



ĀJĪL

ĀJĪL, an assortment of nuts (pistachios, almonds, and hazelnuts being the most common), roasted chickpeas and seeds such as watermelon, pumpkin, and pear (*aṅčūčak*), and raisins and other dried fruits such as apricots, sour cherries, mulberries, and figs. The roasted nuts and seeds may simply be salted, or they may also be seasoned with Persian marjoram, turmeric, and lime or sour-grape juice (*ājīl-e āčār*); in contrast, *ājīl-e šīrīn* or *ājīl-e bī-namak* is made by mixing raw nuts with dried fruits, sugarplums, and *jowzağand* (dried peaches stuffed with ground-up nuts and sugar). *Ājīl* is probably the most common snack enjoyed and offered in Persian homes. It is served alone alongside fresh fruit, sweets, tea, sherbet, and sometimes liquor on a wide variety of occasions: parties, receptions, casual meetings, drinking bouts, picnics, new year ceremonies (*sofra-ye haft sīn*), votive offerings, etc. It may be served at any time of the day, but it is noticeably absent from the three regular meals, although nuts are used as ingredients of certain dishes (e.g., *šīrīn polow*). Some like to carry *ājīl* along to eat as they go for a stroll, wait in lines, or attend the movies (though this is not considered polished manners). According to Āqā Jamāl K̄vānsārī (*Aqā'ed*, p. 22) women are entitled to stipends for *ājīl* from their husbands. Small packages of *ājīl* (often one kg) are among the most popular gifts given to friends and relatives going away on a long trip (*zād-e safar*). The afternoon snack (*tanaqqolāt*) of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah Qājār (r. 1264-1313/1848-96) included *ājīl (awājīl)* of thirteen different items, each in a separate bowl (*ājīlk̄varī*); these he ate along with nine different kinds of pickles before being served fresh fruits, vegetables, ice cream, tea, etc., as *‘ašrāna* (Āšpaz-bāši, *Sofra*, pp. 69-76). It is a widely practiced custom for Iranian



families to have a kind of reunion on the longest eve of the year (*šab-e yaldā*, *šab-e čella*), during which they treat themselves to fruits, particularly watermelon, and *ājīl*. Enjavī reports that in winter in central Iran it is common to have late (normally after dinner) parties (*šab-nešīnī*), in which *ājīl*, usually prepared a long time in advance, is a major item. *Ājīl* is also one of the gifts that would-be grooms send their future brides on this and other occasions. In Kāšān *ājīl* gains special significance in the ceremonies and games (*esfandī*) associated with the eve of Esfand (25 Bahman/14 February; Enjavī, *Jašnhā*, pp. 45-46, 86, 87, 93, 97, 105).

Ājīl probably finds its most significant role in folklore. It is a common item on tables dedicated to saints (e.g., ‘Abbās b. ‘Alī, Fāṭema), usually in quest of a favor. Carrying the *ājīl* used in *samanū* (a kind of pudding made from sprouted wheat) in one’s purse, provided that the *ājīl* has not been tasted, is a guarantee of prosperity (Hedāyat, *Neyrangestān*, pp. 112, 116). In Khorasan, parturient women are advised to stay away from *ājīl* until they have fully recovered (Šakūrzāda, *Aqāyed*, pp. 113-14; cf. Āqā Jamāl, *Aqā’ed*, p. 15). Most important is the use of *ājīl* as a votive offering to seek divine assistance in solving difficult problems or fulfilling wishes, such as payment of debts, recovery from illness, return of loved ones from long trips, getting rid of a rival wife, marrying off an unwed daughter, turning around a declining business, or even expediting the return of the Hidden Imam. The *ājīl* (usually *ājīl-e šīrīn*) used in this connection, known as *ājīl-e moškel-gošā* (problem solving *ājīl*), consists of seven items: dates, pistachios, hazelnuts, almonds, roasted chickpeas, raisins, and dried mulberries (Hedāyat, *Neyrangestān*, p. 59), although other items (e.g., figs) may be added (Šakūrzāda, *Aqā’ed*, p. 51; Šahrī, *Gūša*, p. 70). The purchase of this *ājīl* must be conducted in total silence. Wrapped in a handkerchief, or the like, the “most honestly earned money,” which has been set aside for this particular purpose, is given to the *ājīl* seller (*ājīl-forūš*) who hands over the *ājīl* without saying a word. According to Šahrī, the shopkeeper had to be, or at least had to have the appearance of, a devout Muslim; so much the better if he was also a *sayyed* or named after the Prophet or an Imam. The location of the shop (*ājīl-forūšī*) was also of significance. People preferred one facing south (towards Mecca); owners of stores facing in other directions did their best to compensate by such devices as decorating the store with framed verses from the Qur’ān or images of saints and making sure that the counter faced towards Mecca (for a colorful description of a store in Tehran see Šahrī, *Gūša*, pp. 68-70). At home the *ājīl* was put on a clean piece of cloth and then “cleaned” by the members of the family, all of whom had to be in a state of



ritual purity and to abstain from any idle talk. At the same time, the story behind their activity would be related by one of them: how a poor old *kārkan* (a man whose business is to collect dry bushes from the desert and sell them in the market) became rich by following the instructions of a holy man (usually 'Alī) who appeared to him in a desert and told him to make votive offerings of *ājīl* every month (for the full account and variations see Hedāyat, *Neyrangestān*, pp. 59-61; Šakūrzāda, *'Aqā'ed*, pp. 52-58; Šahrī, *Gūša*, pp. 71-72). At the end, a prayer was offered asking for a particular wish to be granted, and the refuse of the *ājīl* was thrown into running water (Šakūrzāda, *'Aqā'ed*, p. 52). This procedure took place on the eve of the final Friday of a lunar month; on the first day of the next month the *ājīl* thus prepared was distributed among seven people (corresponding to the number of the items in the *ājīl*, according to Hedāyat (*Neyrangestān*, p. 59). According to Šahrī it was taken to the mosque and distributed among the believers between the two prayers (*Gūša*, p. 72). The whole process was repeated for several months (the number varied), sometimes according to the wish for which the offering was made (e.g., Šakūrzāda, *'Aqā'ed*, p. 51, n. 3). Some people completed the cycle of their offering only after their wish was granted, whereas others might make it a permanent obligation for themselves for as long as they lived.

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