

Research Essay

Persian Comfort Food: A Foodways Exploration

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Abstract:

Most Persians consider *tahdig* a comfort food. *Tahdig* is that delicious, buttery, golden, crunchy, round layer formed at the bottom of the Persian-style rice pot. Throughout 2020—the first year of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic—I noticed an increased interest in Persian communities, in both Iran and the Iranian diaspora, in making and consuming *tahdig*: requests for recipes; *tahdig* pictures in social media from recent meals; comments in social media such as “I have been eating so much *tahdig* that I have gained weight...”; etc. One could hypothesize that the Persian communities were finding some level of comfort through their increased interest in and consumption of *tahdig*-centric dishes as a coping mechanism for COVID-19 challenges. This paper deals with characterizations of what the Persian communities around the world consider to be their comfort foods, the reason for turning to their favorite comfort foods, and the associated COVID-19 lockdown impacts. In addition, for the first time in the study of comfort foods, we introduce the concept of diasporic categorization of comfort foods.

Keywords: foodways, comfort food, Iran, Persia, Diasporic (or Diaspora), Rituals

Introduction

Everyone needs to eat. Comfort food, however, is more than just food for the sake of sustenance. Consuming a certain food activates memories and emotions corresponding to that food item. Comfort food incorporates certain aspects of one’s culture, memories, relationships, and emotions, both negative and positive. Comfort food has been a subject of study by philosophers, sociologists, folklorists, anthropologists, psychologists, historians, and other scholars ever since the term was coined in mid-twentieth century (Wikipedia Contributors and Wiktionary Contributors, N.d.). Comprehensive literature reviews of the general concept of comfort food can be found (Locher et al. 2005; Spence 2017; Soffing and Batsell 2019; Wansink and Sangerman 2000; Locher 2002; Wood and Vogan 1998; Wansink et al. 2003). These focus on comfort food in western cultures. There are only a very few studies exploring aspects of comfort food associated with the cultures of specific countries and the associated immigrants of such cultures living in their respective diasporas around the world (Tatti 2019; Sayadabdi 2020; Tye 2017; Tucker 2017).

This paper focuses on the comfort foods associated with Persianate societies around the world including (i) those living in Iran, (ii) those living in historically Persianate societies in countries surrounding Iran (e.g., Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and in Central Asia (e.g., the Parsi communities in India), and (iii) those living in the Iranian diaspora communities around the world. The purpose of the study, summarized in this paper, was four-fold. The first intent was to characterize what Persianate societies consider to be their favorite comfort foods. The second aim was to identify the reason for turning to

these comfort foods. The third objective was to determine the impact of COVID-19 lockdowns on their selection and consumption of comfort foods. And finally, the study introduces the concept of diasporic categorization of comfort foods.

The work presented here is based on historical information about Persian food culture (Floor and Javadi 2019; Mehravari 2022; Zarrabi n.d.; Gunter 1988) as well as on a just-in-time questionnaire-based survey that was conducted in early 2021 to collect data about Persian comfort food during the COVID-19 lockdown (a just-in-time survey is one that is conducted as events associated with the topic of the survey are taking place and hence the respondents' answers are based on their immediate reactions rather than trying to recall past feelings). In addition, anecdotal reports in social media from Persianate communities living around the world in conjunction with my own direct observations were utilized. My personal observations are based on having been a member of Iranian diaspora communities for close to five decades—spanning both coasts of the United States—and having been studying and exploring Persian culinary landscape and history for over 35 years.

Comfort Food in General

Ever since mid-twentieth century, the notion and term of “comfort food” and its usage in the English language has seen an increased prominence. In 1997, the phrase “comfort food” was added to both the Oxford English Dictionary and to the Merriam-Wester Collegiate Dictionary with respective definitions of “food that comforts or affords solace; hence, any food that is associated with childhood or with home cooking,” and “food prepared in a traditional style having a usually nostalgic or sentimental appeal.” Many other definitions have since been provided by scholars in different fields (Spence 2017; Soffing and Batsell 2019; Wansink and Sangerman 2000; Locher 2002; Wood and Vogan 1998; Wansink et al. 2003), particularly psychology and nutrition.

For purposes of this paper, comfort food refers to those food items that not only satisfy one's physical hunger but also one's emotional and psychological hunger. Consumption of comfort food is meant to provide contentment, psychological comfort, well-being, and pleasure. Comfort foods are often associated with a special person in one's life, childhood memories of home cooking, food served at a favorite eatery, and celebratory meals or special cultural ceremonies. They often have nostalgic appeal and sentimental memories, particularly for those who are physically far from their homeland.

In addition to positive emotional attachments evoked by comfort food, there are as many negative emotional scenarios—illness, mental stress, loneliness, breakups, homesickness—where individuals turn to their favorite comfort food. The homesickness emotion is of particular interest, in fact it is central, to this paper.

