



CHAPTER FIVE

# CASSEROLES

# انواع خوراک

When the Iranians aren't cooking over fire, they tend to eat *khoresht*, or stew. Now our word stew, or even its rather grander cousin, casserole, is resonant of school dinners, Bisto-flavoured bowls of overcooked ingredients, food as a punishment. In Iran it is an art-form, and there are hundreds of varieties. Some, like the rich, sharp *ghormeh sabzi*, are national classics, and others, like cardoon casserole, are regional favourites, unheard of in other parts of the country. Some are eaten with rice, and others with bread. They are mostly gloriously simple to make – one-pot affairs. Jamshid's family eat a lot of *khoresht*, and so we have developed very much our own style of preparing them.



*Sorting through sour grapes preparatory to making verjuice.*

## Khoresht-e-bademjun – Chicken and Aubergine Boats

### خوش بادمجان

Unless you happen to dislike aubergines (and, let's face it, they are subject to rampant loathing and ardent passion), you will find this to be one of the most popular Iranian dishes to present; it is one of the great Persian comfort foods. There are two ways of making it – in the north of the country it is made with a rich herby sauce but, most commonly, it is made with a tomato base. Usually it is made with a whole chicken cooked on the bone, with the aubergines sliced, fried and added at the end of the process. For sheer oohs and aahs, we have added our own Persepolitan twist, which puts slivers of chicken breast inside hollowed-out aubergine boats, which we then float in their own tomato-dark sea. This will serve 4 people.

- 4 largish aubergines*
- salt and pepper*
- olive oil*
- 4 chicken breasts, skinned and off the bone, cut into slivers*
- 2 medium onions, sliced*
- 1½ teaspoons turmeric*
- ¼ teaspoon smoked paprika*
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon*
- 1 teaspoon tomato purée*
- ½ –¾ bottle sour grape juice*
- 2–3 tablespoonsful sour grape pickle (or use fresh)*
- 1 can tomato concasse*

Prepare the aubergines by scoring round each one, 1cm from the top

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and 1cm from the bottom. Peel away the skin between the two scored lines. Then, using a sharp knife, cut a line straight down the length of the vegetable between the two lines, so that the point penetrates just to the middle. Carefully reach in and bring out the sacs of seeds which are inside. Set them to one side. Sprinkle salt both on to the outside and the inside of each aubergine, and then settle them between two layers of kitchen paper so that any water which is drawn out is absorbed.

In the meantime, cook the chicken. Fry the onion in a little olive oil, and then stir in the chicken. Cook until sealed. Add the middle bits of the aubergines which you withdrew earlier, the spices, a little salt and pepper and then, after a few minutes more, the tomato purée. Add the fresh or pickled sour grapes (if using), tomato concasse, and about half a bottle of sour grape juice. Cook for around 10 minutes more, and then take off the heat.

Pat the aubergines dry, and then either deep fry for a few minutes (a luxury – you will need to use clean oil, and the aubergines will render it useless for anything else), or shallow fry, turning them constantly until they soften just slightly and brown just a little. Then set them in an ovenproof dish, and spoon a quarter of the chicken mixture into the middle of each. Pour the surplus sauce into the base of the dish, and cover with foil. Bake in a moderate oven (gas mark 4, 180°C) for around 40 minutes, checking halfway to make sure that there is still plenty of fluid in the base of the dish.

As by now I am sure that you are completely converted to the Persian way of doing food, you will no doubt have a large supply of fresh *sabzi* in your fridge (see p. 39) so serve this dish garnished with herbs (*in extremis*, a sprig of parsley will do), crusted rice cakes (see p. 201) or deep-fried croûtons of *barberi* bread.

## Sour grape juice

This is one of the heroes of *la gastronomie Persane*. *Originellement*, at least in Europe, it was known as *verjus*, which in English became the rather more prosaic verjuice. It is somewhere between wine and vinegar in flavour. It is widely believed that in Iran it was cultivated largely to replace wine in food. Ironically, the Persians are generally credited with the invention of wine – 3000-year-old amphorae containing wine sediment have been found in the depths of the Caucasus Mountains. Tales of the drunken revels of old are legion – that great hero Rostam was often so drunk that he had to be helped on to his horse, whilst Hafez mentions wine on more or less every page, and the *Ruba'iyat* of Omar Khayam is more or less a paean to the fruit of the vine.

One draught of Old Wine is preferable to a New Empire,  
It is best to get out of any way not the way of wine;  
The last of the wine is a hundred times better than Feridun's throne,  
The clay lid of a wine vat better than Kai Khosrow's kingdom.

*(Penguin version, translated by John Heath-Stubbs and Peter Avery)*

This was a serious relationship. Until the revolution, Iran had a flourishing wine industry (it is no coincidence that there is a grape named Shiraz); in fact it still has flourishing wine 'activity' behind closed doors.

Anyway, in the absence of grape juice of the fermented variety, they turned to the indigenous sour grape to spice up their soups and casseroles – and it has to be said that it is largely more complementary to food than its alcoholic cousin. It is available in bottled form and as a powder in Iranian and many Middle Eastern shops. The fresh variety is available in this country in the late spring/early summer. Fresh sour grapes freeze beautifully, and are so easy to use (just throw them in, stalk and all). If you are unable to get hold of any sour grape products, then a mixture of dry white wine and lemon juice would suffice. But don't forget the Persepolis mail order service.

