

Via Yalda

MAINS

Sabzi polo ba mahi (Persian herbed rice with fish)

By Sarra Sedghi · Rough Draft Atlanta, 3/21/2025

Ingredients

- [ ] 2 cups basmati rice, soaked in water prior (optional, but recommended)
- [ ] 1 ounce (about half a bunch) fresh parsley
- [ ] 1 ounce (about half a bunch) fresh dill
- [ ] 1 ounce (about half a bunch) fresh green onions or chives
- [ ] 1 ounce (about half a bunch) fresh coriander
- [ ] 2 Tbsp dried fenugreek, or ½ ounce fresh fenugreek
- [ ] 10 cloves garlic, about 1 bulb
- [ ] 3 Tbsp olive or vegetable oil
- [ ] ¼ tsp saffron
- [ ] 2 Tbsp salt
- [ ] 2 ice cubes to mix with saffron to emulsify

Directions

1. **Preparing the aromatics:** Wash the herbs and spread across a clean kitchen towel to dry for at least two hours. If using saffron threads, grind those using a pestle and mortar.
2. Transfer the ice cubes to a glass and sprinkle the ground saffron over it.
3. Put the glass aside in a warm place.
4. **Parboiling the rice:** Wash the rice by moving it around with your hand in a bowl of water and then draining it. Repeat this process four to five times.
5. Fill a pot with water and bring it to a boil. Add 2 tablespoons of salt to the water. (Don’t worry about it being too much. The excess will be rinsed off later.)
6. Once the water is boiling, add the rice to it. The temperature will drop, so immediately bring the water to boiling again.

- [ ] Flatbread, such as pita or naan, to make tahdig or scorched rice (optional)
- [ ] 2 whole large (or four filets, about four pounds) mild fish, such as branzino, red snapper, or Chilean sea bass)
- [ ] 3 whole eggs, beaten
- [ ] ⅛ tsp. saffron, bloomed in 2 Tbsp. water
- [ ] 2 Tbsp. lemon juice
- [ ] ½ tsp. smoked paprika

7. **Assembling the tahdig:** Add 3 to 4 tablespoons of olive or vegetable oil to a nonstick pot and begin to layer the rice by adding pita or naan in the bottom. (Note: the bread is optional as you can still make tahdig without it.)
8. Add the rice mixture with herbs on top, then add 2 tablespoons of water on top of the rice.
9. Poke a few holes on top of the rice mixture to allow the rice to steam and rise evenly.
10. Let the rice steam for 45 minutes on low heat.
11. Combine eggs, saffron, lemon juice, and paprika in a large bowl.
12. Let the filets sit in the egg marinade for about 20 to 25 minutes in the refrigerator.
13. Add vegetable oil to a frying pan and heat up. Cook fish for 5 to 6 minutes on each side until tender.

HOW TO SERVE TAHDIG (SCORCHED RICE)

1. To serve tahdig, you'll need to flip it onto a large plate. Use a plate at least the same diameter as the pot.
2. Before flipping, run a butter knife or spatula along the rice's perimeter to dislodge stuck rice grains.
3. Assemble the plate face down on top of the pot, then lift and flip, ending with the plate face up and the pot face down on top.
4. Gently remove the pot, and use a spatula or wooden spoon to scrape off any stuck tahdig.
5. Place fish next to the rice with a halved sour orange or lemon, fresh tarragon, and slices of red or green onion.

> Pro tip from Famili: "I like to melt some butter and add some saffron to it and add it to the rice half way [through cooking.] This allows your rice to be buttery, and the aroma from saffron alongside herbs will get everyone excited and hungry."

The story

Persians of Metro Atlanta, I am here. Nowruz Mubarak to members of the diaspora, including the Parsi, Afghani, and Kurdish communities, and anyone else who celebrates! The spring equinox has finally arrived, and with it comes rebirth and a fresh new year. That's the ethos behind Nowruz, which translates to "new day" and has been celebrated for roughly 3,000 years.

I'm a girl who's all about spring — the vernal equinox brings Nowruz, the Persian New Year, and with it, time with my family, spring cleaning, and some solid eats. (Catch me at Piedmont Park on April 6, chowing down on a jujeh kebab at the Atlanta Persian Festival.)

As with any holiday, Nowruz goes heavy on family time and food, and Yalda chef and owner Ashkan Famili is sharing a recipe for one of the most popular Persian rice dishes served during the celebration: sabzi polo ba mahi.

"Sabzi polo mahi is a national Iranian dish, but every region puts its own twist on it," Famili said. "My mother's side of the family comes from the Caspian Sea area, and they tend to enjoy this traditional dish with some fish roe cake (eshpel mahi) and seer torshi (barrel-aged pickled garlic)."

“My father’s side is from Tehran, and they enjoy it with shirazi salad, which is diced Persian cucumbers, tomato, parsley, and red onion with lemon and extra virgin olive oil.”

Sabzi polo ba mahi, which translates to “herbed rice with fish,” is a traditional Nowruz dish, just like ash reshteh (noodle soup) or kuku sabzi (herbed baked omelet).

Like many foods tied to the new year from other cultures, Nowruz dishes come with superstitions. Sabzi polo ba mahi, ash reshteh, and kuku sabzi, in particular, are rich in sabzi or greens — most commonly a mixture of herbs that can include dill, cilantro, and parsley — and, in turn, promise prosperity in the new year.

This herbaceous rice, traditionally served with fish on Nowruz, is also often served with lamb shank or chicken. And like other Persian rice, sabzi polo isn’t for the faint of heart. It requires much time and care, and cutting corners will result in a subpar dish.

Much of the prep work, such as washing and drying the herbs, should be done ahead of time. If you plan on making both sabzi polo and the fish, start with making the rice first.

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