



Tehranosaurus Rex

Iran —but I could not hide

story by Paul Ross

photos by Judith Fein & Paul Ross

“DON’T GO!” suggested / pleaded / warned friends, when I told them I was departing for Iran. (One, an avid AIPAC supporter, sneered, “I wouldn’t give one bloody cent to any country engaged in terrorizing others.” Which prompted my response, “You don’t pay taxes?”)

Imprisonment, torture and decapitation were the images that invaded and seized concerned friends’ minds. “I’m just going as a tourist,” said I. “That’s your agenda, but they will accuse you of being a spy,” cautioned a

comrade who knew I'd be writing this food column, adding, "Famous TV star Anthony Bourdain did a totally positive show from there and the local people he cooked with haven't been heard from since." He added that, if I did get into trouble, I should contact the Swiss for, at present, there's no American Embassy. "And," he concluded "when I get one of those 'I'm stranded, desperate and need money' texts from you —I'll know it's real."

On that cheery prognostication, I left.

Tehran is a bustling city of around eight and a half million: rich, poor, upscale, downtown, old, new, renovated and under construction. All are watched over by omnipresent portraits of a scowling Ayatollah Khomeini and a smiling Rouhani (the current President). Women are required to wear *hijab* (head scarves). A multitude are tented in voluminous black and my first reaction was, "Why so many nuns?" Traffic was developing nation chaos: cars played "chicken" with dodging pedestrians, and, the basic attitude of both drivers and walkers seemed to be: "You cut me off. Okay. Next time, I win." Still, the population —outside of their vehicles-- was unbelievably friendly with smiles, open arms and professions of love every time I said I came from America. Though there are German, French and Japanese tourists, Americans are both a rarity and source of curiosity. If you can manage a few words in *Farsi*, you're golden. Even a simple, "Salaam" equals a cultural open sesame.

Iranians are familiar with our culture since young folk breach internet restrictions to partake of TV, movies, and music and every other local I met seems to have a relative in "Tehrangeles, California." (Which has an Iranian population the BBC estimated to be between 300,000 and 500,000.) Because of the long-standing U.S. economic sanctions and Iran's reactionary banning of American businesses, there's not the usual plethora of familiar fast food brands. But there are knockoffs such as "Pizza Hot" and IFC (Iranian Fried Chicken) often visually cloning the originals.



I didn't try any of them. That's not what I was after. Having lived in L.A., I was somewhat familiar with Iranian cuisine and easily settled into dining on the myriad breads and kabobs offered. Grilled viands generally included a choice of beef, lamb, chicken and, occasionally, fish. There were hearty soups and tasty stews. And a unique ice cream called *Faloodeh Bastani* which was redolent of saffron, and served over a bed of cold, sweet and crunchy wheat pasta.



As I toured historical, cultural, and architectural marvels like Persepolis, the palaces of the kings and shahs, a Zoroastrian fire temple, mirrored mosques, tombs, fortresses, museums that displayed dazzling pottery, intricately woven textiles and sculpture from civilizations I had never heard of, workshops of miniature artists, I paused to savor more kabobs than you could shake a skewer at. But I was on the hunt for something else.

Finally, in the town of Kerman, I found what I was seeking: a traditional yet easy-to-make Iranian specialty. *Fasenjan* is a dark, rich and heavy sauce chiefly composed of walnuts and pomegranate. (The latter having been gifted me earlier in the day by a village woman who climbed a ladder outside of her adobe house to harvest the bursting, ripe fruit from a tree in her backyard.)



I'd describe *fasenjan* as "Iran's *molé*." Although, customarily presented with shreds of chicken and served over rice, this delicious sauce would make a great alternative side for a Thanksgiving turkey, and a welcome change from the usual cranberry and gravy.

From 25-year-hotel chef veteran, Mohammad Abraham, I learned how to make *fasenjan*, as well as another poultry dish called *Harotesh Aloo Bey* in two variations: plum and quince.

I just got back from Iran, intact, and filled with beautiful memories, blessed with new friends, and brimming with the desire to show and tell, taste and smell, and surprise all those who never expected to see me again. And now friends are asking, "How can I go?"

If you want to go: In light of thawing relations with the U.S., and the imminent lifting of most sanctions, I expect Iran to soon become a hot tourist destination, which means that the time to go is now –before it's too familiar and possibly "ruined." Because few visitors speak *Farsi*, and there are long distances to be covered, I recommend going with a group, and several companies have jumped on the bandwagon. I was pleased on every level with the small tour I took, offered by Original World Travel. 1 (888) 367-6147 inquire@originalworld.com



My guide attempts to translate a recipe.

Fasenjan

note: You can begin with fresh, whole pomegranates, peel them, extract the hundreds of seeds, etc. –as we laboriously did- but I found it more work than necessary, especially when a ready-made ingredient (Pomegranate Sauce) is accessible and affordable.

ingredients:

4 cups	Walnuts, shelled
1 cup	Pomegranate Sauce (* if using Pomegranate Molasses, then use less sugar. This condiment can be bought at Kaune's and Tai Lin or purchased online)
1	Onion, medium chopped
1	Zucchini, small, sliced in ¼" pieces (more for consistency than taste)
½ cup	Water

¼ cup	Oil (I like Grapeseed for a lighter feel. Sadaf makes one and also a Pomegranate Sauce)
2	Bay Leaves
½ tsp	Turmeric, dry, powdered
¼ tsp	Cinnamon, dry, powdered
¼ tsp	Nutmeg, dry, powdered
	Salt & Pepper, to taste
optional:	
	Flour or Cornstarch to thicken
	I prefer a boiling reduction but, if in a hurry...

Toast the Walnuts. A closely-watched cast iron pan is best, as a baking tray in the oven, not seen, can be overlooked and overcooked. When cool, grind the nuts.

Pour oil into a hot pan and sauté the onion until translucent.

Add ALL other ingredients, leave over low flame to reduce, stir occasionally. (@ 90 minutes) It's ready when the color is a *molé*-like dark brown.

The sweetness can be adjusted with the addition of citrus juice or vinegar and sugar or your preferred sweetener.

Fasenjan, as a sauce, can be served hot or at room temp.

Serves: 6 (Though some like it so much, it becomes a side dish and won't go as far.)

Khoresht Aloo Bey (The first word connotes a stew, the last –royalty)

ingredients:

3	Quince, medium, diced into ½" pieces –OR–
1 cup	Plums, pitted, diced (Prunes work)
1	Onion, medium, peeled, chopped
½ cup	Split Peas (Instant or Fast-Cooking)* –OR–
1 can	Chickpeas (Garbanzos), drained
4 cloves	Garlic
8 legs or 2 breasts	Chicken, skinless
½ tsp	Turmeric
¼ tsp	Saffron (some make a broth infusion)
¼ cup	Oil (Sesame adds a nutty zing and warm, dark tones)

1 cup Water or Stock
 Salt & Pepper, to taste
* if using regular, dry split peas, presoak 1 hour.
 Then drain and use.

In a hot pan, add oil, onion and garlic. Sauté until golden. Add turmeric. Dust chicken with salt & pepper and cook for @10 minutes.

In a separate pan, place quince or plums into 1 cup water over low heat. For quince, simmer 1 hour then change water or add same amount of stock. For plum, just use stock and cook for 40 minutes.

Combine ingredients of both pans, add more liquid if necessary. Add rest of ingredients (spices, etc.), cover, lower flame and cook for 1 hour.

Serve over rice.

Serves: 6