



## ḤALWĀ

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**ḤALWĀ** (Ar. *ḥalwā'*, Pers. *ḥalwā* “sweetmeat”), a generic term applied to various kinds of sweet dishes and fruits (Şafipuri, I, p. 272). In Persian cooking, *ḥalwā* is a mixture of a starchy element (such as wheat flour, rice flour, chickpea flour, or crushed sesame), a fat element (such as butter, animal fat, or vegetable oil), a sweetening element (such as sugar, honey, or molasses), one or several aromatic elements (such as rose water or other flower distillate, cardamom, saffron, cumin, nutmeg, or clove), and water. Every *ḥalwā* is known by the name of its predominant element: *ḥalwā-ye ārd* (flour *ḥalwā*), *ḥalwā-ye berenj* (rice *ḥalwā*), *ḥalwā-ye gol-e zard* (yellow flower *ḥalwā*), *ḥalwā ārda* (sesame *ḥalwā*), and so on.

The origin of *ḥalwā* in Persia dates from the pre-Islamic period. References are found in the Middle Persian text of *Xōsrōv ud rēdak* (ed. Monchi-zadeh, secs. 38-40) to two kinds of sweetmeats (*rōyn xwardīg*): (1) summer sweetmeats, such as *lōzēnag* (made with almond), *gōzēnag* (made with walnut), and *čarb-angušt* (made from the fat of bustard or gazelle and fried in walnut oil); and (2) winter sweetmeats, such as *wafrēnagītabarzad* flavored with coriander (*gišnīz ačārag*). Many references are found to *ḥalwā* in classical Persian texts, but rarely do they provide details concerning ingredients. Abu Bakr Moḥammad Naršaḳi mentions a sweetmeat made with grape syrup (*dušāb*) in the village of Šarḡ near Bukhara (Naršaḳi, p. 21). The profession of making or handling *ḥalwā* was called *ḥalwā-sāzi* or *ḥalwā-gari* (Moḥammad b. Monawwar, pp. 64, 67, 68). The tradition of cooking and donating *ḥalwā* as



charity or in anniversaries and commemorations has for long existed in most Islamic countries, including Persia. In the Ottoman Empire there used to be a ḥalwā feast, and a part of the kitchen in the palace of the sultan was called *ḥalwā-kāna* (Inalcik, p. 810).

*Recipes.* The three starchy, fat, and sweetening elements are usually mixed in equal amounts in various ḥalwās. For example, in the case of ḥalwā-ye ārd, flour is added to an equal amount of already heated oil until it is well roasted, and then dissolved sugar mixed with rose water, cardamom or saffron, or all three depending on the taste of the cook, are added to it. The mixture is quickly stirred until a rather thick paste is obtained. This paste takes the shape of the receptacle in which it is kept; it is ornamented with designs made by a spoon and ground pistachio or pistachio and almond strips.

*Varieties.* Persian cuisine includes many kinds of ḥalwā, the most famous of which are *ḥalwā-ye ārd*, *ḥalwā-ye ārd-e berenj*, *tar-ḥalwā*, *kāči*, *bereštuk*, *zirajuš*, and *ḥalwā-ye gol*. Monsieur Richard Khan (pp. 63-70) has enumerated twenty-one kinds of ḥalwā that were common during the late Qajar period, but Mirzā ‘Ali-Akbar Khan Āšpaz-bāši, the royal chef at the court of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, mentions only twelve varieties (pp. 47-49). There is, however, no mention of ḥalwā in the two manuals of culinary art from the Safavid period, while Moḥammad-Mo’men Ḥosayni, the physician at the court of the Safavid Shah Solaymān, lists several of them with recipes (pp. 1101-3). In more recent cookbooks, the variety and number of ḥalwās have been reduced. Badr-al-Moluk Bāmdād (pp. 26-27) lists only eight kinds.

A particular ḥalwā made with crushed sesame called *ḥalwā ārda* is made in all the countries of the Middle East, and it is the only well-known variety in the West; it is mostly made in Turkey and Greece. Ḥalwā ārda can be made with molasses or sugar; pistachio, almond, or walnut may also be added to it, in which case it is sold in Persia as *ḥalwā šekari* or *ḥalwā-ye maḡzi*.

In traditional Persian medicine, where foodstuff is divided into cold (*sard*) or



warm (*garm*) on the one hand, and wet (*tar*) or dry (*košk*) on the other, ḥalwā is considered to be warm and wet (Jorjāni, p. 129; Aḳawayni, pp. 508, 579, 689). It is therefore prescribed for a cold temper, shown by, e.g., shortage of male sperm (Aḳawayni, p. 508), and prohibited for a warm temper, as with excess of bile, rabies, and various fevers (Aḳawayni, pp. 579, 653, 689). More recently, *kāčī*, a kind of liquid oily ḥalwā made without water, to which cumin seed is added, used to be prescribed for women just after giving birth (Āšpaz-bāši, pp. 81-82). Accordingly, ten days after childbirth, the mother was taken to the bathhouse, where she was given *kāčī*.

*Ritual uses of ḥalwā.* Flour and occasionally rice ḥalwā are customarily served on certain solemn occasions, such as ceremonies commemorating the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn and the mourning sessions following the death of a family member (on the 7th day, the 40th day, and the anniversary). It is also often prepared for merit, especially for the dead, on any occasion that is considered holy (e.g., Friday eve). In such cases, the *ḥalwā* is given away. *Halwā* and *tar-ḥalwā* are among the dishes prepared as votive offerings and for religious ceremonies, and as *sofra* (a kind of thanksgiving reception), in memory of a saint (e.g., ‘Abbās b. ‘Ali, q.v.).

Ḥalwā is such an integral part of the popular folklore that a certain Mollā Ṭoḡrā composed a full narrative poem (*maṭnawī*) called *Nān o ḥalwā* (bread and ḥalwā), which was printed in several lithograph editions and used to be read by school children.

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