

# PPC 125



Petits Propos Culinaires

*Essays and notes on food, cookery and cookery books*

PROSPECT BOOKS

## THE PERSIANATE WORLD'S HEAVENLY FRUIT: THE POMEGRANATE

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Zarduhsht, however, on the occasion of which we write, prepared four things – wine, perfumes, milk, and a pomegranate... Asfandiyar ate of the pomegranate, became invulnerable, and thus acquired the title of 'the brazen-bodied'.

Abolghāsem Ferdowsi, 1010<sup>1</sup>

Along the dark cold street of a winter's evening... carts would be heaped high with freshly-steamed beetroots, or roasting chestnuts, fresh pomegranates, oranges and persimmons. As people passed, I noticed with shock that, while casually asking the price, they would pick up an orange or pomegranate to test it.

Margaret Shaida, 1993<sup>2</sup>

**I**n the fall, as the days get shorter and the nights get longer, suddenly orchards and fruit stands in Iran start glowing red, as pomegranates begin to ripen, and are staged to be brought to market. Although the calendars indicate winter is coming, it is a time of joy in the Persianate world as the availability of pomegranates signifies the approach of when the days will get longer and the victory of light and goodness over the powers of darkness. This is just one of the pomegranate's many folkloric highlights to the Persian people.

The pomegranate, pronounced *anār* in Persian language, is one of the oldest known edible fruits, and is deeply rooted in the history, folklore, culture, religion, literature, romance, food, and craft of the people who have lived in the greater Iran region for millennia. Persians love pomegranates. Some consider it the national fruit of Iran, and some refer to it as the 'ruby from paradise.'

Native to Iran and its surrounding regions,<sup>3</sup> the pomegranate is one of its most important horticultural products. While wild versions still grow on the southern shores of the Caspian Sea in Māzandarān and Gilān provinces, a wide variety of domesticated versions are cultivated in various parts of the country with different colours, sizes, and flavours. Iran continues to be one of the largest producers of pomegranates in the world.

The roads wind through a noble underwood of primeval forests of extraordinary density and beauty . . . often the green gloom of the woods is brightened by the visit of scarlet blossoms of the wild pomegranates, gleaming like glints of fire.

S.G.W. Benjamin, 1887 <sup>4</sup>

Over the centuries, the pomegranate has become an important object in Persian literature and poetry. It is prominent in many mythological tales and in secular and religious traditions as it symbolizes such concepts as fertility, blessing, abundance, and immortality. At times, it has been characterized by such adjectives as mysterious, enchanted and evocative. Along with apples, grapes, and dates, it is included among the heavenly fruits. Many world religions, including those which have had a long presence in greater Iran – Islam, Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Judaism – have revered it through centuries.

Persian literature and poetry are full of symbolic references to the pomegranate which often evoke a romantic mood and portray a common thread of the beauty of this ancient fruit. Throughout the ages, Iranian physicians and scientists have revered the pomegranate's health-giving and medicinal properties, as different parts of the tree and its fruit have been used to treat a wide range of ailments. Persian craftsmen have used different parts of the pomegranate tree and its fruit for a variety of artistic and industrial creations.

To those unfamiliar with the pomegranate, it may seem an unusual fruit that is awkward to eat. However, the pomegranate has long been a major player in Persian food and associated culinary practices. Before the New World fruits, such as tomatoes,

were introduced to the Middle East, pomegranate juice, and its byproducts in the form of molasses and vinegar, were a key flavouring ingredient in traditional Persian recipes. Today, that tradition continues as pomegranate's arils, juice, molasses, and vinegar are commonly used in an array of Persian food items including appetizers, condiments, soups, rice dishes, stews, desserts, and beverages – either as a visible team player or, at times, cleverly disguised.

In this paper, we take a broad foodways approach to explore the linguistic, botanical, historical, geographical, cultural, artistic, and literary dimensions of this heavenly fruit in Persianate society.

#### ORIGIN OF THE POMEGRANATE IN IRAN AND SURROUNDING REGIONS

The famous Swiss botanist, Augustin Pyramus de Candolle, who lived in the second half of the eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, determined that the region that is now modern Iran and its close neighbours was where the pomegranate originated.<sup>5</sup> Wild pomegranates still grow today in central Asia from Iran and Turkmenistan to northern India.



