

A date with the plate

August 1, 2010 – *The Sydney Morning Herald*

<http://www.smh.com.au/travel/activity/food-and-wine/a-date-with-the-plate-20100729-10xhw.html>

Feast for the eyes ... Shabestan-e-No restaurant. Photo: Belinda Jackson

Pomegranate soft drink in hand, Belinda Jackson toasts the delicious — and cheap — flavours of Persian cuisine.

I WAS lost. Lost in Tehran. And Iran's capital is no all-night, raging city. The streets are quiet at nightfall, so by 9pm, it was graveyard central. By the time I found my hotel, lunch was but a beautiful memory. I sneaked into the hotel's restaurant to find two waiters, ties untied, eating their own meals now the guests had all gone.

"Is there a chance of something to eat?"

I asked pathetically.

One waiter looked horrified. "You haven't had dinner? Take!" And he held out the food. On his fork.

Lesson one: Iranians are some of the most hospitable people on Earth. Lesson two: food is paramount.

When my guides to gastro-Iran, Reza, Abdullah and Yasma, had the group revelation that I will put anything (within decorum) into my mouth, a week in Iran became an odyssey of the stomach.

The journey began in Tehran with Reza, whose conversation was peppered with statements such as, "When I was in the Revolutionary Guard ..." Obligatory sightseeing included the serene Golestan Palace and the US Den of Espionage (aka the former US embassy). But we also sat on a fountain in a mosque's courtyard sipping plastic cups of hot, black tea sweetened with nabat, a swizzle stick of saffron-infused sugar, and drank pomegranate juice and the minty yoghurt drink doogh in the gardens of the former US arsenal, now sporting a chic cafe scene and modern art gallery.

Reza also led my stomach to Tehran's heaving bazaar, where we shopped for travel snacks: bags heaving with crunchy roasted almonds, salty pistachios, beautiful, moist semi-dried apricots and tart berberries - sort of like a cranberry and often mixed into rice pilaf.

One night, we drank ash-e-jo, a lemony chicken soup thickened with barley, and ate mosama bademjan, a Persian stew of braised chicken, eggplant and tomato at Shabestan-e-No restaurant. The menu was littered with cute English translations such as "hen's meat" and "sheep's muscle" and the courses were listed as either "Pre Food", "Iranian Food" or "Main Meaty Food".

Moving south to Shiraz, I hate to disappoint: there is no more shiraz in Shiraz. It's illegal to front up to Iran with a swag of duty-free booze and buying it legitimately is a tough call, though the black market is allegedly flourishing. Instead, we drank Delester, known as Islamic beer or the far catchier "near-beer". The idea of alcohol-free beer, now big in all Islamic countries, becomes even weirder when I learn it comes in lo-cal, peach and apple versions and is pitched as a health drink to expectant mums.

My Shirazi hotel, the Kowsar, sports a well-earned reputation for a great breakfast buffet. A long trestle was laden with the Middle Eastern favourites of olives, feta, tomato and cucumber, as well as honey and sweet carrot jam, platters of cold watermelon, buckets of bread and tea from the northern province of Golestan.

Later that day, Yasma and I slipped into a table at Mehr restaurant, in the Shiraz bazaar, to try the nation's staple dish, dizi. Iranian women are a willowy, beautiful bunch and Yasma, seemingly permanently on a diet, was no exception. So she turned her face from the mess of mutton, potatoes and onions in front of me but explained how I had to drain off the broth and drink it separately, then grab the small weapon served with my lunch and mash the meal to buggery before knocking back the meaty paste. Washed down with doogh, my bill came to 45,000 rial (\$5).

Dinner that night with Reza was the opposite to the iconic dizi: we headed to Star Shopping Centre, the coolest mall in Shiraz, for pizza. Iranian pizza is tomato-free. Note to self: go to Italy for pizza, not Iran. On the upside, I discovered my new love, pomegranate-flavoured soft drink.

