Iranian Women's Food Writing in Diaspora

Ce qu'écrivent les femmes de la diaspora iranienne sur la nourriture

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Abstract: In light of the recent surge of Iranians' autobiographies and fictions in the West, this article will examine 'food writing' as an emerging genre of diasporic narrative dominated by Iranian women. It will explore the multiple avenues through which these cookbooks/food memoirs seek not only to make accessible the highly sophisticated Persian culinary tradition but also to ameliorate the image of Iran. Such attempts are partly in response to the challenges of exilic life, namely, the stereotypical portrayal of Iranians in the Western media. Three books with strong memoir components will be further discussed in order to demonstrate how the experiences of the 1979 revolution, displacement, and nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Iran are interwoven with the presentation of Iranian food and home cooking abroad.

Keywords: diaspora, food writing, Iranian women, narrative, nostalgia, revolution

Résumé : À la lumière de la vague récente d'autobiographies et de fictions d'Iraniens dans l'ouest cet article examinera "l'écriture culinaire" en tant que genre émergent de récit diasporique dominé par les femmes iraniennes. Il explorera les multiples voies par lesquelles ces livres de cuisine / mémoires culinaires cherchent non seulement à rendre accessible la tradition culinaire persane très sophistiquée, mais aussi à améliorer l'image de l'Iran. Une telle tentative est une réponse aux défis de la vie en exil, à savoir la représentation stéréotypée des Iraniens dans les médias occidentaux. Trois livres avec de fortes composantes de mémoire seront discutés plus en détail afin de démontrer comment les expériences de la révolution de 1979, le déplacement et la nostalgie de l'Iran pré-révolutionnaire sont entrelacés avec la présentation de la cuisine iranienne et de la cuisine maison à l'étranger.

Mots-clés : diaspora, écriture culinaire, femmes iraniennes, récit, nostalgie, révolution

Introduction: Explosion of Iranian Diasporic Writing since the 1990s

Starting in the early 1990s, over a decade after the 1979 Iranian revolution, the literature produced by the Iranian diaspora (mostly in North America and Western Europe) began to extend beyond academic analysis to include a broad range of fiction and nonfiction. Notably, there has been an outpouring of autobiographical writing by Iranian women published outside Iran in English¹ (Goldin 2004; Hillmann 2016; Naghibi 2009, 2016). Similarly, fiction writing, again dominated by women, burgeoned in this period (Amirrezvani and Karim 2013; Karim 2006; Sullivan 2001).

The writers have been inspired to tell their stories as a response to the negative realities and portrayal of Iran in the wake of the Islamic revolution, and they often strive to construct a positive individual and collective identity vis-à-vis the host country, thereby influencing the perception of the mainstream (Wagenknecht 2015). Moreover, both fiction and nonfiction writers reveal the complexities and diversities of their experiences in a broad spectrum of areas, including revolution, war, migration, exile, longing, belonging, and split identities and cultural differences (Amirrezvani and Karim 2013; Karim 2006; Wagenknecht 2015). And finally, as Nima Naghibi has demonstrated, Iranian women's autobiographies in particular are framed within revolutionary trauma. In other words, a deeply emotional and nostalgic account of longing for a lost homeland and childhood as a consequence of the 1979 revolution lies at the heart of these women's life stories (Naghibi 2009, 2016).

A boom in autobiography by diasporic Iranian women, in particular, has been attributed to a complex web of factors. Many have argued that, as initially noted by Farzaneh Milani (1992) and Afsaneh Najmabadi (1990), first-person narrative was historically and culturally discouraged in Iran as an immodest disclosure of the private; however, finding themselves in a new literary landscape in the United States and Europe, Iranian women resorted to self-narration to reshape themselves not only vis-à-vis newly established Islamic values that subjugated women but also against the Western fixation on veiled women (Karim 2006; Naghibi 2009). Autobiography then became a vehicle through which Iranian women grappled with their past experiences, countered the negative portrayal of Middle Eastern women and negotiated their hyphenated identities in a non-Iranian context (Wagenknecht 2015).

