookbooks was *Tabākhi-é-Neshāt* (in Persian: طاشن یخا ب ط, literally *Cheerful Cooking*) which was published around the time of the First World War by a woman whose Qajar honorary name was 'Neshāt-al-dowleh' (in Persian: طودلا طاشن, literally, 'the delight of the state').⁵ She was the granddaughter of the French adventurer Jules Richard (1816-1891) who served in high Iranian state offices in the mid-1800s.⁶ In her cookbook, *Neshāt-al-dowleh*, whose formal name was Josephine Richard, provides instructions for making basic *tahdig* as well as saffron, yoghurt, and tomato paste variations. The second cookbook, published in 1938, is part of a three-volume set *Āsayeh-é-Zendegāni* (in Persian: ین آگدنز ش ی اس آ, literally, *Comfort of Life*) by J. Tara. In its second volume, the author provides instructions for making basic *tahdig* and for its presentation at a reception.⁷

Imaginative Ways of Taking *Tahdig* Above and Beyond

The rest of this paper presents a sampling of imaginative ways Persian cooks have taken traditional *tahdig* above and beyond its original form, shape, or purpose. These

samplings collectively illustrate some of the drivers and techniques that have resulted in the associated innovations including:

- Creating crunchy dishes other than the original rice-centric *tahdigs*
- Reducing the time and the number of vessels required to make *tahdig*
- Facilitating the incorporation of meat and vegetables
- Meeting dietary restrictions and preferences resulting in, for example, the desire to use more pliable layers of crunchy rice as a substitute for bread
- Satisfying the increasing craving for other (non-rice) crispy and crunchy accompaniments
- Maximizing the amount of *tahdig* generated per cup of rice
- Searching for additional opportunities for Persian cooks to demonstrate artistry and skill
- Gaining finer control of the levels of moisture, oil, and heat used to make *tahdig*
- Using specialty electric rice cookers designed explicitly for Persian rice dishes
- Working with the increased availability of alternative cooking vessels

Matters of Efficiency

Incorporating other components of a complete meal (e.g. meat and vegetables) into the process of *tahdig* making is a clever approach for reducing the required effort, time, and number of vessels used to prepare a meal. In these instances, relatively thin (1 to 2 centimetres) pieces of meat and/or vegetables are arranged at the bottom of the pot – covering all or some of the surface of the bottom of the pot – before parboiled rice is added. Such techniques integrate the cooking of potatoes, eggplants, ribs, or shrimp with the *tahdig* itself (Figures 2-5).

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Matters of Texture and Flavour

Satisfying the ever-increasing popularity and craving for crispy, crunchy accompaniments to a meal, without the need for such traditional techniques as deep-frying, pan-frying, or panini griddling, can be achieved by incorporating the relevant ingredients into the *tahdig* making process. These approaches create crunchy flatbread, chicken wings, oriental post stickers, and even lettuce, on the bottom of the rice pot (Figures 6-9). These techniques also enable new texture and flavour combinations not always possible with traditional methods. For example, a chicken wing *tahdig* provides two distinct texture and flavour combinations. One side is golden brown, crispy, with salty and buttery flavours (salted butter having been used on the bottom of the pot) while the other side is soft and moist, capturing the flavours present in the rice.

Matters of Technology

Good *tahdig* making can be time-consuming – as much as ninety minutes to two hours of total cooking. It also requires a lot of practice – good *tahdig* making has traditionally been a measure of an experienced Persian home cook. There are electric Persian rice cookers specifically designed to form basic *tahdig* along with fluffy Persian

rice (Figure 10). These specialized rice cookers can produce good, simple *tahdig* within one hour with very little active cooking time (Figure 11).

Tahdig is often fought over by family members and guests during meals because the traditional process does not produce very much of it. Moreover, even under situations where there might be enough *tahdig* for one meal – for example, where there are only two or three diners at the table – there will be lots of leftover fluffy rice. Under the best circumstances, a 20-centimetre-wide pot can generate at most a 20-centimeter disk of *tahdig* from three to four cups of dry rice. In other words, the *tahdig*-to-rice ratio is relatively small. Another advantage of the specialized Persian rice cookers is that they can drastically increase the *tahdig*-to-rice ratio. For example, the author can generate a 17-centimetre-wide disk of good *tahdig* while using only three quarters of a cup of dry rice (Figure 12).

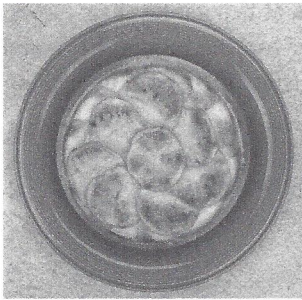


Figure 2. Potato *tahdig*.

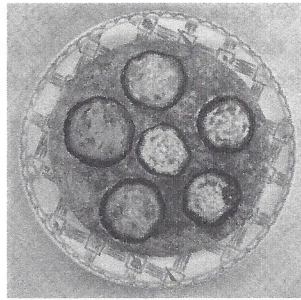


Figure 3. Eggplant *tahdig*.