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## Arabian Lamb Hotpot, Persepolis-style

### خورش با گوشت بر سبک تخت جمشید

This dish is a fusion of Arabic and Persian culinary concepts. That sounds very grand until we confess that it is actually a product of having failed to buy the right ingredients and having lots of people coming for dinner one night. It has to be said that it is very useful having a shop as a store-cupboard, but this dish really does comprise things that most people have in their larders. This will serve 8 people.

- 1 small bunch each mint and coriander, washed and chopped (or use dried)*
- a little oil*
- 3 medium onions, chopped*
- 5–6 cloves garlic, finely chopped*
- 1 boned shoulder lamb, cut into 2cm cubes (retain the bone and get your butcher to cut it into 4cm pieces)*
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric*
- salt and pepper*
- 2 dessertspoons apple (or cider) vinegar*
- ½ bottle sour grape juice (or 2 tablespoons lemon juice)*
- 2 dessertspoons sour grapes (optional)*
- 1–2 cans chick peas (depending on how much you like them)*
- 1 large can or 1 pack frozen spinach*

Sort and wash your herbs or, if using dried, cover with cold water and leave to soak. Heat some oil in a large saucepan and fry the garlic and two of the three onions. After a couple of minutes add the meat and stir until it is sealed all over. Add the turmeric and pepper (we won't add the salt yet – see footnote), fry a little more and then add the vinegar and the sour grape juice. Top up with water until just covered, bring to

به سبک جدید

the boil and set to simmer. In the meantime, retaining a handful of the mint, drain and fry the herbs in a little oil, turning vigorously to prevent clumping (this should take 7–8 minutes). Once they are cooked, add them to the casserole along with the pickled sour grapes, if you opt for them. If necessary, add a little more water to the dish so that everything remains covered. Bring to the boil again, and then set to simmer for at least an hour. After this add the chick peas and the spinach, and cook for another half-hour. Finally, fry the remaining onion and the mint in oil until the mint has darkened and the onion is crisp. Spoon the hotpot into a deep serving dish and strew the crisp onion mixture over the top. Serve with crusted basmati rice (see p. 201), plain thick yoghurt and pickles as desired.

### A word about salt

Iranians are inordinately fond of the stuff and, apart from generally using too much of it, they appreciate its culinary pitfalls. Salt notoriously toughens casseroled red meat if you add it to a dish too early, as do ingredients with hidden salt such as tomato or curry paste. So if you want that melt-in-the-mouth, ‘no less than three helpings will do’ effect, let your lamb or beef cook a while before you season it.

## Khoresht-e-Fessenjun – Duck with Walnut and Pomegranate Sauce



Of all the dishes to come out of the Persian kitchen, this is probably the one with the biggest ‘ooh-ah’ factor. Iranians will always be impressed by it as it contains such traditionally expensive ingredients. It bears the mark of opulence; by serving it to a dinner guest you are either showing great respect or you are just showing off. Foreigners (non-Iranians) are always bowled over by *fessenjun* – the sheer strength and originality of the flavours leave their mark.

This recipe works with any rich meat or game. I’ve made it with quail and pheasant, but I also find it great with chunky fish (e.g. salmon) and big prawns. In truth, most Iranians nowadays would probably prepare it with chicken.

You can accessorize this dish with a garnish of baby meatballs, and enhance the sharpness and texture by adding plums. But these are entirely matters of choice. Personally, I usually go with the plums and ditch the meatballs.

This should be a feast sufficient for 4–5 people.

- 1 duck, jointed*
- 300g shelled walnuts*
- 1 large onion, diced (peeled is good too)*
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric*
- ½ bottle pomegranate paste*
- salt and pepper, sugar, and lemon juice (optional)*
- 100g dried bokbara plums (pre-soaked for 1 hour) or substitute prunes (optional)*
- 250g minced lamb mixed with ½ grated onion (optional)*





Fry the duck in a some hot oil, and allow to cook for five minutes; then remove it from the pan with a slotted spoon and set to one side for a moment. Next grind the walnuts – best to blitz them in a blender, but wrapping them in a teatowel and bashing the hell out of them is another option. Fry the walnuts in the same oil as you cooked the duck, turning constantly until they start to darken; set these to one side. Next fry the onion in the same pan. Now, without burning your fingers, strip the skin from the duck and place the joints back in the pan with the onion. Add the turmeric, salt and pepper and about a pint of water, and set to simmer for about 15 minutes. Then add the walnuts and pomegranate paste, plus the plums if you are using these. If you are doing meatballs, roll the minced lamb and grated onion into 2 cm balls and pop those in as well. Allow to simmer for a further half an hour. Serve on white basmati rice (it's worth getting really nice fragrant rice for this dish), ranging those optional meatballs round the edge, medieval banquet-style. Then sit back and wait for those 'oohs' and 'aahs', not to mention the odd 'darling, you must give me your recipe'.

## **Ghormeh Sabzi – Herb and Bean Casserole with Lamb**

### **خورش قورمه سبزی**

This is Iran's favourite dish. There is a sort of unwritten agreement amongst Iranian housewives that it should be served in every household at least once a week. As far as I know, it isn't actually written into the statute books, but sometimes I wonder.

