

‘The New Persian Kitchen’ by Louisa Shafia

By **T. Susan Chang** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 09, 2013

ARTICLE

PRINT REPRINTS E-MAIL SHARE

I’m not sure what cultural tides are responsible for Iranian food not having more of a presence in the mainstream. Why are fesenjan, khoresht bademjan, and ghormeh sabzi not as well known here as tabbouleh, kibbeh, or biryani, their geographical cousins?

And in the United States, Persian cookbooks until recently have been intimidating affairs, frightening away all but the well-traveled, the expatriate, and the Persian-by-association. Maybe it’s because some of the most traditional recipes are elaborate or time-consuming. But “The New Persian Kitchen,” a second volume by cooking teacher and food writer Louisa Shafia, seeks to change all that. Shafia uses traditional ingredients — saffron, pistachios, pomegranates, dried limes — to powerful effect, but freely reinvents techniques for quicker, equally flavorful, results.

Whole grilled fava beans bathed in balsamic vinegar, garlic, and thyme are messy, flavorful, delicious, just charred and wilted, with edible pods when young. A cold pistachio soup with mint and leeks chills into a surprisingly rich and fresh-tasting bowl of cool summer. Raw and thinly shaved vinegar carrots, with toasted sesame seeds, make a summery side you could imagine eating with sushi. Or with grilled shrimp with lime powder and parsley-olive oil sauce; if you can get the dried Omani limes (online or at Middle Eastern groceries), they add a sharp initial sourness that’s reminiscent of dried mango powder, and makes everything else taste all the sweeter.

Lamb kebabs in pomegranate-walnut marinade use the same flavors made famous in Iran’s signature poultry dish, fesenjan. Grilled over hot coals, they’re one of those recipes that’s good enough to stop time — a mouthwatering, eye-closing experience.

More winners follow: turmeric chicken with sumac and lime that cooks into a quick, golden braise whose bright flavors pop more than you expect for such a simple dish (but double it to meet the yield of “Serves 4”). And though I drank it on a very cool morning, I couldn’t get enough of an icy date shake with toasted nuts, a sort of smoothie, shivering and slurping my way right down to the bottom.

Not every dish speeds to a finish. Browsing a captivating assortment of rices, I told myself time and again that I would try to make the “tahdig,” the golden crust that is the pride and joy of Persian rice dishes. But I kept finding



SARA REMINGTON

Louisa Shafia has authored the second volume of “The New Persian Kitchen.”

myself without the extra 80 minutes it takes, even for the simplest, saffron rice. Sweet rice with carrots steam to a bejeweled and honeyed perfection in one hour; tomato rice with dried limes becomes both tart and mellow in two.

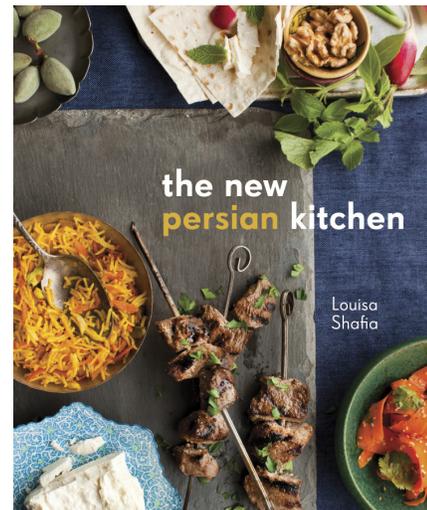
Shafia's version of the Persian classic herb stew, ghormeh sabzi, features tofu, of all things, along with the mandatory herbs and kidney beans. Caramelized onions provide the sweetness (I've tried to make it in the past with honey). This time, I made the mistake of thinking it would take no more than 90 minutes, like versions I've made before; after all, the beans are canned. But not counting the 6-plus hours overnight to freeze and defrost the tofu, this little dish took me 2½ hours. Though the flavors are clear and ravishing, do they warrant the time? The answer is yes.

There were only a couple of misfires, which I'm not sure I can attribute to the author. A turmeric-lime marinade fails to penetrate all the way through tempeh kebabs, but that's always problematic with tempeh, and a minty cilantro-lime sauce partially redeems the blandness. A perfumey rhubarb and rose water sorbet is whimsically embedded with rice vermicelli, which never softens. Should the noodles have been cooked rather than just soaked? Were they the wrong size? Five minds mulled these questions as we tried to chew through cellulose and sucked on the sweet sorbet.

But overall, "The New Persian Kitchen" is a stunner: a bridge between old and new, fresh and dried, cool and hot. I can't get enough of its juxtapositions.

And if, in the end, that means I'll have to clear an afternoon to make the tahdig, you can bet that sooner or later, I will.

T. Susan Chang can be reached at admin@tsusanchang.com.



The New Persian Kitchen

Author: Louisa Shafia

Publisher: Ten Speed Press

Number of pages: 192 pp.

Book price: \$24.99

More

- **Recipe for lamb kebabs in pomegranate-walnut marinade**