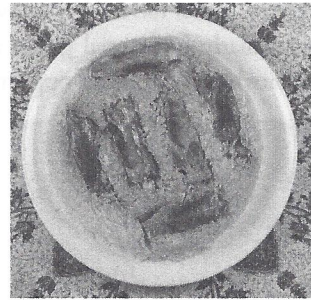


Figure 4. Pork rib *tahdig*.

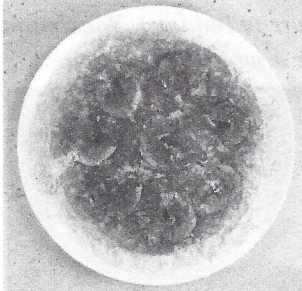


Figure 5. Shrimp *tahdig*.

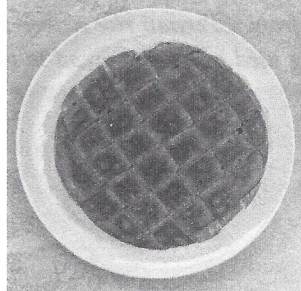


Figure 6. Flat bread *tahdig*.

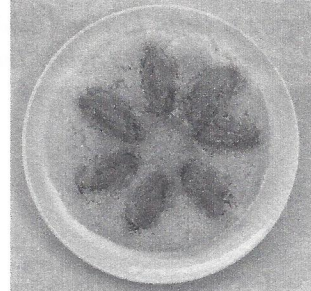


Figure 7. Chicken wing *tahdig*.

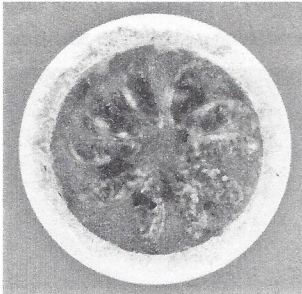


Figure 8. Oriental pot sticker *tahdig*.

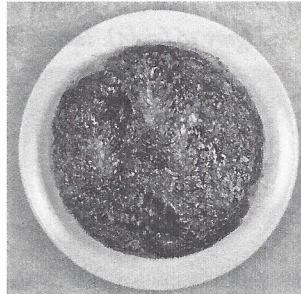


Figure 9. Lettuce *tahdig*.



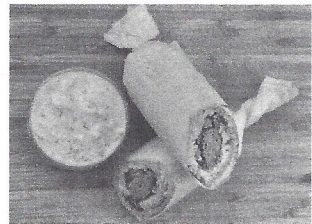
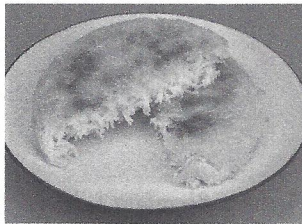
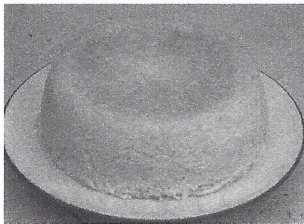
Figure 10. Persian rice cooker that generates good *tahdig*.

Matters of Innovation

By controlling the moisture, oil, heat, and cooking time more precisely in the *tahdig* making process, Persian cooks are able to generate somewhat pliable layers of crunchy rice that can serve as a substitute for bread. These less brittle forms of *tahdig* can then be used to make a range of sandwich-like dishes such as rolls and wraps (Figure 13), taco-like dishes filled with hot or cold fillings (Figure 14), and hamburger-like dishes (Figure 15). Such innovative creations not only serve those with dietary restrictions or personal preferences who want to reduce or eliminate bread from their diet, but also those that seek additional ways to satisfy their craving for *tahdig*.

Matters of Artistry

Persian cooks have been known for elaborate and fanciful ways of decorating their dishes, particularly for special guests and occasions. Recently, the *tahdig*-making process has come to provide yet another opportunity for Persian cooks to demonstrate their skills in creating



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Figure 11 (left). Rice and *tahdig* from a Persian rice cooker. Figure 12 (middle). ‘Maximum *Tahdig*’. Figure 13 (right). *Tahdig* used instead of bread to make a wrap-type sandwich.

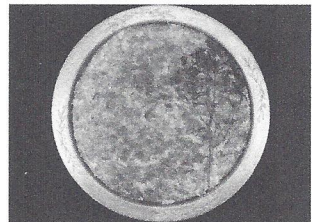
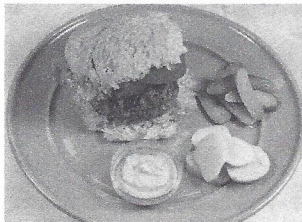
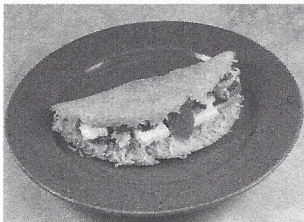


Figure 14 (left). *Tahdig* used instead of tortilla to make a taco-like dish. Figure 15 (middle). *Tahdig* used instead of a bun to make a hamburger. Figure 16 (right). *Tahdig* art mimicking a landscape painting.