When it's blowing a gale around Persepolis we like nothing better than to tuck ourselves up around a roaring log fire and recount epic tales of Persian heroes of old (although a video may be nearer the mark): and

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that's the sort of evening when we just have to have *ghormeh sabzi*, one of the world's ultimate comfort foods.

The dish is quite stunning. If you have made it correctly, it should in fact be a rich green in colour, and the aroma wafting from it should be enough to get them queuing down the street. These quantities feed 6 hearty or 8 modest eaters.

*1 shoulder of lamb, trimmed of as much fat as possible (the sheep is a badly designed animal and it is impossible to remove all the fat), cut on the bone into 3cm chunks (a nice butcher will do this for you)*  
*2 large onions, chopped*  
*8–9 dried limes, washed and pricked in several places*  
*1 teaspoon ground turmeric*  
*400g kidney beans soaked and cooked (or 2 cans of the same)*  
*1 bunch each of fresh coriander, parsley, chives, spinach and fenugreek, washed, drained and chopped*  
*salt and pepper*

Place the lamb, onion and dried limes in a pan of water, sprinkle the turmeric on top, bring to the boil and set to simmer. After an hour, stir your casserole a bit, and fry off the herbs in a little oil, stirring constantly so that they cook through thoroughly (5–7 minutes should do the trick). If they are not properly fried they will clump together when you add them to the main dish. Add the herbs, stir the *khoresht* well, and add some seasoning. Set to simmer again, keeping an eye on the liquid level. Twenty minutes before you wish to dish up, stir in the kidney beans.

Altogether we like our stew to bubble away for a couple of hours, but it will be edible after about one and a half. The finished dish should have a thick, rich green sauce and the meat should be falling off the bone.

Serve with plain white basmati rice (sacrilege to contemplate anything else, I am told), and wedges of onion, raw garlic and a pot of thick plain yoghurt.

Cheat's Guide: washing and sorting all those herbs is a time-consuming business and even the most dutiful Iranian housewife is not above the occasional shortcut. So you can use dried herbs if you wish – just soak them first and then fry them or, if you are lucky enough to have an Iranian store near you, look out for frozen pre-chopped herbs, frozen chopped and fried herbs or even the whole sauce thing in cans. Not that we endorse such scheming in the kitchen, you understand....

## *Khoresht Aloo Bokhara – Plum Hotpot with Chicken*

خورش آلو

This is a really lush casserole – thick and gloopy, sweet and sour, with both crunch and squidge. It should really be called chicken casserole with plums, but as I invariably scoff the plums and peas and sauce, I rarely have room left for the chicken. As a general rule, the meat part of a *khoresht* is largely a detail and so, with a small twist, most of the recipes featured in this book can be made just as successfully in vegetarian or even vegan mode. Here are the quantities for 4–6 people.

*400g aloo bokhara, whole dried plums (widely available at Middle Eastern shops now, but you can use dried prunes)*  
*a little olive oil (or ghee, to be more authentic)*  
*1 large onion, peeled and chopped*  
*1 skinned chicken, cut into 8 pieces*  
*1 teaspoon ground cinnamon plus 1 teaspoon ground turmeric*  
*1 tablespoon tomato purée*  
*sour grapes and sour grape juice*  
*150g yellow split peas (preferably Iranian or Indian)*

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Put the dried plums (or prunes) into cold water to soak – best to do this half an hour to an hour before you start cooking. Heat a little olive oil or ghee in a saucepan and toss in the onion. Fry for a few minutes, and then add the chicken pieces. Turn the chicken gently until it is lightly browned, and then stir in the spices and the tomato purée. Add a tablespoon of sour grapes, half a bottle of sour grape juice, and 500ml cold water. If you are using *chana dall*, i.e. Indian or Iranian split peas, add them now; common or garden split peas (which are not so good as they cook to a mush, losing their integrity) should be added after about 20 minutes. Bring the chicken to the boil, and then set to simmer for around half an hour, stirring occasionally. Drain the plums and mix them into the casserole, together with some salt and pepper. Cook for a further 20 minutes. Taste the sauce. If it is too sour, add some sugar; if it is not sharp enough, you may add more sour grape juice or a dash of lemon juice.

Devour with white basmati rice, fresh herbs and minted onion salad.

I rather like this as a hot (as in chilli) dish, and so I usually add 1–2 red chillies to the recipe at the frying-onion-stage. The combination of thick, sweet and eye-watering is unexpected but delicious. It is not, however, authentic. Iranians are not known for their love of really hot food, and several have thought that I was actually trying to poison them when I tried to spice things up.

## Korma Shalgam – Afghan Lamb and Turnip Casserole Persian-style

### خورش شلغم

Afghan cuisine is similar to Iranian cuisine – they are next-door neighbours and are clearly bound to borrow the odd cup of sugar or recipe from each other. But the Afghans like things a lot spicier – probably something to do with all those lovely mountains, not to mention their neighbours on the other side in Pakistan. Anyway, unlike many Iranians, we really like hot food, and so I make no apologies for including this recipe. It is a favourite with our helper, Mr Mirwais, who says that on a good day, with the wind blowing in the right direction, it is almost a tenth as tasty as his mother's. Rare praise indeed. I especially like this dish because it enhances the flavour of the turnips, rather than drowning them in a sea of root vegetables. This is a truly hearty feast for a cold day. Enough for 6–8 people.

