



QAJAR DYNASTY XIV. QAJAR CUISINE

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xiv. Qajar Cuisine

Persian cuisine is an art that has evolved through centuries of refinement, culminating in the Qajar period and continuing in present-day Iran. Qajar cuisine has its origins in Iran's ancient empires (see [COOKING i](#)), particularly that of the [Sasanians](#) (226-651 CE; Briant, pp. 266-414; see [COOKING ii](#)). The court cuisine reflected the combination of grandeur and extravagance, which was partly responsible for the downfall of the Sasanian empire. The cuisine was highly complex and time-consuming (Christensen, pp. 477-79).

After the conquest of Persia by the Arabs (636 CE), this cuisine was inherited and revived by the 'Abbasid caliphs (r. 750-1258), who emulated most Persian features (Ahsan, pp. 77-164). After the [Mongol](#) conquest of Persia in the thirteenth century, the evolution of Persian cuisine was interrupted, as the Mongols, probably due to their mobile nomadic nature, had no *haute cuisine*. Their cuisine consisted of horsemeat and fermented milk (Ahsan, pp. 176-77; Buell, pp. 57-82; Clavijo, pp. 98, 134-35, 139; Spuler, pp. 92-93), which contradicts Bert Fragner's theory of the Central Asian origins of Persian cuisine (Fragner, p. 54).

The renaissance of Persian cuisine took place under the [Safavids](#), and it is this



cuisine which was inherited and refined by the Qajars and is the predecessor of the Persian cuisine of today. The economy of Iran under the Safavids lent itself to the emergence of a great cuisine. The economy was both agricultural and pastoral. Crops, mainly cereals, were grown. There was an abundance of [fruits](#) of all kinds, especially [grapes](#). However, a comparison of the Qajar and Safavid recipes shows that many features of the Qajar recipes are missing from those of the Safavids. There are two manuals of cooking dating from the Safavid period (see [COOKBOOKS](#)). The first, *Kār-nāma*, was written in 927/1521 by Moḥammad-ʿAli Bāvarči, a cook in the service of an unknown aristocrat during the reign of Shah Esmāʿil (r. 1501-24). The second, *Māddat al-ḥayāt*, was written in 1003/1594-95 by Nur-Allāh, who was cook to Shah ʿAbbās I (Afšār, ed., pp. 36-37, 189; Mahdavi, 2006, pp. 48-49, 278-79).

There is also a cooking manual from the Qajar period called *Sofra-ye aṭʿema* written in 1883 by Mirzā ʿAli-Akbar Khan Āšpaz-bāši, cook to Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah Qājār (r. 1848-96). A comparison of the three manuals is illuminating. The Qajar recipes are much more elaborated, refined, and time-consuming, containing dishes that evidently did not exist in the Safavid period. A particular feature of Safavid cooking, which it shares with that of the ʿAbbasid and the Timurid periods, is one-pot cooking. Even the cooking of [rice](#) (*čelow*/*čolāw* and *polow*/*palāw*), which reached the height of its refinement during the Qajar period, went through a one-pot process during the Safavid period. In contrast, Mirzā ʿAli-Akbar Khan (pp. 7-8) describes in detail the fourfold process of washing, soaking, boiling, and baking, which went into the final processing of the rice and has endured to this day.

The two staple grains of Persian food are rice and [wheat](#). For those who could afford it, rice in its many varieties was an essential feature of a meal. Different types of [bread](#) were part of every meal; in addition to being consumed for its nutritional value, bread was used in the Qajar period employed in eating and serving, and in cleaning utensils by wiping them with pieces of bread. Three types of dishes, *čelow* (plain rice), *polow* (rice containing ingredients), and *āš* (a thick soup), all using rice, are the major components of Qajar cuisine (Dehḡodā, I, pp. 114-15). The method of cooking rice is quite unique to that cuisine and was commented upon by all foreign travelers to Qajar Iran.

A number of other characteristics particular to Qajar cuisine have been mentioned: it is neither spicy nor hot, and almost all dishes go through a process of slow cooking. One distinctive feature is the combination of fruit, nuts, or vegetables and herbs with meat, flavored with saffron and Indian



lemon. This combination is to be found in the meat stews (*korešt*), which are served both with plain rice (*čelow*) and in the mixed rice (*polow*). Most of the dishes are identified by the name of the main ingredient, such as *korešt-e bādenjān* (eggplant stew), *korešt-e ālu* (plum stew), *korešt-e esfenāj* (spinach stew), *morġ-polow* (rice with chicken), *bāqlā-polow* (rice with fava beans), *‘adas-polow* (rice with lentils), *āš-e māš* (soup with vetch), *āš-e anār* (soup with pomegranate juice), *āš-e sabzi* (green herb soup), and so forth. Many other dishes, such as *kuku* (an egg-based dish with mixed herbs), *dolma*, and *kufta*, would be considered side dishes. Two dishes were considered to be the food of the working classes, namely, *ābgušt*, a *pot-au-feu* of lamb and legume, and *eškana*, a light soup with onions, fenugreek, and eggs.

