

Sweet, Sour, and Resentment

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My mother's main ingredient in cooking was resentment—not that I can blame her.

In 1979, my family was living temporarily in Newport Beach, California. Our real home was in Abadan, a city in the southwest of Iran. Despite its desert location and ubiquitous refineries, Abadan was the quintessential small town. Everybody's father (including my own) worked for the National Iranian Oil Company, and almost all the moms stayed home. The employees' kids attended the same schools. No one locked their doors. Whenever I hear John Mellencamp's "Small Town," I think of Abadan, although I'm guessing John Mellencamp was thinking of somewhere else when he wrote that song.

✦By the time of the Iranian revolution, we had adjusted to life in California. We said "Hello" and "Have a nice day" to perfect strangers, wore flip-flops, and grilled cheeseburgers next to our kebabs. We never understood why Americans put ice in tea or bought shampoo that smelled like strawberries, but other than that, America felt like home.

When the revolution happened, thousands left Iran for Southern California. Since we were one of the few Iranian families already there, our phone did not stop ringing. Relatives, friends, friends of relatives, friends of friends, and people whose connection we never quite figured out called us with questions about settling into this new land. Displaying the hospitality that Iranians so cherish, my father extended a dinner invitation to everyone who called. As a result, we found ourselves feeding dozens of people every weekend.

The marathon started on Monday, with my mother planning the menu while letting us know that she was already tired. Fortunately, our rice dishes were made to be shared; our dilemma, however, was space. Our condo was small. Our guests squeezed onto the sofa, sat on the floor, or overflowed onto the patio. We eventually had to explain to our American neighbors why there were so many cars parked in front of our place every weekend. My mother, her diplomatic skills in full swing, had me deliver plates of Persian food, decorated with radish roses and mint sprigs, to them. In time, we learned not to share *fesenjan*, pomegranate stew with ground walnuts. "Yes, now that you mention it, it does look like mud, but it's really good," I'd explain, convincing no one.

Because my mother did not drive, my father took her to buy ingredients every Tuesday after work. In Abadan, my mother and I had started most days in the market, going from vendor to vendor looking for herbs, vegetables, and fruits. The fish came from the Karun and Arvand (Shatt al Arab) rivers, the *lavash* and the *sangak* breads were freshly baked, and the chickens were still alive. We were locavores by necessity and foodies without knowing it. In America, I learned that the time my parents spent shopping was in direct correlation to the degree of my mother's bad mood. An extra-long trip meant that my mother could not find everything she needed, a point she would make loud and clear when she got home: "Why don't they let fruit ripen here?" "Why are the chickens so huge and flavorless?" "I couldn't find fresh herbs." "My feet hurt." "How am I supposed to get everything done?"

The first step was preparing the herbs. My mother insisted that the parsley, cilantro, and chives for *qormeh sabzi*, herb stew, had to be finely chopped by hand. The food processor, she explained, squished them. As she and my father sat across the table wielding huge knives, they argued incessantly. My father did his best to help her. It wasn't enough. As soon as the mountain of herbs was chopped, my mother started frying them. At any given time, my mother was also frying onions. Every few days, while my father was watching the six o'clock news, my mother would hand him a dozen onions, a cutting board, and a knife. No words were exchanged. Much to my father's relief, I once volunteered for this task, but apparently my slices were neither thin enough nor even. It took my father's precision as an engineer to slice correctly.

While all four burners were in use, my mother mixed the ground beef, rice, split peas, scallions, and herbs for stuffed grape leaves. I chopped the stems of the grape leaves. I had tried stuffing them once, but my rolls, deemed not tight enough, were promptly unrolled and then rerolled by my mother.

In between cooking, my mother made yogurt—the thick, sour variety that we couldn't find in America. She soaked walnuts and almonds in water to plump them up; fried eggplants for *kashk-e bademjan*, a popular appetizer with garlic, turmeric, mint, and whey; made *torshi-e limo*, a sour lemon condiment; and slivered orange peels. I had been fired from this task also, having left on far too much pith.

By the time our guests arrived, my mother was exhausted. But the work was not finished. Rice, the foundation of the Persian meal, the litmus test of the cook's ability, cannot be prepared ahead of time. To wit, one day in Abadan, the phone rang when my mother was about to drain the rice. During the time it took her to answer the phone and tell her sister that she would call her back, the rice overcooked. Almost 40 years later, I still remember my mother's disappointment and her explaining to my father that her sister had time to talk because my aunt's maid did all the cooking. My aunt did not even drain her own rice.

We certainly did not have a table big enough to set, so we simply stacked dishes and utensils, buffet-style. As the guest list grew, we added paper plates and plastic utensils. It was always my job to announce that dinner was ready. As people entered the dining room, they gasped at the sight of my mother's table. *Herzereshk polow*, barberry rice, made many emotional. There are no fresh barberries in America (my mother had brought dried berries from Iran in her suitcase), and the sight of that dish, with its distinct deep red hue, was a reminder of the life our guests had left behind.

Our dinners took days to cook and disappeared in 20 minutes. As our guests heaped their plates and looked for a place to sit, they lavished praise on my mother, who, according to tradition, deflected it all. "It's nothing," she said. "I wish I could've done more." When they told her how lucky she was to have me to help her, my mother politely nodded, while my father added, "Firoozeh's good at math."

On Sundays, my mother lay on the sofa, her swollen feet elevated, fielding thank-you phone calls from our guests. She had the same conversation a dozen times; each one ended with, "Of course

you can give our name to your cousins.” As I watched my mother experience the same draining routine week after week, I decided that tradition is good only if it brings joy to all involved. This includes the hostess. Sometimes, even our most cherished beliefs must evolve. Evolution, thy name is potluck.