



ROSE-AND-WALNUT BAKLAVA

If you sign up for a demo in Aliya Ferguson's kitchen, you will be served an Iranian feast crafted by a master chef. And, once you've sampled the exotic delights of this ancient cuisine, you'll need these recipes...



# FROM PERSIA WITH LOVE

PHOTOGRAPHS JAN RAS PRODUCTION ABIGAIL DONNELLY  
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PERSIAN JEWELLED RICE  
WITH CRISPY TAHDIG  
(BUTTERY RICE RÖSTI)

## At first glance,

you'd be forgiven for spotting a bit of Nigella in Aliya Ferguson (Haeri-Mazandarani). The soothing, low timbre of her voice and elegant British accent don't hurt. Nor do the long chestnut locks. And then there's the way she moves effortlessly about her photogenic kitchen, chopping fresh herbs here, sautéing onions there, all while regaling you with anecdotes and interesting asides. But, as a day in her kitchen unfolds, you realise that, by drawing a comparison with an existing TV personality, you are selling this particular domestic goddess short.

"I sound British but I don't identify that way," says Aliya, plopping some double-cream yoghurt into a bowl of grated, cooked beetroot, before stirring through a splash of red wine vinegar, crushed garlic and fresh mint. "I was born and schooled in London, but I also spent parts of my childhood living in Pakistan and Spain. It was quite a nomadic life. My father, Fadhlalla, was born in Karbala to an Iranian father and Turkish-Kurdish mother. He'd always been on a quest to find a place where he could recreate the landscape of his childhood." As fate would have it, that place turned out to

be a macadamia orchard in White River, Mpumalanga, where Aliya and her family relocated when she was 15.

The third of 10 siblings, Aliya credits her paternal grandmother, Bibi, who lived with the family, and her Danish mother, Inge, who came to master the finer arts of Persian cuisine under Bibi's guidance, with fostering her love of cooking. "I was always following them around the kitchen right from when I was tiny," she says. "Cooking for 15 people or more on a daily basis is a full-time job, really, so from the minute my grandmother got up, there would be a day-long preparation in the kitchen. That's the thing with

**"MasterChef UK was a good experience because I realised I am not just an average cook"**

Persian food: it's not technical, but there's always lots of prep at its heart. Look at all these herbs I'm chopping," she interrupts herself, pointing at a chopping board piled with mounds of fresh mint, dill and Italian parsley destined for a bowl of salad. "I have a really vivid memory of watching her making *dolmas*," she resumes. "She would laboriously wrap vine leaves around mince and lentils, then simmer them in pomegranate molasses and stock. We'd have them straight out of the pot, still warm. That's still how I like to eat them today."

After studying business and marketing in Cape Town, Aliya returned to England where she studied nutrition and qualified as a naturopath. Following the birth of her second son, Joseph, she entered *MasterChef UK* and not only got in, but made it all the way through to the quarter-final. "I was really surprised by the fact that I thrived under the pressure," she says of her time on set in 2010. "For one pressure test, I was at the Landmark Hotel in Marylebone and had to make 62 portions of pan-fried sea bass. Not one was sent back. It was such an encouraging experience for me because it made me realise that perhaps I was indeed a better-than-average cook."

As it turns out, Aliya is also an above-

average cookery teacher. For the past year, she has been hosting interactive Persian cooking classes in the kitchen of her and husband Gary's home in Cape Town's City Bowl. The classes – and resulting feasts – have proved so popular that she fully booked in August and is looking at hosting a series of pop-up restaurants.

According to Aliya, the appeal of Persian cuisine boils down to a few delicious fundamentals. It's aromatic rather than fiery, relying on saffron and the spice combination of cinnamon, cumin and cardamom – known in Farsi as *advieh* – to impart flavour. There's also a constant interplay between sour and sweet, with ingredients such as barberries, sumac, dried limes and pomegranate molasses imbuing savoury dishes with a mellow, yet complex base of bittersweet and tart flavours. And fresh herbs – particularly parsley, coriander and fenugreek – enjoy a starring role in many dishes, where they're treated like vegetables rather than mere taste enhancers. "I like to describe Persian cuisine as peasant food with a really sophisticated flavour profile," she says.

A perfect expression of this duality is a pot of *fesenjan*, an iconic Persian stew that Aliya has happily bubbling away on the hob. "This dish contains only a few ingredients – toasted, ground walnuts,

**"Persian cuisine is aromatic rather than fiery, relying on cinnamon, cumin and cardamom"**

pomegranate molasses, cinnamon, turmeric and chicken – yet, as it simmers and goes from a light cappuccino colour to a rich, dark chocolate, it develops really deep flavours," she says.