- 1 small boned shoulder of lamb, trimmed of fat*
- 2 onions, chopped*
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped*
- 1½ really hot red chillies or 3–4 hot green chillies, chopped*
- a little oil of choice (ghee to be more authentic)*
- 2 teaspoons cumin powder*
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric*
- ½ teaspoon smoked paprika*
- 2 teaspoons cinnamon powder*
- 1 can tomato concasse*
- 250g yellow split peas*
- ½ bottle sour grape juice (or three tablespoons lemon juice) and some pickled sour grapes if available*

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*4 medium turnips, peeled and quartered*  
*4 medium carrots, peeled and quartered*  
*2 teaspoons tomato purée*  
*salt and pepper*  
*fresh coriander, chopped*

When you buy the shoulder of lamb you may well ask the butcher to bone it for you. Make absolutely sure you keep the bones, and ask the butcher nicely to cut the bone into enough manageable chunks to go round, otherwise there will be an undignified scrum over the hotpot to retrieve them. If you are terribly British and not yet in the habit of slobbery, finger-licking bone sucking, it is one of those things you need to absorb to live the Persian good-life.

Cut the meat into 2–3cm chunks. Fry the onions, garlic and chillies in a little oil, and then stir in the lamb. Sear the meat, and then add the spices. Add the tomato concasse and a little water, bring to the boil, cover the pan and set to simmer for around half an hour. Then add the sour grape juice, sour grapes, split peas and more water (so that the meat is nicely covered). Carry on cooking for another hour, and then add the tomato paste, turnip and carrot. Season to taste and then simmer for a final half hour.

Serve strewn with the fresh coriander, alongside bowls of pickles or *must-o-khiar* (see p. 50). We recommend that this dish is eaten with brown basmati rather than the white so beloved of Iranians – it is more authentic for Afghan food, generally a lot tastier, and it is just so much better for you. Not that we are trying to nanny you or anything.

## Rhubarb Stew – *Khoresht-e-Rivas*



‘Ooh no!’, we hear you cry. Rhubarb is something that many people find at best unpleasant. One is forced to consume it with custard when one is a child. That slimy sharpness can leave a psychological scar, and I have seen grown men weep rather than face a rhubarb crumble.

This recipe may thus be regarded as therapy for rhubarbo-phobes. It is really nice. Trust me. I like Marmite too. My mother would like readers to know that this recipe has her full endorsement, it is her favourite Persian dish.

This combination of mint and parsley is used for a range of casseroles, most commonly celery and cardoon, so I have listed a couple of variations underneath. I have added coriander because I like it. This makes a stew large enough for 4–6 people.

*1 skinned chicken*

*a little butter*

*1 large onion, chopped*

*1 teaspoon ground turmeric*

*½ bottle sour grape juice (or 2 tablespoons lemon juice)*

*2 dessertspoons fresh or pickled sour grapes (optional)*

*salt and pepper*

*1 small bunch mint (or 60g dried mint)*

*1 small bunch parsley (or 60g dried)*

*1 small bunch coriander (or 60g dried)*

*1 large bundle rhubarb, washed and peeled (if large, mature stalks)*

Chop your chicken: separate legs from thighs, and halve the breasts, leaving it all on the bone. Melt the butter in a pan, and toss in the onion and turmeric. Once the onion has started to soften, add in the

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chicken and seal all over. Add the sour grape juice, sour grapes, salt and pepper, and enough water to cover, bring to the boil and set to simmer. As an alternative to the above, you can just place the chicken, onion, turmeric and seasoning in the pan with the verjuice and water and bring to the boil – but I believe that frying best releases the flavour of the turmeric.

In the meantime sort, wash, drain and chop your herbs (if using dried herbs you will have needed to soak them first). Pour a little oil in a frying-pan, and fry the herbs, stirring constantly so that they do not catch. Cook for around 8 minutes and then add to the casserole. Continue to cook for around half an hour until the chicken is cooked through.

Chop the rhubarb into pieces approximately 3cm long and lower it into the sauce. Cook the whole thing for around another 10 minutes, check the seasoning, and ladle carefully into a serving dish.

Serve with plain basmati rice, yoghurt and fresh raw garlic. And expunge all memories of custard.

### Variations on the theme

Celery: you do the same as above, substituting celery for rhubarb. But as celery requires a little more cooking than rhubarb, you need to sauté it gently for 5–10 minutes before adding it to the *khoresht*.

Cardoons: not something you find easily at your nearest CostMore or PriceBooster supermarket, but can be grown easily in an English garden. The plant is a wild cousin of the artichoke; it is the stalks which are eaten. They resemble salsify (which is available if you look hard enough – the canned variety is very easy to use). Just sauté them as I suggest you do the celery above.



### *Ab-Gusht* as an art form

*Ab-Gusht*, literally ‘meat-water’ or stock, truly is an art form in the Iranian kitchen. While *gusht* does actually mean meat, the term *ab-gusht* is equally applied to ‘chicken water’.

What was historically (and may still be) a way of stretching a few meagre bones into a nourishing meal, is today eaten as a soup and relished as an accompaniment to rice.

Everybody makes it differently, while adhering to a few basic principles, and once you have grounding in what it’s all about, you can experiment freely and have a bit of fun.