Background Information about Persian Cuisine

The history of Persian cuisine is more than 2500 years old. In 550 BCE, when Cyrus the Great defeated the Greeks and Egyptians, the borders of the Persian empire expanded, and Persian food culture was carried into conquered lands. Centuries later, the Persians were defeated by Alexander the Great, the Mongols, and the Arabs, all of whom also carried

Persian cuisine to other lands, including the rest of the Middle East and India. While Persian cuisine has impacted the food cultures of many other lands, this ancient cooking culture is not well known in the West.

Contemporary Persian culinary practices are deeply rooted in the Iranian culture, not only in the country that today is known as Iran, but also in the Persian empire from which it is evolved. Persianate societies in the surrounding countries (e.g., Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and in Central Asia (e.g., the Parsi communities in India), as well as Iranian diaspora communities around the world have also influenced Persian culinary practices. In this paper, labels Persian and Iranian are at times used interchangeably with the distinction that Persian is more of a cultural identity and historical heritage designation whereas Iranian is primarily a reference to people who live or were born in the country that today is known as Iran.

Many of the ingredients used by Persian home cooks are well known to westerners because of centuries of unrecognized influence of Persian cuisine on other food cultures of the world. Generally speaking, Persian cuisine is well seasoned, but is not “spicy.” It is relatively simple to make but has complex flavors that are rich but delicate, presenting a panorama of textures and flavors. It is also visually captivating. Some of the key elements of Persian cookery that are largely unknown to the western world include: nuts and fruit blended into meat braises and rice dishes; the significant role that herbs play in a wide array of dishes; the method of rice cooking in which it is cooked twice (parboiled first, drained, and then steamed); the use of a wide range of delicate souring agents; and the use of unripe fruit and unripe nuts.

Summary Results from a Just-in-Time Survey

A just-in-time-survey was conducted in early 2021, not only to characterize what Persianate societies consider to be their favorite comfort foods and to identify the reason for turning to their favorite comfort food, but also to also determine the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on their selection and consumption of comfort foods (and hence the “just-in-time-survey” label for the questionnaire). The web-based questionnaire was used between February 23 and March 20, 2021 and included ten questions.

Five of the questions were about Persian comfort food and the remaining five were intended to collect demographic information about the participants. The questionnaire was distributed primarily through several active Persian culinary social media groups with worldwide memberships. In addition, the questionnaire was distributed to individuals through Center for Iranian Diaspora Studies at San Francisco State University. Valid and complete responses were received from 273 individuals.

Respondents were given two opportunities to specify their favorite Persian comfort food. Initially, they were asked to select their three favorite comfort foods among a list of ten common Persian food items. In a second question, they were given the opportunity to identify three other favorite comfort foods that were not among the ten listed in the first question. Analysis of the collected data is summarized in Table 1 below.

Rank	Fraction of Respondents Selecting Each Item	Name of the Persian Food Item		
		English Translation	Romanized	Persian Language
1	17%	Persian green herb stew	Khoresh-é-Ghormeh-Sabzi	خورش قورمه سبزی
2	15%	Persian thick herb and noodle soup	Āsh-é-Reshteh	آش رشته
3	15%	Crunchy layer of rice from bottom of pot	Tahdig	ته دیگ
4	13%	Anything made with eggplant	Khoresh-é-Bādemjan, Kashk-ō-Bādemjan, & such	غذاهای بادمجان مثل خورش بادمجان یا کشک و بادمجان
5	12%	Persian steamed rice and grilled kabab	Chelow-Kabāb	چلو کباب
6	9%	Bread, feta cheese, and fresh herbs	Nān-ō-Paneer-ō-Sabzi	نان و پنیر و سبزی
7	6%	Persian meat and potato patties	Kotlet	کتلت
8	5%	Persian meat and potato soup	Ābgoosht	آب گوشت
9	4%	Persian macaroni	Persian Mākāroni	ماکارونی
10	4%	Custard-like sweets	Ferrini, Sholezard, Shirberenj, and such	چیزی مثل فرنی، شله زرد، یا شیربرنج

Table 1 – Most Favorite Persian Comfort Foods

The participants were then asked about the reasons for turning to their favorite comfort food, by selecting up to three circumstances among ten listed options below. Analysis of the collected data is summarized in Table 2 below.

