

Pomegranates & Artichokes

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Saghar Setareh travelled from Iran to Italy in 2007 to pursue her studies in graphic design and photography. When she arrives, she says, she “certainly didn’t have a particular passion for food”. And yet, here she is, author (and photographer) of *Pomegranates & Artichokes: Recipes and memories of a journey from Iran to Italy*.

Like Gaul, the book is divided into three parts: Iran, In between, and Italy. So when we sat down to chat, I wanted to know what she meant by “in between”.

Saghar: What I mean by in-between is virtually all that geographical space that is between Iran and Italy, which is all of the eastern Mediterranean and what we call the Middle East or the Levant, to be more precise, which share a lot of culinary similarities and which are shared on both sides of that space, but in different ways. And for me, that was a way to be able to talk about the similarities between the Iranian and Italian cuisine, because if you look at them, you know, on their own, you can’t find any — or I mean, you could, but it would be very difficult. But when you follow that thread, it’s actually quite easy.

Jeremy: So it’s the way that foods travel between Iran and Italy. The in-between allows you to trace that?

Saghar: I think, Yes. And it allows me to see the similarities because there can be a dish that has something similar with it. And let’s say — I do make this example in the introduction — let’s talk about the aubergines. For example, we have a very, very famous dish in Iran that is from the north. It’s called Mirza Ghasemi. You have it in the book and it’s made with charred aubergines. And then you add tomatoes to it and then then you add eggs and garlic to it. It’s very important that it’s garlicky enough. And then you go, you arrive, to the Levant and one of the dishes that is very well known and everybody almost knows about it is the Baba Ganoush or Mojtaba, and it’s also made

with charred aubergines. And they do also other things with charred aubergines which are repeated in Turkey and also in Greece. And then when you go to Turkey, they also do other things with aubergines that are perhaps not charred, but similar enough to that Iranian dish Mirza Ghasemi that I was talking about, something like Imam Bayildi, which is, you know, you cook the eggplants in a lot of olive oil and then you make the sauce with onions, garlic and tomatoes. And then by the time you arrive to the south of Italy, you can trace the same dish back to many dishes. One of them could, you know, simply be parmigiano, and while that has cheese in it, but it's basically, you know, the aubergine again fried with lots of olive oil, tomatoes and a little bit of garlic in the sauce, and many other dishes. So that's how I trace these dishes. It doesn't mean that they're necessarily connected to each other.

Jeremy: And is the movement generally from east to west, or were there things that went back, as it were? I mean, I'm saying back, but are there things that went from west to east?

Saghar: I am not like: this is very important. I am not trying to make a point by saying that this thing started in the west and then it came to the east or *vice versa*. This thing happened with, you know, with us first in the east and it went to the other way around. This is not my point.

The point of Pomegranates and Artichokes is to see these similarities between recipes and ingredients, which, I mean, makes you wonder: oh, my God, we are peoples, different peoples who eat very similarly. Okay. So naturally, if we eat the same things, very similar things, we must be similar enough too. And it puts a question mark on the movement of the people. I don't want to make a point of: Oh, we invented this thing first. That's not the point. I don't even have the authority. I honestly don't think it should be done, because a lot of things happen simultaneously in different places for simply the reason that those ingredients were available in very similar climates, especially with the foods of the quote unquote New World arrived, like tomatoes or potatoes or peppers. They — these places, all of them — they made those ingredients their own by adding it to the dishes they already have, by dressing it with the condiments they already have. So I don't want to trace ... You know, it's not a linear thing. It's spots happening at the same time together.

Jeremy: That's very refreshing to hear, with everybody sort of claiming we're the authentic this, we're the authentic that. About your own journey, though, I think it's fair to say that it was more or less a complete surprise that you ended up staying in Italy.

Saghar: A surprise? For who?

Jeremy: For you.

