Dining with Darius

The Persian Kitchen and the Spread of Empire

By Rachel Laudan

In April prior to the Expo Milano 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry gathered the chefs who would represent America at the world fair. "You can make connections around the dinner table you can't around the conference table," he told them. In 2012, the State Department had formed a Diplomatic Culinary Partnership with the James Beard Foundation, proclaiming that chefs would "elevate the role of culinary engagement in America's formal and public diplomacy efforts."

Such nods to the kitchen seem quaint in light of history's deep association between cuisine and politics. From the earliest empires, a ruler had to eat and drink to maintain his personal prowess, gather his strength for battle, ensure his virility in bed, and outperform those who aspired to his throne, all the while making sure his enemies did not poison him. Cuisine, like monumental buildings and fine dress, demonstrated and reinforced a sovereign's power. During ages when transport was slow and expensive, dining on exotic luxuries showed off a leader's command of the resources of his domains. When cuisine was shared it bought loyalty from followers, and when withheld it humiliated and punished his enemies. Farm products were central to generating revenues, and once processed were used to pay bureaucrats, bodyguards, and warriors. When annual food shortages before the harvest were a regular reminder of the ever-present threat of famine and riot, it was the ruler's responsibility to make sure that the poor, particularly the urban poor, did not go short.

For more than two thousand years, from circa 550 BC to 1700 AD, Persian high cuisine was as important to the politics of Eurasian states as French gastronomy would become to international diplomacy in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its long reign began when Cyrus the Great led his charioteers down off the high plateau to the plains of Mesopotamia, conquered the rich

▷ Fresco of Shah Abbas I receiving Vali Muhammad Khan, Chehel Sotoun Palace, Isfahan, circa 1657. *Ninara/Wikicommons*

lowlands, named himself King of Kings, and established the largest empire yet seen, stretching from Turkey in the west to the borders of India in the east. Not the least of his prizes was the world's most sophisticated culinary tradition, the Babylonian, which stretched back another thousand years to the first written recipes recorded in 1750 BC. Cyrus adopted its cooks, its dishes, and the organization of its kitchens.

The organization of the imperial kitchen, one of the most important government departments, was to remain remarkably stable over the centuries. Into it was checked and recorded much of the ruler's revenue, whether as tribute, taxes, or the products of his own farms, orchards, game parks, and fisheries. Tribute bearers from around the empire, depicted on the ceremonial staircase that Cyrus's successor Darius I had constructed at the palace of Persepolis, brought grains, oil seeds, fruits and vegetables, and domesticated animals along with showier gold, silver, wild animals, and beautiful slaves. In the elaborate series of kitchens in the palace, and in satellite operations such as bakeries, fisheries, and game reserves, perhaps thousands of workers labored to process and cook these foodstuffs. The head cook, or executive chef, as he would now be called, was responsible for logging the offerings into storage and then out to the kitchens, for organizing the staff, and for getting the multiple meals of the palace served to the appropriate groups. He worked with the steward, one of the ruler's right-hand men, who was responsible for protocol and administration of the palace. Somewhat less senior but also crucial was the royal physician, who with his staff prepared strengthening foods before battle or if the king seemed ill, and monitored the ruler's health, checking his digestion, urine, and excrement to see that foods passed properly. Finally, royal gardeners, huntsmen, and others delivered delicacies such as dates, pomegranates, and game.

The imperial kitchens added value to grains and carcasses, turning them from useless, bulky objects to fine white bread, delicious oils, or aromatic roasted meats, by slaughtering and butchering, threshing and grinding, boiling and crushing, and multiple other difficult, laborious operations. Processed foods were handed out as rations, payment in kind, to the ruler's bodyguards and bureaucrats, and to all artisans, women, soothsayers, entertainers, and of course the cooks, who kept the imperial machine humming. A bronze pillar was inscribed with the rations for Cyrus's meals, reported the Macedonian writer Polyaenus. These included different grades of wheat and barley flour; carcasses of oxen, horses, rams, geese, and birds; milk both fresh and fermented; seasonings and condiments such as garlic and onions, apple and pomegranate juice, cumin, dill, turnip pickles and capers; cooking fats including ghee, sesame, and almond oils; wine of both dates and grapes; "cakes" of dried fruits and nuts bound with a resin; and firewood for preparing meals. Far too much food for any single person, even a King of Kings, these lists bear witness to the way palace provisions were distributed.

