



## Chef's Pantry

# Persian style *with Louisa Shafia*

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By Linnea Covington





# Taste of Persia perfumed and exotically spiced

In a snug Brooklyn kitchen, cookbook author and Persian chef Louisa Shafia plucks ingredients from her pantry. First comes a plastic package of angelica powder, then, she pops the top off a canister of rose buds, and finally, the pretty 43-year-old delicately unfastens the lid to a slim blue tin of Iranian saffron. As she displays them on the industrial steel table she got for \$150 in the Bowery, each item elicits a sigh of joy and enthusiasm.

“Iranian saffron is something people have brought back to me as presents,” said Shafia, flaunting the delicate, golden flower pistils. “It’s kind of a classic thing, if someone comes and visits from Iran, they bring saffron, even if you aren’t a cook.”

It’s been a long time since Philadelphia-raised Shafia has visited Iran, and, since she moved from California 1996, she

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has called New York City home. For over a decade Shafia has lived in the same railroad apartment in Williamsburg, which she now shares with her husband James Rotondi.

When I stopped by for lunch, Shafia was in the throes of writing her second cookbook, *The New Persian Kitchen*, a tome all about Iranian cooking. Her last book, *Lucid Food*, also utilizes Iranian ingredients, but it’s more focused on cooking



with seasonal and local produce, like in her recipe for kale salad with avocado, almonds, and toasted nori, which she shared with us.

While Shafia's books cover an array of items from yogurt, meats, cheeses, and bread, she gets the most animated about using fruits and vegetables, including rhubarb, stinging nettle, apricots, cauliflower, and mango. A lot of her ardor for wholesome ingredients comes from working at high-class, vegetarian eateries like Millennium Restaurant in San Francisco and Pure Food and Wine in New York. While many of the foodstuffs she employs are common to us, some ingredients she uses hail from Iran and remain a mystery to the Western chef.

"We think of people in the Middle East as being so different and that we have nothing in common," said Shafia as she spooned out sticky bitter orange sauce. "But, through our origins we actually have a lot in common."



*Tarshi vegetable pickle made from angelica.*

Take marmalade. Chances are you know it well from British cuisine or even just having tea and scones. Traditionally, marmalade is made from sour orange, which the Persians invented centuries ago when they started preserving food in sugar. Pickles too are a big part of the Iranian table, and, said Shafia, you find torshi, a vegetable pickle made with angelica, at every meal.

"There are lots of sour flavors in Persian cooking," said Shafia. "We use things like pomegranate syrup, rhubarb, sour cherries, and barberries to make things sour."

Less recognizable in Shafia's kitchen were the dried limes and lime powder. Both are used in stews and soups, or, you can do what Shafia does and simmer the lime in water for about 15 minutes to make a tart, yet refreshing, tea.

The array of Iranian ingredients proves vast, some you will recognize, some you might never have heard of, and others you know, but aren't sure how to cook them. Shafia hopes that with her new book, some of those things will become less mysterious.



## Recipe

### Kale Salad with Avocado, Almonds, and Toasted Nori

*Courtesy of Lucid Food, by Louisa Shafia*

**Serves 4**

#### Ingredients

- 1 bunch kale, thick stems removed and coarsely copped
- 1 ripe avocado, diced
- 1 carrot, peeled and sliced into thin half moons
- 1 small, sweet, crisp apple, sliced thin
- 1 scallion, green part only, sliced thin
- 1 large handful toasted almonds
- 1/2 sheet nori
- 1/2 clove garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- salt and pepper to taste

#### Directions

Place kale in a large bowl with avocado.

Add a dash of salt, the garlic, and olive oil. Gently massage together for about three minutes, or until the kale shrinks, becomes darker, and more pliable.

Reserve a small handful of carrot and apple slices for garnish, then gently fold in the remaining carrot and apple into kale mixture. Taste and season with salt.

Divide the salad among four plates. Top each with sliced carrot, apples, and scallions. Season with pepper and scatter almonds on top.

Turn burner on to medium heat, pick up sheet of nori with tongs, and pass it over the flame three or four times. Let the nori cool for a moment, then fold sheet in half lengthwise and cut with scissors along crease. Using the scissors, cut several thin ribbons of nori over each plate.

Serve, or you can keep it in the refrigerator for up to a day.



## Glossary:

**Dried lime:** Once dried, this version of a lime looks brown, but the flavor imparted by the citrus become super sour. Because of this, you use dried lime in soups, stews, or boil it down and make tea.

**Rose:** Rose is a common ingredient in lots of Persian dishes including the frozen rose ice dessert called faloodeh. You can find different types of rose in a few forms; the most popular being rose water and actual rose buds or petals. Shafia suggests breaking down rose buds for the best floral flavor.

**Sour orange:** Commonly found in marmalade, you can also use sour orange while making cranberry sauce, to brighten a soup, or try chopping up and putting into scones or muffins.

**Pomegranate:** Whether you use it as syrup, powder, paste, or have the pomegranate kernels dried, this fruit adds tartness and a bright depth to many meals. In Iran you can find pomegranate in fesenjan, a holiday stew made with walnuts, and an eggplant-based dip called nazkhatun.

**Sumac:** As one of the most popular Middle Eastern spices, the vinegar-tasting sumac comes in a powdered form and gets sprinkled on salads, stirred into soups, or adds a fun kick to a Bloody Mary.

**Angelica:** This flowering plant is also known as Golpar, and is a classic Persian ingredient found in torshi (a type of pickle), and commonly gets sprinkled over raw turnip and fresh pomegranate. Usually it comes powdered, but you can also get it in seed form or as whole petals.

**Barberry:** These tart, dried berries get used a lot in rice, namely the Persian dish called Jeweled Rice. To cook with them, soak for about an hour before adding them to your pot.

**Saffron:** “I found out you are supposed to grind saffron before using it, it enhances the flavor and color,” suggested Shafia. “You put it in really hot water and let it steep for a little bit, then, you smell it and it’s like the Silk Road.” Need we say more? You can add saffron to rice, squash, or anything that has a light flavor to it.



*SAFFRON – “you smell it and it’s like the silk road”*



*Pomegranate: three ways.*



*Dried lime: super sour.*

### Where to purchase Persian ingredients online:

Kalamala: <http://www.kalamala.com>

Kalustyan’s: <http://kalustyans.com>

Sadaf: <http://www.sadaf.com>

Shahrzad: <http://www.shahrzad.com>

### Stores:

Arash International Market: 2720 S Parker Road, Aurora, CO; 303-752-9272

Shiraz Market: 8486 Tyco Road, Vienna, VA; 703-922-9566

Caravan Mideastern Foods: 2817 N Country Club Road, Tucson, AZ; 520-323-6808

Elat Market: 8730 W Pico Boulavard, Los Angeles, CA; 310-659-9250

Sayad International: 95 Fenn Road, Newington, CT; 860-666-7846

Ethnic Foods Company: 204 Central Avenue, Suite 12, Osseo, MN; 952-593-3000

Kalustyan’s: 123 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY; 212-685-3451

Shandiz Mediterranean Grill and Market: 4013 W Parker Road, Plano, TX; 972-943-8885

