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Here's Why Persian Food Is Such a Big Hit in London Right Now

The top places to find incredible takes on beloved dishes from kebabs to the singular golden rice, tahdig.



A spread at Berenjak, where the specialty is upmarket versions of Tehran kebab house fare. It's opening a third location in fancy Mayfair later this year. *Source: Berenjak*

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Persian food has been around for centuries—indeed, it's perhaps one of the world's oldest cuisines. There are clues that it dates as far back as 550 BC, to the Achaemenid Empire.

Yet, despite its illustrious past, most non-Middle Easterners' concept of Persian food doesn't go far beyond grilled kebabs with saffron rice, served from a stall or small family run restaurant.

That image is evolving, though, and rapidly, courtesy of a growing collection of vibrant, modern London establishments. Some have been introduced by enterprising entrepreneurs. Others are from groups expanding their footprint. Take Berenjakh, part of the high-profile JKS Group, where the specialty is upmarket takes on Tehran kebab house fare. It's third London location will open in fancy Mayfair this autumn. Another group, the contemporary Naron, now has three locations across Fitzrovia and Marylebone.

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Persian cuisine, a name often used interchangeably with Iranian cuisine, is defined by its bold, rich and aromatic flavors. Although it's frequently grouped with Turkish and Arab fare—largely due to a shared love of kebabs—Persian cooking has distinct tastes, frequently a combination of sweet and sour. There's plenty of pomegranates, plums and barberries along with pistachios and walnuts. Kebabs are key, but equally important are the homey, hearty and time-intensive stews that form the cuisine's backbone. Saffron, perhaps the most notable spice in Persian cooking, features prominently in everything from rice dishes to kebab marinades, infusing its singular fragrance and golden hue to all that it touches.

Persian restaurants began making a name for themselves in London in the 1980s, following an influx of Iranian immigrants who settled in the city after the 1979 Revolution. "It all started with small, family-run eateries, but as the

community and appreciation grows, Persian dining culture is shifting to a phase where upscale and refined restaurants emerge,” says Piers Zangana, founder of the not-for-profit Persian Hospitality Network.

“By adding a modern twist while preserving authentic flavors, it has made Persian dishes more approachable to non-Persian customers,” says Reza Malekzadeh, co-founder of Naroon. His rendition of maygoo, a traditional currylike dish that features king prawns packed with garlic and powerful spices like turmeric and chile, is reimaged by tweaking the recipe with a tamer, crowd-pleasing sauce flavored with some orange (the garlic remains).

It’s not just the food that’s changing—it’s also the look and location. Berenjak personifies the interior of these contemporary restaurants: sleek rooms with plastered walls and banquettes outfitted with Kilim-style plush cushions that also feel familiar to a broader and more diverse crowd. The look jibes with Berenjak’s current locations: Borough Market and Soho. Traditionally, Persian eateries were located in outer boroughs and in neighborhoods with large Iranian communities like Finchley, Edgware and Ealing. This new wave is set in central high-rent areas including Kensington and Chelsea that “expand the reach of Persian cuisine beyond the traditional community, making it accessible to London’s wider metropolitan crowd,” Malekzadeh says.

Be warned: You’ll find a noticeable shift in price at these new Persian eateries. At traditional spots like the 25-year-old Persian Palace in Ealing, a dish of zereshk polow (barberry rice with saffron chicken) costs £17 (\$23). At Berenjak the large format dish goes for £65, when its on the menu.

Without further ado, here are six excellent forward thinking Persian restaurants you need to add to your dining list.



An assortment of dishes including hummus, kashk-e bademjoon (eggplant dip), shirazi salad and sangak bread, at Naron. *Source: Naron*

Naron, Marylebone, plus other locations

Cousins Mohammed and Reza Malekzadeh launched Naron, whose name is taken from a northern Tehran suburb, in 2020. They now have three locations across Marylebone and Fitzrovia, with a menu of modernized

classic Persian dishes. For a light main, try the kuku sabzi (£11), an herb frittata with an eye-catching, vibrant green color, with a refreshing side of yogurt and the smoky kashk-e bademjoon. The soltani (£30) combines two kinds of kebabs: barg, or “leaf” in Farsi, which refers to the thin, tender lamb meat, and koobideh, made with minced lamb shoulder. The innovative cocktails pair well with the food, particularly the Bloody Maryam and the pomegranate gimlet.