The composition of the actual meal itself depended on the occasion and the status of the family. ‘Abd-Allāh Mostawfi (I, pp. 179, 181) describes family meals and crockery in detail. There were two types of crockery, copper for everyday use and chinaware for guests. These consisted of bowls of different sizes, both for serving the liquid and soft foods such as *āš* and *korešt*, and for eating from, as well as huge platters for dishing out the food. Lunch consisted of *āš* and *ābgušt*, bread, *cheese*, vegetables (*sabzi*), and yogurt, melons and grapes (when in season) or jams (out of season), while dinner was only *polow* or *čelow* with *korešt* and no other accompaniments. Mostawfi emphasizes that there was nothing else. As people went to bed immediately after dinner, it was believed that they should not eat heavy (*sangin*) food, and parboiled rice (for preparation of *polow* or *čelow*, see GILĀN xxi. COOKING) was considered as easily digestible.

Kalāntar Żarrābi describes the meals in Kashan in terms of the user’s social class. He says that the upper classes did not necessarily have a cooked lunch but that they had an elaborate dinner of *polow* with different kinds of *korešt* made with bird, lamb, or fish, whichever were available, accompanied by fresh fruit juice and fruit syrup (*šarbat*) and followed by melon, tea, and hookah (*ġalyān*). The dinner of the middle classes consisted mostly of *ābgušt* with bread, aside from once or twice a week when they ate *polow korešt*. The poor subsisted mainly on bread and cooked *ābgušt* once or twice a week. However, in the summer all classes ate a lot of melons, watermelons, and cucumbers, since they were inexpensive and available to everyone (Żarrābi, pp. 246-48). There is a difference of opinion between Żarrābi and Mostawfi regarding the lunch of the upper classes, which may have been due to different customs in different parts of the country, or to a change in customs



during the period between the two descriptions.

In the Qajar period, houses of the affluent were divided into two sections: *andaruni* (the private quarters) and *biruni* (the public quarters). There were kitchens in both sections. When the family was alone, meals would be eaten in the *andaruni*, while the master of the house would entertain his guests in the *biruni*. Female members of the extended family would also be entertained in the *andaruni*. Usually the cooking was done in the *andaruni* by female servants, supervised by the lady of the house, and by male cooks in the *biruni* for important occasions (d'Allemagne, II, p. 30; Morier, pp. 143-44; Sheil, p. 146). The rooms in Qajar houses were multi-functional, and no specific room was used only as a dining room. Furthermore, there were no tables or chairs, but the floor was covered by a number of carpets, and there would be some bolsters and mattresses for sitting (see QAJAR DYNASTY xii. THE QAJAR-PERIOD HOUSEHOLD).

There were rituals associated with the serving, presentation, and consumption of food. These applied to religious and secular occasions, both auspicious and infelicitous, with specific foods assigned to each occasion. The primary ritual of eating was associated with the spreading of the *sofra* (table cloth) on the floor. The spreading of *sofra* has two meanings: one for everyday eating or entertainment, the other for religious purposes as a result of a vow (*naḍr*).

Whether for ordinary eating or for entertainment, the *sofra* made of white cloth, printed calico, chintz, or *terma* (cashmere), depending on the occasion and the status of the family, was spread on the floor on a piece of leather. People sat around this cloth either on bended knees or cross-legged. The meal was not served course by course, but all the food would be brought to the *sofra* at the same time, although various side dishes known as *moḳallafāt* (accompaniments), which were essential to the meal, were laid on the *sofra* first. These consisted of a plate of fresh herbs called *sabzi*, including basil, coriander, cilantro, fenugreek, tarragon, dill, watercress (of a Persian variety called *šāhi*), and marjoram, among others. The other items laid on the *sofra* were bread, cheese, a bowl of yogurt, *torši* (relish), and jam. The above description would apply to almost all occasions whether when entertaining guests or eating with the family at home.

