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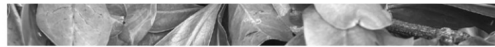
Petits Propos Culinaires

Essays and notes on food, cookery and cookery books

PROSPECT BOOKS

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.