

Persian Tahdig: A Canvas for Culinary Imagination, Innovation, and Artistry

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ABSTRACT: Persian *tahdig* is often described as the delicious, buttery, golden, crunchy layer formed at the very bottom of Persian-style rice pot. Some of the earliest references to the presence of tahdig in Persian cookery date back to the mid-1800s. Over the years, Persian cooks have introduced imaginative practices into the process of making tahdig. These creativities range anywhere from more efficient ways of cooking other elements of the meal (meat and vegetables) integrated with the tahdig in the bottom of the same pot, to using more pliable versions of tahdig as a bread substitute to make a range of sandwiches, to using the tahdig layer to create beautiful edible food art. This paper discusses some of these purposeful and imaginative practices.

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Persian tahdig... the most coveted treat at a Persian meal... at times referred to as the jewel of Persian cooking... or the holy grail of Persian cooking... or the *pièce de résistance* of the Persian cook... It is described as the delicious, buttery, golden, crunchy, round layer formed at the bottom of the rice pot (Figure 1). In reality, however, tahdig is much more.

Tahdig is often fought over by family members and guests during meals; life altering and addicting for some first timers; sparking fierce fury and competition among Persian home cooks; disappearing seconds after having been put on the dinner table; and praised by lovers of Persian food around the world. It is written about in such eminent newspapers as the *Wall Street Journal*, *The Guardian*, and *The New York Times*; featured in such culinary sources as *Cooks Illustrated*, *BBC Good Food*, *Saveur*, and *Bon Appetit*; discussed on National Public Radio (NPR) and British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio programs; seen in programs on such TV networks as Netflix and the Food Network; and discussed in such international scholastic forums as the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery.

Literally translated, the Persian word *tahdig* (in Persian: ته‌دیگ) means 'bottom of the pot'. The classic process to make tahdig involves long-grain rice going through the stages of being soaked in salted water for several hours, up to a day, parcooked in salted boiling water for several minutes, drained, rinsed with cold water, and then slowly steamed in a pot, with melted butter on the bottom over low heat for an hour or two, while covered tightly, during which the tahdig is formed at the bottom of the pot.

In more recent years, tahdig has become much more than the crunchy layer of rice at the bottom of the pot. Persian cooks – both home and commercial cooks – have introduced



FIGURE 1. Pieces of tahdig served on the same platter as the rest of the rice from the pot.



FIGURE 2. Potato tahdig.



FIGURE 3. Eggplant tahdig.

imaginative practices into the process of making tahdig. These creativities range anywhere from more efficient ways of cooking other elements of the meal (meat and vegetables), integrated with the tahdig in the bottom of the same pot, to using more pliable versions of tahdig as a bread substitute to make a range of sandwiches, to using the tahdig layer to create beautiful edible food art. This paper discusses some of these conscious and imaginative practices.

Historical Background

Some of the earliest references to tahdig in Persian cookery date back to the mid-1800s. A translation of an early cookbook in Persian, which was originally published in the form of a pamphlet in India in 1938, contains a reference to tahdig preparation.¹ A relatively recent academic research article shows the existence of the word *tahdig* as early as 1848, in the language of Persian people living by the Caspian Sea, where high-quality Persian rice is grown.²

Information in these references is consistent with other historical narratives about the origination of tahdig and its entry into the Persian cookery landscape. Tahdig had been present on royal menus of fourth and the fifth kings of Iran's Qajar Dynasty who ruled the Persian Empire in 1800s. According to these narratives, the servants who worked in the king's residence would have their meals using the leftovers after the chef had served the king's table. One day, the servants started arguing

loudly over who would get the crunchy rice at the bottom of the pot. When the chef was asked about the commotion, the story of the crunchy rice eventually reached the king and he ordered that some it to be brought to him. The king enjoyed eating this crunchy, flavourful rice, and ordered that this be served to him in the future as an appetizer before the regular rice that accompanied the main course.³ These narratives have been confirmed

in scholarly works documenting the social life of the period, when by the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, tahdig had become part of the diet of high-ranking and well-to-do families in Iran.⁴

Two of the earliest Persian cookbooks intended for Iranian urban housewives, written in Persian and published in early 1900s, include explicit instructions for making tahdig. The first of these cookbooks was ‘Tabākhi-é-Neshāt’ (in Persian: طاشن یخايط, literal translation: Cheerful Cooking) which was published around the time of World War I by a woman whose Qajar honorary name was ‘Neshāt-al-dowleh’ (in Persian: دل و دل طاشن, literal translation: the delight of the state).⁵ She was the granddaughter of the French adventurer Jules Richard (1816-1891) who, around mid-1800s, served in high Iranian state offices.⁶ In her cookbook, Neshāt-al-dowleh, whose formal name was Josephine Richards, provides instructions for making basic tahdig as well as saffron, yogurt, and tomato paste variations. The second cookbook, published in 1938, is part of a three-volume set ‘Asāyesh-é-Zendegāni’ (in Persian: یناگدن ز ش یاسا, literal translation: Comfort of Life) by J. Tara. In its second volume, the author provides instructions for making basic tahdig and for its presentation at a reception.⁷

Imaginative Ways of Taking Tahdig Above and Beyond
In the rest of this paper, we present a sampling of imaginative ways Persian cooks have taken traditional tahdig above and beyond its original form, shape, or purpose.

