

PPC 127



Petits Propos Culinaires

Essays and notes on food, cookery and cookery books

PROSPECT BOOKS

THE ROLE OF POMEGRANATE IN THE PERSIANATE WORLD'S CULINARY PRACTICES AND BEYOND

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When you want to thoroughly welcome a visitor to your home and show them how much you care about them, you offer them a freshly segmented whole pomegranate.

If someone offers you a bowl of pomegranate arils, having gone through the trouble of freeing up the arils, it means they love you very much.

Two Persian Folkloric Sayings about Pomegranates

The pomegranate is an ancient fruit that is deeply rooted in the history, culture, literature, food, and craft of the people who have lived in the physiographical region of Iranian plateau¹ for millennia, as well as within Persianate societies around the world. 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, it is one of the most important horticultural products of the country.

The prominence of linguistic, folkloric, historical, cultural, and literary dimensions of the pomegranate in the Persianate world was recently explored in depth in PPC 125.² In this follow-up article, we dig deeply into the important role that the pomegranate plays in the culinary landscape of Iran and Persianate societies. We begin our detailed exploration by detailing the multitude of techniques Persian home cooks have used over the centuries to harvest and process the edible parts of the pomegranate fruit for culinary purposes, followed by the description of various Persian dishes and beverages that incorporate many forms of pomegranate-based ingredients. We close our exploration with a brief survey of ways by which Persian scientists and craftsmen have utilized both edible and non-edible

parts of the pomegranate for industrial and medical pursuits.

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 by-products 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. Moreover, throughout the ages, Iranian physicians and scientists have revered the pomegranate's health and medicinal properties while Persian craftsmen have used different parts of the pomegranate tree and fruit for a variety of artistic and industrial creations.

DAY-TO-DAY HANDLING AND PROCESSING OF THE POMEGRANATE FRUIT BY PERSIANS

Persians are the masters in working with pomegranates for various day-to-day needs. Over the years, they have come up with efficient and clever processes for the proper ways of picking the fruit from the tree to guidance for selecting the fruit when purchasing them from a greengrocer, best ways to store, opening and freeing the arils, juicing, and dealing with the inevitable stains from the pomegranate juice.

PICKING POMEGRANATES

In the mid- to late-fall, if you ever have the opportunity to visit a pomegranate grove to pick your own pomegranates from the trees, do it. Picking, cracking one open, and eating the arils while surrounded by hundreds of bright red globes hanging from the trees covered by fall's colourful leaves is a lot of fun. However, do not pull the fruit off the branch, as it will damage the skin of the fruit at the point where it was attached to the branch,

reducing its shelf life. Use gardening sheers to snip the fruit from the short stalk that attaches it to the branch. Do not let the fruit fall to the ground as it will bruise the skin, again shortening its shelf life. Pomegranate fruit is non-climacteric, meaning once the pomegranate is cut from the tree, it will stop ripening, and therefore it is critical to pick the fruit at its optimum ripeness. Once fully ripened, if left on the tree, there is the risk of fruit cracking. Commercial pomegranate orchards often pick the fruit before it has fully ripened to minimize the risk of rinds cracking.

...when pomegranates hang heavy like impossible bulbs from skinny branches. As kids, we used to squeeze their leathery skin to crush the seeds to a pulp, then poke a hole with a fork, run outside to avoid dripping on the carpet, and tip our heads back to suck the juice. It was the ultimate juice box...

Donia Bijan, 2011³

PURCHASING FROM A MARKET

When selecting and purchasing pomegranates from a market, look for fruits that have a semi-glossy, smooth, and leathery skin without cracks and bruises. You can identify a pomegranate that has been sitting around for a while and/or was picked past its maturity by its wrinkled skin which may be dry and tight.

STORING

Freshly picked pomegranates or high-quality store-bought ones can be left out at room temperature for a week or so without much deterioration. The best strategy for storing pomegranates for longer periods is to put them in an airtight plastic bag (or two) and store them in the lowest crisper drawer of your refrigerator. After a while, the outer skin will start to dry out, however, this will cause the sugar contents of the arils to concentrate resulting in slightly sweeter taste.

