



Pomegranate Soup: a novel

By Marsha Mehran

New York : Random House

2006.

237 pages

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Summary (from the Publisher)

It has been seven years since Marjan Aminpour fled Iran with her younger sisters Bahar and Layla. In a sleepy Irish town beneath the holy mountain Croagh Patrick she hopes they might finally find a home.

The sisters open The Babylon Café right at the heart of Ballinacraugh's Main Mall, sending the spicy, sensuous wafts of traditional Persian cooking to work their magic on the townsfolk. Soon, business is booming and Marjan is thrilled with the demand for her cooking and with the transformation in her sisters - young Layla finds first love, and even tense, haunted Bahar seems less nervous.

But then the lives they left behind in Iran begin to bleed into the present and everything the sisters have worked for is under threat...

Infused with the textures, scents, trials and triumphs of two cultures, POMEGRANATE SOUP is a delectable journey, highlighted with delicious recipes, into the heart of Persian cooking and Irish living

Reviews

Library Journal

Recalling James Joyce's *Dubliners*, this first novel by Mehran (who was born in Iran but now lives in Ireland) centers on the inhabitants of a small Irish town. When three Iranian sisters move into the former bake shop and open a Middle Eastern caf , turmoil erupts. The quirky and wonderfully fleshed-out characters who make up the populace of Ballinacroagh align with either the sisters and their exotic delicacies or the town bully, Thomas McGuire, who attempts to put them out of business. From the young and lovely Layla to resident gossip Dervla Quigley, these characters come to life; they're as uniquely simple or as deeply complex as the dishes that eldest sister Marjan concocts-recipes included! Personal demons and questioned loyalties play out like a movie on the page (think Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*), making the reader feel like an eyewitness to all the events. A satisfying summer read or book club pick; highly recommended.

Publishers Weekly Review

Beautiful strangers bring exotic recipes to town in Mehran's foodie-lit debut. The Irish hamlet of Ballinacroagh is the unlikely new home for three Iranian sisters and their new Babylon Cafe. Twenty-seven-year-old Marjan, the most skilled in the kitchen; Bahar, the tentative middle sister; and Layla, the charming teenager, fled the Iranian revolution and, after some years in London, have arrived determined to succeed. Initially wary natives soon fall under the spell of the cafe's cardamom- and rosewater-scented wonders, with kindly Estelle Delmonico and friendly Father Mahoney leading the pack. But town bully Thomas McGuire, who loathes "feckin' foreigners," and gossip Dervla Quigley, who thinks "they're all sluts," will do anything to drive the sisters away. As Marjan cements alliances through her recipes and Layla falls in love with McGuire's son, Bahar continues to be troubled by the violence in her past. Fans of *Chocolat* and other cooking-overcomes-cultural-differences stories will savor the tale, not to mention the 13 recipes, including one for pomegranate soup.

Booklist

To give the reader a better appreciation for the pivotal role of food in the novel, Mehran includes recipes for some Iranian specialties: stuffed grape leaves, elephant ear pastries, and the title's pomegranate soup. Stark contrasts between the sisters' lives in Iran and Ireland and between the Irish and Persian cultures energize Mehran's tale. -

Biography

<http://www.marshamehran.com/>



Born in Tehran on the eve of the Iranian Revolution, Marsha Mehran escaped the upheaval with her family for the southern shores of Argentina, where her parents set up a Middle Eastern café in Buenos Aires. She has also lived in Australia and Ireland. Fourth Estate published her first novel, *Pomegranate Soup*. She now lives in New Jersey and is at work on her third novel

To get Marsha to visit with your reading group, contact her at pomsoup@yahoo.com

Bibliography

Rosewater and Soda Bread: a novel (2008) Sequel to *Pomegranate Soup*
Pomegranate Soup: a novel (2006)

Marsha Mehran talks about *Pomegranate Soup* (from BookBrowse.com)

Pomegranate Soup is your first novel. What inspired you to write this book?

