

Aunt Mercan's Persian Rice Pilaf

During our conversation about Persian pilaf, she protested at first when I told her I wanted to know about vegetarian recipes cooked in Iran: "Oh, do you not eat meat like your sister? Girl, I don't know how you can even feel full that way. If I have vegetables for dinner, my stomach starts growling by the time I go to bed as if I haven't eaten anything all day." But immediately afterwards she eagerly explained all the recipes in detail, as if the more recipes she gave, the more we, the vegetarians "would become full."

Zeynep Kılıç

During my childhood, Aunt Mercan was known and talked about in my family because as she is from Iran, she cooks Persian dishes very well. During our conversation about Persian pilaf, she protested at first when I told her I wanted to know about vegetarian recipes cooked in Iran: "Oh, do you not eat meat like your sister? Girl, I don't know how you can even feel full that way. If I have vegetables for dinner, my stomach starts growling by the time I go to bed as if I haven't eaten anything all day." But immediately afterwards she eagerly explained all the recipes in detail, as if the more recipes she gave, the more we, the vegetarians "would become full." In Iran, this rice is called *Shumal-Rasht rice*. The city of Rasht, close to the Caspian Sea, with plenty of greenery and rain, is the place where this rice is grown best. At the end of the article, you can see four



different Persian pilaf rice recipes and an extra soup recipe in full detail.

Aunt Mercan is originally from Urmia, she got married 28 years ago and migrated to Turkey. She is a very positive, friendly woman. While we were chatting, there were many moments when we could not continue because we were laughing so hard. And as I talked to her, besides these characteristics of hers, I had the chance to get to know about her way of living which changed after she immigrated to Turkey after her marriage. I listened to what she told about her past and her mother, and I witnessed closely her approach to motherhood and her children. What she said about the way she treated her own children and the way her mother treated her when she was little, and the comparison between her past and present made me think that she was often questioning herself. The comparison she made between her own mother and the mother she is today, gave us both emotional moments as her voice thinned and trembled.

“I remember, my mother had a toothache, we went to the dentist and when we came back the kitchen was completely untidy, as if we were cooking for a wedding, but she never said things like, ‘why don’t you clean here girls?’ Never. Even if her tooth ached, she tidied the kitchen, she cooked dinner. If it were me, I would yell: ‘My daughter, you see that I went to the dentist! Don’t you think you should tidy the kitchen, don’t you have pity?’ My mother, the poor woman, she never said anything... When I’m reminded of it, I can’t help but think about how cruel I was to her...”

After her marriage, Aunt Mercan immigrated to Turkey and her life takes a whole new turn. Before getting married, she knew almost nothing about cooking. I can't believe it at first, but when I ask her when and where she first made this rice, the answer she gives is enough to convince me.

“By the time I first cooked it I was already married, and I burned the food. I had guests over, I cooked pilaf and I had to turn the heat down. As it happens I didn’t, maybe at that point I didn’t know that I should. Anyway, I saw smoke, I realized I had forgotten to turn the heat down. I couldn’t cook anything before getting married. Even when I had tea, I would put the cup here and the tea saucer there; my mother used to say: ‘Dear, at least put it inside like this’ and she would put the teacup on the saucer for me.”

Persian pilaf is a main course made for dinner, almost each evening. As it is a main course, the presentation is particularly important. At first Aunt Mercan was surprised by how pilaf was served in small amounts in Turkey because in Iran they serve it in the shape of a mountain on a big tray and make various shapes, symbols or write names on it with saffron. Friday is the day when Persian pilaf is especially eaten. It is a day off that people spend with their families, like Sundays in Turkey. To understand the frequency of rice consumption I ask if they ate any bulghur. She answers by saying: “Bulgur is seldom used. They think, ‘Are we going to eat chicken food?’ Even when they cook bulghur they add rice in it, so it is half bulghur and half rice; there must be rice.” This makes me understand how much rice pilaf is important to them.

The trick with Persian pilaf is to let it rest; you turn the heat down and wait patiently. Another trick is to put saffron. Saffron is an expensive spice, because it is obtained by drying and then crushing the petals of a flower called safflower. Each safflower has only a few petals, that’s what makes this spice rare and expensive. Aunt Mercan says that saffron makes people happy and it is good for depression; she recommends brewing some saffron tea by boiling a little bit in water and drink a cup each day. It is of course not easy to have access to such an expensive product. She bought saffron in Turkey once or twice but suspected that these were fake saffron. Now she only asks her relatives in Iran to send her some, but she gets embarrassed each time she asks for it because it is too expensive. Once she gets her saffron, she rations how she will use it in her kitchen very carefully. For example, sometimes, seeing that she puts a lot of saffron on pilaf, her husband asks her “Well, well... Mercan, who is coming for dinner?” She says, apart from Ramadan and special guests, she rarely uses saffron to make it last longer.