The following is a composite account of male entertaining in the Qajar period based on a number of travelers' narratives and other descriptions. The host would greet the guests at the door with phrases such as *koš āmadid*, *šafā*



āvardid, sarafrāz farmudid (welcome, you have brought joy with you, you have honored us). Initially they may have sat round the room in which they were going to eat or in a neighboring room. On the arrival of new guests, everyone would get up and offer their seats to them. If the new arrival was an elderly or a distinguished person, he would be placed at the head of the room. Before dinner, an assortment of nuts (*ājil*), fruit, and sweetmeats (see *ḤALWĀ*) accompanied by tea would be served. *Ġalyāns* would also be brought round. Some guests would bring their own *ġalyāns*, which their servants would prepare and bring in, while others would bring their own silver headpiece that would be screwed on the reed. According to Żarrābi (pp. 246-48), dinner was served late, about three hours after sunset. At some houses, plates would be set on the *sofra* for each guest, and at others, pieces of bread would be used instead of plates. The platters of *čelow* and *polow*, decorated with saffron, were placed in the middle of the *sofra* with serving spatulas (*kafgir*) close to them. Hidden inside the *polow* would be pieces of lamb or fowl. The rice dishes would be accompanied by a variety of *korešts*, among including *fesenjān* (fowl or meatballs in a sauce of walnuts and pomegranate molasses), which was not an everyday dish. There would also be different kinds of *āš* in big china bowls accompanied by china ladles. *Āš* was the only food item for which there were china spoons. In addition there were a number of side dishes such as *kuku*, *šāmi* (a deep fried patty of lentils, egg, and meat), *kašk-e bādenjān* (fried eggplant in a type of buttermilk), and *burāni* (a yogurt dish with different vegetables). Some accounts also include *kabābs* (grilled) of meat and chicken (Rāvandi, VI, p. 481).

Placed between every few guests would be large bowls of *duġ* (liquified yogurt) and or *šarbat* with engraved, long-handled, wooden ladles for serving into the individual smaller bowls provided for each guest. A few minutes before the setting of the *sofra* was complete, servants would bring round *āftāba-lagans* (ewers and basins) of water for the guests to wash their hands. Then, when the setting of the *sofra* was complete, the host would say *b'esmallāh, befarmā'id* (in the name of God, please be seated, help yourself). The younger members would wait for the older and more distinguished ones to go to the *sofra* first. The meal would be consumed in silence. When it was finished, everyone would say *al-ḥamdo le'llāh* (Praise be to God), after which the ewers and basins would be brought around for the guests to wash their right hands, with which they had eaten. Afterwards, tea and *ġalyān* would be brought round again (Binning, I, pp. 318-19; Browne, pp. 119-21; Daryābandari, I, pp. 79-83; Johnson, pp. 120-22; Ker Porter, I, pp. 237-39;



Morier, pp. 150-53; Polak, pp. 94-97; Rāvandi, VI, pp. 480-85; Wills, pp. 90-91).

The other type of *sofra*, to which religious rituals were attached and for which special dishes were prepared, was the *sofra-ye naḍri*, which was spread as the result of the fulfillment of a vow made to one of the Shi'ite imams or to the family of the Prophet (q.v.), and is entirely a female occasion (see [WOMEN iii. IN SHI'ISM](#)); even the *rawẓa-k'ān* (reciter of the tragedy of [Karbala](#)) had to be female. The most important of these was and still is *sofra-ye Abu'l-Faẓl* or *Haẓrat-e 'Abbās*, the half-brother of the third Imam, Ḥosayn, and one of the premier martyrs of Karbala. The vow to him was usually made to ward off sickness, ill health, and safe return from a journey. It is stated in the vow whether the *sofra* will be simple or elaborate. If elaborate, the following dishes would be served: 'adas-polow (rice with lentils), *āš-e rešta* (*āš* of noodles), *ḥalwā-ye ārd-e gandom* (a combination of fried flour, sugar, honey, saffron, and rose water), *kāči* (similar to *ḥalwā* but softer and which can be made with rice flour), *šola-zard* (a type of rice pudding with saffron), and other non-cooked items such as *ājil-e moškelgošā* (problem-resolving *ājil*), dates, bread, cheese, herbs, and fruit (for these dishes, see *Āšpaz-bāši*, pp. 11, 32, 76, 77, 82). Symbolic candles, either five for the holy family (*panj tan*) or twelve for the Imams, were placed on the *sofra*. After those present had eaten, the rest of the food was distributed among the poor. *Ḥalwā* and *šola-zard* were two important items of *naḍri* dishes and were also served in the months of mourning (Moḥarram and Šafar) and at funerals.

Other *naḍri* foods included *āš-e šola-qalamkār* or *āš-e naḍri*, a pledge potage consisting of a medley of herbs, legumes, vegetable, and meat, some of which may not even have been compatible with each other. It is frequently made in keeping a vow to Imam Ḥosayn in the months of Moḥarram and Šafar for the wellbeing of children (*Āšpaz-bāši*, p. 77). *Āš-e Zayn-al-'Ābedin-e Bimār* was prepared in honor of the fourth Imam. The ingredients for this *āš* had to be collected from friends and neighbors, and as a result it was a hodgepodge and was cooked in keeping a vow to the fourth Imam for the resolution of problems and the healing of ill people. It was either distributed among the poor or served at a *sofra* to the Imam, or both (Šahri, 1992, II, p. 369). *Āš-e Abu Dardā* is a votive offering to Abu'l Dardā 'Owaymer b. Zayd Ḳazaraji, one of the companions of the Prophet (Dehḳodā, I, pp. 452-53) for the healing of the sick and the alleviation of pain. It is made on the last Wednesday of the month of Šafar. According to Dehḳodā, the origin of this *āš* is the synonymy of the name Dardā with the word *dard* (pain) in Persian (Dehḳodā, I, p. 114). The