I was living in Ireland in 1999 with my husband, who is Irish. "Multiculturalism" wasn't even in the vernacular; I was one of only a handful of 'foreigners' living in County Mayo. When I walked down the village main street, people literally came out of shop doors to stare at the "brown girl" passing by! At the local pub, I was often asked if I was Japanese or Chinese (ethnic groups which I do not remotely resemble). During this time I met a Middle-Eastern family that ran a deli outside of Castlebar. They sold cans of chickpeas, tahini, and Mediterranean condiments, which are common in supermarkets today, but were a rarity back then. This Lebanese family reminded me of my own parents, who had escaped the Islamic Revolution in Iran and moved to Argentina, where they opened a Middle Eastern eatery. They carried that same haunted, lonely looks on their faces that my mother and father had, as they struggled to build a life in a country so vastly different from their homeland. The image of this family stayed in my mind, even as I moved back to New York and began writing my first novel, a story about Iranian women. Nearly two years later, still toiling with the manuscript, it dawned on me that something was missing from my story -- a sense of joy. A happiness and vitality that is particular to Iranians, to Persian culture itself. I wanted to express the beauty of my birthplace; a vision I knew was incongruous

with the dark, violent images Westerners see when they think of Iran. Above all, I wanted readers to smell and taste one of Iran's greatest contributions to the world: its delicate, perfumed cuisine. Somehow, all these memories and emotions came together as I began to write Pomegranate Soup.

Although Pomegranate Soup is not autobiographical, how much of your protagonists do you see in yourself?

I am a mixture of all three sisters, actually. There is a little of maternal Marjan, a bit of neurotic Bahar, and even a dash of the free spirit that guides Layla, in me.

Pomegranate Soup offers not only a fascinating picture of Revolutionary Iran, but also a buffet of traditional Persian dishes. What inspired you to make food such a prominent aspect of the story, and is there a specific Persian dish you love the most?

I'm mad about cooking. Chopping and frying is so relaxing to me; a perfect expression of love. When you give of yourself through a dish, you aren't just feeding somebody's physical hunger, but a deeper longing for home, for a safe place to rest. I have to say that my favorite Persian dish is gheimeh. It's a delicious stew made from tomatoes, yellow-split peas, lamb, and French-fried potatoes.

Persian cuisine is still fairly unknown to the greater American population. Why do you think this is?

Maybe it's a public relations thing - not enough advertising. There are approximately 1 million Iranian-Americans living in North America, most who moved here after the revolution. So, it probably is just a matter of time, really. I'm definitely ready to spread the word!

It is fascinating how many of our Western ingredients and dishes have a direct connection to Iran. The ancient Silk Road connecting Europe and Asia ran right through the Iran, isn't that so? How do you think this influenced world cuisine?

With dishes dating back three millennia, Iranian cuisine has influenced the eating habits of countless cultures: Ancient Greeks, Romans, Chinese, Indian, Arabic, medieval Europeans, you name it. Lemons, oranges, pistachios, barberries, saffron and pomegranates, were instant sensations in ancient Greece and Rome, flavoring their bland dishes and changing the course of language forever. Many of our words for foods find their etymological roots in Iran. Lemon, for example comes from limoo, the word orange from narang, and so on. Most importantly, Persian cuisine, with its myriad ingredients and balance of sweet and sour flavors, has endured because it is undeniably tasty. A spoonful of saffron rice, buttered and sprinkled with dill and lima beans, is pure heaven.

Persian cuisine, surprisingly enough, has also influenced our own views on healthy eating. The Surgeon General's daily nutritional recommendation -- the food pyramid we've been taught to

follow for so long --has its genesis in the Persian Zoroastrian system of balancing. Where does this balancing theory come from and how is it implemented in Iranian homes today?