Fresh pomegranate juice should be stored in an air-tight glass or plastic container in the refrigerator – if left at room temperature, there is a good chance that it will start to ferment.

For extended storage periods (beyond a week or so), there are two good options. Consider pouring the juice into ice cube trays and put them in the freezer. Once fully frozen, pop them out and store them in a freezer-safe plastic bag or container in your freezer. The second option is to ‘can’ the juice via the traditional boiling-water sterilization process using glass Mason jars.

Freshly freed arils stored in an air-tight container in the lowest shelf of your refrigerator should last for a couple of weeks without much deterioration. For longer storage periods, pour freed arils onto a flat cookie sheet – one layer deep – and put the cookie sheet in the freezer. Once the arils are frozen, store them in freezer-safe containers in the freezer. When you want to use them, you don’t have to thaw them – just sprinkle them on top or mix them into whatever you were planning to use them for. Defrosted arils won’t be as crisp as fresh ones, but they are quite adequate for garnishing your food items, for juicing, or to use in cooking.

OPENING THE FRUIT AND FREEING THE ARILS

Over the centuries, Persian pomegranate farmers and pomegranate lovers have come up with a range of methods for efficiently harvesting the delicious pomegranate arils (without getting covered in pomegranate juice) for both commercial purposes and for personal use at home. Here is the description of a few proven methods.

The most traditional method used by Persians starts by cutting off the crown (calyx). Use the tip of a sharp paring knife to cut a skin-deep circular slit about an inch (2 centimeters) below the crown of the pomegranate and then peel off the circular disk along with the crown to expose the top layer of the arils. Use the tip of the paring knife again to score four or five skin-deep slits downwards to the bottom of the pomegranate. Holding the fruit in the palm of one hand, use your other hand to gently pull, from the center, each of the four or five segments away from the center of the fruit. After practicing a few times, this method will result in a beautiful, open pomegranate where five or six segments are loosely attached to the bottom showing off their gorgeous arils [Figure 1].



*Figure 1: A Segmented Whole Pomegranate and a Bowl of Pomegranate Arils
(Photograph courtesy of Nader Mehravari).*

Once you have an opened pomegranate, there are several options for freeing the arils:

- The simplest, quickest, most natural, and most fun option is simply to bite off sets of arils from a segment with your teeth. If you are out in a pomegranate orchard and have just picked a pomegranate, or are out for a picnic, this is the most satisfying way of eating the arils. It will be a bit messy the first few times that you try it. This has been my favourite way of eating the pomegranate arils when outdoors ever since childhood.
- Often, one wants a bowl of pomegranate arils [Figure 1] to sprinkle on top of a dish, to mix into a dish, to juice, or simply to eat with a spoon. For that, once you have broken the pomegranate into segments, over a bowl, start breaking apart each of the segments while using your fingers to gently roll out the individual arils into the bowl. As you free up the arils inside each of the internal chambers, peel off the thin membranes that separate the chambers to get into other chambers while discarding the skin and the fleshy spongy pit pieces.

Pomegranate juice is known to stain certain fabrics. For beginners, the above methods of segmenting the pomegranate and freeing up the arils introduces the risk of getting splattered with pomegranate juice. A popular option to mitigate that risk is to segment the fruit and free up the arils under water! You need a bowl large enough to be able to more than fully submerge a whole pomegranate. Fill up a large bowl with cold tap water. Cut off the crown and score the sides of the pomegranate as described above. Place it into the bowl. While holding it under the water, gently pull, from the center, breaking up the pomegranate into four or five segments. Take apart each segment under the water freeing up the arils. The internal membrane and pieces of fleshy spongy pit will float to the top and most of the arils will sink to the bottom. Simply remove the floating scraps and strain the freed up arils.