Within a few days, my notebook had acquired simple recipes for rose syrup and cherry syrup, ideal for sipping on a hot summer's afternoon. "Iranians are masters of the car picnic," Yasma said. A single blade of grass will beckon a small party and the green roadsides and roundabouts are just the place to pull up and break out the boiled eggs. And sure enough, on the drive to the ruins of the ancient city of Persepolis, our driver Morteza pulled over at a cold spring, whipped out a thermos and knocked up a fine cuppa. As a bonus, he then demonstrated the Iranian art form of sucking hot tea through a never-melting sugar cube held between his teeth.

In Isfahan, I teamed up with Abdullah, a keen eater, though being lanky and a head taller than me, he had more room to move. As we wandered through the jewel city of Iran, we spooned down sweet saffron ice-cream, mainlined its famed rose-scented nougat, gaz, and slunk through dark streets for late-night kebabs. Served with a salt shaker full of the lemony spice, sumac, eye-blisteringly big hunks of raw onion and drowned in mast, a rich, salty dip of yoghurt and cumin seeds, there's also enough garlic to stop Transylvania in its tracks.



One lunchtime, we dragged ourselves out of Kebab Land and into the refined environment of Isfahan's beautiful, stained-glass Restaurant Shahrzad, all ornate chandeliers and paintings of beautiful girls with joined eyebrows. Our aim: to tackle the fesenjan, a tart, yet creamy sauce of pomegranate juice and crushed walnuts poured over grilled chicken, all on a bed of basmati rice, at \$US18 (\$20) for two, our most expensive meal in Iran.

We ate dizi and blew fragrant plumes of smoke from a water pipe, or ghelyoon, in the bunker-like Azadegan teahouse.

Another evening, Abdullah arrived with bags of groceries to join half of the city picnicking on the grass in Imam Square, home to Isfahan's most dramatic palaces

and mosques. We tore at tranches of sangak, a flat bread cooked on hot stones, jukeh, chicken breast kebab marinated in lime juice, yoghurt and saffron normally served on murderous skewers, and cut open a sweet green melon while horse carriages trotted around the world's second-largest city square.

In the religious city of Qom, we went on a sohan frenzy. The sweet, honey biscuit, studded with saffron and pistachios, is famed throughout the land. It seemed almost irreverent that Qom's key attraction, the immensely revered mosque and tomb Hazrat-e Masumeh, is surrounded by sohan sellers.

Owing to Iran's status as most unpopular kid on the block, it is virtually self-sufficient when it comes to food. Each town has its own specialty: saffron from the second-largest city, Mashhad, sweet sohan from Qom, gaz from the bazaars of Isfahan, while the desert city of Yazd is famous for its apricots, the sweet pastry baklava and pashmak, a white fairy floss flavoured with rosewater.

I left Iran pleased with my culinary achievements but, like any country, you have to leave something for your return. Next time, it's the fast food chains Mashdonalds and McMashallah.

The writer was a guest of Intrepid Travel.

Need to know

IRANIAN food ranges from cheap to very cheap — eating anything foreign will blow your wallet. Remember to use only your right hand for communal eating and don't blow your nose at the table. Some of the places below are touristy but they will enable you try the various dishes for which Iranian kitchens are famous.

Shabestan-e-No restaurant, Hafez Street, Tehran +98 21 8880 9766.

Bastani Restaurant, Imam Square, Isfahan +98 311 220 0374.

Seray-e Mehr Restaurant, Bazar-e Vakil, Shiraz +98 711 222 9572.

Silk Road Hotel restaurant, 5 Taleh Khakestary Alley, Jame Mosque Street, Yazd +98 351 625 2730.

Sharzeh Restaurant, Bazar-e Vakil, Shiraz +98 711 224 1963.

Niayesh Hotel restaurant, 10 Shahzadeh Jamali Lane, off Bibi.

Restaurant Shahrzad, Abbas Abad Street, Isfahan, +98 311 220 4490.

Dokhtaran Mausoleum Lane, Shiraz, +98 711 223 3623.

Trip notes

Getting there

Tehran is connected to Doha via Qatar Airways, Abu Dhabi via Etihad and Istanbul with Turkish Airlines.