Gilân (Northern Iran) Cuisine Specificity

La spécificité de la cuisine du Gilân (Iran septentrional)

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Abstract: In Iran, the northern province of Gilân displays a strong specificity, including the registers of food and cooking. The regional culinary style is characterised by five traits: the base is rice, with a predilection for green, acid, eggs and fish. Cooking methods are also original in the Iranian world: Gilân's culinary culture is not about ovens or dry cooking or roasting, but about browning, simmering and steaming.

Keywords: cooking specificity, food, Gilân

Résumé : En Iran, la province septentrionale du Gilân présente une forte spécificité, en particulier dans les domaines de l'alimentation et de la cuisine. Le style culinaire régional se caractérise par cinq traits : la base est le riz avec une prédilection, en accompagnement, pour le vert et l'acide, pour les œufs et pour le poisson. Les techniques de cuisson présentent aussi une certaine originalité dans le monde iranien : au grillé et à la cuisson sèche, on préfère le mijoté, le revenu.

Mots clés : spécificité culinaire, alimentation, Gilân

In the Iranian world, Gilân displays a strong specificity, including the registers of food and cooking.¹ In this rice-producing region, the consumption of rice is much higher than elsewhere in Iran (Figure 1). Among the eating habits of their neighbors, the inhabitants of Gilân stigmatise especially their predilection for bread, which they sometimes consider with amusement, sometimes

with compassion, sometimes also with repulsion. I heard some young people from Rasht, the capital of Gilân, calling the inhabitants of Tehran *dahân goshâd* (broad mouths) because, according to them, they keep chewing bread, displaying their large teeth. *Shokr ke nashodim Tork* (God be praised that we are not Turks!), also say Gilaks to stigmatise a diet based on bread. A few decades before, bread was almost unknown in the Caspian world and the inhabitants of the plateau were, according to the Gilânis, nothing but ‘poor eaters of barley bread’ for whom rice from Gilân was an enviable luxury. At the beginning of the twentieth century, one reports that the consumption of bread represented, for the countrymen of the Gilân plain, an object of threat when their wives or children were unworthy. ‘The Gilek, said an observer, does not eat bread but he regards it as a food that doesn’t suit his constitution and this to such a point that an angry man will say to his wife: “Go and eat some bread then die!”’ (Rabino and Lafont 1910: 140). Captain Conolly remarked, towards 1830, that Gilak parents, when they scolded one of their children, would threaten to send him to Irak (Arâq) where he would suffer the odious punishment of having to eat bread (quoted by *ibid.* 1910: 140).

Another feature contrasts traditional food regime in Gilân and in inner Iran: Gilânis are fond of beef, an original feature until the last decades that struck most observers, including Aleksander Borejko Chodźko, who served as the Russian consul in Rasht in the mid-nineteenth century: ‘Among all the regions of Persia, Gilân is the only one where beef is consumed and sold in the bazaars. As for the Persians living beyond the chain of the Caspian mountains, they abhor [beef]’ (Chodzko 1849: 203). They eat it as meatballs (*shami rashti*), or they eat the offal (heart, liver, kidneys) in a very popular dish, the *vavishkâ* (which can also be prepared from mutton or wildfowl); as for the intestines (*ruda*), seasoned and preserved in bottles, they constitute the only meat-base food of the poorest during the *gedâ-bâhâr* (the spring of the mendicant), the lean season that precedes harvests.

Garden vegetables and kitchen herbs (*sabzi*) generally appear in the makeup of most dishes and give the regional cuisine the green touch that is its hallmark. These preparations are usually associated with eggs, consumed in great quantities in a society where each rural family raises hens, ducks, geese and turkeys; as the saying goes, *Bâqâle qâtoq / bi morqâne / haft-tâ olâq / ti mehmân-e* (a broad bean stew without eggs, seven donkeys must be your guests!). Poultry and wildfowl, fish and olives are also sought-after items and contribute to the uniqueness of the local recipes. As elsewhere in Persia, cooking is a long and complex operation, since the constituent ingredients of most dishes often require individual preparation on their own. In addition, the regional style of cooking is characterised by generous helpings of fat and oil and by a preference for a sour (*torsh*) flavour: especially appreciated are condiments with a vinegar base and fruit juices made from unripe fruit, which are used to enhance the flavour of dishes. Finally, the regional culinary style is characterised by five traits: the base is rice, with a predilection for green, acid, eggs and fish. I would

Figure 1: Meal in Gilân. Rice, here *polo* for a reception, is accompanied with stews, including *fesenjân rashti*. Source: Christian Bromberger, Spring 2002.

like to emphasise these structural features. The most typical dishes of the region symbolise, each in its own way, a facet of this cooking style.