Historians and archaeologists tell us that it was sometime during the Neolithic era, about 5,000 years ago, that domestication began. Pomegranates are thought to have been domesticated initially in the Transcaucasian-Caspian region, northern Turkey, and the eastern Mediterranean. Evidence for using pomegranates in the Middle East dates from over 5,000 years ago. Pomegranate archaeological artifacts and relics dating to 3000 BCE and beyond were found in Mesopotamia (the region that was conquered by Cyrus the Great of the Achaemenid Dynasty of the Persian Empire in 539 BCE), Armenia, Egypt, and Israel.<sup>6</sup>

From the Mediterranean region, pomegranates travelled to the rest of Asia, to north Africa, and to Europe. They were introduced to the Indian peninsula from Iran and arrived in China via the Silk Road. The Greeks introduced it to Europe. Spanish sailors brought pomegranates to the New World, and Spanish missionaries introduced it into California and Mexico in the 1700s.<sup>7</sup>

The pomegranate tree has proved to be highly adaptive to a wide range of climates and soil conditions and, therefore, although native to central Asia, it is now grown in many different regions. Currently, the most important commercial pomegranate producing countries are Iran, India, Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Turkey, Russia, Pakistan, Israel, Algeria, Tunisia, China, and USA (primarily in California). As of 2014, Iran and India were the world's largest producers of pomegranates.<sup>7</sup>

#### A BIT OF BOTANY

A bit of botanical information about the pomegranate tree, its blossoms, and the internal structure of the fruit itself will help better appreciate many of the concepts that we will explore in the rest of this paper.

Botanically speaking, the common pomegranate (*Punica granatum* L.) is a shrub that naturally tends to develop multiple trunks and has a bushy appearance. It is planted either for its edible fruit or as an ornamental tree. When domesticated, it is grown as a small tree that typically can grow 13–20 feet high. However, under ideal conditions, it can sometimes grow to 23–



*Parts of the pomegranate tree (Otto Wilhelm Thomé, 1885, GNU Free Documentation License - GFDL).*

33 feet. On the other hand, there are bush varieties and dwarf cultivars. Most trees are deciduous but there are several varieties grown in India which are evergreen. The pomegranate requires a long, hot, and dry season in order to produce a good yield of high-quality fruit.<sup>8</sup> There are some fruitless varieties that are grown ornamentally for their showy bell-shaped flowers.

Pomegranate flowers can be single, in pairs, or in small clusters. In most cases, the single flowers grow on spurs along the branches while the flower clusters are at the end of the branch. If you have a pomegranate tree at home, don't worry if you see some of its flowers fall off. Pomegranate trees grow two sets of flowers: vase-shaped and ball-shaped. The vase-shaped flowers are fertile and develop into fruit while the ball-shaped flowers – referred to as male flowers – do not turn into fruit and simply fall to the ground. The pomegranate tree is both self-pollinating and cross-pollinated primarily by bees. The colour of the flowers ranges from soft coral to vivid orange-red depending on the variety of the tree. The relatively long-lasting spring blossoms turn the pomegranate into one of the showiest trees of the season.

The pomegranate fruit is connected to the tree by a short stalk. The fruit is nearly spherically shaped. The fruit is technically a leathery skinned (leathery exocarp, peel, rind) berry containing many seeds, each surrounded by a juicy, fleshy aril. The fruit is topped by the most prominent feature, its crown-looking calyx. Depending on the variety and the state of growth, the top of the calyx could be anywhere from completely closed to widely opened (showing the cluster of stamen). Depending on the variety and stage of growth, the external colour of the fruit ranges from white, yellow, green, pink, red, deep purple to black but most often some shade of red.

The interior of the fruit is divided into chambers (locules) separated by thin pale-yellowish membranous walls (septum) which in turn are surrounded by fleshy spongy mesocarp or pit (albedo) that protects the interior edible parts of the fruit. The chambers are filled with many prismatically shaped arils. Arils are the sacks that hold juice and the seed. Arils are the part of the fruit that is of most interest for culinary purposes. The arils contain the juicy sweet-sour edible part of the pomegranate. The colour of arils ranges from white to deep red. The colour of the arils is independent of the outer rind. Typically, the outer skin reaches its final colour before the arils are fully ripened and, therefore, the colour of the outer skin may not be a good indication of the ripeness of the fruit. Botanically speaking, the pomegranate fruit is classified as a berry (i.e., fleshy fruit that encases seeds produced from a single flower ovary) and can contain anywhere from 200 to over 1,000 arils.