The one more or less essential ingredient is dried limes, *limoo armani*. If you really can’t find them in your local or nearest Middle Eastern store, give our mail-order department a ring. It is worth the effort, and they are lightweight and inexpensive. At a pinch, you can substitute a fresh lemon: give it a rinse, quarter it and pop the whole lot in.

In Iran you can get *ab-gusht* in roadside cafés – it is the Persian equivalent of egg and chips, good lorry-driver fare. It is cooked for several hours, whereupon the meat is stripped out and mashed with the potatoes – the resulting meat patty is served on a plate, with the *ab* served alongside (usually in a baby metal tureen) as a broth. *Lavash* bread is often dunked into the broth. Eaten this way, the dish is called *dizee*’.

## Ab-Gusht with Lamb



This is to feed 8 people as a main course. For fewer people, just reduce the quantities. If you are going to make it just as a soup, then you can do it with bones alone.

- 1 shoulder of lamb, trimmed and chopped on the bone into 2cm cubes*
- 2 medium onions, chopped*
- 8 dried limes, washed and pricked*
- 2 teaspoons ground turmeric*
- 100g chick peas, soaked overnight (or 1 can cooked)*
- 100g white kidney or cannellini beans, soaked overnight (or 1 can)*
- 4 medium potatoes*
- salt and pepper*

Rinse the lamb, and then place in a pan with the chopped onions and dried limes. If you are using dried beans, rinse and add them at this stage as well. Cover with water so that the surface of the liquid is about 5cm above the meat (only 2cm if you are using canned beans). Sprinkle in the turmeric, bring to the boil, and set to simmer; ignore for around an hour and a half. After this, peel and halve the potatoes and lower them in and, if you are using canned beans, add these as well. At this stage, check that the meat is still covered by the stock (add a little boiling water to top it up if necessary), and only now should you add some seasoning to taste. Cook for another half an hour, or until the potatoes are just starting to disintegrate.

Serve with brown basmati – actually I usually serve this with the lentil rice featured in Chapter Seven. Spoon the lamb into the centre of the rice, and serve the *ab* in a bowl separately. This dish needs the company of pickles, yoghurt and bread.

## Ab-Gusht with Chicken

### آبگوشت مرغ

This is eaten with lots of things – *bogoli pulao*, *sib pulao* – its simplicity provides the perfect accompaniment to these delicately flavoured rice dishes. Again, it can be eaten as a soup if you are just using bones and scraps of raw chicken or used as a casserole if you are using whole joints. The recipe assumes the latter. It will be enough for 5–6 people.

*1 chicken, skinned and jointed*

*1 large onion, chopped*

*5–6 dried limes*

*1 teaspoon turmeric*

*¼ teaspoon saffron, steeped in boiling water*

*salt and pepper*

*100g Iranian split peas (or the Indian chana dall)*

*1 can cooked chick peas*

*75g kritheraki (rice-shaped pasta) or pudding rice*

*1–2 potatoes (optional, but then, as I explained above, all these ingredients can be pretty much played around with)*

Wash the chicken and place it in a pan; prick the dried limes and add them to the chicken along with the onion. Pour in enough cold water to cover the meat with around 1cm to spare. Sprinkle in the turmeric and saffron and a starter-offering of salt and pepper, add the split peas and bring to the boil. Once it has boiled, turn the gas down and allow it to simmer for half an hour. At this point add the pasta and the chick peas; peel and halve your spuds if using and lower these in too. Cook the chicken through for another half an hour.

Serve with the rice of your choice, or just dish up in a big bowl and serve with plenty of warm Persian bread. Once again, pickles are a requisite; raw onion, yoghurt and herbs are desirable.

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## Lubia Chitti – Baked Beans with Cheesy Meatballs

### لوسیا چیتی با گوشت پنبیری

In Iran there is a bit of confusion about bean nomenclature, and I find quite a large number of beans get called *lubia chitti* (literally, ‘stripy beans’) – in truth the term most probably refers to pinto beans, which are indeed striped, but it also seems to refer more broadly to any beans in sauce. Our baked beans here are made with haricot or navy beans, but we *still* call them *lubia chitti*. Use any bean you like, as long as it is one which withstands slow cooking. This will be enough for about 6 supper guests, although you will have enough beans left over for lunch the next day.

for the beans:

*500g navy or haricot beans (soaked overnight)*

*butter*

*2 onions, chopped*

*3 sticks celery, chopped*

*1 red and 1 green pepper, diced*

*½ teaspoon cinnamon*

*½ teaspoon cumin*

*½ teaspoon smoked paprika*

*1 teaspoon oregano*

*1 teaspoon mint*

*1 tablespoon tomato paste*

*2 tin crushed tomatoes*

*2 tablespoons Persepolis patent piquant tomato sauce (see p. 331)*

*salt and pepper*

for the meatballs:

*1kg minced lamb*

*1 grated onion*

*2 grated potatoes*  
*3 teaspoons dried oregano*  
*2 teaspoons dried mint*  
*½ teaspoon cinnamon*  
*½ teaspoon turmeric*  
*100–150g halloumi (or mozzarella) cheese, cut into centimetre cubes*

Bring the beans to the boil in unsalted water, cook for about 10 minutes, then drain. Melt the butter in a skillet, and sauté the onions, celery and peppers. When they have softened, add the spices and herbs, stirring well, and then the tomato paste, tinned tomatoes and special sauce. Bring this to the boil, season to taste, then remove from the heat. Layer the beans in an oven dish, and pour the sauce over the top, mixing well. Cover the dish with foil, and bake at gas mark 4/180°C for around an hour and a half.