The above methods require one to open and break up the pomegranate into four or five segments before freeing up the arils. There is a completely different scheme for freeing up the arils that does not require opening and segmenting the pomegranate. For this method you need a knife, a bowl, and a wooden spoon. Use the knife to cut the pomegranate in half as though you were cutting the earth across its equator. Very gently ‘massage’ each half in order to slightly loosen the arils without breaking them. Hold each of the halves loosely in the palm of one hand over the bowl with the cut side facing the bowl. Grab the wooden spoon with your other hand and firmly smack the skin side of the pomegranate half that is in your other hand. Arils will start falling off into the bowl.

In this last method, cutting the pomegranate in half with a large knife is a bit messy and it will naturally result in cutting through some of the arils. A cleaner and more efficient alternative is a cut off the crown with a sharp knife and make a couple of skin-deep cross cuts where the crown used to be. Holding the pomegranate firmly in both hands with two thumbs gently pressed into the cross cuts, pull apart the pomegranate into two halves without damaging any of the arils. Then free up the arils as described previously, smacking each with a wooden spoon. This in fact is the traditional method

used by Persians when they want to process a large number of pomegranates. During the peak of pomegranate harvest in Iran (and in Turkey and Azerbaijan), walking down the narrow alleys separating pomegranate groves, it would not be surprising to hear the thump, thump, thump sound of groups of villagers smacking hundreds or thousands of pomegranate halves freeing up their arils in preparation for juicing and, more importantly, making the famous pomegranate molasses.

There are all kinds of single-use kitchen gadgets on the market advertised to free arils from pomegranates. You really don't need any of them. They don't do any better job than the methods described above. There are also modern automated machineries for industrial use that are beyond the scope of typical home consumers.

JUICING THE POMEGRANATE

As in the case of freeing up the arils, there is a range of methods for juicing the pomegranate fruit. Here is the description of a few proven methods. Some require pomegranate arils to be freed first and some don't.

Among the juicing methods that require pomegranate arils to be freed first, the most frequently used in Persianate societies are:

- Consistent with my own childhood memories, the most traditional method used by homemakers has been to put a couple of cups of arils on a square piece of cheesecloth, bring the corners of the cheese cloth together, and start twisting the sack of arils over a bowl. As you squeeze the sack, the juices will flow out of the sack into the bowl. (Persian homemakers have used this technique for juicing other fruit such as watermelons.)
- If you don't mind the resulting juice to be a bit diluted, put the arils in a pot, add some water, put the pot on high heat and bring to a boil. Cook for a minute or two. Let the contents of the pot cool down a bit so that you can safely handle it. Pour the contents into a fine metal strainer over a bowl and use the back of a wooden spoon or a silicon spatula to press on the cooked, softened, arils to get the juice out. If

you don't have a fine-enough mesh strainer, put a layer or two of cheesecloth in a colander over a bowl, pour the contents of the pot into the cheesecloth-covered colander and repeat as in the previous method.

- The fastest method – but not the best – is to put the pomegranate arils in a blender, and process, then use a cheesecloth or a fine mesh strainer to separate the liquid from the leftover crushed interior seeds of the arils. This method



*Figure 2: Citrus Press Used to Juice Pomegranate
(Photograph courtesy of Nader Mehravari).*

results in a slightly grainy juice which is a bit thicker than other juicing methods and the resulting liquid could be a bit cloudy because it contains some of the pulverized white pomegranate seeds.

Among those juicing methods that do not require the pomegranates to be freed first, the following four are the most popular in Iran:

- Some farmers grow pomegranates for the sole purpose of juicing (for drinking or for making pomegranate molasses, vinegar, or wine). In such cases, the traditional method of juicing had been like traditional methods of juicing grapes for wine making. The fruits are cut in half, put into a (often clay) tub, and stomped on by a person wearing special shoes.
- For juicing smaller quantities of pomegranates, the most efficient method is to use a typical citrus press [Figure 2]. The pomegranate is cut in half and juices are squeezed out in the same way that orange halves are juiced. This is a popular technique used by fruit juice street vendors on the streets in the cities of Iran. (Use of manual or electric citric reamers is not recommended as they will release some of the astringent tannins present in the pomegranate skins and pits into the juice.)
- There are also automated hydraulic extraction machines for industrial settings that are out of the scope of typical home consumers.
- Now we come to not only my, but many other Persians' favourite childhood method, and the most fascinating method of juicing the pomegranate. This method required no knives, tools, or kitchen gadgets. This method works particularly well if you have a relatively freshly picked pomegranate whose outer skin is soft and has no cracks. Holding the pomegranate in the palm of both hands, use both thumbs to press on the pomegranate very gently as you turn the pomegranate one inch at a time in all directions. Press-and-turn, press-and-turn. Be patient and be very gentle otherwise you will crack the

pomegranate skin. You may need to press and turn 20 or 30 times. The goal is to reach a point where all the arils have been slightly crushed, releasing their juice within the interior of the fruit. (Alternatively, or in addition, you can gently roll the pomegranate around on a hard surface while pressing down gently.) Now it is time to enjoy the juice. Carefully make a ¼-inch (½ centimeter) small hole (with your fingers, your teeth, or with the tip of a sharp knife) in the skin of the pomegranate and start sucking out the juice. As you drink (sucking out) the juice, you can continue to press-and-turn the fruit to free up more of the juice. This is an ancient method and there is even a word (both a noun and a verb) for it in the Persian language, *āb-lambo*.

The pomegranate is the only fruit in the world that can be juiced without needing to use any tool.

A Persian Culinary Folkloric Claim

You also find fruit-juice sellers wheeling carts through the streets, and if they are touting pomegranate or orange juice, their carts will be fitted with large metal citrus presses with a strong lever in which they press pomegranates the same way they would press oranges.

Anissa Helou, 2015⁴

GETTING OUT POMEGRANATE STAINS

Pomegranate juice stains fabrics. If you get it on your clothes, tablecloths, aprons, kitchen towels, etc., as quickly as you can, rinse the spot with cold water. Apply a bit of dishwashing detergent directly to the spot, use your fingers to gently rub it into the fabric, let the detergent soak for a few minutes, then wash with cold water. You may have to repeat the process a couple of times. For old pomegranate stains, you may need to apply chlorine bleach or hydrogen peroxide if safe for the fabric. Make sure the stain is removed after washing before putting the item in the dryer.

If you get juice on upholstery or carpet, use a sponge or a few

layers of paper towel to blot out any excess juice. Mix 1 cup of cold water with 1 tablespoon of dishwashing detergent in a small bowl. Moisten a sponge with the soapy water and dab into the stained spot. Work the soapy water into the stain. Use a clean sponge moistened with white vinegar to blot and rinse the area.

USE OF POMEGRANATES IN PERSIAN COOKERY

The pomegranate has been a player in the culinary habits of the Persianate societies for centuries. The earliest evidence of this is in the oldest surviving documented recipes in the world, in the form of cuneiform tablets⁵ from 1700 BCE in the Mesopotamia region. The text of those tablets shows that the pomegranate was part of the kitchen of that region – a region that became part of the Persian Empire during the Achaemenid Dynasty of 550–330 BCE.

A Sassanian Dynasty era (224–652 CE) manuscript with a translated title of ‘King Khosrow and the His Boy’⁶ documents a conversation between King Khosrow II and a young man named Vaspur who had applied for employment in the king’s service. The conversation – the interview – is primarily about the cuisine of that period. The text contains several references to pomegranates. For example, in response to the king’s question about the best fruits for dessert, the boy responds:

The cores of almonds, which have been peeled, crushed and mixed with sugar; the flesh of the fresh cocoanut with crystal-sugar, the grains of the sweet pomegranate and of the sour pomegranate with rose-water...