There is a wide variety of pomegranates with different exterior skin colours (ranging from white to various shades of red, to black), different interior aril colours (from white to deep red), different tastes (ranging from sweet to tart), and different seed hardness (soft-seeded, hard-seeded, almost seedless). There are over 1000 uniquely identifiable samples of pomegranate plants that are maintained in various germplasm collections around the world. After Turkmenistan and Russia, the third and fourth largest such collections are in Iran. The National Iranian Pomegranate

Collection in the city of Yazd, and the Agricultural Research Stations of Saveh in the city of Saveh are reported to have over 700 and 500 samples, respectively. Pomegranates are cultivated widely across Iran, in many provinces, with various colours, sizes, and flavours.<sup>9</sup>

#### THE WORD FOR POMEGRANATE IN THE PERSIAN LANGUAGE

Nothing is more common to be seen there than the Pomegranate, which is very excellent: There are several sorts, as White, Flesh-Colour, Rose-Colour, and perfect Red; there are some which have such tender Kernels in them, that you can scarce feel them in your Teeth. ... Pomegranates come from Yazd, which weigh about a Pound.

Sir John Chardin, 1720<sup>10</sup>

The word for pomegranate in Persian language is *Anār* which is from Middle Persian or Pahlavi.<sup>11</sup> Middle Persian was the literary language of the empire from around the third century BCE to the ninth century CE. Middle Persian descended from Old Persian, the language of the Achaemenid Empire and is the linguistic ancestor of Modern Persian, the official language of modern Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.<sup>12</sup>

Another name for pomegranate in Persian is *nār*, which many linguists consider an abbreviation, but is widely used in Persian literature particularly by many famous writers such as Ferdowsi, Nezāmi, Roodaki, Vahshi, Sa'di, Khaghani, and Molavi.

Over the centuries, various nicknames have been used to emphasize folkloric aspects of the pomegranate.<sup>9,13</sup> They include:

*Miveh-é-Beheshi* meaning heavenly fruit;

*Gohar-é-Zemestani* meaning gem of winter;

*Yaghoot-é-Zemestan* meaning winter's ruby;

*Yaghoot-é-Beheshti* meaning ruby from paradise;

*Miveh-é-Nāhid* meaning fruit of Anahita (the goddess of fertility).

Given the long-term botanical, historical, cultural, and culinary appearance of pomegranate in the Persianate world, it



is not surprising to find that the Persian word for pomegranate, *anār*, has been used to denote many things.

Persian also provides explicit names for different aspects of the tree. They include:

Tree: *golnār*, *nārbon*, or *anārbon*;

Flower or blossom: *nārmelā* or *nārmilā*;

Fruit: *anār* or *nār*;

Arial: *nārdāneh*, *dāneh-ānār*, or *nārdānā*;

Orchard: *anārestān*;

Skin or rind: *poost-é-anār*;

Colour pigment developed from pomegranate skin: *anāri*;

Colour pigment developed from pomegranate flower: *golnāri*;

There are several municipalities in Iran named with words related to the pomegranate. There are at least three cities named *Aanār*, in Markazi, Kermān, and Ardabil provinces. There are also places named *Anārābād*, *Anārbād*, *Anārjān*, *Anārdareh*, *Anārestān*, *Anārestānak*, *Anārsarhad*, *Anārak*, *Anārkool*, *Anārmarz*, *Bāb-anār*, *Bagh-anār*, *Bareh-anār*, *Chasm-anār*, *Anārān*, *Anār-sheereen*, and *Molai-anār*. There are also cities named *Anār* in Pakistan, Nigeria, Kazakhstan, Finland, and Afghanistan.