In the meantime you can get cracking with the meatballs. Make sure that you drain the grated onion and potato before using them; your mixture will otherwise be really mushy. Mix all the ingredients (bar the cheese) together, then with wet hands roll the mixture into little balls no more than 3cm in diameter. Poke a cube of cheese into each one, making sure that it is completely surrounded by meat – the cheese will otherwise just leak out and burn.

After the beans have been cooking for 1½ hours, take them out, stir them, and season to taste.

Put the meatballs on to a greased oven tray and cook for 15 minutes on gas mark 5/190°C, turning once. Take them out of the oven. Next, check that the beans have enough liquid (add a dash of boiling water if necessary), and then spoon the meatballs on top of the bean mixture. Re-cover the beans, and put back in the oven for another 30 minutes.

You can serve this dish with rice or jacket potatoes – there are those who need real concentrations of carbohydrate with every meal – but I reckon it's best just with some warm *naan-e-sangak* (or other bread of your choosing), and a vibrant, verdant salad.

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### The unmentionables – offal

Offal is hugely popular in Iran. I debated long and hard as to whether to include it in this tome – the modern English are pretty lily-livered, if you'll excuse the pun, when it comes to eating the insides, not to mention the extremities, of animals. But it is so very much ensconced in Iran's cuisine that its omission would have been to offer less than a full picture of the nation's kitchen. Besides, with the success of restaurants such as St John, it would seem that 'real' English food, comprising all these things, is enjoying a bit of a comeback.

The successful cooking of such delicacies as tripe, brains and tongue depends less on fancy ingredients and more on method: which is why I will not be proffering recipes for lamb's feet with a blackcurrant *jus*, or brain and pesto gnocchi. I have simply had a chat with the mother-in-law, her brother Mohsen – himself a consummate chef and passionate about animal unmentionables – and a quick flick through Rosa Montazami's oeuvre (see Bibliography). Just for the record, I have tried, enjoyed and tested all of these recipes, but me and tripe are never going to hit it off (although it seems awfully big in Peckham), so for that particular recipe entire credit is due to Ms Montazami and several chats with my local butcher and his customers. Please note that other than liver, kidney and heart, offal tends to take rather a long time to cook. For this reason, Iranians often resort to pressure cookers. If you have one, feel free to get it out and play.

## Tripe – Seer Abi

### سیرابی

For 4–6 adventurous souls, you will need:

*2kg tripe*

*vinegar and salt*

*2 carrots, peeled and roughly chopped*

*1 stick celery – roughly chopped*

*4–5 dried limes (or zest of 1 lemon plus juice of 2)*

*3 medium onions, peeled and roughly chopped*

*1 bulb garlic, peeled*

*100ml olive oil 50g ghee or butter*

*2 teaspoons ground turmeric*

*2–3 fresh chopped chillies (or 1 teaspoon chilli powder)*

*1–2 tablespoons flour*

*100g walnut halves, roughly chopped*

*1 small bunch parsley, chopped*

To enjoy this dish at its optimum, you should begin the process 2 days ahead of when it is required.

The key to doing anything with tripe is to clean it properly. To this effect you should first wash it thoroughly. Then cut it into 4cm squares, place it in a large bowl, immerse it with three parts water to one part vinegar and a handful of salt, cover it and leave overnight to soak. The next day, wash again and clean once more with water, vinegar and salt; then rinse until the water runs clear. Place in a pan, add the carrots, celery, dried limes and two of the onions, together with half the garlic and half the turmeric. Bring to the boil, cover, and cook slowly for 4–5 hours. At the end of this cooking time, remove the tripe and set to one side: strain the stock. Heat the oil and ghee in a pan, and gently fry the

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other onion with the rest of the garlic and the chillies. Once the onion has started to brown, add the rest of the turmeric, and then the flour, stirring constantly. Slowly pour in the strained stock, and put the tripe back in the pan as well. Bring to the boil, season to taste, and then stir in the parsley and walnuts. Allow to simmer for one hour more. You can then dish up if you wish but this dish is one of the few which improve for being left (in the fridge of course) overnight and reheated the next day.

Serve with raw onion and lots of warm Persian bread. Just don't ask me to share it with you.

نوشتیدنی ها

به سبک جدید



## Caleh-pah-cheh – Lamb’s Head and Feet



Lambs are bought by families in Iran to slaughter and cook as an offering or by way of thanks for something – and yes, that does include the return of prodigal sons, as many a Westernized Iranian will tell you upon their first trip home for a while. Professionals are hired to carry out the slaughter, and it is not any crueller than the processes at an abattoir. But it can still be a bit of a shock for the jet-lagged West Londoner in his Armani suit arriving at the family house to find the driveway awash with blood, or ringing with the sound of piteous bleats.

Anyway, the custom of buying a whole lamb has naturally led to some enterprising ways of consuming it. Nothing is allowed to go to waste. Usually some will be given away to the poor, but the head and feet are regarded as a great treat and therefore retained for family use. They are traditionally cooked very slowly through the night and eaten as a breakfast ‘fit for shahs’; they are also touted as a hangover remedy.

