



BERENJ “RICE” III. IN COOKING

iii. In Cooking

The use of rice as a staple food had been introduced in Iran by the Sasanian period at the latest. Ṭa‘ālebī (*Ġorar*, p. 585) mentioned among dishes served at the court of Balāš (484-88) both a royal dish and a Greek (*rūmī*) dish that contained rice. Eṣṭaqrī (p. 91) and Ebn Ḥawqal (p. 254) wrote that rice was milled and baked in bread in Iraq and Kūzestān, where, according to Yāqūt, about 50,000 ovens were in daily operation in the vicinity of Ahvāz (*Boldān* I, p. 413; cf. Jāḥeẓ, p. 117; Ebn Boṭlān, p. 32). Some people were so accustomed to this bread that they became ill when they ate wheat bread. Rice bread was also a staple in Ṭabarestān, Deylam, and Gīlān (Moqaddasī, p. 354; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 381; Ebn Esfandiār, p. 76). The rice bread (*lākū*) prepared in Gīlān today, as well as the varieties made in Kermānšāh, Qazvīn, Shiraz, and elsewhere, is a kind of cookie or tea biscuit, not a dietary staple (see Pūr[-e] Dāwūd, p. 59). The 15th-century Spanish ambassador Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo (p. 166) mentioned various dishes cooked with rice that were served with sweets after kabobs and other main dishes at the court of Tīmūr.

Since the Safavid period the main use of rice in Iran has been in two kinds of dish, *polow* (*palāw*, pilaf) and *čelow* (*čolāw* or *čolow*), which differ mainly in the kind of ingredients used. J. A. Vullers (s.v. *polow*) considered the term *polow* to be derived from Sanskrit *palāla* (millet), a suggestion rejected by E.



Pūr(-e) Dāwūd (pp. 59-60). It is first attested in Persian in the *Mūš o gorba* of ‘Obayd Zākānī (d. ca. 772/1370-71; p. 123). Recipes for *polow* are given in two Safavid cookbooks (*Kār-nāma*, compiled 927/1520-21, Bāvaṛčī Bağdādī, pp. 103-37; *Māddat al-ḥayāt*, compiled 1003/1594-95; N.-A. Āšpazbāšī, pp. 201-30), but they differ from those in common use today, which seem to have originated in the Qajar period.

The current method of preparing either *polow* or *čelow* (Dehḡodā, s.vv.) involves first soaking the rice in heavily salted water overnight, then draining it, adding it to boiling water, and cooking it until the grains are enlarged but not soft. (In earlier times the rice was soaked in salted water for a full week, then used gradually.) The cooked rice is then drained and placed in a pot containing a simmering mixture of ghee and water. For *čelow*, which is served as a side dish with a variety of *kʷoreš(t)s* (stews) or kabobs, the rice is added alone; for *polow* it is layered with other ingredients in the pot. The dish is then cooked over low heat for about ten minutes; when steam begins to rise from the rice, more of the ghee mixture or plain water is poured over the rice, and the pot is covered and allowed to steam (*dam kašīdan*) over low heat for about an hour. (Traditionally the pot was covered with a *damkonī*, a flat round basket filled with straw or scraps of cotton material, then sewn into a cloth cover, but nowadays it is more common simply to cover the pot lid with a clean cloth.) If the dish is to have a tasty crust (*tahdīg*), yogurt, saffron, and an egg are combined and a little of the rice added. This mixture is spread over the ghee in the bottom of the pot; then the rest of the rice is added in the normal way.

Polows are generally designated by the names of the ingredients added to them. The most common kinds are *sabzī-polow māhī*, with green vegetables and fried fish, customarily served with *kūkū* (omelet) on the last evening of the year (in Khorasan it is served at the *sofra-ye haft-sīn*, the moment when the year changes; Šakūrzāda, pp. 99, 100, 101); *rešta-polow*, with noodles and sometimes ground meat, often also served on the eve of the New Year (Nowrūz) to bring good fortune for the whole year (ibid., p. 102); *qeyma(-ye) polow*, with ground meat and split peas; *lūbīā-polow*, with cut green beans, ground meat, and tomato sauce; *ālbālū-polow*, with chicken or small meatballs (*kūfta(-ye) rīza*) and pitted tart cherries boiled in sugar; *bāqlī-polow*, with fava beans and dill; *zerešk-polow*, also called *morg-polow*, with chicken, saffron, and barberries (*zerešk*); *adas-polow*, called *setāra-polow*, in Khorasan, with lentils, raisins, and dates (in Khorasan prepared for *sofra-ye Abu’l-Faẓl*, one