Naming female children with words related to pomegranate is common among Iranian families. The most popular of those names are:

*Ānār* (meaning pomegranate);

*Ānār-Bānoo* (meaning pomegranate lady);

*Nārdānā* (meaning the pomegranate arial or the pomegranate seed);

*Golnār* (meaning pomegranate flower) – the wife of Sassanian King Ardeshi Babakan;

*Golnāri* (meaning the colour of pomegranate flower);

*Nārgol* (meaning pomegranate flower);

*Nārmilā* (meaning the blossom of the pomegranate tree);

*Nārbon* (meaning the pomegranate tree);

*Nāreen* (meaning fiery like the colour of pomegranate);

*Nārmelā* (meaning the blossom of the pomegranate tree) – the

stage name of a popular 1960s Iranian singer and actor, and first name of the daughter-in-law of a famous 1950s Iranian movie actor, director, and wrestler.

The name of a disease where no matter how much water the patient drinks, the patient's thirst will not be quenched is called *khoshk-anār* literally meaning dried pomegranate!

As long as we are talking about the name of this fruit, we should explore a few interesting facts about the name of pomegranate in other languages. The English language name of the fruit, pomegranate, is derived from the Latin name of the fruit *pomum* (apple) *granatum* (seeded or grainy) or seeded apple. The name of the military hand-tossed explosive weapon, grenade, is derived from the French word for pomegranate, *grenade*, suggesting visions of an explosion of arils if a pomegranate is thrown hard at a wall or to the ground (instead of the scattering of deadly metal fragments of a grenade).

#### POMEGRANATE IN PERSIAN MYTHOLOGY, ANCIENT HISTORY, AND FOLKLORE

Given that the pomegranate is one of the world's most ancient fruit, it is not surprising for it to appear in the mythology, ancient history, and folklore of many ancient cultures of the world including the Romans, the Greeks, the Egyptians, the Chinese, as well as the Persians. Pomegranate has had a special place in Persian mythology and ancient history as a mysterious fruit often with magical powers. That allure continues in contemporary Persian folklore.

The literary masterpiece *Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings, is the national epic of Greater Iran. Written by the Persian poet Abolghāsem Ferdowsi, it is of central importance to the Persian culture and Persian language. It is one of the longest works by a single author in world literature. It narrates the mythology, legend, and history of the ancient Persia from the creation of the world to the Muslim Arab conquest of 651 CE which toppled the Sassanian Empire. Its 62 overarching stories are told across over 900 chapters with over 50,000 rhyming couplets. There are

numerous references to pomegranate in *Shahnameh* where the pomegranate portrays physical beauty, death, as well as magical powers.

In the story of the warrior Zāl and his future wife, Rudābeh, the pomegranate is used to refer to physical beauty. When visiting Kabul, which Rudabeh is the princess of, Zāl falls in love with her once he hears her described: ‘O Zāl, thou knowest not beauty since thou hast not beheld the daughter of this man. For she is like unto the slender cypress, her face is brighter than the sun, her mouth is a pomegranate flower.’<sup>14</sup>

Ferdowsi demonstrates the magical power of pomegranates when retelling the story of Esfandiar, the crown prince and a warrior of the Kayanian King Goshtasp of prehistoric Iran. Esfandiar, was a supporter of Zoroaster (Zartosht and Zarduhsht), who is regarded as the spiritual founder of Zoroastrianism. Ferdowsi writes about how Esfandiar become invincible: ‘Zarduhsht, however, on the occasion of which we write, prepared four things – wine, perfumes, milk, and a pomegranate... Asfandiyar ate of the pomegranate, became invulnerable, and thus acquired the title of “the brazen-bodied”.’

In a story about Siyavash, the legendary Persian prince from the earliest days of the Persian Empire, *Shahnameh* associated the pomegranate with death: ‘In the mean season Kai Kaous had learned of the death of Saiawush his son, and a mighty wailing went forth throughout the land of Iran, so that even the nightingale in the cypress was silent of her song, and the leaves of the pomegranate tree in the forest were withered for sorrow.’

