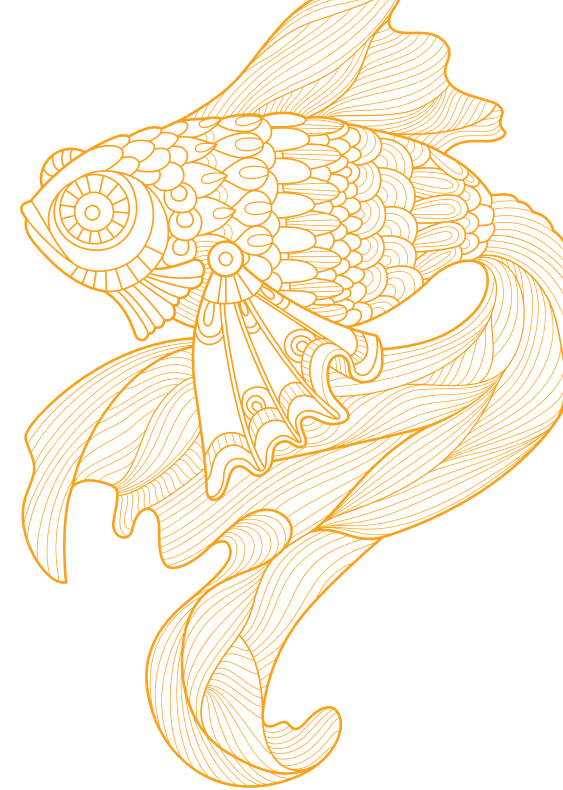




NOWRUZ: REBIRTH, RENEWAL, AND REPAST

*Celebrating the Iranian New Year
in Alabama* BY PHILIP MALKUS



A PALPABLE CHEERFULNESS RIPPLES THROUGH THE AIR WHENEVER PARDIS STITT GLIDES THROUGH ONE OF HER RESTAURANTS' DINING ROOMS.

Her reassuring presence epitomizes hospitality. She floats among tables, tucking a strand of curly black hair behind one ear to lean in and murmur hellos to guests in her soothing alto. Stitt doesn't simply attract regulars. She nurtures them. She remembers whether you like white Burgundy or small-batch bourbon; if she runs into you at the grocery store, she casually mentions that the Brussels sprouts salad you always ordered has reappeared on the menu.

Pardis and her husband Frank Stitt run three restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama: Highlands Bar and Grill, which

melds regional recipes with the culinary acumen Frank honed while living in France in the 1970s and cooking at Chez Panisse in Berkeley, California; Bottega, which basks in the warmth of Italian flavors; and Chez Fonfon, arguably the truest expression of a French bistro in the American South. Frank and Pardis married in 1995. They live and breathe their work. The joke is that there are tunnels under the city that connect their businesses. They have an uncanny knack for appearing at any of them at will. Pardis will take an instant read of a room while Frank disappears to the stoves.

Andrew Thomas Lee



settled in Birmingham. Dr. Iradj Sooudi took a position as a maxillofacial surgeon at UAB Hospital. “I remember when we first moved here my mother would say, in Farsi, “We’ve become more Catholic than the Pope,” Stitt says. “We wanted to be a ‘normal’ American family.”

But if her mother, Parvin, dressed Stitt and her two younger sisters in the polyester styles of the day and sent them off to mainstream children’s activities (Stitt studied ballet), at home she kept Iranian culture vital in the family’s daily life. The aromas of a simmering Persian stew, or *khoresh*, would fill the Sooudi household: perhaps *fesenjan*, chicken in a sweet-and-sour sauce of walnuts and pomegranate molasses; or *ghormeh sabzi*, a verdant, sumptuous mulch of herbs like fenugreek and parsley cooked with tender kidney beans and often cubed lamb. Rice, simply buttered, or stained with saffron and jeweled with dried fruits and nuts, shared the table with crunchy vegetable salads and home-made yogurt. “My mother didn’t know how to cook for five people,” says Stitt. “She’d cook for 20. This is still an issue.”

