

PPC 122



Petits Propos Culinaires

Essays and notes on food, cookery and cookery books

PROSPECT BOOKS

YOGURT IN PERSIAN COOKERY

Nader Mehravari

Ardeshir saw a fire on the mountainside; he and his companions made their way up to it, and as they drew nearer they saw a few shepherds there, watching their sheep and goats. He and his soldiers dismounted, and as their mouths were filled with the dust of battle, Ardeshir immediately asked for water, which the shepherds gave him, together with some yogurt. He rested and ate a little of what was before him.

Abolqhäsem Ferdowsi¹

I'll never forget one of my first culture shocks when I came to the US in 1974, experiencing 'fruit on the bottom' tiny containers of yogurt in a local grocery store. To those who are familiar with the landscape of Persian cookery and/or have been cooking Persian food on a regular basis, yogurt is not what one experiences when walking down the yogurt section of the dairy aisle in a typical Western supermarket. There, one finds a whole section with an ever-expanding array of tiny plastic containers of low-fat, full-fat, flavoured, sweetened, and/or fruit-infused yogurt. There is Greek, Icelandic, French-country style and even soy and coconut based options. In Persian cookery,² however, yogurt is rather simple. It is an undoctored, fresh, plain, tangy, silky, creamy dairy product that is always present at a Persian meal. It can be pourable like heavy cream or as thick as a stiff pudding. Yogurt is ubiquitous in Persian cookery; it shows up not only as a standalone item or condiment, but also as a visible team player in appetizers, side dishes, soups, rice dishes, desserts, and beverages, as well as cleverly disguised in a slew of savoury and sweet creations.

Slowly it dawned on me that in simple fermented yogurt I was tasting something that might have been eaten or drunk by Old Testament patriarchs, Sumerian lawgivers, Homeric heroes, Hindu gods, or the flower of Persian chivalry.

Anne Mendelson³

Yogurt is an ancient food. One thing that historians agree on is that the exact geographical, temporal, and procedural origin of yogurt-making continues to be a bit unclear, and most likely, has diverse origins. All indications are, however, that fermented milk products date back more than 10,000 years to early Neolithic times.⁴ Yogurt could easily have been the result of the unintended fermentation of milk by the nomadic people of Central Asia where milk produced by their goats and sheep was the primary source of protein.⁵ Many credit initial production to nomads who transported their milk in goatskin sacks, which acted as a warm incubator where the fermentation process could take place, resulting in an effective way of transforming milk into a tasty food product that could be preserved for a more extended time in hot climates.⁶

Yogurt was introduced into the modern Western world relatively late – the late nineteenth century – most probably when a few immigrants brought cultures from places like Greece and Syria. The English word ‘yogurt’ that was introduced in the early twentieth century comes from the Turkish word *yogurt* which is related to the Turkish verb *yogurmak* meaning to knead, to thicken, or to be curdled.

When the food was ready, Abraham took some yogurt and milk and the roasted meat, and he served it to the men. As they ate, Abraham waited on them in the shade of the trees. Genesis⁷

There are many mentions of yogurt in ancient Persian historical and folkloric artefacts. Persian folklore mentions prophet Abraham’s fecundity and longevity which are credited to his regular consumption of yogurt.⁸ A prime indication that yogurt has been a food product in Iran for millennia is the fact that the Persian word for yogurt, *māst*, is indeed an Old Persian word which dates to the Achaemenid era (600–300 BCE).

As Margaret Shaida explained in her remarkable book, *The Legendary Cuisine of Persia*,⁹ cold yogurt-based dishes were a

favourite of Queen Borān (Poorāndokht) the daughter of the Sassanian Persian King Khosrow Parviz. After becoming the monarch, and the first woman ever to rule Iran (630–632 CE),¹⁰ yogurt-based dishes were named *Poorāni* after her. This is the class of dishes that today we know as *Borāni*.

There are other references to yogurt in Persian literature, poetry, proverbs, and idioms. Probably the most important is the discussion of yogurt in Iran's national epic *Shahnameh*, or *The Book of Kings* (*Sāhnāmeḥ*) written by the great Persian poet Ferdowsi between the tenth and eleventh centuries,¹¹ where shepherds present the historic hero Ardashir with water and yogurt after a battle.