Saghar: Not that I ended up staying in Italy, but that I came to Italy. That was a surprise for me because I had never thought about Italy in my life before. You know, preparing myself to come to Italy, it wasn't a country I had considered, but by the time I arrived, it wasn't so much I knew I wanted to stay in Italy, it was more that I knew I didn't want to go back. And I was already in Italy. And, you know, as much as I didn't know anything about Italy, I remember I fell in love with Rome, like, immediately. And I was so consumed ... You know, all of us, when we come from that part of the world, you are so consumed with dealing with the bureaucracy of things, being able to stay, that at least in my head, I wasn't thinking about: Oh my God, this is good, this is bad. Do I want to stay? Do I want to leave? Do I want to go somewhere else? And by the time I had figured it out and things were more or less kind of normal, I was too exhausted to even think about going anywhere else.

Jeremy: But you came as a student in 2007, and you were here when everything blew up in 2009. That must have had an impact.

Saghar: It did have an impact because, you know, in the recent history of Iran, in the last 100 years or so, we've had these attempts at reaching democracy several times. Perhaps the most well-known one is the 1979 revolution. But there have also been other very significant episodes, such as the 1953 coup that happened against the democratic government of President Mossadegh we had in Iran. And then there was ... We had something in 1998 or 7 — now, I can't remember. I'm sorry — against the students. And then this election fraud that happened in 2009. That was the one, the first one for which I was old enough to really understand what was going on. And we were away and all of our friends and family were there. And we had been pretty much involved also before the elections. And we ... You know, it was kind of a happy moment, as weird that word can sound. So, yes, it had a huge impact.

And but, you know, it's been said somewhere by mistake that I realised at that time I was an exile and I couldn't go back. That's not true. I never thought I was an exile at that moment. There was a ... I did postpone a trip. But I went actually, the first time I went back to Iran was in, I believe, October of 2009. So it's not like I couldn't go back. I could go back. But it was, you know, it was a shock. It was very traumatic for us, especially because we were glued to the screen and we couldn't really put out our energies into actual protest or anything. And it was, watching everything happen, it was horrific. But I would say not as horrific or perhaps maybe a little less horrific — I can't quantify that any more — of what's been happening since September 2022 with the Women's Life movement. It has definitely been more horrific. I think they've killed more people, more tortured, more people. We definitely spent all we had left of our mental health on that. But I still think the shock of 2009 was greater on me.

Jeremy: Yeah. The whole business, though, it seems ... I notice, for example, that you've got a comment from Olia Hercules and it seems that food has become part of activism, especially maybe for expatriates who can't really do something on the ground, but using food to to raise money and to gain support. Do you think ... Am I right that that is something more recent, people using food in that way?

Saghar: I honestly don't know because people like Olia ... I mean, it's not like Olia clinged on to food because the Russian occupation happened. She was, you know, she's an amazing ... She's one of the best food writers of our times. She's been doing whatever she's doing for quite a few years now. And then your country is occupied. There's a war. You use whatever you've got. In my case, I was ...

Actually I think the Iranian situation is even more complicated, because I didn't want to put all of my attentions on Iran foodwise, because I would say that I wanted to write Pomegranates and Artichokes, to write ... Not to talk just about Iran, but a whole situation of, most importantly, immigration and the freedom of movement. And I always thought this is one of the reasons I came up with this idea, because I thought that the food of these places can show it very well, the similarities of these people. So I wanted to use it as a means to talk about this problem of migration policies.

Then the Iran things happened. And I personally — and I repeat, this is a very personal thing — I have some problems because I know what is expected of Iranian food in the Western media. You want it to be exotic and rosewater and pomegranates and pistachios and do this and this and that and, you know, one thousand and one nights. And I didn't want to do that. And I especially didn't want to apply it to the moment of the revolution. But, you know, I had finished everything with the book before the revolution. Even now, I am quite wary of that. I don't want to ever mix the two things, especially because I realised that I am doing this professionally and I have a book that I'm promoting at this moment and I don't want it to ever sound like that I am, you know, talking about the revolution at the same time, also promoting my book, like this is the last thing I want to happen.