At Berenjak, the smell of breads baking in the oven hits you when you walk in. *Source: Berenjak*

Berenjak, Borough Market, plus other locations

The facades at the Berenjak locations are unassuming, but step through the doors, and you’ll be hit by the smell of the sangak flatbreads baking in the open kitchen. Carpets line the floors, and the atmosphere is buzzy with the sound of nostalgic Iranian party music drifting through the speakers. Chef Kian Samyani’s small-plate, or mazes, style of dining, includes starters like kashk-e-bademjoon, a coal-cooked aubergine with dried mint and whey (£9.50), and the yogurt-cucumber dip mast-o-khiar (£8.50). First-timers should try the staple kebabs: tender, juicy jujeh (chicken, for £22) and chenjeh (lamb tenderloin, for £45). The ghormeh sabzi is a rich lamb stew

with kidney beans, dried lime and mixed herbs (£26). Book your reservations in advance, as the places fill up, and probably won't ease when the next Berenjak opens in Mayfair later this year.



During the day, Meykade offers singular pistachio lattes, along with Persian-styled pastries and cookies. *Source: Meykade*

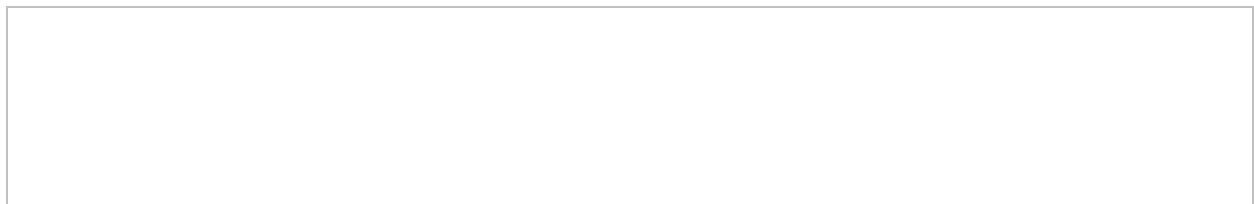
Meykade, Chelsea

Cafe by day and wine bar by night, Meykade is an intimate, chic spot that opened in November. The specialty is coffee infused with Persian ingredients: There are aromatic pistachio lattes as well as matcha blended with cherry purée and rose water syrup (£7.50 each). They complement the cafe's pastry selection, which includes pistachio cookies and date confections combined with rose and cardamom. At night, the music gets louder, and adult drinks take center stage. The £18 Meykade Bellini is a delicious mix of Prosecco with saffron syrup, while the wine selection, with bottles ranging from £59 to £78, features selections from Drood Winery, which imports grapes from Iran and cultivates them in Sweden.



R&H Cafe Gallery, where the specialty is Persian brunch. Source: R&H Cafe Gallery

R&H Cafe Gallery, Kensington





Play Alphadots

Play Alphadots

Tucked away in a side street, the new R&H Café Gallery transports guests to a Persian home with its cozy open kitchen, antique decor and terracotta arabesque-tiled flooring. You won't find the region's ubiquitous kebabs and stews here; instead, chef-owner Zahra Fathi makes brunch the unconventional focus. Her reasoning: "I wanted to shed light on the breakfast component of Persian food and noticed there was a gap in the market." The cafe's signature bereshte, a twist on scrambled eggs combined with feta cheese, dill and subtly sweet toasted walnuts, is a must (£13.50); Sangak, a traditional flatbread served with homemade carrot jam, is also delicious.



On the menu at Diba: ghormeh sabzi, a hearty stew of lamb and kidney beans, served with saffron rice. *Source: Diba*

Diba, Marylebone, plus other locations

With locations in Marylebone, Richmond, Wimbledon and Chelsea, Diba is working to become London's first Persian restaurant franchise. The name, a tribute to the late Queen of Iran Farah Diba Pahlavi, reflects the restaurant's blend of heritage and modernity. The vibrant interiors are decorated with Persian motifs in a style reminiscent of relief sculptures. The golden rice (tahdig), a beloved crispy, crusted delicacy, is especially good, and there are generous portions of baghali polow mahiche, slow-cooked lamb shank served with aromatic rice, fresh dill and shelled broad beans (£24.95). Diba plans to open a new location in London every two years, with the next one set for 2026.





Apadana Restaurant, Kensington

Apadana isn't new—it dates back to 1967, making it London's oldest Persian restaurant. But last year, under the new ownership of Bita Gharmani, a former waitress at the restaurant, the place has undergone a major renovation and now features a more modern look with minimalist white walls, contemporary wood flooring and tables complemented by modish geometric upholstered chairs. Gharmani has also made some updates to the menu, reimagining, for instance, the classic chelo khoresht bamieh (a tomato-and-beef-based stew with okra, garlic and onion) as a vegetarian dish (£16.99) to cater to broader dietary preferences. But classics remain, like the menu's star: the bold, smoky-flavored minced lamb dish koobideh kebab (£16.99); and nan paneer sabzi (£8.99), a staple of Persian gatherings composed of fresh herbs like coriander, mint and parsley, alongside curd cheese, radishes and bread. The traditional clay oven is still in place in the dining room, and it continues to turn out comforting warm flatbreads topped with sesame and pistachios.



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