As pointed out by Maria D. Wagenknecht, while the above factors play a part in the surge of the Iranian American self-narratives, the audience-publisher dynamic should also be considered for the overwhelming presence

of Iranian American autobiographies in general and for the dominance of Iranian women's voices in particular. According to her, ethnic autobiographies are popular because they seem to fulfil Western voyeurism and 'lift a perceived "veil" of an otherwise hidden and little-understood society and its even more-hidden female lives' (Wagenknecht 2015: 14–15).

In what follows, I will use the above-noted frameworks to dig into a newly emerged genre of writing by Iranian women outside Iran that has received little to no attention within academic studies: Iranian women's food writing.

The Emergence of Iranian Diasporic Women's Food Writing

Since 2011, we have witnessed the rise in popularity of yet another category of writing by Iranian women, residing mainly in the US and Europe, which in its broadest sense could be referred to as 'food writing'. This genre includes food blogs, food columns and articles in high-profile periodicals, television shows, as well as published cookbooks and food memoirs. For the purpose of this article, I will be including quotes and references from nine books in this category to discuss the multiple avenues through which, consistent with Iranian memoirs and fictions, these narratives seek to project a positive image of Iran, and how this projection is in part a reaction to the negative portrayal of Iran and Iranians in the West. In the second half of the article, I will further focus on three of these books that have a strong memoir component. I will demonstrate how in these accounts, like in many Iranian diasporic autobiographies discussed by Naghibi (2009, 2016), the experiences of the 1979 revolution, displacement, exile, and particularly nostalgic sentiments for Iran are interwoven with the presentation of Iranian food and culture.

First of all, a note on the usage of the terms 'food memoir', 'cookbooks', 'food writing' and 'food narratives' in this article. In its conventional sense, 'food memoir' refers to self-reflexive writing that follows a clear story line, often that of a coming of age and life's hallmarks remembered through food events. It articulates the significance of food preparation and consumption as they relate to personal, social and cultural aspects of the author's life and are accompanied by recipes – often of the foods that have direct bearing to the story. Unlike food memoirs, 'cookbooks' do not have a story line as their backbone; nonetheless, they are rarely merely a collection of recipes. Cookbooks, too, are culturally situated and communicate historical information and personal relations. Finally, cookbooks often contain capturing illustrations of foods and landscapes and as such are beautiful, almost collectable, objects in their own right.

As demonstrated below, the illustrated cookbooks by many Iranian women published in the US and United Kingdom are heavy with scattered short stories about childhood, homeland, belonging, departure, and settlement in new countries—all filtered through food recipes and cooking. Therefore, I have chosen to use, in most cases, the broader term 'food writing' to refer to a wide range of

such books. I will use the two terms ‘food writing’ and ‘food narratives’ interchangeably. More generally, while the top cookbooks and food memoirs are still written by white male and female authors, the rise in voices of women of colour both in cookbooks and food memoirs is evident (Tandoh 2017).

From the 1980s – when the major populations of Iranian émigrés started to form in Western countries – to 2011, the landscape of Iranian food literature would have been almost blank were it not for two shining stars in Europe and the US. In Ireland, Marsha Mehran wrote two culinary fiction books, *Pomegranate Soup* (2006), an international best seller, and *Rosewater and Soda Bread* (2008). In these books, Mehran delightfully describes the culinary adventures of three young and beautiful Iranian sisters in a remote village in Ireland and how they gradually charmed locals through the exotic Persian foods they prepared out of their aromatic cozy little home restaurant. Both books contain recipes. In the US, where the majority of Iranian expatriates live, until recently Najmieh Batmanglij was the only audible voice in the field. Having published eight cookbooks since 1986, she has been referred to as ‘the goddess of Iranian cooking’ (Ottolenghi 2013) and the ‘grand dame of the Iranian cooking’ (Sen 2018).

