

Persian PERSUASION

Dubai-based Iranian-American chef Ariana Bundy discusses the culinary heritage of Iran and what makes it so special

TEXT BY CHIRANTI SENGUPTA

She was born in Iran, studied in Switzerland and has lived in New York, Paris, London and Dubai. But nothing quite prepared Ariana Bundy for the extraordinary journey she undertook to prepare for her cookery show designed to put the delicate flavours of Iran on the global map — a show that would ultimately air on Nat Geo People as Ariana's Persian Kitchen.

The award-winning Iranian-American chef and author has walked the road less travelled across Iran to glean its gastronomic delights and experience the most authentic taste of its home-grown specialities for her eight-episode show. From the old city of Yazd and the lush pastures of the Caspian region, to the majestic former Persian capital of Isfahan and the wilderness of the saffron-producing regions in Khorasan, Bundy scoured traditional bazaars for ingredients, mingled with

farmers and traders and broke bread with local cooks across the country to unravel the culinary secrets of Iran and its people.

"It was a spectacular adventure across a vast and versatile country, visiting many destinations I had never been to before," says Bundy. "The old cities and small towns are treasure troves of culinary delights."

Each 25-minute episode saw Bundy recreating the recipes she picked up from the far-flung corners of Iran at her home in Dubai, using available ingredients and shortcuts to create exotic feasts.

"As the show was funded by my husband and me, we shot at a very leisurely pace over the harvest seasons of pomegranate, rose and saffron," says Bundy, who lives between San Francisco and Dubai.

The soft-spoken chef earned her culinary credentials at Le Cordon Bleu and Le Notre in Paris,

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PHOTO: SHARON SHERMAN



Above: Ariana in the kitchen
Right: Zereshk rice dish

ARIANA BUNDY'S RECOMMENDED RESTAURANTS IN IRAN

PESARAN-E KARIM, MASHHAD

"Go there for its succulent lamb dishes such as shishlik, lamb confit and kebabs."

KhAVAR KHANOOM'S RESTAURANT, CASPIAN

REGION "Located on the Gilan and Mazandaran border, Khavar Khanoom serves decadent Caspian delicacies. Try the fish stuffed with pomegranate, herbs, flavourful rice and smoky eggplant."

CHAI BAR, TEHRAN

"Set in a beautiful garden, this is the place to go for light Persian homemade fare."

to stay away from them, she adds. "We believe chillies mask the flavours of fresh ingredients and don't complement saffron, a colouring and flavouring agent used extensively in Persian cuisine.

"My friends in the UAE and other countries hardly know anything about Iran and many of them are still hesitant to travel there. Through my TV show and the cookbook, I tried to dispel misconceptions about this fascinating country and celebrate its culture and gastronomic traditions," she says. 🍷



