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Food—By Sheryl Julian and Julie Riven



## Honoring the past

**Fatemah Agdas Zoka-Bina**, 63, settles into a banquette at Lala Rokh, the Beacon Hill restaurant her children own, that celebrates her Persian cooking. Her son, Babak Bina, sits down on one side, and her daughter, Azita Bina-Seibel, who owns another Boston restaurant bearing her name, nuzzles her on the other. As they pose for a photographer, the mother leans very slightly toward the son and looks at him admiringly. "He's her favorite," Bina-Seibel announces conspiratorially to the crew behind the camera. Even Zoka-Bina, who speaks only the Farsi of her native Iran, seems to understand. "That's not true," she says, as her daughter translates. "when I look at you," she says, "I look the same way."

Old-fashioned sibling rivalry crosses cultures. But little else about how the Bina family operates feels rooted in modern times. Lala Rokh is a tribute to the mother's cooking, and her children defer to her about everything. Both are deeply devoted to the traditional ways of Persian families and are adoring and respectful of Zoka-Bina. Together, the sister and brother talk about how their family entertained in Iran - sometimes they had a couple of dozen guests, several times a week - and the satisfaction their mother took from seeing people happy in their house. Lala Rokh, they say, is a glimpse into this life.

It's a world few Americans know. Persian home cooking, which is based on aromatic spices in unexpected combinations, evolved through centuries of crisscross travel along the silk route. Spices and tastes seem at once familiar and foreign, many borrowed from India. A stew of veal, split

yellow peas, and potatoes is flavored with lemon and saffron. Veal with lentils is simmered with caramelized onions, currants, and dates. There are a number of kebab dishes, though none of the meat is on the bone as it might be served at a restaurant in Iran. The dishes include chicken marinated in yogurt, saffron, and lemon; ground sirloin with turmeric and saffron. Lamb shank is braised with chickpeas and okra. Eggplant is combined with ground beef, mint oil, and goat's milk yogurt. A thick soup marries tarragon with spinach, beans, tomatoes, dried plums, and juice from unripe grapes.

Even in Iran, Zoka-Bina's food was different from the food served in many homes, often layered with many complicated spice mixes. Her parents came from the region of Azerbaijan in northwest Iran, flanked on the east by the southern tip of the Caspian Sea; on the west by the shallow, salty Lake Urmia; on the north by the nation of Azerbaijan.

Babak Bina says that Persian cooking is "based on an ancient philosophy of balancing hot and cold. When you consume foods that are cold, you must balance them with foods that are hot." Similar to the ancient humors and the Chinese principle of yin and yang, the Persian balance can be drawn from the foods in a meal. For instance, says Bina, "if you eat a lot of salad greens, which are cold, then you can balance them with honey or pastries that are extremely sweet. Honey and sugar are both hot."

Other cold foods include yogurt, vegetables, and some fruits. Hot foods are always the sweet ones. To balance a meal, Persians begin with a plate of beta cheese, scallions, and radishes, with fresh herbs basil, mint, and tarragon (all are cold). Then they might eat a grilled meat dish (hot) and a dessert made with honey (hot), and the balance is in place. The plate of cheese and greens, called sabzi chordal is as common to the Persian table as salt is to ours. "In Iran, when people come to visit," says Bina, "the hosts might say, 'Stay for dinner. Let's have some bread and cheese together.' Or they'll say, 'We'll just have sabzi chordal and bread and cheese.'" "What you get with it, he says, is a meal, course after course, that took many hours to prepare. All families entertained this way, says Bina. His was no exception.

**Babak Bina, his mother, Fatemeh Zoka-Bina, and his sister, Azita Bina-Seibel, at Lala Rokh, one of the family's two restaurants in Boston.**