#### THE POMEGRANATE IN PERSIAN ANCIENT HISTORY

Herodotus, the ancient Greek historian who lived in the fifth century BCE in the Greek city of Halicarnassus, part of the Persian Empire at that time (now Bodrum, Turkey), is known for having written a detailed account of the Graeco-Persian wars.<sup>15</sup> There are explicit references to pomegranates in Herodotus’ work emphasizing, not only the presence of, but also the importance of pomegranate in ancient Persia. Herodotus writes about

golden pomegranates adorning the spears of Persian warriors in the phalanx on the battlefield: ‘Thus rode forth Xerxes from Sardis – but he was accustomed every now and then, when the fancy took him, to alight from his chariot and travel in a litter. Immediately behind the king there followed a body of a thousand spearmen, the noblest and bravest of the Persians, holding their lances in the usual manner – then came a thousand Persian horse, picked men – then ten thousand, picked also after the rest, and serving on foot. Of these last one thousand carried spears with golden pomegranates at their lower end instead of spikes; and these encircled the other nine thousand, who bore on their spears pomegranates of silver. The spearmen too who pointed their lances towards the ground had golden pomegranates; and the thousand Persians who followed close after Xerxes had golden apples.’

Herodotus also writes about Darius the Great’s use of a pomegranate to praise Megabazus, one of his most loyal and trusted military commanders: ‘Darius, having passed through Thrace, reached Sestos in the Chersonese, whence he crossed by the help of his fleet into Asia, leaving a Persian, named Megabazus, commander on the European side. This was the man on whom Darius once conferred special honour by a compliment which he paid him before all the Persians. ‘He was about to eat some pomegranates, and had opened the first, when his brother Artabanus asked him “what he would like to have in as great plenty as the seeds of the pomegranate?” Darius answered – “Had I as many men like Megabazus as there are seeds here, it would please me better than to be lord of Greece.” Such was the compliment wherewith Darius honoured the general to whom at this time he gave the command of the troops left in Europe, amounting in all to some eighty thousand men.’

Plutarch, the Greek philosopher and historian who lived during the first and second centuries CE, when writing about the Achaemenid king Artaxexes, points not only to the popularity of pomegranate in ancient Persia, but also to the skills of people of Iran in cultivating pomegranate during the Achaemenid

period:<sup>16</sup> ‘For there was no gift so small that he did not accept it with alacrity; indeed, when a certain Omisus brought him a single pomegranate of surpassing size, he said: “By Mithra, this man would speedily make a city great instead of small were he entrusted with it.”’

During the Achaemenian dynasty, most of the ancient Near East, including Mesopotamia, had come under the control of the Persian Empire. A Mesopotamian cuneiform clay tablet dating to 513 BCE – currently in the Metropolitan Museum of Art – documents a rent payment by a tenant gardener in the form of 100 pomegranates.<sup>17</sup>

During the Abbasid Caliphate, the pomegranates of some Iranian cities were so liked that the guardians of those cities were obliged to send some pomegranates along with other gifts. For example, the people of Ray used to send thousands of pounds of pomegranates to the Caliph’s court every year.<sup>18</sup>

#### POMEGRANATES IN PERSIAN FOLKLORE

Persian fairy tales, superstitions, fables, parables, and other such popular beliefs, many orally transmitted, are full of references to pomegranate. A famous Persian fairy tale, centred around a mythical bird called *simorgh*, begins with, ‘In the garden of the palace there grew a pomegranate tree with only three pomegranates; their seeds were fabulous gems that shone like lamps by night. When ripe, the pomegranates would turn into three beautiful girls who were to become the wives of the three princes. Every night, by the king’s order, one of his sons guarded the tree lest anyone should steal the pomegranates.’<sup>19</sup>

Many people in the East, including Persians, believed that among the hundreds of seeds in a typical pomegranate, only one had supernatural healing attributes, and since they all looked alike, one had to eat them all oneself, not share any with others thus losing one. Some Iranian growers believe that when the Canopus Heliacal Rising happens and shines on the pomegranates in their orchards, the arils become red and ripen.<sup>20</sup> It is said that if you plant a pomegranate tree in your garden sickness will disappear

from your home because pomegranate is the cure of many pains, and beauty enters your home because inside the pomegranate there is a fairy.<sup>21</sup> By burning the branches of pomegranate and spreading the smoke of the burnt wood in the air, the ancient Iranians drove away the hidden demons from their house and made the living space clean.