of the leading Shi'ite observances; *ibid.*, pp. 48-49, 54); *māš polow*, with vetch and sometimes cubed or ground meat and tomato sauce (in Khorasan the wealthy prepare *zerešk-*, *rešta-*, *'adas-*, and *māš-polows* on the eve of *čahāršanba sūrī*, the last Wednesday of the year, as gifts for their close relatives); *šīrīn-polow* (lit. "sweet pilaf"), with sautéed carrot slivers, candied orange peel, chicken, saffron, slivered almonds, and pistachio nuts; *kalam-polow*, with chopped, sautéed cabbage leaves, ground meat, and tomato sauce (in the variant known as *kalam-polow-e šīrāzī kohlrabi* [*kalam-e sang*, *kalam-e qomrī*] is used instead of cabbage leaves, and basil and lime juice are added; another variant is made with red cabbage leaves, sugar, lime juice, and ground meat); *morašša'-polow* (lit. "studded pilaf"), with chicken, saffron, spices, barberries, and slivered candied orange peel, served with raisins, almonds, hazelnuts, pistachio nuts, and barberries scattered over the top; *noḳod-polow*, with fresh green peas combined either with chunks of meat, dill, and ghee or with ground meat and tomato paste or sauce; *kabk-polow*, with partridge and spices; *mašāleḥ-polow*, with browned meatballs, saffron, and spices; *estāmbolī-polow* (lit. "pilaf from Istanbul"), like *qeyma(-ye) polow* with either ground meat, split peas, or browned ground meat combined with onions and tomato sauce; *qorma(-ye) sabzī polow*, with sautéed greens, chunks of meat or meatballs, and dried lime; *šīrāzī-polow*, with chicken, miniature eggplants, barberries, saffron, sugar, eggs, and yogurt; *vālak-polow*, with *vālak*, a kind of wild green; *felfel-polow*, with sautéed green-pepper strips, carrots, ground meat, and tomato sauce; *bādenjān-polow*, with sautéed chopped eggplant, ground meat, and tomato paste; *taḥčīn*, with yogurt, saffron, eggs and either cooked chicken (*taḥčīn-e morḡ*) or the meat of unborn lamb (*taḥčīn-e gūšt*) or with sautéed spinach, eggs, sour grape juice, and meat or meatballs (*taḥčīn-e esfenāj*).

A dish called *kata* is prepared with rice cooked with double the amount of water, salt, and ghee in a tightly covered pot over low heat; saffron and yogurt may also be added. Other variants involve cooking in tomato sauce rather than water and adding diced raw potatoes and browned ground meat (*kata-ye estāmbolī*); *chopped vālak (kata-ye vālak)*; and *vetch (kata-ye māš)*.

Dampoktak, or *damī*, a dish resembling *polow* and popular with less affluent families, is made by adding water to *pīāzdāḡ* (sautéed onions) and boiling them with peeled fava beans, rice, salt, and turmeric until the water is completely absorbed. *Dampoktak* may also be made with bulgur (*dampoktak-e balḡūr* or a mixture of rice and bulgur). Rice is used in a number of other dishes, especially ground-meat mixtures shaped into balls, patties, and the like



(e.g., *kūfta[-ye] berenjī*, *kūfta-ye tabrizī*, *kotlet-e berenj*) or used to stuff vegetables (*dolma*).

Delicacies prepared with rice include *širberenj*, with milk, cardamom, sugar, and rose water, often eaten with grape syrup; *šola*, boiled in a mixture of water and large quantities of sautéed onions; and *šolazard*, with saffron, sugar, and rose water (traditionally ghee was also used, and some families still follow this practice; in many areas *šolazard* is prepared as alms for religious occasions like *arbaʿīn* (20 Şafar), the fortieth day after the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn, or 28 Şafar, when the death of the Prophet and the martyrdom of Imam Ḥasan are commemorated).

There are also a number of sweets made with rice flour. For *ḥalwā-ye ārd-e berenj*, the flour is first lightly browned in oil and set aside. Sugar is dissolved in water and brought to a boil; this syrup, called *širšekar*, is then combined with saffron, rose water, cardamom, and the browned rice flour. The mixture is returned to the heat until it is thickened; it is eaten garnished with pistachios and almonds. As *ḥalwā-ye ārd-e berenj* is of a somewhat thinner consistency than *ḥalwā-ye ārd-e gandom* (made with wheat flour), it is also called *tarḥalwā* (soft *ḥalwā*). There are two more variants, *tarḥalwā-ye gol-e zard*, to which candied yellow flower petals add a special aroma, and *tarḥalwā-ye pūst-e portağāl*, which includes boiled orange peel. *Ferenī* is similar to *širberenj*, though sweeter, and was traditionally served to infants or hot to adults who required soft food; in some cities it was sold on street corners in the morning. *Yağ dar behešt* (called *tarḥalwā* in Shiraz) is like *ferenī* but thicker. Its ingredients are rice flour, milk cardamom, sugar, rose water, and starch (not used in *ferenī*). Spread on trays, it is cut in lozenge-shaped pieces and garnished with pistachios. In the past it was made thinner and served, like *širberenj*, with grape syrup. In Shiraz it is particularly popular during the month of Ramazān. *Nān-e berenjī* is a traditional cookie baked especially during the New Year holidays; it is prepared with rice flour, ghee, generous amounts of cardamom and rose water, and egg whites and is sprinkled with *sīāhdāna* (*Nigella sativa*). The homemade variety is small and was traditionally made in thimbles, though nowadays molds with raised designs are used; Kermānšāh and Qazvīn are well known for their *nān-e berenjī*.

Berenj-e bū-dāda or *berenjāk* is rice soaked and drained as for *polow* and set aside in a basket until nearly dry; it is then placed in an iron skillet and roasted (*bū dādan*) in the same way as melon seeds. *Rešta-berešta*, a traditional



cookie prepared mainly during the New Year, consists of rice-starch paste scooped up in strands on a special comb, twirled, then deep-fried in oil and sprinkled with powdered sugar.

Rice is also used to make certain kinds of thick soup (*āš*).

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