Rank	Fraction of Respondents Selecting Each Item	Reasons for Turning to One's Favorite Comfort Food
1	23%	To cherish childhood memories or to be nostalgic
2	17%	To indulge
3	14%	To relieve stress of daily life and to improve mood
4	13%	To reward oneself
5	8%	To remember and honor those who are not with us anymore
6	8%	Other
7	6%	To deal with homesickness
8	4%	To get extra energy
9	4%	To counteract COVID-19 lockdowns
10	3%	When you are sick

Table 2 – Reasons for Turning to Favorite Comfort Food

Finally, the participants were asked whether they had noticed (consciously or unconsciously) if they had been turning to their favorite Persian comfort food more often during the past 12-months due to COVID-19 challenges. Analysis of the collected data is summarized in Table 3 below.

Fraction of Respondents	Respondents answer whether they had been turning to their comfort food more often during the COVID-19 pandemic		Fraction of Respondents
24%	Yes, a lot.	Yes	60%
36%	Yes, some.		
40%	No, not really.	No	40%

Table 3 – COVID-19 Impact on Turning to Favorite Comfort Food

More detailed analysis of the survey data, incorporating collected demographic data, is being considered for a future study. Full survey raw data is available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1vqqEeUQ929D_969IE2ufk7SEAAudwE9b/view?usp=sharing.

Diasporic Categorization of Persian Comfort Food

Given that comfort food is not an easy concept to formally define, some sort of categorization (Douglas 1972) is beneficial to better explore different facets of comfort food. There have been various attempts in the past to define a taxonomy for comfort food. The earliest such efforts appear to be by psychologists in 2003 (Wansink et al. 2003) where the authors provide a categorization of comfort food based on the physical characteristics of the food items. Another group of scholars from fields of medicine, sociology, and anthropology posed four categories describing comfort food: nostalgia, indulgence, convenience, and physical comfort (Locher et al. 2005). More recently, psychology researchers suggest a situational approach to classifying comfort foods into such scenarios as illness, negative emotion, positive emotion, reward, and remembrance (Soffing and Batsell 2019).

Comfort food is historically associated with American culture, where it reflects a particular ethos around food (Long 2022), however, the idea of finding comfort from food seems to exist in other cultures as well. Given the strong relationship between eating habits and cultural identity, it is only natural to consider a diasporic dimension in the study of comfort food of different cultures.

For Persianate societies around the world, the availability and the sources of food items, and the associated ingredients, has a major impact on their utility as a comfort food. For example, for those who live in Iran, what might be considered a comfort food might in fact be very different from those Persians who live in other parts of the world. This is consistent with common patterns seen in ethnic foodways where individuals and groups must adapt their foodways to the specific cultural contexts in which they find themselves.

Our proposed diasporic categorization of comfort foods for Persianate societies is depicted in Figure 1. The first categorization tier criterion is based on where the individuals live:

- Those living in Iran
- Those living in historically Persianate societies in countries surrounding Iran (e.g., Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and in Central Asia (e.g., the Parsi communities in India)

- Those living in the Iranian diaspora communities around the world (e.g., USA, Canada, UK, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand)

Given the additional complexity and challenges faced by those living in the Iranian diaspora to acquire their favorite comfort foods, additional categorization tiers are warranted. The second categorization tier is based on whether the desired comfort food is produced in Iran or in the diaspora.

For those comfort foods produced only in Iran, the next tier of categorization depends on whether:

- Food items can be brought by immigrants themselves when emigrating,
- Food items can be brought back by immigrants themselves on one of their return trips from Iran, or
- Food items can be sent to immigrants by family and friends in Iran.

For those comfort foods produced in the Iranian diaspora, the next tier of categorization depends on whether:

- The prepared food items are purchased by immigrants from sources outside of Iran, or
- Food items are prepared by immigrants themselves.

The importance of having the second and third tier of categorization (for those living in the Iranian diaspora) was illustrated by a study documenting interviews and informal conversations with the community of Iranian diaspora in New Zealand (Sayadabdi 2020).

The ideas captured in the proposed diasporic categorization depicted in Figure 1 can further be expanded for specific cultures, circumstances, and geographies. For example, an Iranian immigrant living in Los Angeles, where there is a large and well-established Persian community, will easily have access to their traditional comfort foods and associated culinary ingredients compared to one living in a small town in the American South.

