

Ethnic Food in Grand Surroundings

EXECUTIVE DINING

by Fifi Chao

One tends to think of ethnic restaurants as small, friendly, family-run places.

That is not, however, exactly the case at **Darya**, a big and beautiful Persian restaurant in South Coast Plaza Village. Yes, the clientele is heavily Persian with a smattering of others who have been smart enough eaters to discover the delicious tastes of this cuisine—and its affordability. But, they are not sitting at formica tables.

Darya is almost a dining palace. Who would expect to find a vast room bathed in tones of beige and white with soaring ceilings, a quintet of gorgeous crystal chandeliers and a dozen faux-marble columns seemingly holding up this universe? There's an upstairs space with decorative balcony railings that form an attractive mezzanine. Leaded glass windows overlook the outside world. The tables, clad in beige linen (even at lunch), are surrounded by dark wood chairs in a shell motif that are upholstered for ultimate comfort. Lovely Persian carpeting flows throughout. Money was lavished on this atmosphere.

Waiters, snappily dressed in black and white, are just friendly enough and professional at the same time. As soon as you are seated and menus presented, you are given a tray of freshly baked flat bread, cut into perfect rectangles. Then the decisions on ordering begin. I must inject that Persian food is one of the ethnic cuisines most suited to the American palate: slightly different spicing than we grew up with, but not hot-spicy at all and not exotic to the point of being an adventure too foreign to really understand. Indeed, I cannot recall anyone we've introduced to this food who has not become a great fan.

I would encourage you always to begin a meal with one or two of the appetizers, since the gentle spicing of them is so good at getting the palate ready for the meal.

Among a passel of starters, I have recently discovered a most pleasing combination of flavors in the dolmeh. These are grapes leaves stuffed fat with mostly ground beef, a little rice, some split peas, green onions, basil and just a hint of tarragon. What's not to like? I had, on previous occasions, begun with the unique combination of chicken and potato salad called Salad Olivieh, panir sabzi (plate of imported feta cheese, walnuts and fresh herbs to relish with some of that flat bread) and an appetizer to which I have become totally addicted, tadig. The tadig is fascinating to me because of its texture and its resemblance to Chinese crispy rice. You choose to have it with one, two or three different sauces: ghormeh sabzi (sautéed vegetables and kidney beans with lime flavoring), fesenjon (walnut and pomegranate melange) and/or ghemeh bademjan (fried eggplant recooked with tomatoes, peas and onions). The latter two are my favorites.

The menu is pretty large. Persian food is always served with very generous portions of basmati rice (the Cadillac of varieties with a wonderful nutty tone to it). Many entrées are also sided with a large charbroiled tomato. I have become a habitué of certain main dishes. Albalo polo finds chicken cooked with black cherries. Adas polo is chicken cooked with raisins, lentils, dates and saffron (craving it as I write). Beef shish kebab is comprised of large chunks of marinated filet mignon that are skewered and charbroiled (outstanding). Lamb shank is swell comfort food, tender as it is and so nicely melanged with lima beans and gentle spicing. I am also a pushover for the fesenjon chicken cooked in the aforementioned sauce. Who would expect to find fresh pan-seared trout or fresh Lake Superior whitefish with a sauce akin to our barbecue drizzled over it?

Sometimes I do not want to eat meat and I find **Darya**'s vegetarian entrées compelling at those times because they are loaded with flavor and texture. For instance, they cook a variety of vegetables on a skewer and they come out with a nice smokiness from the charbroiling. Persian stew is a nice mixture of seasonal vegetables cooked with tomatoes and fresh herbs and a bit of saffron, the whole on a mattress of basmati rice.

Persian desserts often are flavored with rosewater as is the custard-like faloodeh and their ice cream. For a most classic ending, try the crackly honey- and walnut-laden bakhlava. For the not-so-sure, select something from the Persian, French and Italian pastry tray.

AT A GLANCE

DARYA PERSIAN CUISINE

Address: 1611 Sunflower Ave., Santa Ana (in South Coast Plaza Village)

We are Not located in Orange!

Phone: (714) 557-6600

Open: Lunch and dinner daily