Zoroastrianism was founded by the Persian prophet Zoroaster around 600BC and is now believed to be one of the first, if not the first monotheistic religion. It's dualistic in nature, and its basic concept concerns opposing forces: good and evil struggling for supremacy. This theory of opposites extends to every aspect of life, including diet. Foods, like people, are believed to have natures, hot or cold, garm or sard. Melancholia or lack of energy can be treated with Garm foods. Hot-temper, fevers, and nervous tension will be alleviated by Sard foods. Good health is obtained when there is a balance. Most modern-day Iranians, my mother included, still believe in this system of gastronomic balancing. During my school years, if I had an important exam coming up or needed to have all my wits about me for an assignment, my mother would insist I eat ajil: a mixture made from dried fruit such as raisins and figs and walnuts, almonds and pistachios. She believed that this garm food would raise my energy levels and help with concentration. (I would always ace a test when I followed her advice!) To calm me down on hot days, or when I was particularly temperamental, cucumber and yogurt dip combined with white basmati rice was a good sard remedy. Likewise, in the book, Marjan keeps a close watch over her moodier sister Bahar, feeding her dishes according to her state of mind.

In the US we take our meals wherever we can: the dinner table, the couch, in the car, squeezing them into our busy schedules, almost like an afterthought. It's completely the opposite in Iranian homes, with their tradition of the sofreh. How does the sofreh affect the way Iranians eat?

Not until my late teens did I ever use a dining table for something other than collecting books, errant newspapers and household bills. All my childhood meals were celebrated on a piece of embroidered cloth called the sofreh. Sitting cross-legged along its borders, families are able to 'touch base' in the most fundamental of ways. A picnic three times a day! A typical meal could last up to two hours, and if the weather was particularly hot, the entire contingent would move outdoors. Rooftops or any patch of grass would do. In the book Marjan has a wonderful memory of spending a hot summer's night eating and telling stories on her childhood home's sunken rooftop. I, too, have distinct memories of dining around a sofreh on our rooftop in Buenos Aires, while my mother told me fantastical tales of Scheherazade and the 1001 Nights.

There are some dishes and ingredients that are quintessentially Persian. Fresh herbs, for instance, aren't just used as seasonings and/or garnishes. What is it about herbs that Persians love so much?

Nothing, absolutely nothing beats a warm piece of lavash bread folded over creamy feta cheese and a fat sprig of sweet basil or mint. Herbs reign supreme in Persian cuisine. Platters piled with bunches of tarragon, marjoram, mint and basil accompany every meal, as does homemade cheese and just-baked bread. Persian supermarkets, unlike their Western counterparts, devote long refrigerated aisles to fresh herbs, which are sold by weight and not sprig. Stews, salads, rice, egg dishes, ground meat mixtures - all contain at least a cup, if not more, of chopped herbs. Marjan Aminpour has a special affinity for herbs, a green thumb for planting them

wherever she goes. They give her strength and hope. I also grow my own herbs. I use small terracotta pots, lining them along my sunny kitchen windowsill. It was a practice I picked during my time in Ireland, where the inclement weather made it hard to grow delicate plants outdoors. I love my little collection of sweet basil, lemon mint, dill, and cilantro!

I love the image of the bubbling samovar in the novel, which is so central to the Aminpour sisters' café. Coffee is the caffeine of choice in the US, but in Iran there is an entire ritual surrounding tea. Can you tell us a bit more about this?

There was a period in my childhood when samovars seemed to be taking over our household. My mother had an obsession for them and scoured garage sales and Persian grocery stores for antique, brass, miniature, and electric versions of the water boiler used to make tea. No matter what time of day, visitors to our home were ensured a hot cup of tea thanks to these miraculous machines. Persian tea is easily obtained at any Middle Eastern grocery store nowadays. However, if you're looking for an approximation in the general supermarket, an even mixture of Earl Grey and Darjeeling will do. Persian tea exudes a rich, orangey perfume and a dark amber color. The thing to remember is that Persian tea is always meant to be taken with some sort of sweet accompaniment, such as sweetened nuts, fruit, nougat candy, dried mulberries, or raisins. But beware: Persians never sweeten their tea beforehand. Rather, cubes of crystallized sugar are clenched between the teeth, before a sip is taken, allowing for the synthesis to occur right on the tongue.