Several Persian proverbs also involve yogurt. When someone is talking out of both sides of their mouth, a phrase whose literal translation is 'Someone is talking about yogurt and the gate' (*Māst-ó-darvāzeh sohbat mikonad*) is used. When someone is being too picky, it is said they are 'Picking a strand of hair from a bowl of yogurt' (*Moo ra az māst keshidan*).

It [Persian-style yogurt] is one of the best things I've tasted in quite a while – thick and smooth and glossy, and with an aroma that I feel relatively certain is what Heaven smells like.

Jeffrey Steingarten¹²

Persian-style yogurt, made via old-world, small-batch, hand-made methods, tastes and is noticeably different than mass-produced varieties commonly found in most Western supermarkets. To better appreciate this difference, a bit of scientific explanation of the yogurt-making process is worth sharing.

Simply speaking, yogurt is a mild-sour fermentation of milk when colonized by one or more strains of heat-loving lactic-acid bacteria. The bacteria used to make yogurt are referred to as yogurt cultures or starters. Fermentation of sugars in the milk by these bacteria produces lactic acid, which acts on milk protein to give yogurt its texture and characteristic tart flavour. The process

involves: (i) heating the milk, (ii) partially cooling it, (iii) adding the starter, (iv) incubating in a warm environment, (v) moving the yogurt someplace safe to prevent it from being disturbed, knocked, or jolted during incubation, and (vi) draining it if a thicker version is desired.

Today, most commercial yogurts are made within a matter of hours and may include a range of additives such as thickeners (e.g., pectin, starch, gum, tapioca), stabilizers, non-fat milk solids, health-claiming substances (e.g., inulin), natural or artificial sweeteners, etc. Old-fashioned Persian-style yogurt only needs two ingredients: whole milk and yogurt culture starter – plus, of course, a bit of love, care, and patience. It takes a day or more to make, is creamy (the higher the fat content, the creamier the result), and has a noticeable but pleasant tangy flavour. Some truly artisanal Persian yogurt recipes take up to three days.¹³ Thickening occurs, not by adding more ingredients (thickeners and stabilizers), but instead by simply straining it – subtracting – to drain off some of the liquid whey (which can, and should, be used for other purposes). To make it tangier (more sour), one can simply let the yogurt incubate longer, or once done incubating, by leaving it in the refrigerator for a few days before straining; the retained whey in the undrained yogurt speeds up the process and increases the sourness.

The easiest way to demonstrate the importance of yogurt in Persian cookery is simply to point out examples – certainly not an exhaustive list – of its uses within a wide range of categories of Persian dishes as illustrated in Figure 1, below.

Some believe that a Persian *sofreh* – the physical setting and the people gathered for a meal in Persianate society – is not complete without the inclusion of a simple standalone bowl of yogurt. It could be plain – drained or undrained – or sometimes flavoured with a bit of a popular dried herb such as flakes of dried mint or with regional herbs such as *Ziziphora* (for example, in Iran's north-