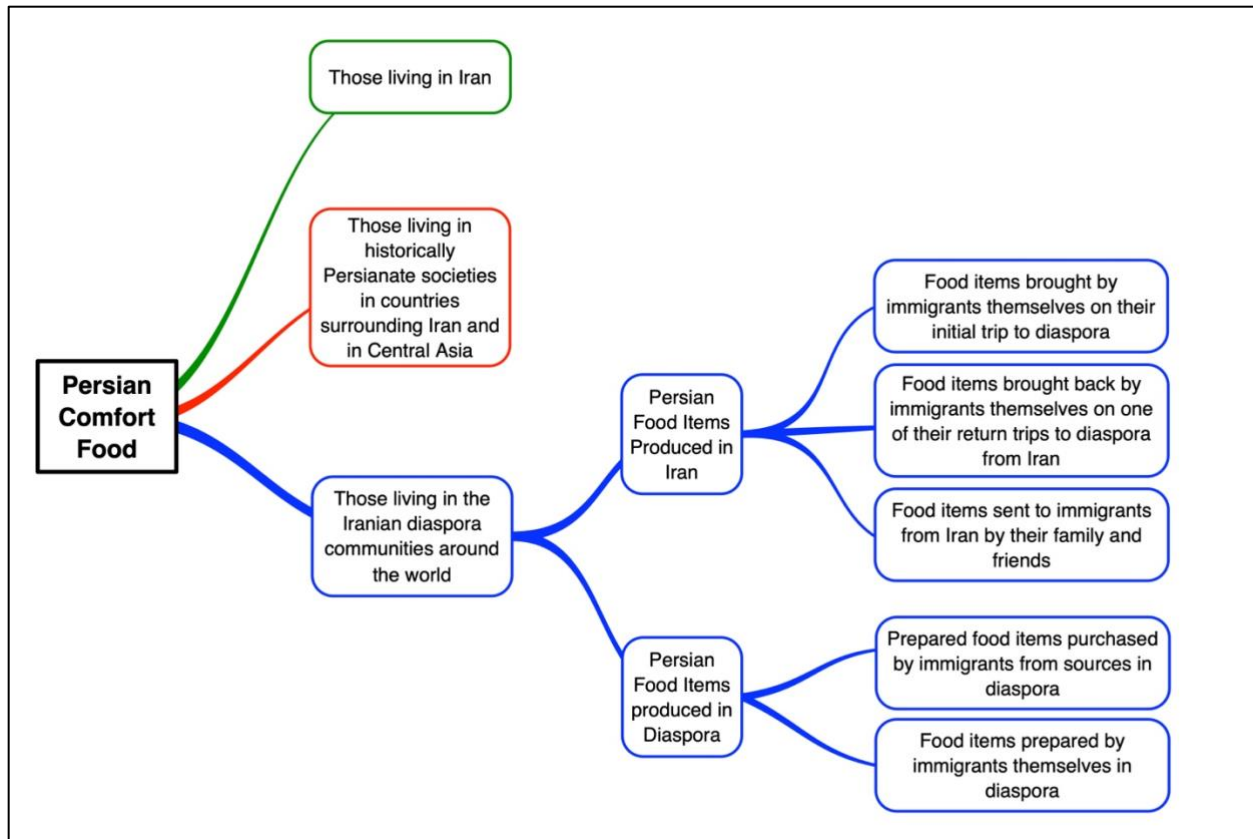


Figure 1 - A Diasporic Categorization of Persian Comfort Food

Closing

The results presented here capture an initial exploration of Persian comfort food. Our focus has been the comfort food for Persianate communities around the world. In particular, those living in Iran, those living in historically Persianate societies in countries surrounding Iran (e.g., Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Armenia) and in Central Asia (e.g., the Parsi communities in India), and those living in the Iranian diaspora communities around the world (e.g., USA, Canada, UK, Western Europe, Australia, New Zealand). Through an on-line questionnaire-based survey, we were able to characterize what Persianate societies consider to be their favorite comfort foods – the top three being Persian green herb stew (Figure 2), Persian thick herb and noodle soup (Figure 3), and the crunchy layer of rice from bottom of Persian rice pot (Figure 4). We also explored why members of Persianate societies consume their favorite comfort foods. The top three reasons were to cherish childhood memories or to be nostalgic, to indulge, and to relieve stress of daily life and to improve their mood. Given the broad range of items that Persians consider as their favorite comfort foods, it appears that no ingredient common in Persian cookery (e.g., eggplant, rose water, rice, saffron) has an impact in their comfort food preferences, and the primary driving force for consuming comfort food is about positive emotions evoked from an individual’s past, including childhood, and from the time when they lived in their homeland of Iran. Our survey was conducted in early 2021, which enabled us to explore the impact of COVID-19 on their selection and consumption of comfort foods—with 60% of respondents indicating some increased interest in their

favorite comfort food due to COVID-19 challenges during 2020. In addition, we introduced the concept of diasporic categorization of comfort foods which, we believe, will contribute to future studies of comfort food of various food cultures around the world in their respective diaspora.



Figure 2 - Persian green herb stew



Figure 3 - Persian thick herb and noodle soup



Figure 4 - Tahdig, the crunchy layer of rice from bottom of Persian rice pot

Acknowledgements

The author acknowledges the assistance of Dr. Amir Sayadabdi, a faculty member at the Anthropology Department at Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand, for sharing results from his award-winning PhD dissertation about food habits of members of Iranian diaspora in New Zealand.

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