Until recently, then, the food of Iran has been relatively unknown in North America and Europe, except perhaps for a few foods such as rice and kebab. In the past decade, however, there has been a growing interest in Persian home cooking and its culinary traditions. Such interest is triggered by and reflected in a growing body of online and print food writing, including feature articles by reputable chefs and food writers in the mainstream media,² Persian food blogs³ and, more significantly, the emergence of a new generation of Persian cookbooks, travelogues and food memoirs. Since 2011, at least 13 Persian food narratives authored by Iranian women have been published in the US and UK, two of which have been best sellers.⁴ In the second half of 2018 alone, four cookbooks were published, three of which received considerable amount of media coverage and awards.⁵

Out of the 13 books listed above, I have selected nine for a closer examination of their shared characteristics with other genres of writing produced by Iranian women outside Iran: *Food of Life* (2011) by Najmieh Batmanglij; *Maman's Homesick Pie* (2011) by Donia Bijan; *Pomegranates and Roses* (2012) by Ariana Bundy; *From a Persian Kitchen* (2014) by Jila Dana-Haeri; *Bottom of the Pot* (2018) by Naz Deravian; *The Enchantingly Easy Persian Cookbook* (2016) by Shadi HasanzadeNemati; *The Saffron Tales* (2016) by Yasmin Khan; *From a Persian Kitchen* (2018) by Atosa Sepehr; and *The New Persian Cooking* (2013) by Louisa Shafia.

These books are authored by women of diverse backgrounds and experiences – from chefs and recipe developers to home cooks, established or debut authors, authentic or creative cooks, with mixed ethnic and racial backgrounds. All nine books will be used as references to briefly introduce the manners in which the perceived Iranian characteristics are represented

through its foods, recipes and the history behind them. Three of these books will be the subject of further focus to demonstrate their thematic connection to the trauma of revolution, the experiences of displacement and the sense of nostalgia for homeland.

Food Writing as a Means to Educate the Public

All the books forming the focus of this article share two important elements. First, their intended audience is primarily American and English-speaking European, or the host country in which the book is published. Second, the intent of these books, beyond and indeed through introducing a sophisticated and vibrant culinary tradition, is to enlighten and educate the public about Iranian culture and traditions and to offer a positive image of Iran otherwise obscured by the mainstream Western media. This is done through providing a cultural guide highlighting Iranian rich history, its cultural, linguistic, climatic, and culinary diversity, and emphasizing its pre-Islamic traditions, thereby distancing themselves from the Islamic state.

As argued by several researchers of Iranian diasporic writing, the deteriorating relations between Iran and the US since 1979, the stereotypical media coverage of women in black chador and bearded angry men shouting against America, the post-9/11 labelling of Iran as an 'axis of evil' and the debates over Iran's nuclear enrichment program and its poor human rights record have negatively impacted Iranian exiles. They have further argued that Iranian American fiction and autobiographic writing have tried to influence the perception and definition of the mainstream, to free themselves from the shadow of the hostage crisis, the Persian Gulf War and so forth, and to offer a positive public identity by representing diversity and multiplicity of voices (Karim 2006; Wagenknecht 2015). In fact, Naghibi discusses the social and political waves that led to the surge of Iranian women's narratives, identifying the 1979 revolution, the events of 9/11 and the 2009 presidential election as landmarks that inspired both the narrators to tell their stories and the readers to pick up these books (Fotouhi 2015; Naghibi 2016).

Iranian food writers are no exception in their attempts to counter the negative portrayal of Iran and the hostile policies towards Iranians further intensified since 2017 under the Trump administration. The newly emerged rise in popularity of Persian food writing therefore is partly associated with the of rise of food appeal in general (Rappaport 2016). More significantly, such a surge is a reaction to the social and political upheavals leading to the experiences of displacement and exile, particularly in response to the hostile policies and the stereotypical depiction of Iran and Iranians in the mainstream media.

Iranian foods and recipes as well as the histories and stories behind them become a medium through which Iranian culture and characteristics are projected. Not knowing the true face of culture, Shafia believes, is at the root of

divisive policies such as immigration bans: 'A feast of saffron, pistachios, and pomegranates can explain more about the Iranian character than any news story and can serve to bridge the gap between our two cultures' (Shafia 2013: 8).

The following themes are picked up by the majority of the food writers to provide a background to Iranian culture for the Western audience.