There is a continuing, well-documented, and extensive use of pomegranates in Persian cookery in the oldest surviving cookbooks of the greater Iran, starting with 10th and 13th century Arabic language cookbooks that contain many Persian dishes,⁷ to the 14th century culinary satirical work of the Persian poet Aboo-Eshaq Halaj-é-Shirazi,⁸ to two 16th century Persian language cookbooks from the Safavid Dynasty era.⁹

HUMORAL CLASSIFICATION OF POMEGRANATE PARTS

Attention to humoral properties of culinary ingredients – heat,

moisture, coldness, dryness – and the resulting food items has been a mainstay of Persian culinary art. The humoral classification of different parts of a pomegranate are as follows:

- Pomegranate, as a whole, is considered cold and wet
- Pomegranate juice is considered cold and wet
- Pomegranate rind is considered cold and dry

In addition, pomegranate rind is a bit astringent and pomegranate roots are astringent.¹⁰

USE OF POMEGRANATE FLOWERS IN PERSIAN COOKERY

The pomegranate flower, in addition to having a very attractive bright orange-red colour, contains a good amount of nectar which makes it a popular destination for bees. According to Gregory Levin, the well-known botanist who has been studying pomegranates for over fifty years, only apple and cherry blossoms provide more honey than pomegranate blossom.¹¹ In the pomegranate growing regions of Iran, some growers, in collaboration with local beekeepers, have produced honey from pomegranate flowers which is primarily used to sweeten tea or served for breakfast instead of jam.

Dried petals of pomegranate flowers are used to make beautiful herbal infusions which can be served either hot or cold.

USE OF POMEGRANATE ARILS IN PERSIAN COOKERY

There are several Persian dishes that incorporate whole pomegranate arils. The most famous of these is a side dish called Zeytoon Parvande, which is a mixture of olives, crushed walnuts, pomegranate molasses, whole pomegranate arils, and other flavourings.

There are Persian thick soups that have pomegranate arils in them. Persian cooks also sprinkle whole fresh pomegranate arils on top of various dishes for flavour enhancement and as decoration. Pomegranate arils are also used to make a delicious jam and a tangy fermented chutney.

Anārdāneh is a spice made from whole arils dried in the sun for a couple of weeks – it is also very popular in northern India.¹² The seeds inside the pomegranate arils can be cold pressed to make an excellent tasting oil (which is also used in skin care products as well as for producing glossy emulsion paints).¹³

USE OF POMEGRANATE JUICE IN PERSIAN COOKERY

Drinking pomegranate juice is very popular among Persians – anywhere from breakfast, instead of orange juice, to a thirst-quenching drink anytime.

In fact, pomegranate juice is one of the most popular beverages that one finds on traditional street juice vendor carts or in modern juice bars in Iran. Pomegranate juice is also used to make mouthwatering Persian fruit leather called Lavashak-é-Anar that is an irresistible and addictive snack. Persians are also known for making wine from pomegranate juice.

...the fessenjans of fowls and boiled meat; also partridges boiled and served with the concentrated juice of the pomegranate and pounded walnuts.

C.J. Wills, 1891¹⁴

USE OF POMEGRANATE ‘MOLASSES’ IN PERSIAN COOKERY

The most important pomegranate-based ingredient in Persian cookery, made from pomegranate juice, is Rob-é-Anār known in the West as pomegranate molasses. Although it has been extremely popular in Persian (as well as Turkish and Azerbaijani) communities for decades, it is largely unknown to Western palates. It is also somewhat misunderstood in the West because of the unfortunate Western labeling of it as ‘molasses’. Unlike other molasses that Westerners are familiar with, there is no added sugar in it. Culinarily speaking it is a juice that has been inspissated (concentrated) through boiling. This magical sweet-and-sour syrupy substance is made by gently boiling pure fresh pomegranate juice over an extended period until a deep dark crimson syrupy liquid is formed. It is a key ingredient in

Persian dishes including braises, soups, vegetable dishes, kabābs, fish dishes, condiments, and marinades.

The most famous of such dishes is called Fessenjān. It is made by braising chunks of meat, along with crushed walnuts, pomegranate molasses, and a bit of sugar, cooked slowly over an hour or two. Duck is the preferred meat for this dish, but it is equally delicious when made with lamb, beef, chicken, or tiny meatballs. It is a rich, deep brown, tangy-sweet braise that is served over the famous Persian steamed rice.