But I also did — this was before the book was released, it was exactly a month before book publication, it wasn't my idea, it was one of my best friends idea — to do a sort of a dinner for fundraising to help some of the people in Iran who've been shot in the eye during the protest, and they needed operations. And we did a fundraising dinner and that was, you know, traditional Iranian dinner and everything. Whereas with my own work, with the sort of ... When I teach classes and, you know, this book, I've tried to stay away from — not always. I mean, I've taught a lot of Iranian cooking classes — but I wanted to like, you know, let's expand the thing a little bit.

And I have two reasons for that, not only just for the people on this side, especially on the Italian side and in the West in general, to see the similarities and to kind of accept that, oh, you see, no big deal. It's not not that different. We're not that exotic, we're not that ethnic. We're not that different. But I also want to bring Iran closer to its neighbour countries, in this case in its west, because we're not talking about the other side, because there has been also, you know, a wall for many different social and political and geographical reasons, you know, and cultural also. And I, I really want to, you know, cover that gap.

Jeremy: Let me succumb a little bit to the the the myth of Iranian food. Okay? There's an awful lot of saffron. Yes. What is the significance of saffron within Iranian cuisine?

Saghar: Well, again, I would say there is a lot of saffron in the dishes that appear in the Western media because there are dishes in Iran

that don't have saffron. And the symbol of saffron in Iranian cuisine is the same that it could be almost anywhere else. Well, perhaps not in Italy. It's affluence, okay? Because saffron is expensive. Good saffron is expensive. But we're also very much used to that flavour. And we like it when we put it both in sweet and savoury dishes. But, you know, apart from that, I'm not sure that it has a specific meaning. It's just that especially when you're cooking for guests, you use dishes with saffron and you use more saffron than normal in that. But it doesn't mean that simple regional dishes, they all have saffron. They almost always don't.

Jeremy: So saffron is something that you would use more for guests than just for domestic cooking.

Saghar: So you would like — let's say you are using a dish that you would cook it also for domestic cooking like a normal rice. Okay. You do add a little bit of saffron for your normal white rice. But when you have guests, you definitely add more saffron and you might even add a dash of rosewater to that saffron because, you know, it's for guests. So, you know, you pipe everything up for guests naturally, like everyone else. Yes.

Jeremy: But talking about rice, there's this impossible to achieve ... You know what I'm going to say, don't you? I know that I wrote it down because I knew I wouldn't remember it. Yeah. Tahdig. Yes. Is that ...

Saghar: Yes, the Tahdig. So it's not impossible. Okay. So the secret to ...

Jeremy: ... I haven't said what it is. Nobody knows. I mean, if people don't know, it's that crispy stuff on the ...

Saghar: Oh, yes. So the tahdig ... In Persian, it literally means the bottom of the pot. Tah means bottom, dig is the pot. Okay. So when you cook rice, which needs quite a lot of time in the method — I have explained the method as a master recipe in the beginning of the book — you should get this crispy rice. Okay. But it depends. And you know, this is the secret. The secret to getting a good tahdig is experience. Okay? So don't think you can get it right on your first attempt. Okay. It's a good pot. You need a very good, heavy, nonstick pot. This is what you need. Okay. And luck, because even the most experienced cooks with the best pots ever, sometimes get their

tahdigs wrong. Okay? And so it's, it's a combination. It's sort of a magical thing. Okay. Sometimes it doesn't happen, but it's still delicious. Sometimes you burn it. But then, you know, once you get the hold of it — and trust me, this thing about the pot is really important. And something I didn't expect, I learned recently is that it actually works better on induction because we have, we use a sort of a, Oh my God, what is the name in English? The spargefiamme, which is ...

Jeremy: ... Oh, a heat diffuser.