Americans who know Persian food mostly through restaurant dining might think the cuisine centers around kebabs. Its breadth stretches much further than skewered meat. The ancient Persian empire (whose regions encompassed what are today parts of India, Egypt, and Greece) reached its apex 2,500 years ago. Persian cooking traditions spread east and west from its crossroad position on the Silk Road to influence global cuisines exponentially.

Domination and dissemination scattered the fundamentals of Persian cooking across continents. Zoroastrians, practitioners of a 3,500-year-old monotheistic religion, fled Muslim rule for India beginning in 651 A.D. Their culinary skills shaped the jeweled biryanis and rich meat

At this time of year, their menus begin to fill with the galvanizing tastes of spring: English peas, fiddlehead ferns, soft-shell crabs, rhubarb. For Pardis, March is also the time to relish a repast of entirely different flavors: *kuku sabzi*, a frittata-like baked egg dish dyed emerald green from cilantro, dill, and other herbs; a platter of rice jeweled with bright dried fruits and pistachios; and bean and noodle soup garnished with dried mint and *kashk* (yogurt’s sharper-tongued cousin, made from reconstituted whey).

Nowruz, or Persian New Year, is an annual secular festival timed to the spring equinox. Feasts served over thirteen days in March celebrate rebirth, renewal, and the rewarding complexities of life. For Pardis, who is Iranian-American, *Nowruz* dishes were as indelible to her Alabama upbringing as the farmstead strawberry and asparagus patches that framed Frank’s Yellowhammer State childhood.

Born Pardis Sooudi, Stitt and her parents moved to Birmingham in 1971 when she was five. Her parents had emigrated from Tehran in the 1960s so that her father could attend medical school in America. After stints in New York, Houston, and Chicago, the family

curries that came to define northern Indian cooking. The crisp, raw salads beloved by Persians became essential elements for the feast of Lebanese small plates called *meze*; the meat and fruit combinations in Moroccan tagines trace their lineage to the fragrant stews Parvin Sooudi prepared for her family.

Nowruz (often spelled *Norooz*) has been a vital Iranian celebration for thousands of years, adapted over the centuries and observed devotedly across the world. Today, the nationwide Iranian-American population numbers between one million and two million; Michelle Obama hosted a gathering commemorating *Nowruz* at the White House in 2015. Festivities around the Persian New Year revolve around food, certainly. The occasion also marks a time to start fresh. Stitt remembers that her family customarily cleaned every inch of the house. “It was also like Christmas to me,” she says. “Buying new clothes and exchanging gifts was part of the ritual.”

When Stitt was growing up, the Sooudi family celebrated *Nowruz* with seven or eight other Iranian-American families in Birmingham; her parents held the blowout first-night feast at their house for years. Her mother set a table that hewed closely to the traditions she’d grown up with in Iran. The arrangement is called a *sofreh*, which every family customizes to their aesthetic. She laid out the banquet on a burgundy ceremonial cloth woven with silvery threads.

As with Easter and Passover meals, many of the foods served during *Nowruz* represent themes associated with springtime. Seven has been a sacred number in Persian culture for millennia, and every

sofreh includes *haft-seen*, or seven symbolic foods, including *sabzeh*, sprouted grains and grass that signify renewal. Stitt recalls platters of *sabzeh* all over the house; on the thirteenth day of *Nowruz* they’d throw them into a body of water during a picnic that concludes the festivities. *Nowruz* foods also included *sib*, or apples, for health; *seer*, or garlic, to symbolize medicine; *senjed*, dried fruit to denote the sweetness of love; and *samanu*, a sweet pudding made from sprouted wheat to represent fertility (Parvin Sooudi flavors hers with saffron.) Each food weaves a narrative. *Serkez*, or vinegar, connotes patience and wisdom through aging; and *sumac*, made from dried red berries, symbolizes sunrise and the promise of a new day.

