



Finishing a dish with fresh herbs at Brooklyn's Eyval. | Eyval

REPORTS

Inside the Next Generation of Persian Restaurants

How Iranian chefs in the U.S. are providing the diaspora with nostalgia and comfort — alongside something new

by [Sara Akhavan](#) | Apr 21, 2025, 11:11am EDT

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For many Persian families, a meal is a kind of performance. It's saffron-stained fingertips clouding a freshly sacrificed manicure. Chimes of chatter between khalehs and other aunties playing an acts-of-service tug-of-war surrounding the bountiful sofreh spread out across the table. An intoxicating cloud of eau de basmati, on the brink of a perfect steam. The crackle and pop of a sun-kissed golden layer of crispy

tahdig, in its final moments above a steady flame, ready for its debut with a strong flick of the wrist onto a silver serving tray.

The deliciously over-the-top ritual of inviting loved ones, neighbors, and friends into one's home for a meal is an essential part of Iranian identity. "Our family's food is a time capsule of their childhoods and ours. It's soulful and unpretentious," says Natalie Hekmat, Los Angeles chef and co-owner of [Voodoo Vin](#), self-described as a "Persian country kitchen." So much so that over time, that interior space has become synonymous with the act of eating itself. Under a political regime that often dictates behavior in public, Iranians have embraced eating meals within the home as the greatest luxury of all: the luxury of freedom. For this reason and more, traditional Iranian cuisine has carried on as one historically defined by an at-home experience rather than a restaurant affair.

That extends to restaurants like Hekmat's, where "we're making everything on three induction burners, a toaster oven, and a few Dutch oven pots," she says. "It's easy to feel like you're sitting at a family gathering in a Persian home — pots of stew bubbling, guests fighting over tahdig."

In recent years, a new generation of restaurateurs and Persian cuisine enthusiasts — like Fares Kargar of the Michelin-starred [Delbar](#) in Atlanta, and Arsalun Tafazoli of [Leila](#) in San Diego, among many others — have taken on the challenge of introducing (or reintroducing) Persian food in a new light to American diners: less the everything-to-everyone Persian restaurants from the '80s and more intricate in intention and flavor. For Iranians, it's a hopeful way of connecting with our culture here with our neighbors, as we watch it crumble year after year in our homeland.

Post-1979 Iranian Revolution, the Iranian immigrant population in the U.S. more than doubled, [according to the Migration Policy Institute](#), to roughly 283,000 people by the year 2000. The early roster of restaurants in the U.S. that opened in the 1980s and 1990s, then, had to acquaint Americans with popular kabob dishes such as koobideh (minced beef), joojeh (juicy chicken), or soltani (filet mignon and minced beef pairing). Not only would skewered meat have been somewhat familiar to a non-Persian audience, but those kabobs were also more efficient to prep, cook, and serve than the laborious prep and lengthy cook times of the khoreshts (stews) and slow-cooked meals typically tied to the home.

I have fond memories of these restaurants of my childhood — their banquet seating and faded prints of Persepolis, our family's terrain, for birthdays, reunions and drawn-out evenings of indulging in conversation, dance, and scents of charcoaled meats over fire that took my dad, uncles, and aunts back

to the streets of Tehran. These restaurants have carried the stateside diaspora community (by 2019, the Iranian population in the U.S. numbered 385,000 people, according to the Census Bureau, with 36 percent living in the Los Angeles area). They still hold nostalgic delight: Iranian families and friends like mine have created camaraderie here over decades, forming bonds over familiar sounds of Farsi and shared beshkans (a method of snapping your fingers while dancing) symphonizing in the air.



The kotlet (beef and potato croquette) sandwich at Azizam in Los Angeles. The restaurant tags many of its Instagram posts with the hashtag **#notjustkabobs**. | Azizam



A rosewater-flavored cream roll at Voodoo Vin in LA. | Voodoo Vin

But those restaurants often didn't reflect the cuisine that families were cooking for each other at home. "Iranian food found in a home goes beyond just kabobs, with a variety of seasonal dishes that can be sometimes difficult to recreate in a restaurant setting," says Misha Sesar, who owns **Azizam** in Los Angeles (also known to many by its nickname, **Tehranelles**) with her partner Cody Ma.

Casting an angelic halo with its soft, pastel branding and cozy-cute name, Azizam (Farsi for "sweetheart" or "darling") features charming vintage relics and children's books in Farsi adorning its entryway. Colorful piles of house-pickled torshi (mixed vegetables) illuminate the space alongside eye-catching plates of kofteh tabrizi (beef and rice meatball) stuffed with dried stone fruit and walnuts. The cafe serves unpretentious, intentionally minimal Iranian sandwiches like zaban (tongue) and kuku (herb frittata) on barbari flatbread.