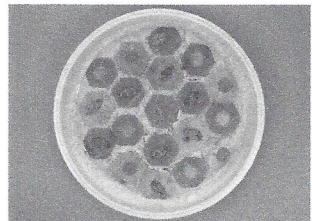
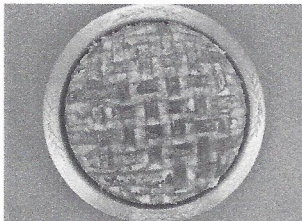
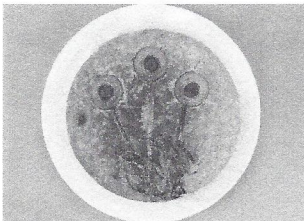


Figure 17 (left). *Tahdig* art mimicking a flower painting. Figure 18 (middle). *Tahdig* art creating a lattice pattern. Figure 19 (right). *Tahdig* art creating a hexagonal pattern.

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edible art. A relatively simple set of examples of such *tahdig* range from mimicking paintings (Figures 16 and 17), to generating geometric patterns (Figures 18-20), to taking advantage of natural patterns in plants and vegetables (Figures 21-24), to surprising one's Valentine (Figure 25). Some of this *tahdig* art goes above and beyond just being artistic creations. For example, *tahdig* can be made to resemble popular board game like Settlers of Catan (Figure 19). *Tahdig* can even become an educational tool to teach young children, for example, to identify the leaves of different kinds of herbs (Figure 24). Interested readers can see such sophisticated *tahdig* artistry by searching online with the keywords '*tahdig* art'.

Matters of Kindness

This sampling of the imaginative ways in which contemporary Persian cooks have taken traditional *tahdig* beyond its original form, shape, and/or purpose are relatively new – especially considering how long *tahdig* has been part of the landscape of Persian cookery. There is, however, another imaginative way that Persian cooks have used *tahdig* that has been around for a long time – long enough that it is almost a forgotten practice.

Before there were non-stick cooking vessels, *tahdig* had to be scraped out of the bottom of the pot in small or large pieces. This process always left *tahdig* crumbs

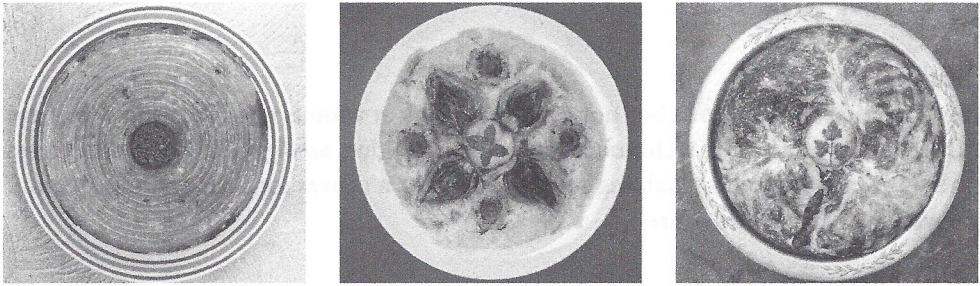


Figure 20 (left). *Tahdig* art using bucatini noodles to create a circular pattern. Figure 21 (middle). *Tahdig* art taking advantage of the natural patterns of fennel bulbs. Figure 22 (right). *Tahdig* art taking advantage of the natural patterns in cabbage leaves.

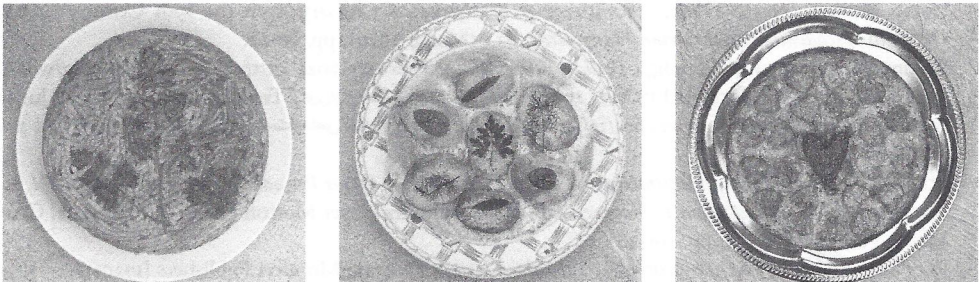


Figure 23 (left). *Tahdig* art taking advantage of the natural patterns of parsley leaves. Figure 24 (middle). *Tahdig* art taking advantage of natural patterns in the leaves of different popular herbs. Figure 25 (right). A Valentine's Day *tahdig*.

