

Iranian food revival

Emily Shardlow talks to Ariana Bundy about her cookbook *Pomegranates and Roses*

It might seem that Ariana Bundy's latest cookbook, which she started working on 10 years ago and will be launched at the Emirates Airline Festival of Literature on March 9, has been a long time in the making. When you consider that many of the recipes in the Persian cookbook are thousands of years old, though, it rather puts things into perspective.

"This isn't like my first book, which was all my own recipes. This is a book featuring the cuisine of all the Iranian people, with recipes that have been handed down for generations and generations, so I feel a real sense of responsibility," says the Iranian-born chef and author.

In the introduction to *Pomegranates and Roses*, Bundy begins by writing: "While Persia conjures up images of nightingales, roses, poetry and gardens, Iran makes most Westerners uneasy." Talking to me at her villa in Dubai, where she lives with her husband and son, she says one of the reasons she decided to write the book was so that she could share her version of Iran. "I wanted to tell people about Iranian food culture; to let them know how wonderful the cuisine is – how elegant, how delicate, how really tasty it is."

Bundy, a professional chef who trained at Le Cordon Bleu in Paris, freely admits that before she started to collate recipes and ideas for *Pomegranates and Roses*, she was by no means an expert on Persian cooking. "I knew the food, in that I had my taste memory of the dishes, but I didn't know how to make them. When I was abroad, I would have to wait for family gatherings or special occasions to get my fill."

By spending time in the kitchens of her relatives, talking to people on the phone and travelling back to Iran, *Pomegranates and Roses* slowly but surely came into being. "Through working on the book, I learnt so much about my heritage, about the country, about my family. I'm not saying that because of the book, I am a master of Iranian cooking; I'm simply saying that I am a professional chef and over a number of years, I learnt to dissect the Iranian cuisine, to demystify it and to put the recipes back together, in a romantic way."

This sense of romance is felt throughout the entire cookbook,

both in terms of the beautifully presented food – which was styled by Bundy and her mother using dishes and fabrics sourced from Iran – and in the inclusion of old family photographs, illustrated prints that were taken directly from her grandmother's poetry books and the way the chapters and recipe titles are written in Farsi. Perhaps most importantly, though, the recipes are interwoven with tales about growing up in Iran, with references to the place that the food has in Iranian history and in her family life.

Persian food, Bundy is quick to explain, extends far beyond chelo kabab, the dish that most foreigners who visit Iran are likely to eat. "The flavours are very refined – one of the skills of cooking the cuisine is learning to have a delicate hand with spices so that you can showcase the freshness of the food – and the dishes are very comforting," she explains. "We use common ingredients – carrots, potatoes, tomatoes, beans – and put them together in a way that creates something entirely different – chicken with plums, carrot and orange rice sprinkled with spices."

Bundy says that the ancient cuisine is a considered one, which is very much influenced by a medical system called unani, developed in part by the Persian physician Avicenna. "Unani categorises food into hot and cold types, for the most part based on their calorific value – so for example pomegranates, watermelon and yogurt are cold and bananas, raisins and most nuts are hot. The idea is to create a balance."

She adds that the perfect dish will incorporate both hot and cold elements, but will favour one over the other, depending upon the season, so for example: "Fessanjan, a rich pomegranate and walnut stew which was traditionally made with wild duck and meatballs, has hot (walnuts) and cold (pomegranates) elements, but is more of a hot dish, so is traditionally served in the autumn or winter months."

Bundy explains that the cuisine is also characterised by the use of certain spices, in particular saffron and cinnamon ("saffron is king, we use it in almost everything"), by the liberal use of oil – which is seen as a mark of generosity – and by a certain com-