Saghar: A heat diffuser! And it's made of metal and it has a lot of holes. And we always put this on the gas hob. Okay. Because another thing is that you need the heat to be diffused because if you're on a normal gas hob, the thing only the heat at the centre, you won't get it. Okay. And that's how ... I don't remember where I cooked it recently on induction and it turned out, Wow! And you need a lot of oil like that, that the good pot needs to be well greased. Okay. And that's how you get to flip it. Okay. And then also the time. You start always on a high flame for like ten minutes or so, and then you reduce it and you give it time. But trust me, if you if you get these things — good pot, heat diffuser or induction, good pot, oil, I said the good pot, but you know, you should say few more times because it's very important — like the best Iranian cook in the world in the wrong pot won't be able to get a good tahdig. I mean, it sticks. Then you need to scrape it with a wooden spoon or something, which is still very nice, but you can't flip it.

Jeremy: I was intrigued ... A couple of weeks ago you had a pasta recipe with potato on the bottom to make a potato tahdig? Is that ... Did you invent that? Is that ...

Saghar: No, no, no, no, no. You can make different tahdig. I mean, of course, there's the rice one, especially in these years since, you know, Samin Nosrat did her tahdig, it's the rice one that is the most famous one, because it's the easiest one because you just put the rice there and this thing happens. But there are different types of tahdig. You can make tahdig with almost anything because the function of tahdig more than anything is to protect the rice. Okay. So you would put something at the bottom of the pot. And again, remember, good pot oil, a lot of oil. And it can be with flatbreads and you usually add a little bit of saffron.

So imagine a little bit of pita or lavosh that comes out. Wow. Wow. It comes out very good. And then there's the potatoes. And personally, I am in love with potato tahdigs. I would have killed as a child for potato tahdigs and they would give me all of the tahdig and I would ...

You know, people fight over tahdig because imagine ... you have a big pot and there's a lot of rice in it but the surface of the pot always remains the same. So there's always a little tahdig. It's a little bit of delicatessen for, you know, for everyone. And the sort of dishes, like that macaroni dish, which is the Iranian sort of spaghetti dish. And or, for example, there's another dish in the book. It's called Lubia Polow. It's this rice, sort of a pilaf with green beans. It has a tomato sauce. It's very good. So these things that they're mixed, things that you get the juices that in this long process of cooking, they go down. When you have something like the flatbread or potatoes, they absorb those juices and they become divine. But no, that's definitely something that exists.

Jeremy: One day I will I will have the courage to try that. But so far, I have the good pot. I have the oil. I don't have the courage. Let me ask ...

Saghar: You have a good pot?

Jeremy: Oh, I have a good pot.

Saghar: Then you're set. You try, you know, you try. And then I think you're going to get it because ... And then if you don't, you'll try next one. And you know you will get it, unless you burn it completely, which I don't think can happen because you're going to be there and you can smell it. You will get some part of it because maybe it becomes a little bit mushy and not crisp. And it happens to me also a lot of times, it's not like I can ... I told you there is a factor of luck. Sometimes you just don't get it right. But like if you have the good pot, but without the good pot, no, you won't.

Jeremy: Tell me about rice as a sweet dish in your book, because you've got sort of rice cakes, rice puddings ... of course, the English have a rice pudding ...

Saghar: Everybody has a rice pudding. And that's also one of the reasons that rice ... there are many rice puddings in the book because ... And this is one of those recipes, I mean, one of those cases, not the

recipes, because there are different recipes where you can actually historically trace back where, you know, why we all have rice puddings. And it's the most fascinating history. It was impossible to write about all of it in this book. There was just too much information.

So at a certain point I realised that we have white puddings and rice puddings in all of these regions and even beyond. And I wanted to add one form or another of these to each chapter. And when I started reading into rice puddings, I came upon ... you know, possibly anyone who has ever read some historical sources about medieval cooking has come upon this, so it's not like I dig this out of the history. There are two very important dishes, both in the medieval, let's say Arabic part or Arab Persianate part, and in the European part. The Arab Persianate dish is called isfidhahaj. It's very difficult. It's a very difficult name. And it's basically ... It literally means white stew. And then the European one is, of course, the blancmange. So what I found out is that, well, it says that it's what is is an arabised name of a Persian dish.