In Gilân rice is consumed daily as *kate*. It is a simple and quick recipe. Once cleaned and rinsed, rice is poured into a quantity of cold water one and a half to two times its volume, then heated to a boil until the water is thoroughly absorbed, and cooking ends with steaming (*dam*) on a low fire. The result of this cooking technique is a compact mass of grains stuck together, which is turned out of the mold, cut out with a knife and formed into little balls by hand before being consumed. At breakfast *kate* can be eaten cold (usually leftovers from the day before), accompanied by cheese, preserved garlic, onion, fish roe, uncooked broad beans soaked in water, nuts and olives, or eaten hot, swimming in sweetened milk, mixed with syrup of *arbâ* (*Diospyros lotus* L.) or simply served with jams. In the past 30 years, bread has gradually replaced rice, and breakfast is more and more similar to that consumed on the Iranian plateau. Lunch is the main meal: it includes the ever-present *kate*, served with stews, browned or salted fish, yogurt, onion and raw herbs (in the spring and summer).

The Gilânis particularly appreciate pickled garlic bulbs (*sir-e torshi*), candied for seven years if possible in vinegar, in which one enhances the acidity with barberries; eggplants cooked in vinegar, cored, stuffed with herbs and mint

Figure 2: Sale of pomegranate paste in Rasht bâzâr; on the right *haft-e bijâr*.
Source: Christian Bromberger, Spring 2005.

and preserved in jars in vinegar; and also more composite preparations, such as *torshimakhlut* (acid mixture) and the *haft-e bijâr* (seven ricefields), a mixture of thin eggplants with tops cut off, green peppers, green tomatoes, onion and crushed garlic, cabbage, turnip and so on, and a bunch of finely chopped herbs. The set is salted and preserved in vinegar, covered to a depth of one finger. Another popular and acidic accompaniment is *zeitun parvarde* (marinated olives), a mixture of pitted green olives, crushed kernels of walnuts and pomegranate juice, flavoured with garlic, mint, pennyroyal, and finally seasoned with oregano and pepper. This predilection for acid is again obvious when we consider the abundant use of green or sour juice to season: *âb limu* (lime juice), *âb-e nâranj* (acidic orange juice) and especially *âbqure* (green grape juice). In taverns, as in the most exclusive restaurants, one often sees guests hail the boy and ask him to bring green grape juice or condiments that have marinated in vinegar. These dishes are among those that Gilânis prefer, and they feel the lack of them and need for them as they move away from their region. A major sign of this predilection for acid is *fesenjân rashti*, prepared, as elsewhere in Iran, with walnuts, pomegranate paste and poultry, but its colour is darker than in other regions (Figure 2), testifying to its stronger sourness: the pomegranate paste is made from wild fruits; and you never add sugar during cooking, as in Tehran, a detail that makes Gilâni cooks angry. Let's

add to that one of the most emblematic dishes of regional identity, the *mirzâ Qâsemi*, based on a mixture of eggplant caviar and chopped garlic, browned beforehand with turmeric and tomato puree added during cooking.

This predilection for acidic food combines with a visual and aromatic predilection for potted herbs. Among about 50 ragouts in the regional cuisine, some are exclusively vegetable, as the *torshi tare* (sour 'leek' – *Allium porrum* L.) and the *khoresh shish andâz* (ragout with six products cast in the pot). The *kuku* (vegetable cakes) are also a homage to veganism: the *sabzi kuku* (with leaves of *tare* and parsley chopped) is the formula – not very expensive – most frequently prepared by cooks. The use of various varieties of mint testifies to the importance of green and to smells in the regional cuisine. To give the dishes their local aromatic touch, one employs *Mentha sylvestris*, *Mentha pulegium* L. and common mint (named with scorn *Khalkhâli nânâ*, 'mint of the Turks of Khalkhâl'). It is by mixing *Mentha sylvestris* and *Mentha pulegium* chopped with coriander and salt that one prepares the *delâr*, a paste called also *namak-e sabz* (green salt), which Gilânîs consume with cucumber slices, salad, plums (*âluche*), still unripe (Figure 3) and more. This spring food, acting as a purgative medicine, combines predilections for green and acid. Gilânîs are fond of acidic plums – to the point, a story tells, that they protect the plum trees from the attacks of the fox rather than the poultry house!