As a marinade, Rob-é-Anār is used in such famous side dishes as Zeytoon Parvande, discussed in an earlier section, and for several regional Persian kabābs, giving them a deep tangy flavor.

The northern provinces of Gilān and Māzandaran, on the shores of the Caspian Sea, have several specialties that uses Rob-é-Anār, including several sour-tasting stews such as Morgh-é-Torsh, meaning sour chicken, Anār-bij, which is made by cooking meatballs in a sauce full of herbs and crushed walnuts, and Mala-bij, which is where a white fish is cooked with aromatic herbs, walnuts, Rob-é-Anār, and Persian hogweed.

USE OF POMEGRANATE PARTS IN PERSIAN HANDCRAFTS

Over the centuries, Persian artists and craftsmen have masterfully utilized different parts of the pomegranate tree for a wide range of innovative artistic and industrial creations.

RIND OF THE FRUIT

Pale-yellow colouring agents have been extracted from pomegranate rinds for centuries. The traditional method used by Persian craftsmen involves collecting pomegranate rinds after farmers have utilized a portion of their pomegranate harvest for producing pomegranate juice and pomegranate molasses. The rinds are dried in the sun and ground into powder. The active colouring agent is then extracted from the powder with water.

The resulting pale-yellow dye is a key player in the process of making the famous Persian *termeh* tablecloths. The traditional fabric used for Persian *termeh* tablecloths is a hand-woven calico

(*karbās-é-dastbāf*). However, the background colour for the design is not white but a pale-yellow or fawn colour. The white hand-woven calico fabric is boiled in a solution of pomegranate rind, then rinsed and dried. The resulting dyed fabric is then used to print (hand-stamped) the traditional design of Persian *termeh* tablecloths.

Another method for obtaining the fawn background dye is as follows: after thorough moistening, 20 to 30 printed naturally white calicoes are spread on the ground, all on top of one another, each one being sprinkled with finely ground dried pomegranate rind before the next one is placed over it. More water is poured over this pack, and it is left alone for several hours. After a final rinse in fresh water the cloths are dried in the sun. This process also serves as an additional colour fixer.¹⁵

In addition to the traditional methods of extracting colouring agents from the rind of pomegranates, there are more contemporary techniques for home craftsmen as well as for industrial applications.^{16, 17}

TRUNK OF THE TREE

Pomegranate tree wood is very hard. Although a Babylonian text refers to a building edifice made from a 3-meter-long pomegranate beam, the small size of a typical pomegranate tree prevents it from being used for construction applications. However, the wood's hardness allows for the creation of small decorative handicrafts as well as small farming and agricultural tools. Small cups made from pomegranate wood have been found in Bronze Age archaeological sites.¹⁸

DRIED WHOLE OR HALF FRUIT

Dried whole or half pomegranates have been used by Persian craftsmen to create anything from children's toys to household decorative items.

Although it may take a few weeks, the whole fruit can be dried if left in the sun. Once dried, it can be painted and used as an attractive decorative object.

Cut a pomegranate in half, with the pulp carefully scooped

out, then dry in the sun. They can then be used as percussive musical instruments by hitting (clapping) the two halves against each other. Each half can also be used by children to play in sand.

OTHER PARTS OF THE POMEGRANATE TREE

Persian craftsmen have used the very vibrant red vegetable dye that is produced from dried crushed pomegranate flower petals for Persian carpet making and textile crafts. Persian tanneries have used the bark of the pomegranate tree (as well as the rind of its fruit) for tanning leather. A black vegetable dye can be extracted from the roots of the pomegranate tree and can be used for Persian carpet making and textile crafts.