And I could not possibly understand, like, what dish is this? And then I searched for it and I found it. And I found that it's Persian is actually called sepidba, and ba is a very ancient word for stew again. So basically these white stews, and this was a very, very old Persian recipe, apparently, that was then ... They used to make it in the Abbasid court. And that's where we have the first manuscript of the Arab cooking, because we don't have, nothing is left of the ancient Persian recipes, as in written recipes. It was a stew made with white ingredients. And so the white ingredients could be almost anything. But there was almost always rice or rice flour in it. There were almonds, there were chickpeas, there was sugar, there was meat, because when you cook it, it becomes white. And there are many, many, many, many different versions of it. And so was the blancmange. You know, the blancmange had a lot of almonds, meat, sometimes rice flour. But, you know, rice gets to Europe later on. And these dishes are very, very similar. And there are many different varieties for them. And the meat was usually used as a thickener and there was meat in them and there was also sugar in them. So there were meaty dishes like they were stews that were also sugary.

Apparently we can't tell which of these dishes inspired the other ones, like there is not enough evidence to say that. But, you know, it's completely fascinating that they exist. And then something happens

during the years and these dishes, they start, you know, losing one or other ingredients and they become other specific dishes. In particular, they lose the meat and they become the white puddings or the rice puddings that we know today with the aromatics. But, you know, we still have a lot of evidence of them that they have stayed. For example, in Iran, we still have a sort of a porridge that is made with grain and meat and you serve it with sugar, butter and cinnamon for breakfast. Or in Turkey we have this pudding. It's a dessert that it's with rice, flour and everything. It's made with chicken breast and it's sweet. You still have it. You can find it. A lot of tourists freak out when they realise that. But it's delicious. In Europe, it loses the meat and it's then substitutes with gelatine and it becomes all the jellos, even the pannacotta, because the pannacotta is the same thing, you know, white desserts, they're all related in this way.

Jeremy: But they also can all be identified with a particular country, region, area, people by the condiments, by the aromatics.

Saghar: So in Iran, we use we use rosewater and cardamom. And the rosewater in Iran, the flavour is a little bit different from other places. I think it just simply depends on the roses. So all rosewaters are different. Kind of like, say, wine, I don't know. And then when it gets to the Levant, it doesn't have the cardamom, it has the rosewater. But we have the addition of orange blossom, all the citrus. And then we lose the rosewater by the time we arrive to Italy, we have the orange blossom in Campania, for example, even in the pastiera or other things. And they add, you know, all the citrusy things, lemons, but also sometimes vanilla. So it's fascinating.

Jeremy: One of the things I find very interesting about your book and history of producing it, there's there's this circle of — I think they're all women here in Italy writing books, quite personal, quite memoir — and you're all very supportive of each other, which is great. Has that been important to you?

Saghar: The support of the women of the food writing community has been everything to me. I don't think I would have been able to do that without them because, you know, it's one thing to be interested in food and these things, and you can't do a book or, you know, get into the publishing business, which is very difficult, just by that. And I've been, you know, quite blessed with these friendships since the early days that I started working with food, be it, photography

workshops, different collaborations and things. And yes, they've been fundamental in Italy and some of them even outside Italy. But, you know, I was just thinking about it that we're in Italy. We're very, very fortunate because we have a lot of amazing people from different places, especially mostly women. I don't know why it's mostly women, to be honest, that they're all very supportive of each other.

Jeremy: Do you consider yourself an Italian cook?

Saghar: No.

Jeremy: Do you cook Italian food?

Saghar: I do cook an Italian food. There are, you know, a lot of my recipes in the book, in the Italian chapter. I don't consider myself an Italian cook because ... but, you know, I don't consider myself an Iranian cook either. I do consider myself a cook. And I'd like to say that I am a sort of cook that I don't want to be bound by the nationality. I just can't put that in front of myself. But I'm definitely more at home with, let's say, Middle Eastern, Iranian, Mediterranean and Italian food. That's it. But I'd like to be able to explore. I just I want to say I'm a cook. And before being a cook, I'm a photographer and a writer, because I think I'm those things before being a cook. And then, those things I write about, I can also cook.

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