Bon appetit!

Persian Pilaf

Ingredients

- Iranian rice
- Lemon salt
- Liquid oil
- Lavash
- Potatoes

Preparation

“We can decide to cook pilaf for dinner during the day here. But in Iran they soak the rice one day before. They rinse it thoroughly 3 times, add salt and let it soak overnight. I haven’t prepared it like that since I came here. I soak the rice in the morning to cook it for dinner. If you soak overnight, it cooks more quickly, if not it takes longer. First you boil the water, more than half the pot. You put salt in it. Add 3-4 pieces of lemon salt too, this makes the rice whiter. When the water boils, you will rinse the rice and drain the water thoroughly, pour the rice into the boiling water, it must boil well. In the meantime, you will take out the foam, then you will see that each grain of rice will start to float. You take one grain and eat it; it shouldn’t be hard but softish. If it is soft, you drain the rice, you will put oil in your pot. If you have lavash bread, you spread it at the bottom of your pot, then you cut some potatoes in thin circles, dry them with a napkin, arrange them on the lavash bread.

Sprinkle saffron on it, and some salt, then pour the rice on it, then you will pour oil on it, then you know there are the refrigerator bags, tear one off like this, place it in the pot so that the steam does not come out, close the lid, turn the heat down. It takes 15-20 minutes to rest. It has to rest well. How do you know the pilaf is well rested? When you take the lid like this, you will see steam inside. Now you can take your pilaf and serve it. Shake off the pot nicely, we call the bread and potatoes at the bottom ‘kazmak.’ My brother used to say, ‘Mama, don’t cook rice, cook kazmak,’ and my mother would reply: ‘My son, how can we cook kazmak without the rice?’ He loved kazmak that much! They brew saffron both with ice and with hot water, but ice is better than hot water, it gives a better color and smell. Put 3-4 cubes of ice in a glass, throw the saffron on it, and when the ice melts pour some of your rice and mix to give shape. You can then draw the sun, the moon whatever you want, you can create a design on it like that.”

Persian Pilaf with Green Beans

Ingredients

- Green beans
- Green lentils (optional)

- Onion
- Oil
- Iranian rice
- Salt
- Pepper

Preparation

“You chop the green beans and cook them, then you fry onions in oil, you add the beans, and you add spices, you can also add green lentils if you like. For 1 cup of rice, you put 2 cups of water, when it boils you turn the heat down to let infuse the pilaf.”

Persian Pilaf with Carrots

Ingredients

- Carrots
- Onions
- Iranian rice
- Salt
- Pepper
- Turmeric
- Red pepper flakes
- Oil
- Parsley
- Mint

Preparation

“Rinse the rice, put it aside to soak. Carrots, you can chop them into cubes or grate them if you want. If you chop into cubes, you must boil them a little bit. Then you fry onions and carrots in oil, then you add rice, water, and spices. Lastly you add the parsley and mint.”

Persian Pilaf with White Cabbage

Ingredients

- White cabbage
- Iranian rice
- Oil

- Salt

Preparation

“You rinse white cabbage, you chop up like you were preparing a salad, you put it in a pan and cover it without any oil, let it cook like that a little, then you add oil to fry, then you add rice and let it infuse.”

Bonus: Süp Soup

Ingredients

- Cracked wheat
- Carrots
- Potatoes
- Tomato paste
- *Zereşk*¹
- Lemon juice

Preparation

“This one is cooked with cracked wheat. You rinse the wheat, you add water just above the wheat and let it boil, when it boils you cover it and turn the heat off, you let it infuse for 1-2 hours. After that you turn the heat on and then turn it off when it boils. You repeat this 3 times. Chop carrots and potatoes into cubes, there must be less potatoes than carrots. You put these in the wheat to boil. In another pot dilute some tomato paste. Tomato paste will not let carrots cook. If you like you can add pepper flakes. We also put zereşk, it is a kind of currant. I buy it from Iran, I have never seen it in Turkey. It has a sour taste. It grows on a tree. You also have to put lemon juice in this soup, this is its characteristic.”



¹ You can see Iranian currant zereşk in the photos above.