Discussion Questions

From Random House Reading Guide

http://www.harpercollins.com.au/authors/50022003/Marsha_Mehran/index.aspx

1. Each chapter in *Pomegranate Soup* begins with a traditional Persian recipe, which is then incorporated into the story. Why do you think the author has chosen to highlight the food in this manner? How do you think the recipes guide the narrative?
2. We first meet the three Aminpour sisters in the kitchen of the new Babylon Café. Discuss how this setting offers a glimpse into the differences in their personalities. If you have siblings, do you recognise the dynamics between the three sisters?
3. How do you think the village of Ballinacraugh perpetuates the fairytale image tourists often have of Ireland? In what ways, if any, does Ballinacraugh differ from this idealised picture?
4. The Aminpour sisters escape Tehran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. What do you know of Iran's history, particularly the revolution of 1979?
5. Both Marjan and Bahar were romantically involved with men who supported the Islamic Revolution. These relationships led the two women to perform revolutionary activities, which

they later regretted. Do you feel either sister has come to terms with her violent past? Have you ever felt like you've lost your moral compass in a relationship?

6. The Babylon Café provides a venue for dreams to flourish. Discuss how food and the sisters' temperaments influence the villagers to pursue dreams that may have lay hidden, even to themselves. Have you ever experienced a quiet epiphany such as the one that Father Mahoney has over a bowl of abgusht? Or was your moment of transformation more pronounced, like Tom Junior's in the Cat's cottage?

7. What parallels do you find between Ballinacroagh's bully, Thomas McGuire, and Hossein Jaferi in Iran? Can you think of any other parallels between the sisters' experiences in the Irish village and the Revolution-era Iran?

8. Young Layla and Malachy provide a romantic subplot for the story, but they also embody the future. Do you agree with this observation? Discuss.

9. Do you think that the sisters have found a home in Ballinacroagh? Do you think they are ready to heal from the painful events of their past?

Discussion Questions from BookBrowse.com

http://www.bookbrowse.com/reading_guides/detail/index.cfm/book_number/1644/Pomegranate-Soup

1. Marjan cooks in accordance to the Zoroastrian system of gastronomic balancing, known as sard and garm. As one of the world's first monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism introduced the dual ideas of good and evil, which are now practiced in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Have you ever heard of Zoroastrianism or the concepts of sard and garm, cold and hot foods? How is this balancing system similar to eating habits in the West? How is it different?

2. Why do you think the author has chosen to set Pomegranate Soup in 1980s Ireland, instead of today? How do you think the village of Ballinacroagh perpetuates the fairytale image tourists often have of Ireland? In what ways, if any, does Ballinacroagh differ from this idealized picture?

3. The Aminpour sisters escape Tehran on the eve of the Islamic Revolution. What do you know of Iran's history, particularly the revolution of 1979? Were you surprised to read that the Shah was as unpopular as he was with many Iranians? If you were around during the time of the revolution, what images do you remember receiving about it through media outlets in the West?

4. Both Marjan and Bahar were romantically involved with men who supported the Islamic Revolution. These relationships led the two women to perform revolutionary activities, which they later regretted. Do you feel either sister has come to terms with her violent past? Have you ever felt like you've lost your moral compass in a relationship?