Aliya's starch of choice to accompany *fesenjan* – and the other aromatic stews she demonstrates in her classes – is always Persian rice. Ideally, it's made with Iranian rice, which has fat, fluffy grains, but because she has trouble laying her hands on the real thing in South Africa, A-grade basmati procured from Atlas Trading in the Bo-Kaap suffices

And if Aliya is exacting about her raw

ingredient, she is even more so about the final incarnation. After she salt-soaks, parboils and rinses the rice, she mixes about a cupful of the translucent grains with melted butter before tamping the mixture down into the base of a pot. She then adds the rest of the rice, combined with saffron and barberries, before gently steaming it all, covered with a dish-towel-wrapped lid. "The scariest thing you're ever going to do in the kitchen is tip out a pot of Persian rice," laughs Aliya. "You say a prayer, you hope for the best... I think I have about an 85% success rate in getting the *tahdig* to come out in one piece."

The golden-brown disc of crisped rice that crowns the mound of yellow grains was just as sought after by Aliya and her siblings when they were growing up as it is now by her sons Noah and Joseph. "They're always complaining that none of the good bits are left over after my guests have left," she says, smiling.

Indeed, a bite of the crackly, buttery crust, combined with the fluffy aromatic rice and bursts of sharp acidity from the barberries, makes for a dish that's so much more than the sum of its parts. Drenched in the velvety, reduced sauce of the *fesenjan*, the chicken so tender that it flakes off the bones, it culminates in a feast that tastes as much of far-off destinations as it does of home. Peasant food that would rock the Royals. **W** [aliyavibrantlife.com](http://aliyavibrantlife.com)

## ROSE-AND-WALNUT BAKLAVA

**Makes 20 pieces**  
**A LITTLE EFFORT**  
**GREAT VALUE**  
**Preparation: 40 minutes**  
**Cooking: 45 minutes**

**For the syrup:**



Aliya with her sons  
Noah and Joseph.

**water** 1 cup  
**caster sugar** 170 g  
**good-quality rose-water** 2 T  
**lemon** 1, zested and juiced  
**butter** 150 g, melted  
**phyllo pastry** 1 roll, thawed and cut to fit the pan

**For the filling, mix:**

**almonds** 150 g, finely chopped (use a food processor)  
**walnuts** 150 g, finely chopped (use a food processor)  
**icing sugar** 50 g  
**ground cinnamon** 1 t  
**ground cardamom** 1 t

**1** To make the syrup, bring the water and sugar to a boil, then reduce the heat and simmer for 10 minutes. Add the rose-water and simmer for a further 4 minutes. Add the lemon juice and zest and set aside.  
**2** Preheat the oven to 180°C. Brush a 33 x 23 cm baking tray with a little melted butter and arrange a sheet of phyllo in the tray.  
**3** Brush generously with butter and repeat with half the phyllo (at least 6 sheets depending on the packet, but up to 8 is fine). You can overlap the sheets to fit the tray and don't worry if they stick together or break.  
**4** Sprinkle with the filling and layer the remaining phyllo on top as you did for the first 6–8 sheets, brushing each sheet with butter as you go.  
**5** Using a very sharp knife, cut the baklava into diamond shapes the size of a generous mouthful, making sure to cut to the bottom of the pan as it will be hard to cut at the end of baking.  
**6** Gently spritz the top of the baklava with water to help the pastry crisp up and bake for 30 minutes.  
**7** Once out of the oven, pour over the cooled syrup. Ideally let it sit for 6–12 hours, but it can be served the next day. Store in an airtight container in a cool place for up to a week.

**WINE:** Nederburg Special Late Harvest 2018

### PERSIAN JEWELLED RICE WITH CRISPY TAHDIGH (BUTTERY RICE RÖSTI)

**Serves 8 to 10**  
**A LITTLE EFFORT**  
**GREAT VALUE**  
**Preparation:** 30 minutes, plus 45 minutes' standing time  
**Cooking:** 45 minutes

**basmati rice** 400 g  
**fine salt** 4 T  
**melted butter** 3 T  
**light olive or vegetable oil** 1 T  
**salted butter** 50 g, cut into 8 cubes  
**saffron water** 3 T (see cook's note)  
**barberries** 50 g (optional), soaked

**1** Place the rice in fine-mesh sieve and rinse under cold running water for 1 minute, shaking continually.  
**2** Place the rice and 2 T salt in medium bowl and cover with 4 cups water. Stir gently to dissolve the salt, then allow to stand for at least 45 minutes or up to 2 hours. Drain the rice and rinse again.  
**3** Bring 8 cups water to the boil in a large saucepan over a high heat. Add the rice and 2 T salt and boil briskly for 6 minutes from the time you drop the rice into the water, not from when it starts to boil again.  
**4** Drain the rice and rinse once