Iran's rich history. Persian cuisine is perceived and described as perhaps the most sophisticated and diverse in the world, partly because of its exposure to various cultures and its ability to adopt foreign foodways when diversifying and enriching its own. Iran was located on the Silk Road trade route that connected China to the Mediterranean Sea. As a result, the native cuisine of ancient Iran was influenced by the cultures that passed through it, bringing along not only their silk but also spices, citrus fruits and rice (HasanzadeNemati 2016; Sepehr 2018). Furthermore, in the span of three thousand years, the Persian Empire extended at times from Egypt to India and from Greece to China. The empire was also subjected to invasions by Moghuls and Arabs. Persian culture and cuisine – including tastes, ingredients and cooking techniques – therefore both influenced other nations and was impacted by other world cultures. For example, tomatoes, now the basis of many Iranian salads, side dishes and stews, reached Iran by the way of the Ottoman Empire following the Spanish conquest of the Americas and was gradually, and hesitantly, adopted by the natives. On the other hand, *nan* (bread) and *polo* (rice) was imported to India by the Zoroastrians who fled the Arabs' invasion of Iran and sought refuge in India in the mid-700s (Shafia 2013: 5).

Iran's variable climate and geography. The diversity in Persian cuisine is attributed not only to its ancient history but also to its dramatic climate and geography (Shafia 2013; Dana-Haeri 2014; Khan 2016). From the hot-summer Mediterranean climate of the green and mountainous north to the cold and hot desert climates in central and southern Iran, the striking climate differences has led to the development of varied tastes, flavours, food items and cooking methods. For example, the cuisine of the north of Iran is predominantly rich in herbs, and offers sweet and sour tastes. It commonly uses dried and fresh fruits and nuts in stews and mixed rice dishes, and the herbs mostly used are mint, tarragon and parsley. The cuisine of Iran's south, on the other hand, is influenced by aromatic and hot spices from India; sauces are often rich in tamarind juice and curry spice, and the dominant herbs used in dishes are cilantro and fenugreek (Dana-Haeri 2014). On the more specific food items, Khan notes that 'meatballs stuffed with prunes and walnuts might feature in the Turkish-influenced north-east of the country. Garlicky eggplant dips might appear by the Caspian Sea. Sweet rice dishes, layered with fruit and nuts, abound in central Iran; with perhaps some spicy fried squid in the south' (Khan 2016: 13–14).

National commonalities. Despite the vast diversity of dishes and methods, certain practices and values are considered universal, namely, preparing food in abundance and sharing it with others. 'It is ingrained in our DNA', Deravian

writes, 'to be prepared to feed anyone who might walk through the door' (2018: 20). And Khan maintains that 'an Iranian would never simply reach into the fruit bowl and take a bite of an apple; instead, they would cut the apple into slices and offer it around the whole group, even if that meant there was only one slice left for them at the end' (Khan 2016: 15). As with commonality in types of dishes, all regions cook *aash* (thick soup), *khoresht* (stew) and rice, accompanied by yogurt and sweets. And in all regions, 'the combination of herbs and spices with main ingredients creates multiple layers of taste and aroma, delicately balanced so that none is dominant over others and allowing flavors and textures to complement one another' (Dana-Haeri 2014: 11). Persian food in general is described as informal, unpretentious, instinct-driven, healthy, wholesome, varied, balanced in nutrition, fresh, medieval and exotic yet accessible, and adjustable to different diets and restrictions.

Pre-Islamic culture. The new generation of Iranian food writing predominantly identifies with a pre-Arabic and pre-Islamic past (as noted by Waghenknecht [2015] in her study of Iranian American self-narratives). It is believed that Zoroastrian teaching and traditions have had a lasting impact on Iranians' diet, lifestyle and indeed worldview. Therefore, the Zoroastrian legacy and seasonal festivities, especially the Persian New Year, *Noruz* on the spring equinox and the *Chahrshanbeh soori* celebrated right before then, as well as the winter solstice, *Yalda*, are often presented as cherished cultural festivals relating to food symbolism and explained through the filter of fondly remembered childhood memories.