SIGNIFICANCE OF POMEGRANATE FRUIT IN HEALTH AND MEDICINE

The pomegranate is one of the oldest medicinal plants in the world. Its uses for healing and prevention of illness has long been recognized by practitioners of traditional folk medicine going back to classical and medieval times. Practically all parts of the pomegranate tree – roots, bark, leaves, flowers, rind, seeds, juice – contain chemicals such as polyphenols, that have been used to treat many ailments and diseases. The range of therapeutic properties of the pomegranate is quite long, including wound and injury healing, pain and inflammation control, and treating diabetes, jaundice, cardiovascular disease, nausea, asthma, respiratory infections, and hundreds of others.^{19, 20}

Pomegranates' medicinal values were known to the ancient Persians. Throughout the ages, Iranian physicians have revered both the scientific and folk pomegranate-based medical practices for treatment and prevention of a wide range of conditions.

Aboo-Ali Sina, commonly known in the West as Ibn Sina or Avicenna, a 10th century Persian polymath, known as the father of modern medicine, had written about the medicinal properties of pomegranate in his *The Canon of Medicine*, a five-volume encyclopedic work which, until the 18th century, was used as the standard medical text in Europe and the Islamic world. In fact, he had provided numerous and explicit instructions utilizing

different parts of the tree for dealing with a variety of ailments and preventive precautions such as:²¹

Drinks to slow down drunkenness: mix one part of white cabbage water, one part of acidic pomegranate juice, and half part vinegar, boil, and drink one *oka* before starting drinking alcohol.

If something stronger is needed, then take six drams of each of pomegranate peel, flower, and leaf midrib, sumac, four drams of oak, and two drams of dill; grind all, sieve, and sprinkle.

CLOSING

This, along with the earlier paper published in PPC 125,²² has been a broad foodways look at the Persianate world's beloved fruit, the pomegranate. As a foodway study, in addition to extensive culinary dimensions, we have explored historical, geographical, cultural, linguistic, artistic, religious, literary, and folkloric aspects of the pomegranate and its importance to the people of Iran and the larger Persian communities around the world. Given that the pomegranate is one of the oldest known ancient fruits, and the fact that it is native to a geographical region centered around Iran, it is not surprising to find it deeply embedded in the ancient history, culture, and culinary practices of the people who have lived in the greater Iran region for thousands of years. The importance of the pomegranate to Persianate societies around the world persists today, as it continues to be cultivated extensively in Iran, is a key element of major Persian annual cultural celebrations, is a subject of interest to contemporary Iranian artists and literary personnel, and is highly present in Persian culinary landscape in a variety of forms and shapes. No wonder the Persians refer to it as the national fruit of Iran, revere it as though it was a ruby from paradise, and consider it their beloved fruit.

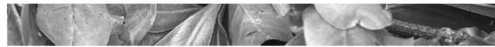
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FESENJĀN

(Nader Mehravari's Persian Pomegranate and Walnut Meat Braise)



Pomegranates growing in the Chelsea Physic Garden, London.

(Image: Sam Bilton.)

Persian cuisine is famous for its slow-cooked meat braises. For centuries, braises have been an integral and expansive class of dishes within the Persian cookery landscape. Fesenjān (a.k.a. fesenjoon) or khoresh-e-fesanjān is one of the most famous, popular, and notorious of Persian meat braises. It is a uniquely Persian sweet-and-sour meat braise that incorporates ground walnuts and pomegranate molasses. The contrasting textures and flavours of pomegranate molasses and ground walnut come together to create a thick and rich braise with an eye-catching dark brown colour.

Unlike what you may have heard about fesanjān, it is a simple dish to make. There are only three key ingredients – pomegranate molasses, walnuts, meat – which collectively create a uniquely sumptuous dish. Don't be discouraged about the total time it

takes to make this dish. Once everything is cooking in the pot, you don't have to do much of anything other than letting it simmer gently on the stovetop.

Despite the fact that the most famous version is made with duck, it is equally delicious with lamb, beef, chicken, turkey, other fowls, fish, and even with tiny meatballs. I recommend cooking the lamb or beef version first as these are the simplest and quickest versions, with almost certain assurance of success on the first try. Like many other Persian meat braises, fesenjān can be made a day or two ahead of time as long as it is reheated gently.