I am assuming for the purposes of the exercise that you are not actually going to be killing your own sheep on the front lawn, but rather making a trip to the butcher. Nice butchers will sear the furry bits off, and cut through the tendons of the feet, so that all you have to do is give them a quick rinse and cook them. This is what you need for a romantic ‘breakfast’ for 2 people.

- 1 lamb’s head, skinned*
- 2 lamb’s feet, de-furred*
- 2 large onions, chopped*
- 2 level teaspoons ground turmeric*
- 3–4 bay leaves*
- 100g dried chick peas, soaked for 6 hours*
- 100g dried cannellini beans, soaked for 6 hours*
- salt*

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Rinse the head and feet and pop them in a large pan with the onion, bay leaves and turmeric. Cover with plenty of water and bring to the boil. Drain the soaked beans, and add them to the pan. Wrap the lid of the pan in a clean tea towel (it helps absorb any cooking odours), and set to simmer – preferably overnight, but 5 hours will do. Just before serving, add salt to taste.

The eyes, tongue, flesh and brain are all edible, as is the bone marrow, but you can fry the brain separately (see below). Serve with the stock and lots and lots of bread. You will be surprised at how tasty this is (and this is from someone who really doesn't rate meat that highly).

## Fried Brains

If you haven't acquired your brain as a by-product of the previous recipe, buy really fresh calves' or lambs' brains from the butcher (1 per person for lamb, half a head per person for a calf, as a rough guide). Soak them in cold water for ten minutes, and then blanch them in boiling water with a dash of lemon juice for 15 minutes. Remove from the water, pat dry, and then cut each brain in half (there is a 'natural' dotted line down the middle for this). Mix a couple of serving-spoons of flour with a teaspoon of turmeric and a teaspoon of salt: coat each piece of meat with the flour, and then fry in butter. Serve with lemon wedges. Again, extraordinarily scrummy.

## Tongue à la Mother-in-Law

### خوراک زبان به روش مادرشوهر

Oh squeamish ones, you can peek again now – this dish is at least familiar. Pressed tongue is still a regular presence in the British diet.

My mother-in-law usually uses lambs' tongues, and so that is what I have assumed for this recipe. You can use calf's tongue: as a rough guide, 1 calf's tongue, in feedability terms, equates to about 3 lambs' tongues. When we eat this, it tends to be more as a casserole; which suits me, as I am less than thrilled about the appearance of the things (not to cook, but to eat), so when they are heavily disguised I can just dip in and enjoy the flavour of the sauce. In Iran, this dish is a prize item, served to guests with great aplomb. It is another of those dishes which serve to separate the women from the girls (at least in terms of culinary skill). This will be enough for 4 people.

*about 8 lambs' tongues*

*1 large onion, chopped*

*2 bay leaves*

*black pepper*

*a handful each of chopped tarragon, mint and parsley*

*4 cloves garlic (2 quartered, 2 chopped)*

*salt*

*a bunch of spring onions, washed and chopped*

*oil for frying*

*500g mushrooms, cleaned and quartered*

*2 dessertspoons tomato purée*

Again, preparation is key. Scrape the tongues to remove any unwanted bits, then wash them and place them in a pan. Cover with water, add the chopped onion, bay leaves, pepper, fresh herbs and the two quartered

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cloves of garlic. Bring to the boil, and then turn the heat down and cook for 4–5 hours (until the tongues feel tender when you poke them with a fork). At the end of this cooking time, add salt to taste and bring back to the boil for 10 minutes. Take the meat out, reserving the stock. Whilst they are hot, peel the tongues, and if you serving these as a party piece, slice through each tongue at 2 mm intervals, nearly but not all the way to the base, so that the tongues can be opened out like a fan and guests will easily be able to help themselves to individual slices (if not, just leave them whole). Set them to one side.

Now make the 'sauce'. Fry the spring onions in a little oil. Add the mushrooms, and continue to cook until they are golden brown and all the water content has evaporated. Grind the remaining garlic with a little salt, and add to the mushroom/onion mix, and after 5 further minutes, add the tomato purée, stirring well. Pour in the reserved stock (which you should really strain), and bring to the boil. If you are having the dish informally, just lower the tongues back into the sauce, and when piping hot, serve with hot Persian bread and fresh herbs. If you are showing off, you will need to range your tongues tastefully on a platter, making the partially severed slices clearly apparent. Spoon a little of the sauce over each tongue. Surround with..., well, they usually use piped mashed potato these days, but I prefer rice and the lentil mash on p. 240. The idea is to make the dish look really spectacular, with piles of fresh herbs dotted in between. Serve the remaining sauce in a bowl on the side.

## Chicken on a Bed of Prunes and Spinach

### خوش آو سیاه با اسفناج

This recipe is based on another *kboresht* from the north-west of Iran, but we have gone all *ash-pazi jadide* (Persian *nouvelle cuisine*) with this. Rather than dish up a vat of green casserole, we merely wilt the spinach, toss lightly with the prunes and top it with shredded chicken. The delicious sweet/sour sauce is drizzled over the top. I saw something like this done on Persian daytime television, but I only caught the end bit, so have had to devise my own method. To feed 4 people.