ingredients for this *āš* also are collected from friends and neighbors. According to the gender of the sick person, a male or female figurine is made from dough and dropped into the *āš*. After the patient has eaten some of the *āš*, the *āš* is distributed among the poor, and the figurine is dropped into running water to wash away the illness (Āšpaz-bāši, p. 77; Šahri, 1992, II, p. 369).

Nāṣer-al-Din Shah also observed a *naḍr*. It is not clear whether it was his own or his mother's idea, or that of the courtiers, for his wellbeing (E'temād-al-Saltāna, 1971, p. 95; Mostawfi, I, p. 287-88). Towards the end of every summer, tents would be erected either at Qaṣr-e Qājār (Qajar Castle) or the royal hunting lodge of Sorḡa Heṣār for the ceremony of *āšpazān* (cooking *āš*). All the courtiers would participate in the preparation and cooking of this *āš*. They would all clean herbs and legumes and take part in the stirring of the *āš*. Nāṣer-al-Din Shah also participated in the stirring. The *āš* came to be known as *āš-e Qājār* and was similar to *Āš-e šola-qalamkār* due to the miscellaneous assortment of the ingredients (Mo'ayyer-al-Mamālek, pp. 145-49).

Also, specific dishes were prepared for special occasions. *Āš-e rešta-ye pošt-e pā* (noodle potage behind the instep) was made on the third or fifth day of the departure of a traveler, especially for those going on the Ḥajj pilgrimage, for a safe journey and rapid return. At wedding feasts, *širin polow* (saffroned rice with julienne of orange peel, almonds, pistachios, and carrots with lamb or chicken) was one of the necessary dishes (Āšpaz-bāši, pp. 12-13). On the tenth day during *mawludī*, the celebration of the birth of a child, the mother and child, accompanied by close friends and family, went to the bathhouse. Either *'adas-polow* (lentil *polow*) or *māš-polow* (mung bean *polow*) were made for the occasion. Specific dishes were made also for particular festivals. For instance, for the New Year celebration (Nowruz), *sabzi-polow* (rice with green herbs), smoked fish, and *kuku-ye sabzi* were cooked. On the first day of Farvardin, people prepared *rešta-polow* (rice with noodles) so that *rešta-ye kār be dast āyad* (so that the thread of affairs will be in hand).

The nineteenth century was contemporaneous with the greater part of Qajar rule; it was also the period when Iran came under the greatest impact of the West, which affected every aspect of life economically, politically, socially, and culturally. Among the areas affected was Persian cuisine and the customs related to it. New ingredients (e.g., potatoes, tomatoes, green beans, and peas), hitherto unknown in Iran, were introduced. They could all be identified by their attribution of *farangi* (from Europe), such as *sibzamini-e farangi* (potato),



gowja-ye farangi (tomato), *noḳod-e farangi* (peas), and others (for a list of these, see E'temād-al-Saltāna, 1984, I, pp. 136-37). Consequently new Persian dishes were invented, such as *lubiā-polow* (green beans with rice), *kuku-ye sibzamini* (potato tortilla), or *eslāmboli-polow* (rice with tomato paste), and these entered the daily repertoire. A new dish, also introduced in the second half of the Qajar period, was *čelow-kabāb*. Although both *čelow* and *kabāb* had already been among popular Persian culinary items, a dish made of their combination was a new feature (Āšpaz-bāši, pp. 8-9).

By the end of the nineteenth century, actual foreign dishes had entered the Persian repertoire, a fact attested to in a manual of cooking from the end of the nineteenth century (dated 1898) by Aḥmadqoli Šāmlu. This manual has a whole chapter on *aḡdia-ye farangi* (foreign dishes) and includes such dishes as macaroni, *polow-e itāliā'i* (risotto), *nimru-ye farangi* (scrambled eggs), *biftek-e farangi* (steak), *kabāb-e farangi* (schnitzel), *kabāb-e žigo* (pot roast), aspic, jelly, a variety of sauces, and others. Simultaneously, the elite adopted Western customs such as eating with cutlery, using tables and chairs, and assigning a special room for dining, the *sofra-kāna* (Sālur, II, pp. 1118-21; Browne, p. 119; Bird, I, p. 206). Hence some of the customs described above gradually disappeared, although many Qajar dishes have survived to this day and are often prepared by Iranians at home and abroad.

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