Pomegranate molasses is readily available in glass bottles in Middle Eastern and Mediterranean markets, in ethnic food aisles of well-stocked grocery stores, as well as through a wide range of online sources.

INGREDIENTS (SERVES 6)

- 3 cups walnut halves (about 10 oz or 285 g)
- 3 tablespoons (30 ml) olive oil (or a neutral cooking oil or ghee) plus more as needed
- 1 lb (500 g) boneless leg of lamb meat (or stewing beef), cut into 1 to 1.5 inch (2 to 3 centimeter) chunks
- ½ tsp ground black pepper
- ½ tsp Diamond Crystal Kosher salt (or ¼ tsp table salt)
- 1 small onion (about 4 oz or 110 g), peeled, diced ¼-inch (6 mm)
- 1 tsp turmeric
- 1 cup pomegranate molasses (about 11 oz or 330 g)
- 2 tablespoons sugar

Optional: ¼ cup fresh pomegranate arils for garnishing the finished braise.

METHOD

1. Chop walnuts coarsely (size of coarse cornmeal) – about 12 one-second pulses in a food processor. You should have about 2.5 cups of ground walnuts.

2. In a large saucepan or Dutch oven, heat 2 tablespoons of oil over medium-high heat until simmering. Season the meat with salt and pepper all over and add to the saucepan in a single layer. Cook for about 10 minutes, turning occasionally until the meat is well browned on all sides. Transfer the meat to a plate with a slotted spoon and set aside.
3. Add 1 tablespoon oil to the same saucepan that you had used to brown the meat. Lower heat to medium then add the chopped onions. Sauté the onions for around 10 minutes until translucent and the edges have turned golden brown.
4. Sprinkle 1 teaspoon turmeric over the sautéed onions, stir thoroughly and sauté for another 30 seconds.
5. Add 1.5 cups (360 ml) of water to the saucepan, bring to boil, while scraping the bottom of the saucepan to free up all brown bits left from browning the meat and sautéing the onions.
6. Add the meat that had been set aside, the ground walnuts, pomegranate molasses, and sugar to the saucepan. Stir to mix then bring to the boil. Cover and reduce the heat to medium low.
7. After 10 minutes, uncover and observe the strength of the bubbling. Give the contents a gentle stir before re-covering. Adjust the heat (you will probably have to lower the heat) so the contents are simmering with very gently.
8. Continue cooking for a further 90 minutes, checking once every 15 minutes while giving it a gentle stir each time. Gradually the colour of the braise will change from light brown to deep dark brown and you will start seeing some of the oil that has been naturally released by the walnuts come to the surface.
9. Transfer the contents to a serving bowl and garnish by sprinkling some fresh pomegranate arils over the top if desired.

NOTES

- **How to Serve:** Like practically all other Persian *khoreshes* (braises), Fesenjān is best served with Persian steamed white rice, *chelow*, along with a few pieces of Persian crunchy rice,

tahdig. In traditional Persian fashion, the meal is served family style where individuals start by spooning some rice onto their plate and topping it off with spoonfuls of the braise. Alternatively, instead of rice, fesenjān can be accompanied with some sort of Persian flatbread (e.g., *Lavāsh*, *Sangak*, *Tāftoon*, *Babari*) or another type of flat bread such as pita. Given the richness of Fesenjān, a side of Persian Shirāzi salad (chopped cucumbers, tomatoes, and onions), Persian māst-o-khiār (chopped or grated cucumber, yogurt, crushed dried mint leaves) and/or the ubiquitous Persian plate of fresh herbs, sabzi-khordan (any combination of fresh mint, tarragon, Thai basil, watercress, scallion, radish) is customary among the Persians, but not necessary.

- **Leftovers and Storage:** Fesenjān is extremely leftover friendly. Store any leftovers in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to a week. Add a couple of tablespoons of water as part of gently reheating. Warming it up in the microwave works fine as long as you zap it in one-minute intervals with a couple of minutes of rest in between. For longer storage, Fesenjān freezes very well for at least three months, as long as it is stored in an airtight freezer safe container.