**“The scariest thing you're ever going to do in the kitchen is tip out a pot of Persian rice”**

more with cold water for about 30 seconds. Rinse and dry the saucepan well to remove any residual starch. Brush the bottom and 2.5 cm up the sides of the saucepan with the oil and a little melted butter.  
**5** Mix 1 cup parcooked rice with 2 T melted butter and stir until combined. Spread the buttered rice mixture evenly into the bottom of the prepared saucepan, packing it down well.  
**6** Mound the remaining rice in the centre of the saucepan on top of the rice base (it should look like a small hill). Poke 8 equally spaced holes through the rice mound, but not right through to the base, using the handle of a wooden spoon. Place 1 cube of butter in each hole. Drizzle the saffron water over the rice.  
**7** Wrap the saucepan's lid with a clean dish towel and cover the pan tightly, making sure the towel is secure on top of the lid and away from the heat. Cook over a medium-high heat until you hear a sizzling noise, then reduce the heat to the lowest setting and cook for 30 minutes, or until the rice is tender and fluffy and the crust is golden brown around the edges.  
**8** Remove the covered pan from the heat and place in a sink filled with cold

water to help release the crispy rice from the bottom. Turn it out onto a dish. If it doesn't release, lift the crispy bits out of the pan and place around the rice.  
**9** Pan-fry the rehydrated barberries in a knob of butter and ¼ t sugar until they start to puff up. Sprinkle over the top of the rice to serve.

**Cook's note:** To make the saffron water, grind 1 small pinch saffron with ½ t sugar using a pestle and mortar until it forms a powder. Mix with 3 T hot water and steep for 10 minutes.

**MEAT-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE WINE:** Woolworths Spier Private Collection Chenin Blanc 2017

### MAAST VA LABOO (BEETROOT-AND-YOGHURT SALAD)

**Serves 6 to 8**  
**EASY**

**GREAT VALUE**

**Preparation:** 10 minutes  
**Cooking:** 30 minutes

**medium beetroot** 3, trimmed  
**plain Greek or full-cream yoghurt** 1½ cups  
**garlic** 1 clove, crushed to a paste  
**fresh mint** 4 T finely chopped, plus torn leaves for serving  
**red wine vinegar** 2 t  
**salt** ½ t

**1** Boil the beetroot until tender, about 30 minutes depending on size. Allow to cool slightly, then rub off the skins using kitchen paper. Grate the beetroot coarsely.  
**2** Mix the beetroot, yoghurt, garlic, mint and vinegar in a bowl. Season with salt and more vinegar, if desired.  
**3** Cover and chill until ready to serve, garnished with mint.

**Cook's note:** This is best made a maximum of an hour before serving but can be stored in the fridge in a sealed container. The water will separate from the yoghurt.

**CARB-CONSCIOUS, FAT-CONSCIOUS, HEALTH-CONSCIOUS, MEAT-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE WINE:** Diemersdal Grenache Rosé 2018

