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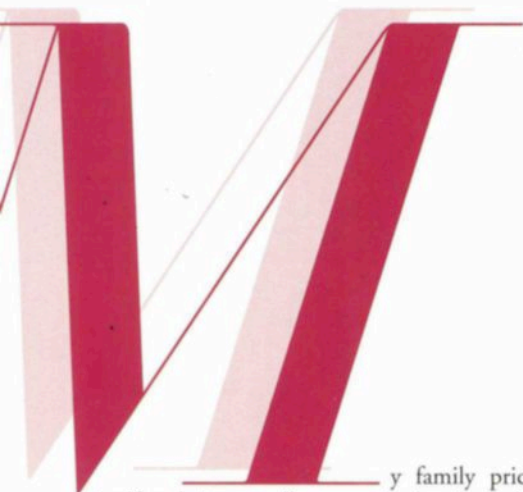
Flavours OF THE PAST

Author of *Pomegranates and Roses*, chef ARIANA BUNDY, relives the gourmet globetrotting that led her back to her roots and a passion for Persian food

Styling by CATH PRECHELT,
photographs by ISIDORA BOJOVIC

Ariana in her comfort zone, in the kitchen where she is researching dishes for her new book





My family prides itself on being equally at ease in the city and in the country, and as a young child I grew up very conscious of our family's deep connection to the land. Although my grandparents lived in Tehran, they would spend a lot of time on their vast lands near the town of Qazvin and in their picturesque villages. Come summer my grandparents, my mother, her siblings and 40 or so cousins would shed their city clothes and head for the country. They were all young and energetic, riding their horses from one village to another, sometimes stopping in between to set up camp under sour cherry trees.

They would light bonfires to eat barbeque from a recent hunt, laugh, flirt and then sleep under the bright stars cocooned in mosquito nets and the fresh country air. In the main house the servants would prepare food grown on the land: fresh roasted vegetables, tender marinated Kabbab from the herd, Kuku's (similar to Spanish tortilla or Arabic Eggah) from fresh eggs, and hot bread straight from the Tanoor, the grain taken from the fields of wheat nearby. I had a mere glimpse of this life before we had to escape the troubles in Iran.

After the 1979 revolution, my brother, mother and I went to live in New York and met up with our new American father. We became a family nucleus of four in a culture so different from ours. I became immersed in American, Japanese, Italian and any other global food you can imagine. I ate with relish, trying nachos, sushi, papadums, tagines, chowders and anything and everything you can think of. Why wouldn't I? I wanted to savour the taste of it all while I could - everyone said we were going back home soon, once the trouble died down and everything went back to normal.

My talented mother lived by the New York minute. She was not only a mother but a social butterfly, hanging out at Studio 54 and studying fashion at Parsons. She cooked all kinds of food for us, but made sure that we ate Iranian food occasionally and always on special days like the Norouz Persian New Year. She also threw lavish parties for her friends who had never seen food like that before, a true Persian feast. I watched as she impressed her husband's Boston Brahmin family (cousins to the Kennedy's and the Roosevelt's) with her delicate stews, saffron-tinged rice and heavenly desserts scented with rose water.

Years passed and we still couldn't go back to Iran so we moved around the big cities of the world. It was incredibly enriching; eating French cuisine, falling in love with the ethnic foods of London, the generosity of Italian food, the Swiss ethics for fresh produce. In the summers, we ventured ever further, visiting Thai markets, eating conch by the Caribbean Sea, Nasi Goreng in the middle of rice fields in Bali, boiled lobsters in New England, every minute of it delicious, evocative and wonderful!



Ariana's aunt Maryam as pictured in *Town & Country* magazine



Ariana's grandmother and family, from whom she inherited her love of Persian cuisine



Sophia Loren, from a picture in Ariana's home, depicting an image of the original domestic goddess



Ariana's grandmother's cousin who instructed the *Shah* of Iran on etiquette

"I wanted to learn to cook this food so I could relive those days with my family"

— ARIANA BUNDY

My dashing father owned fine dining French restaurants in Tehran and Beverly Hills, so I learned classic French dishes. I not only loved food, but I loved feeding people, it seemed only natural for me to have become a chef.

Those were fun days. But there were many moments where images of Iran would flash before me and pull at my heart. I longed for my grandmother's food,

the smell of fried onions and rice steaming away with butter and saffron. I missed her freckled hands peeling garlic and the little bowls of cold rice puddings she put in the fridge, that called out for some thick grape molasses. I often thought of those lunches and dinners where we all sat together and broke bread, hearing the laughter of my family, the jokes and the sound of clearing up; the long afternoon naps followed by hot tea and sweets; the sound of dice hitting the wooden backgammon board; the occasional cool breeze on the hot summer days, sitting by the pool scooping the flesh out of a giant watermelon with a spoon.

The daydreams kept me going until one day I woke up and decided to write a book called *Pomegranates and Roses*, to bring it all back to life. I wanted to learn how to cook this food so that I could relive those days with my own family, to pass on those ancient recipes that people have been making for centuries. Surely there were other young women like me, unsure about how to prepare their own cuisine, who didn't want to rely on the family gatherings to eat the food they cherish.

Persian food is about generosity and eating together. It's balanced in the hot and cold aspect (Garmi and Sardi) a yin and yang equivalent to balancing dishes. It's delicate, flavourful and has a harmony of ingredients and spices, relying heavily on fresh produce that demands a delicate hand when using spices. Chillies are almost never used except for a handful of recipes from the deep South, and everything from tea to sweets, stews, soups and rice dishes are made golden by the use of saffron, the king of Persian spices.

When I think about it, my idea of heaven would be...an al fresco lunch in the countryside with my family and all the cousins, eating and drinking together under the gentle sun with my late grandparents looking on from up above the clouds. In life, what is more important than that?

Pomegranates and Roses is published by Simon & Schuster and is available at Jashanmal bookstores, Dhs145 ■