

## Darya

Seductive Persian cuisine at South Coast Plaza Village.

By Patrick Mott

Good Persian food is more than just intriguing; at its best, it's seductive - full of flavors and textures and techniques that are elegantly simple, often precise, always distinctive and unique. Preparation and presentation are clean, crisp and fresh and the mixture of ingredients often is inspired.

With good Persian food, you are not just satisfied, you're beguiled. Seduced.

If this sort of rich culinary experience sounds good to you, you'll want to put Darya high on your restaurant to-do list.

Located in South Coast Plaza Village, Darya is owned by three men-Ray Essahanian, Sam Salout and Ali Abedi. The trio has owned and operated Persian restaurants in the area since 1984 and Darya has been located in South Coast Plaza Village since 1996. (There is another restaurant of the same name in Tustin, but Essahanian said it is not affiliated with the Santa Ana Darya.) The kitchen is under the supervision of head chef Carmela Vasquez.

Like the cuisine it serves, Darya's decor is a meld of simplicity and elegance. Cream-colored columns support the ceiling of the spacious dining room, the comfortable chairs are tastefully upholstered, the white tablecloths fairly gleam and the subtle but intricate carpet keeps the ambient noise nicely muted. Also, tables are set well apart, underscoring the feeling of spaciousness.

And as long as you're feeling expansive, a fine bet for starters is one of the combination appetizer platters, which allow you to choose combos of three, four or five of the regular starter dishes. We left it to our solicitous waiter to pick four dishes out for us and his suggestions made for a varied and delicious plate.

The borani, a medley of fried eggplant, yogurt, onions and herbs, was a delightful rich light brown m>lange in which all flavors were bright and easy to identify. The golden brown fried onions particularly added muscle to this deceptively piquant starter.

The maust'khiar was simplicity itself, but with very happy results. It's a combination of yogurt and chopped cucumbers flavored with mint. If this sounds like a perfect hot day snack, it is. Smooth, cool, crunchy and the mint never overpowered.

The torshi was a simple combination of chopped fresh tomatoes and cucumbers flavored with parsley and brought to life with a generous squeeze of fresh lemon juice. Again, perfect for a hot day.

The more familiar dolemeh - stuffed grape leaves - were filled with ground beef, rice, tarragon, split peas, green onions, basil, parsley and fresh herbs. It sounds a bit overwhelming to read the ingredient list, but the marriage of it all resulted in a substantial but complex series of little bites. The whole was definitely greater than the sum of the parts.

The unusually succulent lamb shank entr>e was served on a separate plate from its accompanying rice, with good reason. Combining the two on the same plate would have diminished both the presentation and the fine individual flavors of each. The seasoned and boiled shank was not only a generous portion, it was pleasantly lean and uncommonly moist and tender. It was no work at all to eat it off the bone with a fork. The rice was one of the lovely little surprises at Darya, where the basmati rice is often mixed with



Co-owner and event coordinator Ray Essahanian

various other ingredients such as cherries or pomegranates, which enhance the overall flavor immensely. In this case the basmati rice was mixed with fine dill weed and lima beans - yes, lima beans - and the result was a spicy huskiness that complemented the lamb beautifully.

The chicken soltani consisted of two strips of gorgeously golden chicken served with basmati rice and a charbroiled tomato. Tasting the very lean chicken prepared two ways - one strip charbroiled, the other ground - is an enjoyable experience in texture and consistency and, again, a squeeze of fresh lemon is all the extra zing it needs. This is an excellent light meal (in terms of calories, at least; the portions are generous). Also, the tomato shouldn't be passed off as a mere garnish. The charbroiled skin elevates this tomato's taste hugely.

The service is gentle and mannerly, attentive without being oppressive. And our waiter was happy to explain the intricacies of some of the more unfamiliar ingredients and terms. We felt we were in good hands even before the suggested appetizers arrived.

***Darya, 1611 Sunflower Ave. (South Coast Plaza Village), Santa Ana. (714) 557-6600.***