### SHIRAZI SALAD

**Serves 4 to 6**  
**EASY**

**GREAT VALUE**

**Preparation:** 15 minutes

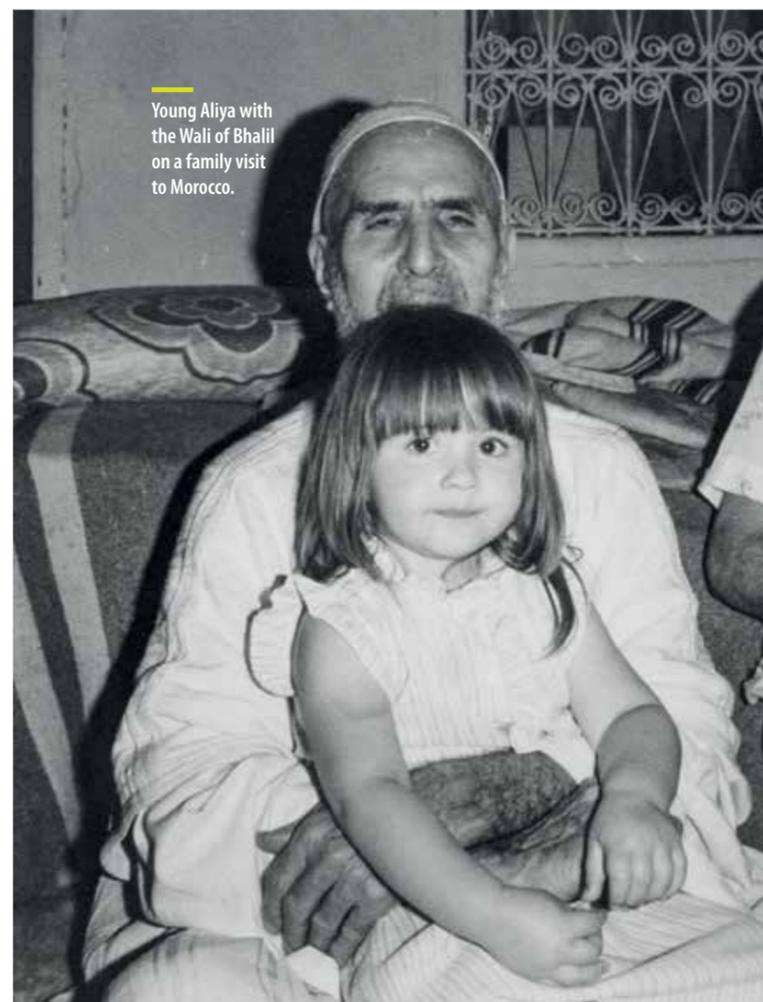


MAAST VA LABOO (BEETROOT-AND-YOGHURT SALAD)

SHIRAZI SALAD



FESEJAN (POMEGRANATE-AND-WALNUT CHICKEN)



Young Aliya with the Wali of Bhalil on a family visit to Morocco.



BASTANI (SAFFRON-AND-ORANGE BLOSSOM ICE CREAM)



Above: Aliya's paternal grandmother, Bibi (left), and Danish mother, Inge (right), nurtured her love of cooking from when she was a young girl.

**ripe tomatoes** 300 g (I like to use different coloured small exotic ones)

**Israeli (baby Mediterranean)**

**cucumbers** 200 g

**spring onions** 3

**medium red onion** 1 (finely chopped and soaked in white wine vinegar, a little salt and sugar)

**radishes** ½ cup chopped

**Italian parsley** a handful

**fresh mint** a handful

**fresh dill** a handful (optional)

**olive oil** 4 T

**lime or small lemon** 1, juiced

**dried mint** 1 t (optional)

**sumac**, for sprinkling, (optional)

**1** Chop all the vegetables and finely chop the herbs. **2** Mix the olive oil and lemon or lime juice and season the salad with the mint and sumac. Serve immediately.

**CARB-CONSCIOUS, FAT-CONSCIOUS, HEALTH-CONSCIOUS, MEAT-FREE, DAIRY-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**  
**WINE: Alto Rouge 2017**

## FESENJAN (POMEGRANATE-AND-WALNUT CHICKEN)

Serves 4

EASY

**GREAT VALUE**

Preparation: 20 minutes

Cooking: 1 hour 15 minutes

**walnut halves** 200 g

**olive oil** 2 T

**large onion** 1, sliced

**skinless deboned free-range chicken**

**thighs and drumsticks** 8 pieces

**salt** 2 t

**pomegranate molasses** ½ cup, plus extra to taste (see cook's note)

**ground cinnamon** 1 t

**ground turmeric** 1 t

**freshly ground black pepper** 1 t

**chicken stock or water** 2 cups

**pomegranate rubies**, to garnish (optional)

**1** Toast the walnuts in a shallow pan over a medium heat for 8–10 minutes, or until golden brown and fragrant. Once cooled, transfer to a food processor or blender and blend finely. Set aside. **2** Heat a large saucepan over a medium heat. Once hot, add the olive oil and onion. Cook until soft. Once the onion is browned, add the chicken and brown. Season with salt while browning. **3** Reduce the heat and place all the other ingredients into a blender to make a creamy, golden sauce. **4** Add the sauce to the chicken and simmer gently for 1 hour and 15 minutes, or until the desired thickness is reached. You're looking for a dark brown, thick sauce.

**Cook's note:** To make pomegranate molasses, simmer 1 litre pomegranate juice with 3 T lemon juice and 100 g sugar for 1 hour until thickened and reduced.

**DAIRY-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**

**WINE: Beaumont Hope Marguerite Chenin Blanc 2017**

## BASTANI (SAFFRON-AND-ORANGE BLOSSOM ICE CREAM)

Serves 8

EASY

Preparation: 15 minutes

**whipping cream** 1 cup

**condensed milk** ½ x 385 g can

**saffron water** 2 T (see cook's note)

**orange blossom water** 2 T

**pistachios and pesticide-free rose petals**, to decorate

**1** Whip the cream until stiff peaks form, then gently fold in the condensed milk. Add the saffron and orange blossom water.

**2** Churn in an ice-cream machine, or pour into small glasses or a shallow Tupperware, sprinkle with pistachios and freeze.

**Cook's note:** To make the saffron water, grind 1 small pinch saffron with ½ t sugar in a pestle and mortar until it forms a powder. Mix with 2 T hot water and steep for 10 minutes.

**WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**

**WINE: Woolworths Weltevrede Vanilla Chardonnay 2018**