5. In the classical Greek myth of Persephone, Demeter, the goddess of Spring, has a daughter named Persephone who is kidnapped by Hades, god of the Underworld. Have you ever heard of this myth? What parallels do you see between this myth and the three sisters' story?
6. The Babylon Café provides a venue for dreams to flourish. Discuss how the food and the sisters' temperaments influence the villagers to pursue dreams that may have lay hidden, even to themselves. Have you ever experienced a quiet epiphany such as the one that Father Mahoney has over a bowl of abgusht? Or was your moment of transformation more pronounced, as Tom Junior's in the Cat's cottage?
7. What parallels do you find between Ballinacroagh's bully, Thomas McGuire, and Hossein Jaferi in Iran? What are the differences? Is Thomas McGuire's malevolence born of evil, or is his villainy more pathetic, even humorous, perhaps? Can you think of any other parallels between the sisters' experiences in the Irish village and revolution-era Iran?
8. Marjan, Bahar, and Layla try to protect one another from the memories of the past. Discuss the various forms in which this protection is exhibited. How is this over-protectiveness similar to events you might have experienced in your own life? Do you relate to any one sister's methods more?
9. Croagh Patrick looms protectively over the village of Ballinacroagh. The holy mountain is where the patron saint of Ireland, Saint Patrick, reportedly took his Lenten fast, banishing the evil spirits that had haunted him his entire life. What roles do Croagh Patrick and Saint Patrick play in Bahar's self-revelation? What do you think initially sparked her desire to climb the mountain?
10. Young Layla and Malachy provide a romantic subplot for the story, but they also embody the future. Do you agree with this observation? Discuss.
11. What would you like to see happen to the three sisters after the story ends? Do you think they have found a home in Ballinacroagh? Do you think they are ready to heal from the painful events of their past?

Pomegranate Soup Recipe

http://www.familyspice.com/recipe_html/pomegranate_soup.html



INGREDIENTS:

- 2 TBS olive oil
- 1 cup parsley, chopped
- 3/4 cup cilantro, chopped
- 1 cup spinach, chopped
- 1 medium leek
- 8 cups of vegetable or chicken stock
- 1/3 cup lemon juice
- 1/2 cup rice, uncooked
- 1/3 cup yellow split peas
- 1/4 cup pomegranate paste or 1 cup pomegranate juice or 2 cups pomegranate seeds
- 2 TBS sugar

- salt & pepper
- 6 TBS pomegranate seeds (optional)

- 1. Heat a large stock pot on medium and add:**
 - 2 TBS olive oil
- 2. When oil has heated, add:**
 - 1 cup parsley, chopped
 - 3/4 cup cilantro, chopped
 - 1 cup spinach, chopped
- 3. Cut in half, lengthwise:**
 - 1 medium leek
- 4. Spread the layers of the leek open and hold them under running water to remove the sand and dirt trapped inside the leek.**
- 5. Coarsely chop leeks and add to the mixture in the pot.**
- 6. Cook vegetables for 15 minutes.**
- 7. Pour in:**
 - 8 cups of vegetable or chicken stock
 - 1/3 cup lemon juice
- 8. Cover pot and bring to a boil.**
- 9. When soup is boiling, add to pot:**
 - 1/2 cup rice, uncooked
 - 1/3 cup yellow split peas
- 10. Cover pot, reduce heat to low and cook for 30 minutes.**
- 11. Stir in:**
 - 1/4 cup pomegranate paste or 1 cup pomegranate juice or 2 cups pomegranate seeds
 - 2 TBS sugar
- 12. Cover pot and simmer for 20 more minutes.**
- 13. Season soup to taste with:**
 - salt & pepper
- 14. When ready to serve, pour soup into individual bowls and garnish top of each bowl with:**
 - 1 TBS pomegranate seeds (optional)

For further reading

Crescent by Diana Abu-Jaber

A Free Life by Ha Jin

Netherland: A Novel by Joseph O'Neill

The Blackberry Wine by Joanne Harris

Chocolate by Joanne Harris

The Girl with No Shadow by Joanne Harris

Chez Moi by Agnes Desarthe

Comfort Food by Kate Jacobs

Crescent by Diana Abu-Jaber

Like Water for Chocolate by Laura Esquivel

Practical Magic by Alice Hoffman

Namesake by Jhumpa Lahiri