Nothing established the ruler's position within his own court and with foreign dignitaries more than the great feast. Whole carcasses were roasted, an extravagance in a land where fuel was scarce. Sauces, time consuming to prepare, accompanied the meat. Confections were created from sesame oil, honey, barley meal, and fresh mild cheese. Guests went home with leftovers and the elaborate silver and gold drinking horns from which they had quaffed their wine. A fine gift induced loyalty in humans, "just as it does in dogs," sniffed Xenophon, the Greek historian who served in the Persian army. The Greeks might sniff, but a hierarchy of benevolence was the working assumption of most of the ancient world.

Power to Feed

With food and cooking so important, it's not surprising that the universe was thought to be a giant kitchen in which fire and water were the chief agents of change just as they were in the sculleries and bakeries of the palace. The sun beamed down fire (thought to be a real living thing that danced and died if it were not fed), the moon water. Fire and water were the driving agents of a world made up of a hierarchy of living things, each with their own way of dining. Minerals, then believed to be alive, needed little more than water. Plants thrived on water and earth, cooked by the sun until they flowered and seeded. Animals ate raw meat or vegetables, alone and standing. Nomads who (at least by reputation) ate raw meat but no grains, were considered little better than animals; civilized humans ate meat and grains only if they had been further cooked in the fire, and they ate them reclining, sitting, or kneeling with their fellows. The poor among them ate the less prestigious grains, the darkest bread, and rarely saw meat. The privileged, perhaps 10 percent of the population, enjoyed high cuisines that included fine white bread, meat, sauces, and sweets. At the pinnacle of the hierarchy was the monarch, who ate the most refined foods, dining alone since he had no equal. He was the pivot of the cosmos, poised between the natural and the supernatural, the gods who supped on ethereal aromas and smoke. The more cooked the food, the more refined, the more concentrated, and the more powerful it was.

A chain of culinary benevolence (or bribery) bound together gods and humans, rulers and subjects. The gods had given food to humans, especially the grains and the domesticated animals, it was believed. In return, the king offered sacrifices of grains and animals to the gods to guarantee fertile women, good crops, and success in war. The king thus ensured the peoples' well-being, receiving in return grains and animals in tribute from his subjects. As historian Amy Singer puts it, it was the power to feed that fed power.

And so Persian cuisine, a cuisine that satisfied these multiple political needs, was refined during a thousand years and more of successive Persian empires, the Seleucid, the Parthian, and the Sassanid. Other empires that bordered on the sequence of

Persian empires copied what they could. The Greeks, for example—although suspicious of imperial extravagance—adopted Persian sauces, Persian wine cups, and Persian dining benches, while Alexander the Great took cooks as part of the spoils of war. Drawing on these intermediaries, the cuisine of imperial Persia found echoes in the cuisine of imperial Rome.

In 762, the second caliph of the Abbasid Dynasty founded Baghdad. He modified the Persian culinary tradition to fit the gradually emerging Islamic culinary strictures, as Cyrus had co-opted the cuisine of Babylon a thousand years earlier. By the end of the century, Harun Al-Rashid, best known today from the *Thousand and One Nights* (although the stories about him are probably fictitious), took it to new heights. For the caliph and his court, the cooks prepared chicken, tender young goat, and lamb in sauces rich with almonds and pistachios, spices, vinegar, and green herbs. They seized on newly available sugar to create pastries and confectionary that went beyond the halvas and brittles prepared with honey. For the people, agricultural reforms and new ways of food processing improved the diet.