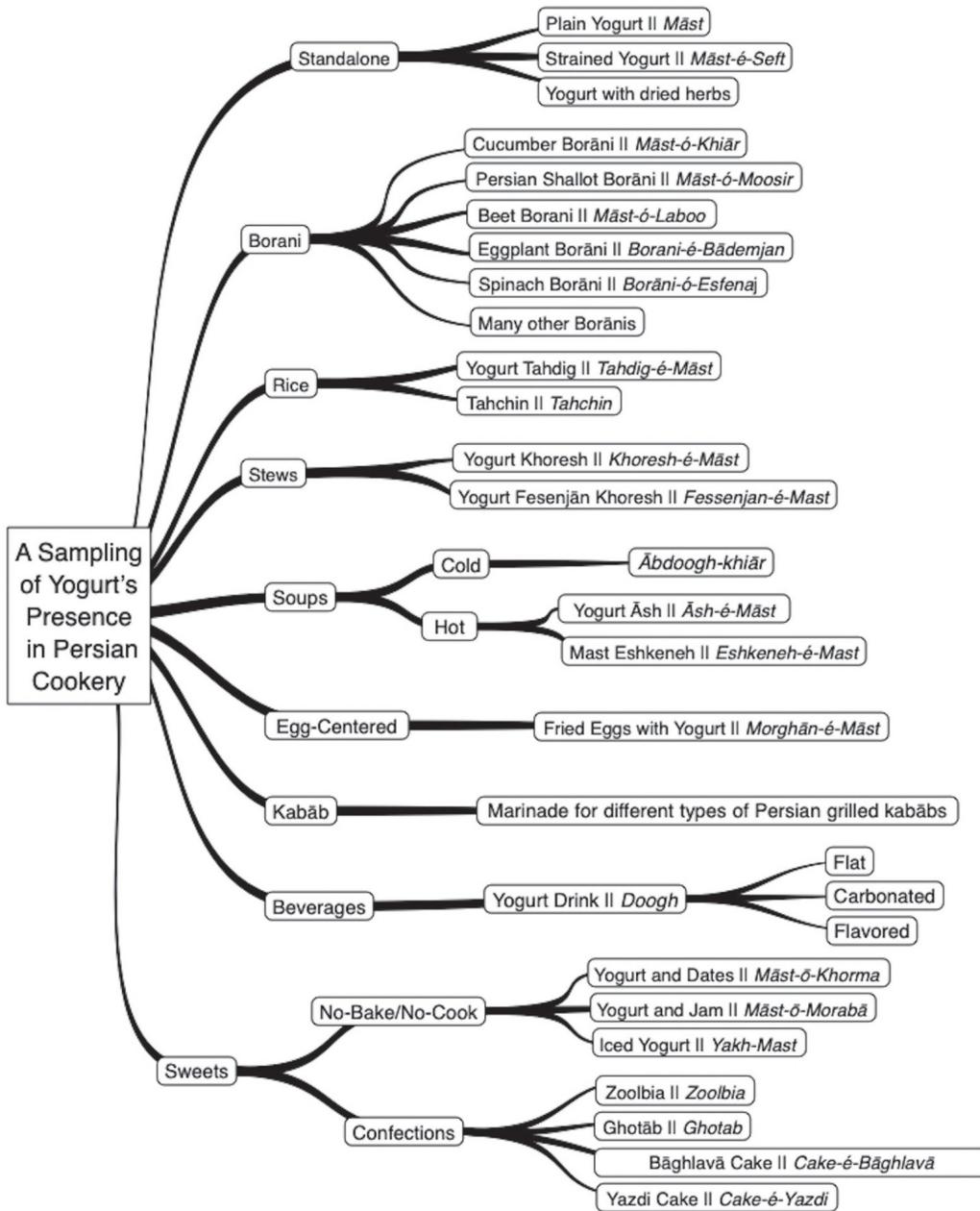


Figure 1. A sampling of yogurt's presence in Persian cookery.

eastern province of Khorasan). My father's family originated in this region, and, regardless of what the primary dish(es) of the meal was or were, he would put a spoonful of yogurt on his plate. This simple practice of including yogurt modifies both taste

(sourness, tartness) and texture (creaminess, thickness), creating a distinct palette of options.

One of the most common ways yogurt is used in Persian cooking is in the class of dishes referred to as appetizers, starters, accompaniments, or side-dishes. For example, *borāni* is a large category of yogurt-centric dishes that have been present in Persian cookery for over 2,500 years.¹⁴ These are mixtures of yogurt (drained or undrained) and some raw or cooked fresh vegetables along with some simple spices (Figure 2). The most popular is cucumber *borāni* (*māst-ó-khiār*) followed by spinach *borāni* and Persian shallot *borāni*. These dishes are so popular that you will find them on the menus of practically every Persian restaurant. They are fundamentally vegetarian but there are a few variations that include chopped meat.

Yogurt is used in famous Persian rice dishes primarily in two ways. It is used as part of making the yogurt version of *tahdig* – the delicious, buttery, golden, crunchy layer at the bottom of the rice pot. The addition of yogurt reduces the amount of oil needed and introduces tanginess to the *tahdig*.

