

Sweet, Sour, and Resentful

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A persian matriarch arrives in the new world with a suitcase full of recipes, an open-door policy for guests, and an insatiable appetite for bitterness.

¹My mother's main ingredient in cooking was **resentment**—not that I can blame her.

²In 1979, my family was living temporarily in Newport Beach, California. Our real home was in Abadan, a city in the southwest of Iran. Despite its desert location and **ubiquitous refineries**, Abadan was the **quintessential** small town. Everybody's father (including my own) worked for the National Iranian Oil Company, and almost all the moms stayed home. The employees' kids attended the same schools. No one locked their doors. Whenever I hear John Mellencamp's "Small Town," I think of Abadan, although I'm guessing John Mellencamp was thinking of somewhere else when he wrote that song.

³By the time of the Iranian revolution, we had adjusted to life in California. We said "Hello" and "Have a nice day" to perfect strangers, wore flip-flops, and grilled cheeseburgers next to our kebabs. We never understood why Americans put ice in tea or bought shampoo that smelled like strawberries, but other than that, America felt like home.

⁴When the revolution happened, thousands left Iran for Southern California. Since we were one of the few Iranian families already there, our phone did not stop ringing. Relatives, friends, friends of relatives, friends of friends, and people whose connection we never quite figured out called us with questions about settling into this new land. Displaying the **hospitality** that Iranians so cherish, my father **extended** a dinner invitation to everyone who called. As a result, we found ourselves feeding dozens of people every weekend.

⁵The **marathon** started on Monday, with my mother planning the menu while letting us know that she was already tired. Fortunately, our rice dishes were made to be shared; our **dilemma**, however, was space. Our **condo** was small. Our guests squeezed onto the sofa, sat on the floor, or overflowed onto the patio. We eventually had to explain to our American neighbors why there were so many cars parked in front of our place every weekend. My mother, her **diplomatic** skills **in full swing**, had me deliver plates of Persian food, decorated with radish roses and mint sprigs, to them. In time, we learned

not to share fesenjan, pomegranate stew with ground walnuts. “Yes, now that you mention it, it does look like mud, but it’s really good,” I’d explain, convincing no one.

⁶Because my mother did not drive, my father took her to buy ingredients every Tuesday after work. In Abadan, my mother and I had started most days in the market, going from **vendor** to vendor looking for herbs, vegetables, and fruits. The fish came from the Karun and Arvand (Shatt al Arab) rivers, the lavash and the sangak breads were freshly baked, and the chickens were still alive. We were **locavores** by necessity and **foodies** without knowing it. In America, I learned that the time my parents spent shopping was in direct **correlation** to the degree of my mother’s bad mood. An extra-long trip meant that my mother could not find everything she needed, a point she would make loud and clear when she got home: “Why don’t they let fruit ripen here?” “Why are the chickens so huge and flavorless?” “I couldn’t find fresh herbs.” “My feet hurt.” “How am I supposed to get everything done?”

⁷The first step was preparing the herbs. My mother insisted that the parsley, cilantro, and chives for qormeh sabzi, herb stew, had to be finely chopped by hand. The food processor, she explained, **squished** them. As she and my father sat across the table **wielding** huge knives, they argued **incessantly**. My father did his best to help her. It wasn’t enough. As soon as the mountain of herbs was chopped, my mother started frying them. At any given time, my mother was also frying onions. Every few days, while my father was watching the six o’clock news, my mother would hand him a dozen onions, a cutting board, and a knife. No words were **exchanged**. Much to my father’s relief, I once volunteered for this task, but apparently my slices were neither thin enough nor even. It took my father’s **precision** as an engineer to slice correctly.

⁸While all four burners were in use, my mother mixed the ground beef, rice, split peas, scallions, and herbs for stuffed grape leaves. I chopped the stems of the grape leaves. I had tried stuffing them once, but my rolls, **deemed** not tight enough, were **promptly** unrolled and then rerolled by my mother.

⁹In between cooking, my mother made yogurt—the thick, sour variety that we couldn’t find in America. She soaked walnuts and almonds in water to plump them up; fried eggplants for kashk-e bademjan, a popular appetizer with garlic, turmeric, mint, and whey; made torshi-e limo, a sour lemon **condiment**; and **slivered** orange peels. I had been **fired** from this task also, having left on far too much **pith**.

¹⁰By the time our guests arrived, my mother was exhausted. But the work was not finished. Rice, the foundation of the Persian meal, the **litmus test** of the cook’s ability, cannot be prepared ahead of time. **To wit**, one day in Abadan, the phone rang when my mother was about to drain the rice. During the time it took her to answer the phone and tell her sister that she would call her back, the rice overcooked. Almost 40 years later, I still remember my mother’s disappointment and her explaining to my father that her

sister had time to talk because my aunt's maid did all the cooking. My aunt did not even drain her own rice.

¹¹We certainly did not have a table big enough to set, so we simply stacked dishes and utensils, **buffet-style**. As the guest list grew, we added paper plates and plastic utensils. It was always my job to announce that dinner was ready. As people entered the dining room, they **gasp**ed at the sight of my mother's table. Her zereshk polow, barberry rice, made many emotional. There are no fresh barberries in America (my mother had brought dried berries from Iran in her suitcase), and the sight of that dish, with its **distinct** deep red **hue**, was a reminder of the life our guests had left behind.

¹²Our dinners took days to cook and disappeared in 20 minutes. As our guests **heaped** their plates and looked for a place to sit, they **lavished** praise on my mother, who, **according to tradition**, **deflected** it all. "It's nothing," she said. "I wish I could've done more." When they told her how lucky she was to have me to help her, my mother politely nodded, while my father added, "Firoozeh's good at math."

¹³On Sundays, my mother lay on the sofa, her swollen feet **elevated**, **fielding** thank-you phone calls from our guests. She had the same conversation a dozen times; each one ended with, "Of course you can give our name to your cousins." As I watched my mother experience the same **draining** routine week after week, I decided that tradition is good only if it brings joy to all involved. This includes the hostess. Sometimes, even our most **cherished** beliefs must **evolve**. **Evolution**, thy name is **potluck**.