"Iranians are excited that they are able to see these dishes in a restaurant — sometimes they have not seen or had these dishes in years," says Sesar. "A lot of the diaspora in LA have been away from home or their family and coming to Azizam provides that nostalgia and comfort."

Founded in 2021 via grassroots pop-ups, the now brick-and-mortar restaurant daily welcomes both Iranians and non-Iranian customers in its hip Silver Lake home. “LA is a pretty adventurous city, so people come out to experience something new. We see quite a mix of non-Iranians and Iranians,” says Sesar. “Quite a few young Iranians bring their parents and grandparents by to try our food, as well as a lot of the older generation will come in on their own because they are curious.”

At Brooklyn’s **Eyval**, chef and owner Ali Saboor also sees this generational exchange. “My favorite interactions are when New York-based Iranian college students bring their parents far away from glitzy Manhattan to here in Brooklyn to try our food,” he says. At Eyval, a **scallop-based ghalieh mahi** (South Iran’s signature spicy fish stew, traditionally made with cod or salmon) — featuring a braise bursting of flavors from Iranian herbs, chile, and tamarind — is elevated with squid ink for a pop of color. Boranis (small plate starters), typically featuring eggplant or spinach, flaunt a modern interpretation with seasonal vegetables such as grilled carrots, fiddlehead fern, mushrooms, or broccoli rabe served atop thick strained triple cream yogurt paired with fluffy, house-made barbari or komaj bread.

“The best Iranian dishes have always been cooked at home,” says Saboor, who displayed his talents previously as chef de cuisine at **celebrated Sofreh**. “While we try our best to hit those flavor profiles, our goal is not to replicate. Instead, we consider seasonal, local, and great quality ingredients as our driving factors.”

At other modern Iranian restaurants, chefs are bringing a fresh lens to the landscape by honoring specific regional traditions, and trusting audiences (both Iranian and otherwise) to follow their lead. “We wanted to define mazze from our own angle,” says Hanif Sadr, owner of Komaaj Mazze & Wine Bar in San Francisco, “specifically what we can offer from northern Iranian cuisine.”

The flavors and aromas of northern Iran reflect the region’s fertile grounds, from Caspian shores boasting local fish to rolling mountains sprouting wild, indigenous herbs, and vast, lush farmland with revered quality produce.



The interior of Komaaj Mazze & Wine Bar in San Francisco. | Sara Akhavan



Spinach, cilantro, and green garlic stew with sumac-roasted parsnip at the Northern Iranian-focused Komaaj. | Sara Akhavan

Komaaj's menu is compact and crafted to honor these regional ingredients, like in a saffron-smoked ozunboron (sturgeon) and sumac-smoked mahi azaad doudi (salmon belly). "Smoked fish is the most important part of northern Iranian gastronomy and we wanted to emphasize that," says Sadr.

Sadr's takes on (non-fish) northern Iranian recipes like anar polo (pomegranate rice and chicken), sharbat sekanjabin (mint & vinegar drink), and zeytoon parvadeh (olive and walnut mix marinated in pomegranate molasses) all pack a sour-meets-savory punch; that umami-like flavor combination is particularly accentuated in northern Iranian cuisine, sustained with greater access to tart ingredients like pomegranates and lemons. And in a baghali polo tahchin dish highlighting baked dill, Sadr transforms tahchin, a common dish across Iran, into a flavorful and visual ode to the wild, aromatic vegetation of northern Iran.

In both tangible and intangible ways, refreshing the Iranian culinary landscape in the U.S. encompasses true art and gratitude. It marks a major shift for the community — an invaluable milestone in the history of Iranian immigrants who have fled and carved a ~~re~~^{new} home of their own, now enjoying the luxury to throw paint at the wall; to dream up and

create an enticing course of action to break bread with those outside of the Iranian community.

"At age 17 I fled Iran, and now, I'm focused on creating moments that take your heart away ... creating an experience so unique that it makes people fall in love with the same perspective of Persian cuisine that I fell in love with — the dishes that tell stories," says Kargar, owner of Atlanta's Delbar, which now has three locations. "The dishes beyond the typical Middle Eastern restaurants that have been around for decades and only serve kabob."

The growing allure and curiosity towards the cuisine from non-Iranians serves as a cathartic moment for the diaspora to heal, process, and creatively thrive in sharing the most beautiful, enticing parts of Iranian culinary tradition: those born within the home. And now, a little special somewhere that feels just like their own.

"I used to beg my mom and dad to throw parties on the weekends and invite family members over so I could cook for them," laughs Kargar. "Cooking became a way of life for me — it was, and still is, a pure moment of joy to help put a smile on faces." ▶



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