- 4 chicken breasts, on the bone if possible*
- 1 large onion, chopped*
- 1 knob of green ginger (anomalous to classic Persian cuisine, but all the rage on daytime TV over there), chopped*
- 4 cloves garlic, chopped*
- 1 teaspoon ground turmeric*
- 2 tablespoons apple (or cider) vinegar*
- 1 teaspoon saffron, steeped in boiling water*
- 1 teaspoon ground cinnamon*
- 500g prunes*
- 2 tablespoons honey*
- 1 tablespoon sugar*
- 1kg fresh spinach, washed*
- 100g nibbed almonds*
- olive oil, salt and pepper*
- 4 portions basmati rice*

Fry the onions, garlic and ginger, and when they start to soften, stir in the chicken and turmeric, together with a light sprinkle of salt and pepper. When the chicken is sealed all over, add 1 litre cold water and

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the vinegar, bring to the boil and add half the saffron. Cover the pan and simmer for around 15 minutes or until the chicken is cooked through. Retrieve the chicken breasts and set them aside, and then bubble the sauce gently for another 10 minutes to reduce it.

Take 4 tablespoonsful of this chicken stock and put them into another pan. Stir in the prunes and heat gently for 7–8 minutes. Then add the sugar, cinnamon and honey; stir, and take off the heat.

Cook the basmati rice according to your normal method, and streak the rest of the saffron through it to give variegated colour.

Take the breasts off the bone (which you may now discard) and chop into fine slices. Scoop the prunes out of the spiced syrup and reserve. Pour the reduced chicken stock into the syrup, and heat through.

Heat a drop of olive oil in a frying-pan, and fry the nibbed almonds. Remove them with a slotted spoon and reserve, and then swiftly toss the spinach into the hot oil, stirring constantly. Just as it starts to wilt, throw in the prunes and take off the heat.

Layer a large and splendid serving dish with the rice, followed by the prunes and spinach. Then comes the sliced chicken, and a strewing of nibbed almonds. The sauce should be trailed across the top.

## Tamarind Lamb and Mushroom Cobbler

### خوراک بره وقارح دریائی

This recipe is based on *khoresht-e-gharch* – mushroom casserole – a perennial favourite in my mother-in-law’s family. It has to be said that mushrooms are not one of *the* quintessential Persian ingredients – as you travel east out of Europe you will find that they are used less and less (until you get to the Orient, where they have plenty of indigenous, exotic varieties), so I suspect that the Persian mushroom eating habit was introduced from Europe. This recipe sees the *khoresht* thickened, and topped with a herby, saffron crumble – it should thus be served without rice. Enough for 4 people.

*1 onion, chopped*

*450g lean, boneless lamb – neck fillet, leg or shoulder*

*½ teaspoon ground cumin*

*1 teaspoon ground turmeric*

*1 teaspoon ground cinnamon*

*1 tablespoon flour*

*1 tablespoon tamarind concentrate (see note below)*

*2 tablespoons sour grape juice (or 1 tablespoon lemon juice)*

*350g mushrooms*

*salt and pepper*

for the cobbler:

*90g butter*

*100g wholemeal flour*

*100g plain flour*

*100g grated cheese (optional)*

*½ teaspoon ground saffron dissolved in boiling water*

*handful each of fresh chopped coriander, chives and parsley*

*salt and pepper*

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Fry the onion in a little oil. Cut the lamb into 2–3cm cubes, and add it to the softened onion, together with the cumin, cinnamon and turmeric. Seal the meat well, before adding the flour. Stirring constantly, add enough water to cover the meat, cover the pan and set to simmer. You can at this stage transfer it to a casserole dish and cook it in the oven (gas mark 4/180°C), but it is easier to play with and observe on the hob. Cook for one hour, stirring occasionally, and then add the sour grape juice and tamarind paste. Wipe and quarter the mushrooms, and fry these in a knob of butter until the water content has evaporated (5–10 minutes, stirring regularly). Add these to the meat, season to taste, and cook for a further 15 minutes.

Make the crumble topping by cutting the butter into little pieces and rubbing it with your fingertips into the mixed flours (it should resemble breadcrumbs). Add the saffron, herbs, cheese and a sprinkle of seasoning. Transfer the meat to a proper casserole dish (if you haven't already), and strew the crumble on top. Bake at gas mark 5/190°C for around 25 minutes, until the top of the cobbler is lightly browned.

Serve with your choice of potatoes or vegetables.



## Tamarind

Tamarinds are deeply intriguing little fruits, strongly resembling something John Wyndham might have created, or perhaps the product of a space-ship's hydroponics bay. Once you have cracked the outside pod, you need then to peel off the 'string' inside, and watch out for the shiny, black alien-spawn pips. Tamarinds come in two varieties – sweet or sour – both of which are incredibly flavoursome. The sweet is prepared and eaten just so – its chewy pulp is more like a confection than a fruit, and it has a similar effect to prunes (if you see what I mean). The sour can also be eaten *au naturel*, but is mostly made into a thick, sharp, exotic paste for cooking. You can make your own paste by steeping a few peeled tamarinds in boiling water and then pressing it all through a sieve. But the ready-made stuff is available in all Middle Eastern food stores, and is a great little ingredient to have in your pantry – use it for thickening and sharpening sauces and soups, or as a marinade ingredient.