# Toot, Plymouth: ‘A very good time indeed’ - restaurant review

Toot, a Persian place in Plymouth, could easily blow its own trumpet, but they’ve let me do it instead

**[Toot](https://tootonline.co.uk/), 46 Mayflower St, Plymouth PL1 1QX (01752 223736). Starters £5.95, mains £12.50-£17.50, desserts £5.95, wines from £21.50**

Shortly after the starters had been cleared at Toot in Plymouth, plates of individual butter portions were placed on the table, as if it was breakfast in a seaside B&B. We squinted at their silver foil wrappings. What’s that all about? And then it dawned on us. We were in a Persian restaurant and the rice was coming. All hail the Persian way with rice: that light, fluffy miracle of individual grains, made all the more luscious through the liberal application of butter. Plates are placed in front of us, the snowy peaks stained a light saffron-yellow. Our waiter encourages us to apply the butter. She points us at the shakers on the table, which contain the deep purple citrus burst of sumac. “Use that, too,” she says briskly, and disappears into the kitchen.

Automatically, we start forking away the rice, as if forgetting that it’s really there to keep the rest of our order company. But then, in a restaurant drawing on the traditions of what is now known as Iran, it’s hard to see the rice as anything but the main event. Culinary league tables are frowned upon these days. Describing one part of the world’s food traditions as intrinsically better than another’s is just not the done thing. They are all the product of their unique history and culture. And so on. That said, if there was ever a rice Olympics, which is a sporting tournament I could very much get behind, those cooking it in the Persian way should easily take the gold. God, it’s good.

The approach to Toot, which opened in Plymouth a few years ago, is not a happy one right now. It’s located just off Armada Way, a long pedestrian shopping precinct, its hard modernist lines softened by the broad, heavily planted woodland down the middle. In March, after being told by the town’s citizens how much they liked those trees, the council started chopping them down anyway. They did this in the small hours of the morning, like furtive petty criminals trying to get away with larceny. An injunction was taken out an hour into the work, stopping the chainsaws, but by then the damage had been done. The night I was in Plymouth the huge piles of felled woodland were still lying there, rimmed by high wire fences, now tied with coloured ribbons by locals to mourn their demise.

We navigate our way around the chaos and the hoardings, to the riot of colour that is Toot, its window bearing the legend “Persian food on fire”. Inside, there are saffron-coloured walls to match the rice and rough-hewn furniture in candy crush shades as if the mood board for the makeover was a packet of Skittles. The menu is divided between a long list of small dishes at £5.95 each, and kebabs, grills and stews priced in the low to mid-teens. Tonight, as there often is when BBC Radio 4’s Kitchen Cabinet is on tour, we are many and we are hungry. The boss looks at our nine eager faces and points at a £35-a-head deal: pretty much all the starters, platters of kebabs, tea and baklava to finish. She does some quick mental arithmetic and tells us exactly how much it will cost. She’s the kind of woman to whom you want to entrust your evening and we do so, greedily. Inevitably, we will leave tonight with warm foil containers packed with that which we could not finish.

It was not for want of trying. There are many joys among those small plates, which arrive in bowls perched on long slate platters, a utilitarian vehicle, rather than some deeply annoying presentation device. There are pert meatballs in an intense tomato sauce, heavy with cinnamon. There’s an olive oil-drizzled hummus topped with thick threads of spiced roast lamb shawarma and the cool barbecued aubergine dip moutabel, soft with tahini and sweet-sour courtesy of pomegranate molasses. There’s a dish of hot stewed aubergine, making a virtue of the vegetable’s light astringency. There are sweet, crisp chicken pastilla, made with filo and more cinnamon, and nutty falafel and stuffed vine leaves. There are an awful lot of things. We tear at soft folds of warm flatbread, and mop and dredge and mop again. To prove I hadn’t mislaid all my critical faculties I should say there were also some odd, potato-heavy fish cakes, which seemed to have wandered in from another, rather less ambitious restaurant.

The starters are cleared. The butter arrives. The rice is served. A few minutes later we look up to see vast platters of kebabs hove into view. I endeavour to take a photograph, but really what I need is a drone shot. I make do with a drifting video from one end of the pitch to the other. “It’s a meat field,” one of my companions says, admiringly. He’s not wrong. It is lamb and chicken, delivered three ways. There are chops, long minced lamb kebabs and grilled pieces of lamb; there are chicken wings, minced chicken kebabs and pieces of chicken.

All of it is appropriately charred and briskly seasoned and so fresh off the grill that they seem to be sizzling in front of us. Alongside are a few grilled tomatoes and peppers, so you can claim to be eating a balanced diet. I have also ordered a bowl of their fesenjoon, a famously rich stew of crushed walnuts and pomegranate molasses the colour of night, in this case served with dinky chicken kofte. It is sour and savoury and compelling. The non-meat eater in our group declares himself very well served by the gheymeh bademjan, a stew of aubergine and lentils, spritzed with lime, from the sizeable non-meat menu. I should have tried it, but I was seated in front of a meat field. Not my fault.

At the end, we sip thimble-sized glasses of tea, heady with cardamon, and nibble at tiny squares of baklava for which we do not have space. In creative-writing classes students are told to “show don’t tell”. If I’ve passed that test, you should already understand that Toot gave us a very good time indeed and at a very good price. We are the last to leave. The owner stands by the door and asks us sweetly to leave positive reviews on some festering digital hell-hole site, the name of which I missed. I thank her profusely, comforted rather grandly by the knowledge that I should really be able to do a little better than that.