#### THE POMEGRANATE IN PERSIAN LITERATURE

In addition to its presence in Persian mythology, ancient history, and orally transmitted folklore, figurative references to pomegranates appear in the literary works of many classical and contemporary writers and poets. They have used the pomegranate's unique features to describe loved ones, the sorrow in one's heart, the beauty of nature, and the taste of life. Moreover, there are many non-Iranian authors who have written about the love of Persians for the pomegranate. A sampling of such work is sprinkled throughout this paper and a few additional examples are listed below:

The tenth-century poet Ferdowsi describes the beauty of a Persian princess as, 'Her mouth resembles a pomegranate blossom';

The thirteenth-century poet Rumi writes, 'If you buy a pomegranate, buy one whose ripeness has caused it to be cleft open with a seed-revealing smile. / Its laughter is a blessing, for through its wide-open mouth it shows its heart, like a pearl in the jewel box of spirit. / The red anemone laughs, too, but through its mouth you glimpse a blackness. A laughing pomegranate brings the whole garden to life';

The fourteenth-century poet Hafez writes, 'Love makes of each moment an eternity / And tends the garden of the heart's desire / When love mocks, ruby tears fall heavy as pomegranates';

Another poem from Rumi: 'Come to the orchard in Spring. / There is light and wine, and sweethearts in the pomegranate flowers';

The clever tenth-century poet Manuchehri Dāmghāni, known for his riddles, leads the reader astray from the beginning by

alluding to the similarities between a pregnant woman and the object he describes – a pomegranate: ‘What is it that is like a pregnant woman, / in whose pregnant belly are a handful of babies. / Unless you smash her to the ground, she will not deliver her babies, / When the babies are born, they are delivered and eaten entire. / A mother delivers one, two, or three babies / How can this be mother to three hundred babies? / Until the child has been brought forth from the womb, a mother / Does not put it to bed; this is no secret, it is well-known. / In her belly she has made for her babies a little yellow bed, / and the heads of the babies can be seen inside her.’

#### POMEGRANATES IN SECULAR CEREMONIES AND CELEBRATIONS

The pomegranate plays a role in several joyous events that are celebrated nationwide in Iran, in Persianate communities in the neighbouring countries, and in Iranian diaspora communities around the world. The one in which the pomegranate has the most prominent role is called *Shab-é-Yaldā*, which literally translates into ‘the night of Yalda’, the Persian celebration of the winter solstice – the longest night of the year. *Shab-é-Yaldā* has been celebrated in the Persianate world for at least 5000 years. The origin of the Persian word *Yalda* is Syriac which means ‘birth’ or ‘rebirth.’ It signifies a turning point of days getting longer and the victory of light and goodness over the powers of darkness and hence the reference to birth or rebirth. It is a time of joy. It is generally celebrated at home when, after dinner, family members gather around a colourful spread that includes pomegranates, watermelon, persimmons, mixtures of dried fruit and nuts, various Persian confections, and a book of poems by the fourteenth-century Persian poet Hāfez. Watermelons and pomegranates are, by far, the most important food elements of the celebration. The spherical shape of the pomegranate symbolizes the sun, the outside of the fruit reflects dawn, and the bright arils inside represent glow of life. Pomegranates often appear in multiple form – whole fruit sitting on the top of the fruit basket, segmented to show off its beautiful internal

structure, and a bowl of arils, easy to eat.

The other two national Persian celebrations which feature pomegranates are *Norooz* and *Chāhārshanbeh-Soori*. *Norooz*, meaning ‘new day,’ is the celebration of the Persian new year that takes place on the spring equinox, the first day of spring. *Chāhārshanbeh-Soori*, meaning ‘fiery Wednesday,’ takes place on the eve of the last Wednesday before the Persian new year and is one of its preparatory events. Although the pomegranate is not as prominent an element of *Norooz* and *Chāhārshanbeh-Soori* compared to *Yalda*, it does appear alongside the food items specifically consumed during these celebrations.

Another illustration of the importance of pomegranates to the people of Iran and its surrounding regions is the number of cities that have annual pomegranate harvest and thanksgiving festivals in autumn. These take place in a wide range of communities in Iran from the capital Tehran to small villages in pomegranate-producing regions. The role of these festivals has been to give thanks for the harvest, to celebrate the importance of pomegranate culture, and to support growers and producers of pomegranate-centric products. Harvest festivals provide an opportunity for the growers to showcase their particular varieties and for the attendees to taste them. Artist-craftsmen display images of pomegranate, and in some cities, elaborate, some larger than life-size, marionettes are paraded around as musicians play traditional music instruments such as *sornā* (an ancient double-reed flute) and *dohol* (a percussion instrument). Food and beverages obviously play a role in pomegranate festivals. Vendors supply the attendees with a wide range including juice, fruit leather, ice-cream, candy, jams, soups, and confections. At times, unique culinary challenges are incorporated. For example, the 2011 festival in Tehran featured a massive 800-kilogram cake decorated with images of the fruit. In some pomegranate producing regions, after the conclusion of the festivities, attendees may head over to local orchards to help the farmers harvest the fruit.