Another important category of Persian rice dishes where yogurt plays a central role, is called ‘*tahchin*’. Here, large amounts of yogurt, egg yolks, and liquid-steeped saffron are mixed with parboiled rice, after the rice has been drained. The resulting mixture is then carefully arranged (the literal translation of Persian word *tahchin* is ‘arranged on the bottom’), often layered with pre-cooked meat that has been dipped in yogurt (or other flavourings), starting from the bottom of the pot. Careful steaming, with the pot tightly covered, over low heat for an hour or two, results in one of Persian cuisine’s most prestigious dishes.

Persian ‘*khoreshes*’ are an important class of Persian stew-like dishes that are often served alongside rice. Fundamentally, they are meat braises augmented with wide variety of fresh herbs, vegetables, fruit, nuts, and/or spices. There are also vegetarian versions. There are over 100 types of *khoreshes* in Persian cookery. In a few of them, yogurt plays a central role. In particular, yogurt *khoresh* (*khoresh-é-māst*) where drained yogurt and egg yolk are

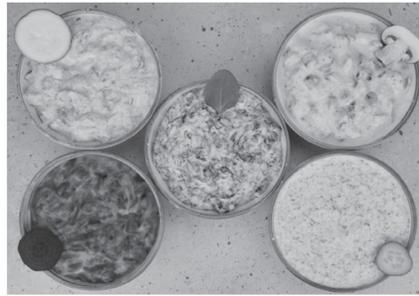


Figure 2. Different types of Borāni.



Figure 3. Tahdig with lamb.

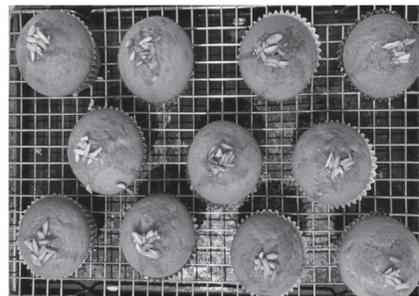
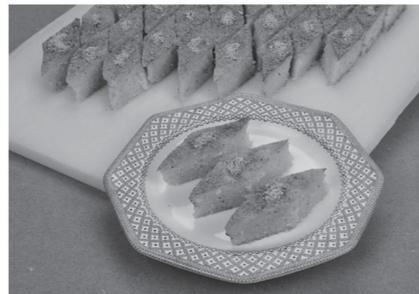


Figure 4. Lamb rib chop Kabāb.

Figure 5. Ghotāb.

Figure 6. Bāghlava cake.

Figure 7. Yazdi cake.



added to the braised meat, and yogurt *fesenjān khoresh* (*khoresh-é-fessenjan-é-mast*) where finely chopped walnuts and yogurt are added to braised meat.

When it comes to soups and soup-like dishes, there are one cold and several hot varieties where yogurt plays a prominent role. The Persian cold soup *ābdoogh-khiār* is a popular summer dish that can be thought of as a diluted version of cucumber *borāni*, mentioned above, with the addition of other ingredients such as raisins and walnuts. Once served, typically a handful or two of small pieces of Persian flat bread are added to soak up some of the liquid – which can be a meal of its own.

Yogurt is also a major player in several famous hot soup-like dishes. Yogurt *eshkeneh* (*eshkeneh-é-mast*) is a relatively thin soup with primary ingredients of egg, onion, garlic, yogurt, and walnuts. Another important example is yogurt *āsh* (*āsh-é-māst*) which is a relatively thick soup with ingredients often including rice, yellow split pea and/or other types of legumes, significant amounts of different types of fresh herbs (parsley, cilantro, mint, garlic chive green, etc.), and yogurt. It can be made both with meat and without.

Yogurt plays a major role in many of the celebrated and better-known Persian grilled meat dishes (*kabāb*). For example, the tenderness and flavour of the famous Persian chicken *kabāb* (*joojeh-kabāb*) and lamb rib chop *kabāb* (*sheeshleek*) are due to marinating the meat in a mixture of yogurt, saffron, onion, and lemon juice.