Traditional medicine. The notions of hot-cold balance in foods and temperaments, rooted in the traditional medicine of ancient Persians, is often reflected on as the basis of Iranians' healthy diet. 'For us, food is also classified as "hot" (*garmi*), which "thickens" the blood and speeds the metabolism, and "cold" (*sardi*), which "dilutes" the blood and slows the metabolism. Dates and grapes, for instance, are "hot" fruits; plums, peaches, and oranges are "cold". . . . [People] with "hot" natures must eat "cold" foods to achieve a balance' (Batmanglij 2011:12). Not all authors concur on the significance of the hot-cold notion for modern Iranians. For example, Bundy allocates a good few pages to trace its origins to *Unani* (Greeks) and claims 'it is something that everyone in Iran understands instantly and practices in their everyday cooking and eating' (2012: 16). Dana-Haeri (2014), a doctor herself, however, dismisses the notion of hot-cold altogether, and attributes the 'balance' in Iranians' diet to the diversity of dishes Iranians consume: appetizers and accompaniments balance the diet; herbs provide vitamins and antioxidants and boost the immune system on a daily basis; yogurt provides probiotics.

Romanticism and exoticism. Reference to Persian customs, identity and especially foods and ingredients in an exotic, sensual and poetic light is very much present not only in the 'packaging' of these books (i.e. cover, titles, blurbs, etc.) but also in the descriptions provided by some of the authors. Deravian, for example, writes that '[Persian food tastes] fragrant, flavorful,

fresh, elegant, cozy, unfussy like a love poem' (2018: 10). Similarly, Shafia compares discovering Persian ingredients to 'lifting the lid off of a treasure box: the dazzling sight of pink rose petals and green cardamom is surpassed only by the heady scent and delicate flavor of red saffron and golden turmeric' (2013: 9). She describes saffron as 'almost certainly the world's sexiest spice' (ibid.: 14), and the roses used in Persian cuisine as being originally described by Sufism as 'the Mother of the Scents and the Queen of the Garden' (ibid.: 13). In the process of explaining one's background and culture and depicting a pleasurable food culture, Iranian food writers sometimes tend to self-exoticize (Wagenknecht 2015). Analysing this tendency within its appropriate theoretical framework is beyond the scope of this article, yet it is important to acknowledge its prevalence in Iranian women's food-related accounts written in English outside Iran.

Backed by 2,500 years of refinement and evolution, Iranian cuisine is presented as one of the most sophisticated culinary traditions, worthy of the world's recognition. The striking regional linguistic, cultural and culinary differences are not only explained in these narratives but represented through providing a wide range of food recipes from almost all corners of this vast country. Food symbolism in Persian festivities, originating in the pre-Islamic era, is central in many of these books, and food-related Islamic traditions are limited to *eftaar*, the evening meal Muslims take during Ramadan, and *nazri*, or vow dish, on a few occasions. The colourful and pleasant depiction of Persian foods is certainly intensified by the accompanying food pictures in most cases and is intended to represent Iranian history and its refined character and ways of living.

Revolution, Displacement and Nostalgia in Food Writing

The Iranian diasporic food narratives are written from the perspectives of those who were born and raised in Iran and left the country in the wake of the 1979 Islamic revolution and the hostage crisis at a young age, or those who have a more distant connection to their Iranian heritage and/or represent a 'post memory' – a memory passed on to them through the force of their parents' nostalgia (Naghibi 2009: 87; 2016: 130). As such, childhood memories and the pre-revolutionary era, challenges of displacement and resettlement, and nostalgia for a lost or missed homeland is intertwined with the presentation of Iranian food for many of these authors. Focusing on three food narratives, I will demonstrate how, like autobiographies produced in large numbers by Iranians abroad since the late 1990s, different forms of food memoirs revolve around the experiences of the revolution, immigration and nostalgia caused by it.

Maman's Homesick Pie by Donia Bijan is the only book in my collection fitting the classic definition of food memoir – a number of recipes following a

story line and nonillustrated. It is also a good example of what Naghibi refers to as 'post memory', a memory and a sense of nostalgia passed down to her by her parents. Thirty recipes shared in the book trace Bijan's journey from her childhood in Tehran to her family's exile in the wake of the Islamic revolution and the threat of execution directed at her mother, all the way through her teenage years in the US, her training and apprenticeship in Paris and becoming a successful chef back in America.