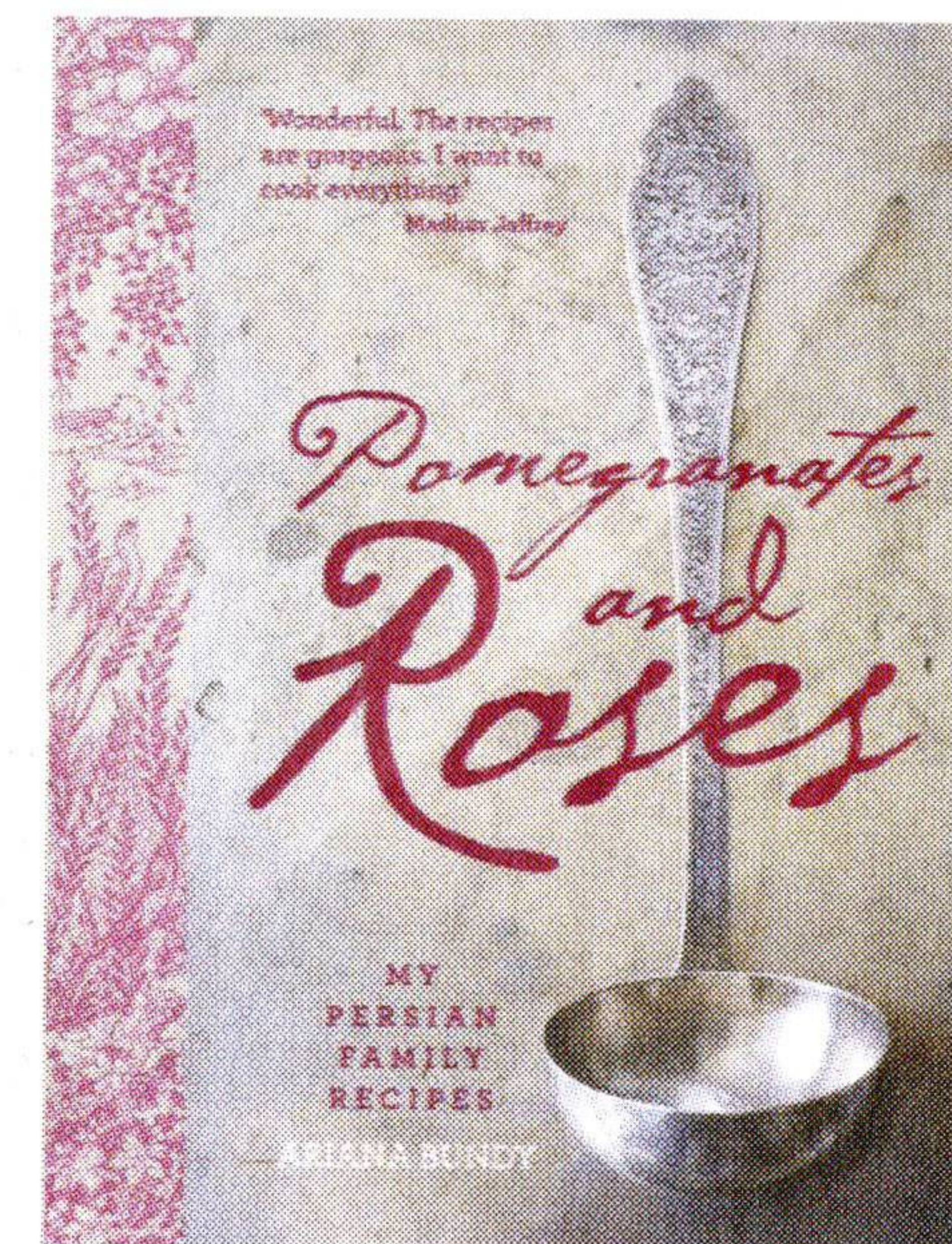
Ariana Bundy demonstrates traditional Iranian cooking. Courtesy Ariana Bundy

plexity of technique, which means that many of the dishes require long cooking times. Drawing upon her knowledge as a chef, she has addressed these issues in *Pomegranates and Roses*, in a bid to make the recipes as appealing and accessible as possible. "I've altered some of the

recipes to make them more healthy and also offered plenty of shortcuts, without losing the essence of the dishes, so that everyone can cook and enjoy them," she concludes.

● Ariana Bundy will perform a cookery demonstration and launch

Pomegranates and Roses, My Persian Family Recipes at the Emirates Airline Literature Festival on Friday, March 9, from 1.30pm to 2.30pm at the InterContinental hotel in Dubai. She will also be appearing in conversation with Joscelyne Dimbleby at a Literary Tea on Saturday, March 10



Pomegranates and Roses by Ariana Bundy. Courtesy Ariana Bundy

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from 4.30pm to 6pm at Anise restaurant, InterContinental hotel. Tickets for both events are still available. For more information visit www.tickets.emirateslitfest.com/v-142-ariana-bundy.aspx

✉ eshardlow@thenational.ae