Stitt and her sisters helped color eggs, similar to ones children dye for Easter. One of Stitt’s favorite comforting *Nowruz* dishes was *ash-e reshteh*, a thick soup packed with greens, herbs, beans, and squiggly noodles, which signify the tangles of life and the unraveling of mysteries.

“Mom’s *sofreh* had non-food elements as well,” Stitt recalls. “My parents cherished Persian literature, so the table was set with books of poetry and also the Koran, even though we weren’t religious. Old Persian coins symbolized prosperity. A goldfish swimming in a bowl represented new life, and a mirror, one that was used as part of my parent’s wedding ceremony, indicated self-reflection.”

Nowruz was always a rich time of togetherness for the Sooudis, and an intensely social stretch when visitors would constantly come in and out of the house. Stitt didn’t feel comfortable inviting non-Iranian friends to *Nowruz* until she was well into her teens. The Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 complicated her high school experience; she remembers some classmates asking if her parents were responsible.



“I was self-conscious about being different until college, when I realized those differences made me unique, and that they were actually something to embrace,” says Stitt. “What I felt would be perceived as totally bizarre to my American friends—a mid-March New Year’s celebration with a roomful of dark-headed foreigners, strange food smells, samovars steaming, lots of double-cheek kissing, and Persian music—was actually fascinating to them, in a good way. It helped me to see my world through others’ eyes. It made me proud.”

Only recently has Stitt considered that the warmth her parents showed guests during *Nowruz*, and throughout the year, may have helped pave her route toward being a successful restaurateur. “There is a strong parallel between Iranian hos-

pitality and Southern hospitality. Our experience of Iranian culture was having an open home, the sense of never knowing a stranger, that there was enough to feed everyone and everyone was welcome. That’s also, I think, the highest expression of our Southernness.”

Owing to the constant busyness of her schedule, Stitt hasn’t always made it to her family’s *Nowruz* celebrations. This year, she reached out to her sisters (both of whom live in New York; her parents still live in Birmingham) to ensure a Sooudi gathering. Everyone committed. Given the current political and social tensions in America, this is an especially poignant time to wash away the dust of the past year, convene at the table, reflect on renewal and relationships, and feast deliciously with loved ones. 🍷

Philip Malkus is a freelance writer who has also written for Southern Living and Atlanta magazine. His ideal progressive meal at Frank and Pardis Stitt’s Birmingham restaurants would be the stone ground baked grits at Highland’s, the lamb porterhouse chop at Bottega, and the coconut cake at Chez Fonfon.

Kuku sabzi (Iranian herbed frittata)

Adapted from “Food Of Life” by Najmieh Batmanglij

One of Pardis Stitt’s favorite comfort foods and an essential dish for *Nowruz*, kuku sabzi can be eaten at any temperature—including cold, for a breakfast on the run. Serve it with yogurt and condiments like hot sauce or harissa. Stitt’s mother, Parvin Sooudi, often swaps out the spinach for kale or beet greens (Stitt prefers spinach) but always includes scallions, parsley, cilantro, and dill.

8 eggs
1 tsp. salt
¼ tsp. freshly ground black pepper
2 cups spinach, blanched, squeezed dry, and chopped
1 cup finely chopped scallions or fresh garlic chives
1 cup finely chopped parsley leaves (either curly or Italian flat leaf)
1 cup finely chopped cilantro leaves
1 cup chopped fresh dill
1 Tbsp. dried fenugreek
½ cup olive oil

Break the eggs into a large bowl, add the salt and pepper, and beat with a fork. Add the spinach, scallions, chopped herbs, and fenugreek, and mix thoroughly.

In a large nonstick pan, heat the olive oil, then pour in the egg mixture. Cook on medium-low to medium heat, uncovered, until the kuku has set, about 20 to 25 minutes. Cut into wedges in the pan and gently turn each side over, and cook in the pan for another 10 minutes. (You may need to add more oil.) Serves 4 to 6 people.

NORTHWARD BOUND

Detroit’s evolving food system has deep Southern roots

by DEVITA DAVISON

