

# PHOENIX NewTimes Dining

## SINGIN' IN IRAN

By [Howard Seftel](#) Wednesday, Jun 30 1993

Tasty Kabob is much spiffier than the grungy joints I used to eat at overseas. It's bright, clean and airy, the windows adorned with flowered curtains, the walls lined with Persian artwork. The friendly proprietors enjoy chatting about the home country, and are rightfully proud of what they serve. Persian food is heavily scented with spices, but it's not spicy-hot. It's filling but not heavy. And it has that indispensable ethnic virtue of being easy on the wallet.

Borani is a good way to get your taste buds acclimated before the main dishes arrive. It's pur,ed eggplant, delightfully blended with garlic, onions and mint, terrific scooped up on warm pita bread. If you think salad has to mean a hunk of iceberg lettuce drenched with Thousand Island dressing, try the Shirazi version. Cubed bits of tomato, cucumber, onion and feta cheese float in a light, tangy vinaigrette sauce that never saw the inside of a bottle.

Yogurt lovers are in for a treat. Tasty Kabob makes its own, and it will forever sour discerning culture mavens on commercial varieties.

Here, the yogurt is mixed with shallots or cucumbers. Eat it plain, or shovel it onto the main dish.

Yogurt is also the principal ingredient in the Iranian national drink, doogh. Mixed with soda water, a little salt and a sprinkling of dried mint leaves, the drink is too weird for me. But my wife guzzled it down with unveiled enthusiasm.

Persian entrees are deceptively simple. A kabob platter looks like a mountain of rice and some slabs of meat.

But once you dig in, you'll discover just how deceiving appearances can be. Chelo kabob Sultaini features two huge skewers of beef. One is a mouth-watering, ground-beef mixture, heavily seasoned with onion and spices. If [McDonald's](#) ever put this on a bun, I'd actually go there without my kids. The other skewer is sublime, a tantalizing, marinated, grilled strip of tenderloin, soft as butter. If your group has carnivorous impulses and the mildest spirit of adventure, this dish will prove deeply satisfying.

Another Persian staple is joojeh kabob. It's done right--an entire marinated cornish hen is cut into legs, wings, thighs and breast, then skewered. Expertly grilled, it's startlingly flavorful, unlike most of the mass-produced, plastic-wrapped poultry we're used to.

Kabobs come with traditional roasted tomato and a pile of naturally perfumed basmati rice, so wonderfully flavorful that it's delicious unadorned.

Tasty Kabob, perhaps attuned to American sensibilities, furnishes just half the amount of rice you'd get in Iran. That means the platters contain twice as much rice as the ordinary American can consume.

"Small portions" and "Iranian food" are two phrases that cannot logically appear in the same sentence.

Just as the many words Eskimos have for "snow" signify its variety and importance, so do the many Persian words for "rice." Plain, cooked white rice is chelo. But rice combined with spices, meat and vegetables is polo. One of my all-time favorites is baghali polo, rice heavily infused with dill, studded with lima beans and topped with fork-tender lamb shanks.

Good Iranian desserts have two prized qualities: massive doses of sugar and rose water, and a sixmonth shelf life. Both bamieh and zoolbia, sweet, deep-fried pieces of dough, meet the standard. If you don't have any insulin handy, simply end the meal with soothing Iranian tea, picturesquely brewed in a samovar.

Tasty Kabob is inexpensive, hearty, authentic, agreeable, tasty. How many more reasons do you need to make a visit?