A good part of the book is about her family, and particularly about her mother: her education in London as a nurse, her passionate cooking not only for her family but for the patients in their private hospital (run in collaboration with her physician husband), her social activism and holding public office and advocating for women's rights. Above all, Bijan's mother has a strong presence in the book as the main source of the author's inspiration and success in life. Upon settling in America, her mother started collecting recipes and cooking them as a means to curb her homesickness and to once again feel at home. The author's examination of these recipes after her mother's death then becomes her only key to revisiting her mother's force of nostalgia and the inspiration for writing the book.

Bijan's account is marked by the trauma of the revolution and a premature departure and displacement. Her family heard about the unrest leading to the revolution on the radio while vacationing in Spain. Convinced that they could not return to Iran, they first sent the author, 16 at the time, to America and stayed on in Europe. '[They became] refugees, biding their time, waiting for the dust of the revolution to settle. But the dust became a storm that left their lives in ruins' (2011: 41). In her early years in America, Bijan learned a new way of life and felt the effects of the tension and hostility between Iran and the US. She also experienced a sense of loss that seemed to never let go of her. 'The true sense of belonging was lost forever, along with my dog, my stamp collection, my charm bracelet, my house, my street, my school, my country' (ibid.: 49).

When Bijan reunited with her parents in 1980 in America, the sense of belonging starts to be restored as they slowly stock their pantry with turmeric, cumin and basmati rice and her mother starts cooking 'real food' again: 'feta cheese and shelled walnuts with piles of fresh mint, tarragon, and basil accompanied [their] meals again' (2011: 59). The longing for an unreachable home, however, never left her mother.

[My mom] was painfully aware that she would never again walk in the courtyard of her youth, lay flowers on her parent's gravestones, see her beloved Caspian Sea or the snow-capped Mount Damavand. She would no longer revel in the scent and preparation of *Noruz* . . . Gone was the heady perfume of hyacinth, which lingered in the air for weeks before the holidays, as essential as the scent of pine in December. . . . War, revolution, sanctions, jihad, fanaticism, will all take turns ripping a country apart, but *Noruz* prevails no matter where you're washed ashore, as do the food, the song, the poetry, and the art that heal any torn nation. (ibid.: 79–80)

Over the course of the development of the story and Bijan's life, food and cooking remains a strong bridge not only to increasingly remote childhood memories of Iran but also to significant events in her adult life. At the end, she is linked to the little French village she studies in to become a chef and feels 'Iran might as well have been on another planet' (ibid.: 191).

Unlike *Maman's Homesick Pie*, the books by Bundy (2012) and Deravian (2018) come in 'cookbook format' – hard cover with glossy paper accompanied by high-quality artistic food photography. In common with all other Iranian food writing, they contain autobiographical notes mainly related to happy and colourful recollections of their childhood years, interrupted by the revolution, as well as a deep nostalgia for Iran.

In *Pomegranates and Roses*, Bundy includes 15 short anecdotal stories in between the food sections where we learn about her family background: about her father who studied abroad in the mid-1960s and owned a French restaurant in Tehran; about her mother and other women in her family who not only were excellent cooks but artists, activists and writers. We also learn about her fondly remembered childhood years, when she spent her time between the countryside in her grandparents' lands, where they grew fruits, bred sheep and produced their own wine, and in several big Iranian cities. Like Bijan's, Bundy's family were taken by surprise by the 1979 revolution and fled the country when the author was five. They left Iran within days, taking with them bits and pieces of their belongings, not knowing when they would be back. In America, Iran and its memories came back to life through Persian foods and events, such as *sabzi polo* on *Noruz*. Bundy studied at a French institute to become a chef.

Like Khan (2016) and Batmanglij (2018), Bundy returned to her much loved and longed-for homeland of Iran in her adulthood in preparation for writing her book. She travelled extensively in Iran to research, to engage in locals' kitchens and to make and share new food memories. Even though reunited with her homeland, the nostalgia for a lost childhood and a sense of melancholy due to living far from Iran appears in Bundy's narrative ever so implicitly. For example, in the section on 'The Persian Rose Garden' she writes about rose symbolism in Persian literature, in people's lives, in gardens and the process of distillation: 'Ever since I was a child, I've been comparing any rose I see to those in Iran. I've climbed fences, crossed roads, come to a screeching halt in my car to smell a rose growing out from someone's garden . . . all the while thinking to myself, maybe this one will smell like the roses at home' (Bundy 2012: 211).