In some regions of Iran, as well as in such neighbouring countries as Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, the pomegranate



plays many roles in weddings.<sup>22</sup> One is merely placing a few, or a basket full of, pomegranates on the ceremonial wedding *sofreh* (a traditional and very elaborate Persian spread) to wish for a joyful future for the newlyweds. Another example is the bride choosing to drop a pomegranate on the floor, or throw it against a wall, hard enough to crack it – the scattered arils are a sign of blessing for future offspring. Then, in some Zoroastrian communities, the parents of the bride and groom give pomegranates to the newlyweds to endow them with fecundity.

#### IN RELIGIOUS TRADITION

Since the pomegranate is of ancient origin, it is not surprising that it has been referred to in the holy books of all major world religions and hence, at times, is referred to as a holy fruit. Iran has been a Muslim country – primarily Shia Muslim – since the Arab invasion of the seventh century. Over the centuries, however, its ancient history has intertwined with and been home to several other religious traditions including Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity. The pomegranate has had a role in all of them. For example, ancient Persians, and some scholars, believe that Eve and Adam were tempted with a pomegranate in the Garden of Eden and not with an apple. Another example is the pomegranate symbolizing abundance and fertility due to the many seeds that it has. There are, however, several pomegranate-centric beliefs that are unique to only one of the religions.

Zoroastrianism was the primary faith of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. It was developed about 500 years earlier than the Achaemenid period by the prophet Zoroaster and spread across the empire. With a central belief in the supreme deity Ahura Mazda, Zoroastrianism is perhaps the first true monotheistic religion. Pomegranates have had long and deep symbolic functions for Zoroastrians of the greater Iran as well as the Parsi community in India.

The Persian new year, *Norooz*, meaning new day, is celebrated by all Persian communities around the world. The centerpiece of the celebration is a beautiful spread called *Sofreh-é-Haft-Seen*,

referring to the seven food items whose Persian names start with the letter in the Persian alphabet that sounds like an 's'. In addition, the spread has on it a range of fruit, confections, flowers, the holy book of the family, and books of poems by Persian poets. The Zoroastrians of Iran have had a unique tradition of including a whole pomegranate fruit with coins inserted in it as a symbol of prosperity, longevity, and good health in the new year.<sup>23</sup>

The medical properties of pomegranates have long been explored in Zoroastrianism. The Baresman, or Barsom is a bundle of sticks used as a ritual instrument in certain Zoroastrian ceremonies. The pomegranate is one of the trees that Baresman is made from. In the rituals, the Baresman fasces represents strength, good health, and overcoming disease. Baresman is also closely related to *Haoma*, a method of healing depending on pounding a mixture of pomegranate twigs and leaves, along with other plants and water.<sup>24</sup>

Among other uses of pomegranates within Zoroastrian traditions are the planting of pomegranate trees in their fire temples, burning pomegranate branches during certain religious rituals, and carrying pomegranates along with flowers and sweets to marriage proposal ceremonies as a sign of love, life, and alliance.

Pomegranates have always been popular in Judaism and their role is seen in Hebrew traditions among Iranian Jews. The pomegranate is said to have 613 seeds representing the 613 commandments in the Torah which is interpreted as the pomegranate being a symbol of righteousness, knowledge, and wisdom. Many Torah scrolls are decorated with pomegranates. The vestments of Kohen Gadol, the high priests in Jewish tradition, have had pomegranate decorations as instructed in Exodus 28:33–4: 'On its lower hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple and crimson yarns, all around the lower hem, with bells of gold between them all around – a golden bell and a pomegranate alternating all around the lower hem of the robe.'