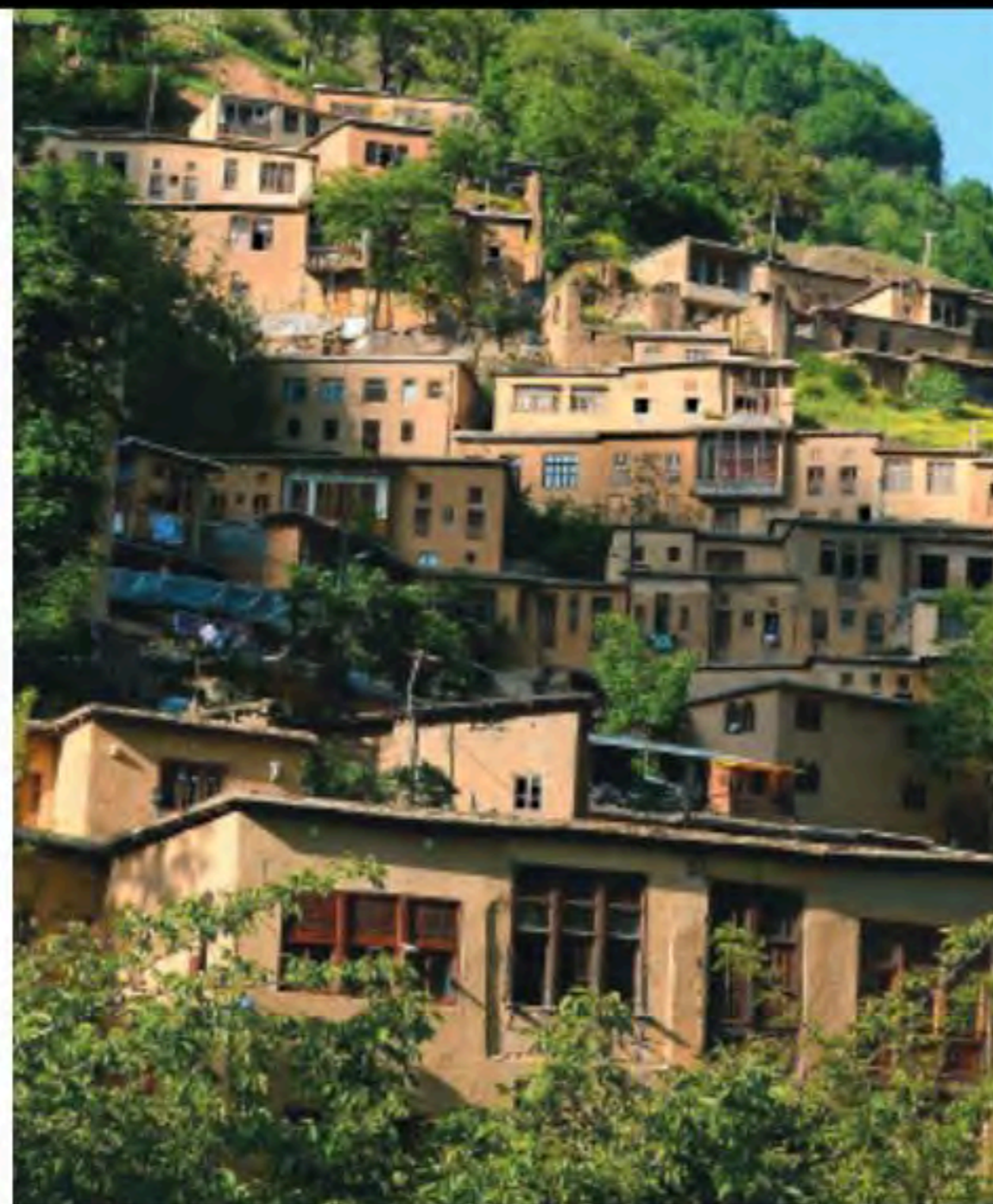
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in the desert, which they later used to refrigerate food. Thanks to all these systems, Iranians have always been fastidious about the freshness of ingredients in their food," says Bundy.

While rice, meat, vegetables and plenty of fresh fruits form the staple Iranian diet, the cuisine varies widely from its neighbours in the Middle East. "Persian cuisine is unique in taste and preparation. Contrary to popular belief that Iranians use pomegranate in everything, we actually use it judiciously to enhance flavours, while saving the fruit primarily for its juice and cleansing properties."

While some Middle Eastern and neighbouring countries use chillies to flavour meat and rice dishes, Iranians prefer



trained at the French capital's legendary patisserie Fauchon and worked as the head pastry chef at the Mondrian Hotel in Los Angeles before moving to Dubai in 2008. The rich heritage of the Persian cuisine that she grew up with laid the foundation for her show and her cookbook, *Pomegranates & Roses: My Persian family recipes*, released in 2012, which won an award at the Gourmand World Cookbook Awards that year and was shortlisted for the Best Cookery Book at the Writers' Guild of Great Britain Awards in 2013.

"I always felt that the cuisine of Iran was yet to be explored fully and not many people had written about it either. With

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the show, I returned to my roots and discovered many jewels of Iranian gastronomic traditions, hidden in the by-lanes of ancient towns," says Bundy.

"Iranian food is always fresh, subtly laced with wonderful flavours and colours," she says. "A balanced Iranian diet is more than just grilled meat on a bed of fragrant rice; it's based on the principle that if we can make right choices with regard to hot and cold ingredients and spices, we can create harmony in our body."

Aromatic herbs blended with a variety of seasonal, fresh produce always lend a punch to any Iranian dish. "Centuries ago, Persians not only learnt the technique of growing fruit and vegetables in an arid climate by developing aqueducts, an ingenious system for tapping underground water, but they also mastered the technology of producing ice and storing it

Opposite clockwise: Snowy mountains in Tonekabon county, Mazandaran province; Masuleh village, Gilan province; The Si-O-Se Pol bridge in Isfahan has over 33 arches; Dried fruit in the market in Tehran

Top right: A villager plucks saffron flowers near Torbat-E Heidarieh, northeast Iran
Bottom right: Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque at Naqsh-e Jahan Square in Isfahan