Bottom of the Pot by Deravian is perhaps the most emotionally charged with nostalgia, melancholy and longing for her lost homeland and childhood – a longing wrapped around aromatic layers of steaming Persian rice, and the instances and substances that help her make a 'home', wherever that might be. 'Memory is an elusive seducer', she writes, 'hard to pin down. She teases with

a hazy snapshot of what once was . . . A newly opened bottle of rose water, the bitter tang of a dried lime. Sometimes that's all it takes to get lost her in her grip' (Deravian 2018: 9).

Deravian's family, too, left Iran at the height of the 1979 revolution and hostage crisis, when she was eight. They, too, did not anticipate it coming and left Iran in haste, 'with no proper good-byes, or a closure' (2018: 30). She reflects on her rich childhood memories: the lush landscape of the Caspian Sea at her father's side, and a traditional Persian home, which she remembers as a 'majestic labyrinth' and *koofteh tabrizi*, at her maternal grandfather's side (ibid.: 5).

Each of the ten food sections starts with a three-page story from past and present – from Tehran, Rome, Vancouver, Los Angeles, 'over three continents, across three decades' (Deravian 2018: 348). These stories are heavy with exotic scents and nostalgic memories, and each have a theme and title relevant to the food section that follows the story. For example, the section on *aash* varieties is entitled 'Heart' to indicate how *aash* and yogurt were always present together at the author's adult home in Vancouver, after leaving Iran to 'restore order and balance not only to the meal, but to the body and the world at large.' 'If *aash* is the foundation of the Persian kitchen', Deravian maintains, 'plain yogurt is its heart' (ibid.: 73). She explains how her mother used to make yogurt in Tehran, reminiscing that 'once a week, on yogurt making nights, I offered up my childhood blanket to keep the pot of soon-to-be luscious yogurt warm. The very same blanket that had been left behind in Iran, unaware that I would never return to it' (ibid.: 74).

The feeling of longing is carried along in the book as well as in the author's journey through different cities and finds a place to rest, or not, in Persian foods that she cooks, or the ones she remembers being cooked by her family.

Conclusion

For the new generation of Iranian diasporic food writers, food is often connected in delicate ways to bridging the past, healing loneliness, and connecting to and assimilating in the host country. Bijan, remembering her first few years after migrating to America, writes that 'food offered enormous consolation for homesickness, as well as a chance to make friends' (2011: 54). Sepehr, in an interview about her books, explains how upon settling in London, cooking Iranian dishes for her neighbours opened up the doors to friendship and later formed the basis of her cookbook (Moore 2018).

Just as food and cooking has been, for these authors and many like them, a means to connect to their homelands and new homes, food writing is employed as a means to show the bright, hospitable and refined character of Iran and Iranians, 'to promote Iranian culture', in Sepehr's words, 'because all

we hear in the news is bad news' (Digby 2018). In a more recently published article, Shafia reflects on the US ban on Muslim countries imposed by the Trump administration in 2017:

As a dual citizen of the U.S. and Iran, I certainly won't be visiting Iran again any time soon (I may very well not be able to return to the U.S. if the travel ban is reinstated). I hope that we as a country can keep Muslims and Middle Easterners in our embrace. There are no magic solutions to bridging the gap that has opened up between us. But we're all more similar than we think, and looking to food as a translator is a good place to start. (Shafia 2017)

The purposes of the food narratives are manifold, each delivered in their own unique way. Some try to simplify, demystify, at times modernize and Westernize the sophisticated and seemingly intimidating and inaccessible Persian cooking, while others develop recipes that reflect 'something of both cultures' (Karim 2006: xxviii). For Bijan, for instance, seared duck livers with sour cherries or crème caramel with pistachio exemplify a marriage of French and Persian flavours (2011: 189). In all the instances, however, an integral part of Iranian diasporic food writing, besides the introduction of Persian culinary cultures and actual food recipes, remains the introductory or explanatory notes about Iran's rich history, varied geography, pre-Islamic teachings and diversity of cultures and cooking traditions.