Pomegranates are typically eaten on Rosh Hashanah, the Jewish new year, not only in Iran but across other Jewish communities

around the world. A rather unique Persian Jewish tradition is the Rosh Hashanah Seder. The practice is at least 2000 years old; it is believed that at one point it was practised by Jews of all cultural backgrounds. Today it remains a beloved Persian ritual. The pomegranate is one the nine symbolic foods for Rosh Hashanah Seder.<sup>25</sup>

According to the Acts of the Apostles, which tells about the founding and spread of the Christian Church, there were Persians among the first new Christian converts at the Pentecost during the time of Jesus (see, for example, Acts 2:9). There has been a continuous presence of Christians in Iran ever since.<sup>26</sup> Armenians and Assyrians have historically been the majority of Christians in Iran. Given their long-term presence they share some of the same secular beliefs and interests as do other Iranians. They, however, have additional pomegranate-centred beliefs and interests that are either unique to their ethnic background and/or to Christianity. The pomegranate is heavily symbolic among Armenian Christians, for example the 365–6 seeds they contain confirm them as a symbols of time's passage; the fruit is also deemed to put evil spirits to flight; and if a bride throws and breaks a pomegranate, the scattered arils ensure that the bride will have children; they also believe that eating bread made from dough mixed with pomegranate seeds increases the chance a woman will have a son.

Independent of ethnicity, pomegranates appear in Christian beliefs and artifacts. Perhaps the most visible are associated with numerous medieval Christian paintings that depict the Madonna and child with pomegranates. Most often the pomegranate appears split and showing seeds, which has been interpreted by some scholars as a symbol of fertility, hope, and resurrection.<sup>27</sup> In Christianity, the large number of seeds encased in a single fruit is also interpreted by some scholars as a symbol of the universal church.<sup>28</sup>

Muslims, not only in Iran, consider the pomegranate heavenly and sacred. The pomegranate is referred to explicitly three times in the Quran. It is portrayed in Quran 6:99 and 6:141 as an example

of good things that God had created. According to Quran 55:68, pomegranate trees grow in the gardens of paradise.<sup>29</sup> Further references include Quran 66:99, 'And it is He who sends down rain from the sky, and We produce thereby the growth of all things. We produce from it greenery from which We produce grains arranged in layers. And from the palm trees – of its emerging fruit are clusters hanging low. And [We produce] gardens of grapevines and olives and pomegranates, similar yet varied. Look at [each of] its fruit when it yields and [at] its ripening. Indeed in that are signs for a people who believe,' and Quran 966:141, 'And He it is who causes gardens to grow, [both] trellised and untrellised, and palm trees and crops of different [kinds of] food and olives and pomegranates, similar and dissimilar. Eat of [each of] its fruit when it yields and give its due [zakah] on the day of its harvest. And be not excessive. Indeed, He does not like those who commit excess.'

There are also multiple sayings by the Prophet Mohammed about the pomegranates in the Hadith.<sup>30</sup> For example: 'There is not a pomegranate which does not have a pip from one of the pomegranates of the Garden (Jannah) in it. ... Whoever eats a pomegranate, Allah will light his heart forty nights. ... Pomegranate and its rind strengthen digestion (stomach). ... Eat the pomegranate, for it purges the system of envy and hatred.'

#### IMAGES OF POMEGRANATE IN PERSIAN ART

Images of pomegranates have appeared in Persian paintings, ceramics, sculptures, jewelry, textile, and other visual arts for centuries. Some of the earliest known examples are from an Iron Age site near the city of Rudbar in the northern province of Gilan. Another set of early examples is from Ziwiye in the north-eastern province of Kordestan dating to the ninth to seventh centuries BCE. Among the hoard of gold, silver, and ivory objects discovered at the site are several decorative elements related to pomegranate; some are currently on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The number and variety of such artifacts increases with the Achaemenid Dynasty. One of the most striking examples is the rock relief from the Apadana staircase in the ceremonial

capital of Persepolis showing Darius holding an object interpreted by scholars as a pomegranate branch with one open and two not yet opened blossoms.

Contemporary Persian artists have continued their ancient predecessors' tradition of incorporating images of pomegranates into their art. One of the most graphic instances is the centrepiece to a traffic roundabout in the city of Saveh, south of Tehran. Saveh was also the site of an organized pomegranate festival



*Pomegranate sculpture in Saveh (Photograph licensed under CC-BY-3.0).*

## NOTES

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