The Persian cold yogurt-derived drink, *doogh*, is an ancient beverage that has been present in both Persian and other Middle Eastern cuisines long before the invasion of the Mongols.¹⁵ The English writer Frederic Shoberl commented in 1828 that ‘Plutarch mentions it [*doogh*] as part of the ceremony at the consecration of the Persian kings, to quaff a large goblet of this acidulated mixture.’¹⁶ The contemporary Persian word for *doogh*, comes from the Parthian language,¹⁷ a member of the Middle Persian languages that were used in the greater Iran region between around 450 BCE and 650 CE. *Doogh* is one of the most popular beverages in Iran and across the Indian subcontinent. Some refer to it as the Iranian

people's national cold beverage and some consider it 'the' beverage to go along with the Persian *chelow-kabāb* dish of Persian-style steamed rice and grilled meat. Traditionally, *doogh* was made by churning yogurt in an animal skin bag (*kheek/mashk*) – often a goatskin bag – until the fat separated in the form of butter, which was then removed. The liquid left behind from the churning process was the original authentic *doogh*. Over the years, however, other – maybe not as authentic – methods have become popular for making what most people now know as *doogh*. Such methods range anywhere from letting various mixtures of milk, water, and yogurt sit unrefrigerated for two or three days for additional fermentation, to simply mixing store-bought yogurt with tap water or soda water. Regardless of the preparation method, *doogh* is often served cold over ice with salt and flakes of dried mint added. Commercially produced bottles of *doogh* – both flat and carbonated – are also popular, sold along with other popular non-alcoholic beverages.

In sweet recipes, yogurt is a key ingredient in several famous Persian confections (i.e., cooked or baked) as well as several simple dessert-like dishes that do not require any cooking or baking. A simple mixture of yogurt and dates (*māst-ō-khorma*) is a speciality of central and southern provinces of Iran. The fifteenth century satirical Persian poet Boshāq At'Ameh (Abnu Eshaq Fakhr al-Din Hallaj Shirzi), who used Persian culinary terminology in his poetry, describes a somewhat romantic relationship between yogurt and dates: 'Dates and yogurt have embraced each other; And they are free from thorns of cardoon.'¹⁸

Iced yogurt (*yakh-mast*) is another simple regional dessert-like dish from the northern parts of Iran where the winter temperatures often drop below freezing. It contains yogurt, sugar, raisins, rosewater, with a mixture of crushed pistachios, walnuts, and almonds. Traditionally, in wintertime, after combining all the ingredients, the mixture is left outdoors until a thin layer of frozen yogurt forms on top of the bowl. In a typical modern home kitchen, the same effect can be reproduced by putting the mixture in the freezer for about 30 minutes or so.

And finally, there are some famous delicious Persian confections where yogurt plays a major role. In the opinion of this author, the four most important (or, maybe, most delicious) of those confections are firstly, *zoolbia*, made by deep-frying thick strands of an aromatic batter of yogurt, wheat starch, flour, rose water, saffron and yeast which is then soaked in a saffron-infused sugar syrup. Secondly, *ghotāb*, a baked or deep-fried pastry shaped like a crescent moon with scalloped edges, filled with walnut powder, confectioner's sugar, cardamom, and cinnamon (Figure 5). The primary ingredients of its pastry dough are yogurt, rice flour, and egg yolk. It is a speciality of the city of Yazd in central Iran – a city famous for many sweets and confections. Thirdly, *bāghlavā* cake (*cake-é-bāghlavā*) is a very moist cake with batter made with yogurt, almond flour, sugar, and eggs (Figure 6). After being baked, the cake is then saturated with an aromatic rose water and saffron infused sugar syrup – the same magical syrup that is used to make Persian *bāghlavā*. And finally, Yazdi cake (*cake-é-Yazdi*) are small individual cupcake-like delights whose primary ingredients are yogurt, eggs, sugar, flour, cardamom, and rosewater (Figure 7).

Depending on which part of the world you live in, you might be able to purchase Persian-style yogurt locally. Start by checking middle-eastern grocery stores. If you live in the United States, look for such brands as White Moustache, Damavand, Abali, Sadaf, and Karoun. The Straus Family Creamery's whole milk European-style plain yogurt is a close alternative. If you live in the United Kingdom, look for such brands as Alwand, Abali, Naz, Pegah, and Diba.