The need to provide a cultural guide and elaborate on Iran's rich heritage, culinary and otherwise, may indicate the marketability of such representations, but above all, such representations speak to the challenges of living in exile and having to wrestle not only with traumatic past experiences of revolution and immigration but also with the challenges of living in exile, facing discriminatory policies and negotiating clashing cultures and split identities.

An important feature of the new generation of food narratives is the authors' tendency to reflect on their personal lives – a theme I have only scratched at the surface of here but is certainly worth more in-depth studies. Scattered autobiographical notes are present in these books to varying degrees – from old photo albums to a trip down memory lane to the Caspian Sea and the taste of *fesentjaan*, inserted in little sidebars, to more elaborate accounts of 'self-writing' (Wagenknecht 2015). In writing about their personal lives and reminiscing about their interrupted childhoods and lost homeland, these authors also reveal the less-advertised and lesser-known sides of Iran. In all three food memoirs that I focused on, for instance, mother figures appear not only as knowledgeable and skilled cooks, but also as strong, inspiring and socially influential women. Furthermore, by employing a self-reflexive mode of writing, they connect to the reader at a deeper level, revealing the shared humanity of us all regardless of the countries of origin and the preferred taste or flavour.

The emerging Iranian diasporic food writing follows in the footsteps of the bulk of self-reflective literature by Iranians outside the country, as they tell stories of immigration, longing and belonging. Like stories shared at the

dinner table over a meal, these stories are secondary to the food that has been meticulously prepared, proudly displayed and generously shared; nonetheless, they are meant to inspire and dazzle the guests and connect with them at a deep emotional level.

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Notes

1. Following Wagenknecht, I use the terms 'autobiography' and 'memoir' as synonyms in this article (2015: 7).
2. Samin Nosrat, a New York Times food columnist, the author of the best seller *Salt, Acid, Fat, Heat* (2017a) and the host of a Netflix show has advocated on behalf of Iranian food writers and enlightened Americans about Iranian food through her online and published forums. Among her articles are '10 Essential Persian Recipes' (2019) and 'The Verdant Food of Iran Entices at Persian New Year' (2017b). Other examples include 'Yotam Ottolenghi's Recipe for New Year Celebration Tah Chin' (Ottolenghi 2018) and 'Najmieh Batmanglij Is the Grande Dame of Iranian Cooking. It's Time You Knew Her Name' (Sen 2018).
3. At least 30 Persian food blogs in English are currently active. Some of the most popular ones include: *Turmeric & Saffron*, *Persian Mama*, *Bottom of the Pot*, *Zozo Baking*, *Persian Fusion* and *Unicorn in Kitchen*.
4. These books, ordered alphabetically by author name, are: Batmanglij, *Food of Life* (2011); Batmanglij, *Joon* (2015); Batmanglij, *Cooking in Iran* (2018); Bijan, *Maman's Homesick Pie* (2011); Bundy, *Pomegranates and Roses* (2012); Dana-Haeri, *From a Persian Kitchen* (2014); Dana-Haeri et al., *New Persian Cooking* (2011); Deravian, *Bottom of the Pot* (2018); HasanzadeNemati, *The Enchantingly Easy Persian Cookbook* (2016); Khan, *The Saffron Tales* (2016); Sepehr, *From a Persian Kitchen* (2018); Shafia, *The New Persian Cooking* (2013); and Maryam Sinaiee, *From the land of Nightingales and Roses* (2018).

5. To cite a few examples, *Bottom of the Pot* by Deravian was winner of the IACP 2019 First Book Award. It was chosen as one of 14 best cookbooks of the year by the *National Post* and interviews and/or features related to the book appeared in a dozen journals and magazines, including *O, the Oprah Magazine*, *Atlantic*, the *Vancouver Sun* and the *Montreal Gazette*. *From a Persian Kitchen* by Sepehr, published in the UK, was recognized as one of four Best Food Book of the Year by the *Irish Times* and was widely covered by media including BBC Radio, the *Observer* and the *Irish Times*. *Nightingales And Roses* by Sinaee won the Guild of Food Writers First Book Award and was shortlisted for Edward Stanford Travel Writing Awards.

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