The two most famous dishes that go with rice are prepared with eggs, the *bâqâle qâtoq* and the *mirzâ Qâsemi* (popular etymology relates this to the creator of the dish, a certain Mirzâ Qâsem). The former is a stew made with short broad beans (*pâch-bâqâle*) cut in two, browned with chopped garlic, dill and turmeric, then simmered in a little water, to which eggs are added at the end of the cooking time. This dish connotes so much the regional identity that the hero and savior of the region in a famous folktale is nicknamed Bâqâle qâtoq. *Mirzâ Qâsemi* is prepared with the ingredients mentioned above. At the end of the process, one adds beaten eggs or eggs cooked in the oil used to brown the garlic. In this, as in other preparations, much attention is paid to the seasoning of the oil used for cooking, thus enhancing the flavour of the ingredients. Eggs are also present in *kukus*, the preparation of which is closely related to that of an omelet (a mixture of beaten eggs and other elements cooked together), but they are cooked like cakes (in a closed environment, in frying pans with lids covered with embers and more often today in ovens).

A favorite among scaled fish is the *mâhi sefid* (white fish), a variety of goat-fish (*Rutilus frisii kutum*). In everyday life, fish is simply browned in oil. For receptions and special occasions, more elaborate recipes are used, such as *fefich* or *febij* and *malate*. *Fefich* is fish gutted and stuffed with crushed walnut halves, pomegranate paste, herbs, various spices, and possibly the washed fish eggs. Once stuffed, the fish is sewn up and cooked in the *gamaj* (bowl), placed on two pieces of tile or wood to keep it from sticking. *Malate* is a fish prepared on the grill or in the oven after being gutted and coated with pomegranate paste or seasoned with sumac (*somâq*). In everyday life, the less expensive

Figure 3: Sale of *âluche*, Rasht bâzâr. Source: Christian Bromberger, Spring 2005.

varieties of carp (*kapur*), bream (*sim*) and *kuli*, a small clupeid, are served with rice in less affluent households. All the soft parts of the fish are consumed: in addition to the flesh, this includes the fish roe, eaten raw or prepared as a cake with herbs (this dish is called *ashbol kuku*); the intestines, which are browned and specially liked for their sweet taste; and the heads, whose contents are sucked or which are prepared in stews with herbs (a recipe called *mâhi kalle qâtoq*, ‘fish head stew’, or *taboryân*). Fish heads are also used in bouillons (*mâhi kalle âb*, ‘fish head broth’), after being browned in oil with a mixture of garlic and turmeric. This taste for fish heads has earned Gilaks the disparaging nickname of *kalle mâhi khor* (eaters of fish heads).

These are the main characteristics of Gilâni cuisine. I shall add some characteristics of cooking methods. Gilân’s culinary culture is not about ovens or dry cooking or roasting, but about browning, simmering, and steaming. Among cooking methods, browning (*vavish*, *vabij*, *vavij*) is a favorite, and the word appears frequently in the names of utensils and prepared dishes. *Kulevich* applies to the frying pan, *sirabij* is a dish made with garlic stems browned with eggs, and *vavishkâ* is a popular dish pompously referred to as *hasrat-al-moluk* (the envy of monarchs). Simmering in water is also a widespread culinary method for soups (*âsh*) as well as rice, meat and poultry (e.g. *torsh-e morq*, ‘sour chicken’), and most preparations include both these cooking methods. Steaming is used to complete rice preparation, a method also used in a closed and dry environment for vegetable cakes (*kuku*) browned in oil beforehand.

When we recall these characteristics and the diversity of recipes in Gilân, we understand why UNESCO has awarded Rasht, the province capital, for its culinary culture.

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Note

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1. On Gilân cooking, one can also refer to Bromberger (2013).

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