Once again, surrounding states emulated this powerful cuisine. It was recreated in Indian sultanates and central Asian states and across northern Africa. Elements crept into the newly prosperous princedoms and kingdoms of Europe. A version was found in Al-Andalus; because Christian conquistadors set their sights on the Americas, traces are found across Latin America.

In 1330, the court physician Hu Szu-Hui presented the Mongol emperor of China with a cookbook-cum-dietary manual and food inventory called the *Proper and Essential Things for the Emperor's Food and Drink*. As he explained in the introduction, "There is none, near or far, who does not come to court and offer tribute. Rare dainties and exotic things are all collected in the imperial treasury." That meant that the Mongols, although best known in the public imagination as fierce warriors who pierced their horses' necks and sucked on the blood for sustenance, followed centuries of precedent and co-opted Persian cuisine for the court. They had begun their conquests in the 1220s and by mid-century controlled northern China, Persia, Russia, Baghdad, and by 1280 southern China as well.

In the Chinese capital Khanbalik, near present-day Beijing, Kublai Khan asked Chinese advisors to devise a cuisine that would display the Mongol court as powerful and cosmopolitan as befitted emperors who portrayed themselves as heirs to the world's great empires, calling themselves King of Kings like the Persians, Son of Heaven like the Chinese, Caesar like the Romans, and Great King like the Indians. Captives from Persian lands were instructed to set up flourmills and oil presses, grow grapes and make wine. In the kitchens, traditional Mongol meat soups were prepared with Persian (or with Chinese) thickeners, vegetables, and spices as part of imperial culinary policy.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a trio of Islamic empires, the Safavid, the Ottoman, and the Mughal, which stretched from the Mediterranean to much of India, continued the Persian tradition, with delicate rice pilaus now added to the cuisine. In Isfahan, Shah Abbas I served envoys such as Vali Muhammad Khan of Bukhara. In Istanbul, the Topkapi kitchens of Suleiman the Magnificent had earlier prepared meals for the ruler and his janissaries, as well as elaborate festivities in which sugar sculptures were paraded to the delight of his subjects. And to the east, on the terrace of the fort of Agra, Shah Jahan, the Mughal emperor who built the Taj Mahal and ruled one-seventh of the world's population, gave white banquets by the light of the moon, his retinue dressed in white kneeling on white carpets. Prepared by cooks brought from different parts of the Islamic World to work in the kitchens in Delhi or in the sixteen large kitchen tents that were part of the emperor's train, they featured chicken breasts in a sauce of almonds and creamy yogurt and pilau rice rich with butter and white raisins. They were served on dishes of gold, silver, and Ming porcelain, while the shah drank wine from an auspicious milky white Chinese jade cup, perfectly sized to fit in his palm, and believed to turn color if the drink were poisoned. The Savafid, Ottoman, and Mughal courts received European envoys who reported on the magnificence of the cuisine.

European diplomacy, though, was headed in a different direction. High French cuisine had been created in response to the scientific, political, and religious changes of the mid-seventeenth century as part of the court ceremonial of Versailles. Adopted by the aristocratic diplomatic class, it became first the cuisine of European diplomacy, then over the course of the nineteenth century, the cuisine of world diplomacy. To participate, Asian courts added second, French kitchens. Those of republican persuasion—first the Dutch, then the young American republic, drawing on traditions that went back to republican Rome and democratic Greece—were opposed to such monarchical displays. They embarked on a reform of culinary politics, maintaining the commitment to provide decent diets for their citizens, but distancing diplomacy from the deeply entrenched model of extravagant dining. Although American state dinners have most frequently been French, they have always been modest by historical standards. And the Barack Obama administration's Diplomatic Culinary Partnership continues the move from historical precedent by choosing, for diplomacy, the culinary traditions of the United States.