These samplings will collectively illustrate some of the drivers and techniques that have resulted in the associated innovations including:

- Creating crunchy dishes other than the original rice-centric tahdigs
- Home cooks desire to increase efficiency – in particular reducing the time to make tahdig and reducing the number of vessels required
- Facilitating the incorporation of meat and vegetables into the process
- Dietary restrictions and preferences resulting in, for example, the desire to use more pliable layers of crunchy rice as a substitute for bread



FIGURE 4. Pork Ribs tahdig.



FIGURE 5. Shrimp tahdig.



FIGURE 6. Flat bread tahdig.



FIGURE 7. Chicken wings tahdig.



FIGURE 8. Oriental pot stickers tahdig.



FIGURE 9. Lettuce tahdig.

- Ever increasing popularity and craving for other (non-rice) crispy and crunchy accompaniments
- Maximizing the amount of tahdig generated per cup of rice
- The search for additional opportunities for Persian cooks to demonstrate artistry skills
- Finer control of levels of moisture, oil, and heat used in the tahdig making process
- Use of specialty electric rice cookers designed explicitly for making Persian rice dishes
- Increased availability of alternative cooking vessels

Matters of Efficiency

Incorporating other components of a complete meal (e.g., meat and vegetables) into the process of tahdig making is a clever approach for reducing the required effort, time, and number of vessels used. In these instances, relatively thin (1 to 2 centimetres) pieces of meat and/or vegetables are arranged at the bottom of the pot – covering all or some of the surface of the bottom of the pot – before parboiled rice is added. Figures 2–5 illustrate such techniques where cooking of pieces of potatoes, eggplants, ribs, or shrimp are integrated with the tahdig making process.

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Matters of Texture and Flavour

Satisfying the ever-increasing popularity and craving for crispy and crunchy accompaniments to a meal, without the need for such traditional techniques as deep-frying, pan-frying, or panini griddling, can be achieved by incorporating the relevant ingredients into the tahdig making process.

Figures 6-9 illustrate examples of creating crunchy flat bread, chicken wings, oriental pot stickers, and even lettuce on the bottom of the rice pot. These techniques also enable new texture and flavour combinations not always possible with traditional methods. For examples, a chicken wing tahdig provides two distinct texture and flavour combinations. One side is golden brown, crispy, with salty and buttery flavours (salted butter having been used on the bottom of the pot) while the other side is soft, moist, and capturing the flavours present in the rice.

Matters of Technology

Good tahdig making can be time consuming – as much as 90 minutes to two hours of total cooking. It also requires a lot of practice – good tahdig making has traditionally been a measure of an experienced Persian home cook. There are specialized electric Persian rice cookers specifically designed to form basic tahdig along with fluffy Persian rice (Figure 10). These specialized rice cookers can produce good simple tahdig within one hour with very little active cooking time (Figure 11).

Tahdig is often ‘fought over’ by family members and guests during meals because the traditional process does not produce very much of it. Moreover, even under situations where there might be enough tahdig for one meal – for example, where there is only two or three diners at the table – there will be lots of leftover, fluffy, rice. Under best circumstances, a 20-centimeter-wide pot can generate at most a 20-centimeter disk of tahdig from three to four cups of dry rice. In other words, the tahdig to rice ratio is relatively small. Another advantage of the specialized Persian rice cookers is that they can drastically increase the tahdig to rice ratio. For example, the author is able to generate a 17-centimeter-wide disk of good tahdig while using only three quarters of a cup of dry rice (Figure 12).

Matters of Innovation

By controlling the levels of moisture, oil, heat, and cooking time more precisely in the tahdig making process, Persian cooks are able to generate somewhat pliable layers of crunchy rice as a substitute for bread. These less brittle forms of tahdig can then be used to make a range of sandwich-like dishes such as rolls and warps (Figure 13), taco-looking dishes filled with hot or cold fillings



FIGURE 10. Persian rice cooker that generates good tahdig.



FIGURE 11. Rice and tahdig from a Persian rice cooker.



FIGURE 12. ‘Maximum Tahdig.’



FIGURE 13. Tahdig used instead of bread to make a wrap-type sandwich.