You can also make your own. It is not difficult, and you don't need any special equipment. For your first time, start with one quart (approximately 1 litre) of whole milk – preferably unhomogenized minimally processed cream top. The only other ingredient you need is two tablespoons of commercial, store-bought plain unflavoured yogurt that contains live yogurt culture

– read the label to confirm that it contains live active yogurt culture. Before you start, gather a couple of blankets and identify a spot in your home or apartment where you can leave the yogurt for 12 hours without it being disturbed, knocked, or jolted. Pour the milk into a large heavy pot and gently heat it up to about 190°F (88°C) which is just below the boiling point. You need to stir it and scrape the bottom of the pot while the milk is being heated to prevent scorching the milk. Reduce the heat before it starts boiling and keep it at that temperature for 10 minutes. Turn off the heat and let the milk cool to about 110°F (43°C). At that point, pour about 1 cup (250 millilitres) of the milk into a small bowl and stir in the two tablespoons of the store-bought yogurt. Then stir the mixture back into the pot of milk. Now it is time to let it incubate. Pour the warm cultured milk into a glass or plastic container. Cover it and wrap the container in four or five layers of blanket – you are trying to insulate the container. Leave it someplace where it won't get disturbed for 12 hours. For example, if you are not going to use your oven for the next 12 hours, put it in there and close its door – turned off of course. Another good place to put it is in a sink that is not going to get used for the next 12 hours. After 12 hours, unwrap the container and move it to the refrigerator. Leave it in the refrigerator for 24 hours. As Alton Brown would say, your patience will be rewarded.

Yogurt has and continues to be an essential part of the landscape of Persian cuisine. It has been present in Greater Iran – the regions of west Asia, central Asia, south Asia, and Transcaucasia where Iranian culture has had significant influence and Iranian languages were spoken. For at least 2,500 years, yogurt has shaped the eating habits of Persianate societies, including Iranian diaspora communities globally. In addition to being a subject in Persian literature and folklore, it continues to be a key ingredient in a vast array of Iranian food items. Yogurt and its elemental qualities reside at the intersection of gastronomy, history, traditions, and culture. It continues to be a fundamental ingredient in any

kitchen that prepares Persian food items and serves a multiplicity of purposes, including as a digestive. Yogurt is often present at any Persian *sofreh* whether it is a breakfast, lunch, or dinner meal; it is the common denominator of many appetizers, starters, and side dishes; it acts as a condiment enabling individuals to adjust the flavour and texture of the food on their plate according to their individual preferences; it behaves like a sauce for enriching and thickening soup-like and stew-like dishes; it tenderizes meat; it is the base of Iranian people's historical national cold beverage; and, it can replace some of the oil, eggs, milk, and cream needed in both savoury and sweet food recipes. Without yogurt, a Persian kitchen would simply be incomplete!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

1. Abolqasem Ferdowsi, *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*, translated by Dick Davis (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), p. 543.
2. In this article, the discussion of "Persian Food" or "Persian Cookery" includes culinary principles and practices of not only those communities who live in the country that today is called Iran (including Kurds, Arabs, Azaris, Turks, etc.) but also certain communities in other countries such as the Parsians of India (the Zoroastrian community that left Iran for India after the Arab invasion) as well as communities who speak Persian who live in countries other than Iran such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan. Generally speaking, the discussion includes culinary history of the communities in the ancient Greater Iran because "Persian food" is the food of a larger community than just those who are considered to be in "Iranian Diaspora."

All photographs were taken by the author who owns the corresponding copyrights. All dishes depicted in this article were prepared by the author in a typical modern Western home kitchen.

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4. Reay Tannahill, *Food in History* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1988) pp. 27–29.
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6. Sheryl Sternman Rule, *Yogurt Culture: A Global Look at How to Make, Bake, Sip, and Chill the World's Creamiest, Healthiest Food* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015).
7. Genesis 18.8, New Living Translation.
8. *Handbook of Fermented Functional Foods*, ed. Edward R. Farnworth (2nd ed., London: Taylor & Francis, 2008).
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