FIGURE 14. Tahdig used instead of tortilla to make a taco-like dish.



FIGURE 15. Tahdig used instead of a bun to make a hamburger.

The above sampling of imaginative ways in which contemporary Persian cooks have taken traditional tahdig above and beyond its original form, shape, or purpose are relatively new – relative to how long tahdig has been part of Persian cookery landscape. There is, however, another imaginative way that Persian cooks have used tahdig, that has been around for a long time – long enough that it is almost a forgotten practice.

(Figure 14), and hamburger-like dishes (Figure 15). Such innovative creations not only serve those with dietary restrictions or personal preferences who want to reduce or eliminate bread from their diet, but also those seek additional ways to satisfy their craving for tahdig.

Matters of Artistry

Persian cooks have been known for elaborate and fanciful ways of decorating their dishes, particularly for special guests and occasions. More recently, the tahdig making process provides yet another opportunity for Persian cooks to demonstrate their skills in creating edible art. A relatively simple set of examples of such tahdig art are shown below. They range from mimicking paintings (Figures 16 and 17), to generating geometric patterns (Figures 18-20), to taking advantage of natural patterns in plants and vegetables (Figures 21-24), to surprising one's valentine (Figure 25). Some of this tahdig art go above and beyond of just being artistic creations. For example, to the lovers of the popular board game *Settlers of Catan*, Figure 19 is the depiction of the Island of *Katan*, and the one shown in Figure 24 can be used by adults as a fun and attention-grabbing tool to teach young children to identify leaves of herbs. Interested readers can see much more sophisticated tahdig artistry by searching the Internet, or the Instagram platform, with keywords 'tahdig art.'

Matters of Kindness



FIGURE 16. Tahdig art mimicking a landscape painting.



FIGURE 19. Tahdig art creating a hexagonal geometric pattern.



FIGURE 22. Tahdig art taking advantage of natural patterns in cabbage leaves.



FIGURE 17. Tahdig art mimicking a flower painting.



FIGURE 20. Tahdig art creating a circular geometric pattern using bucatini noodles.



FIGURE 23. Tahdig art taking advantage of natural patterns of parsley leaves.



FIGURE 18. Tahdig art creating a geometric lattice pattern.



FIGURE 21. Tahdig art taking advantage of natural patterns of fennel bulbs.



FIGURE 24. Tahdig art taking advantage of natural patterns in the leaves of different popular herbs.

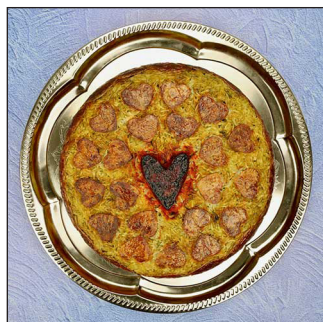


FIGURE 25. A Valentine's Day tahdig art.



FIGURE 26. Special tahdig crumbs treats.

Back when there were no nonstick cooking vessels, tahdig had to be scraped out of the bottom of the pot in small or large pieces. This process always created a small amount of leftover individual tahdig crumbs (individual crunchy rice kernels) at the bottom of the pot. Some home cooks, including my maternal grandmother, would throw a fistful of cooked rice onto the bottom of the pot to capture both the tahdig crumbs and the naturally remaining butter from the bottom of the pot. The cook would then put a few tablespoonsful of the mixture in the palm of one hand, close their fist, and form an oblong-shaped delightful snack approximately 2 centimetres wide and 4 centimetres long. In Persian, the common name for this scarce creation is 'Changāli' [in Persian: چل‌آگنج, literal translation: something that was formed by closing fingers towards the palm of the hand forming a fist] (Figure 26). If there were any 'Changāli' made, the cook would come out of the kitchen to the table after the rest of the meal had already been served. The cook would then give these special treats to her or his 'special people' at the table (as there would only be at most two or three of them) such as the younger members of the family. A double sign of love and caring of the cook – for not letting anything go to waste and for sharing the treats with the most loved ones at the table.

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Closing

This paper has been a broad, but not exhaustive, look at various ways Persian cooks have utilized the foundational techniques involved in tahdig making process to imagine and create other innovative delights, enabling tahdig to serve as a canvas for culinary imagination, innovation, artistry, and more.

Photograph Credit

All photographs shown in this article depict dishes prepared and photographed in a typical modern western home kitchen by the author.

Notes

1. The Khwan Niamut: or, Nawab's domestic cookery, ed. by David E. Schoonover, (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1992), p. 27.
2. Habib Borjian, 'Nešāb-e Ṭabari revisited: A Māzandarāni glossary from the 19th century,' *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, Volume 63, Issue 1 (March 2020), pp. 36-62.

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