Royal Afghan Dinner

Rice is king in this meal of savory vegetables, aromatic spices, and fork-tender lamb

BY ALI SERAJ

When I was growing up in Afghanistan, dinner was the most important meal of the day. This was the time when the immediate family, and very often other family members, would gather at my parents’ house. Since my grandfather, His Majesty King Habibullah, had 38 wives and 58 children, there was never a shortage of relatives dropping in for dinner.

The main and most important dish was always rice. Cooked in many different ways with a variety of meats, vegetables, and spices, rice was considered the king of the table. To this day, my favorite version is qabuli palau. Filled with tender chunks of lamb and flavored with onions and seven spices, it’s the most aromatic of all the rice dishes. It’s served with two complementary vegetable stews and a crisp salad. The four dishes together make a hearty, satisfying winter meal.

To develop their full flavor and to get the texture of the rice just right, these dishes can’t be hurried. None of the steps, however, is difficult or time-consuming. You’ll be surprised how easily this meal comes together.

INTRIGUING LAYERS OF FLAVOR

Filled with lamb, or sometimes chicken, qabuli palau could be a meal on its own. But in Afghan cooking, we like to layer flavors over flavors: some contrasting, some complementary. The rice is flavored with an aromatic combination of spices (see photo on p. 44), some of which are used in desserts in the West—clove, cinnamon, and cardamom. Combined with a garnish of carrots and fruity raisins, the rice has an almost sweet taste to it, though it’s really not sweet at all.

The stew we always serve with qabuli palau, and never on its own, is banjan borani, an eggplant and
tomato stew garnished with yogurt and mint (see top photo at left). The spices and raisins in the rice bring out the tartness of the yogurt and tanginess of the thick tomato sauce. If you tried the eggplant stew with plain rice it would taste almost bland. With the highly spiced rice, the eggplant tastes full of flavor.

The second stew that goes so well with qabuli palau is saland-e-kachaloo, a potato stew flavored with crushed coriander seeds and fresh coriander leaves (cilantro). When served with the palau, the spices mix and the potatoes are flavorful but neutral tasting. If you were to serve the potatoes with white rice, which I do on occasion, the potatoes would taste much spicier than they do with the palau.

The salata is an Afghan salad that serves as a referee between the dishes. Chopped tomatoes, onions, cilantro, and sometimes cucumbers are doused with lemon juice to make a tangy, crunchy salad that awakens the taste buds and goes well with all the dishes on the plate.

RICE IS THE CENTERPIECE

I'll always remember the first time I cooked rice in the United States. Not familiar with local ingredients, I returned home from the grocery store with two boxes of Minute Rice. I followed the instructions on the box carefully in an attempt to prepare the family's famous qabuli palau. What resulted—a pale and sticky glob—must have made my grandfather turn in his grave. I had committed the greatest dishonor to this king of Afghan foods.

Unsure of what had gone wrong, I called my mother in Germany for advice. She told me that the rice most similar to Afghan rice is basmati, an aromatic, long-grain rice from India. When it cooks, the grains expand in length almost twice their original size and remain separate, unlike shorter-grain rices, which become quite clumpy. I found an Indian market that carried basmati, and I have never repeated my mistake. If you can't find basmati, I suggest you...
use Carolina long-grain rice. It will stick together more than basmati, but it still gives acceptable results.

**Soaking and parboiling keeps the grains separate.** In Afghanistan, we say that after it is cooked, each grain of rice should stand out by itself and have a smile on its face. Starting with the right rice is important for ending up with long, separate grains, but how you handle the rice is also important. I wash the rice thoroughly to rid it of any surface starch (see photo below). Then I let it soak in warm water for an hour or two. The longer the rice soaks, the longer the grains expand during cooking, and I think longer grains look and taste better.

Next I partially boil the rice to wash away any excess starch and to help each grain of rice expand. I know that many experts say that washing and boiling the rice removes vitamins and nutrients, but whatever nutrients may be lost from the rice will be deliciously replenished by the spices, onions, meat, and vegetable oil.

**Lamb flavors the rice.** You can make the *qabuli palau* with lamb, beef, or chicken. I think that lamb adds the most flavor to the dish, while beef and chicken nicely absorb the flavors but don’t contribute much of their own. The meat, cut into two-inch chunks, cooks on its own in a caramelized onion broth before it’s mixed with the rice. It’s a good way to use flavorful but tough stew meat, such as lamb shoulder or beef chuck. If I’m using chicken, I choose a big roaster and cut it into quarters.

**My special spice mix.** Royal Afghan cuisine is one of the most aromatic and varied in the world because of its use of spices. All spices are mixed and ground fresh for each dish, and every cook has personal, well-guarded combinations. When family members come to visit and remark on a dish they particularly like, I’ll mix them up a batch of the spices rather than tell them what’s in it.

So now, for the first time, I’m revealing my secret. In *qabuli palau*, I use a mixture of cumin seeds, cloves, black peppercorns, cinnamon, and cardamom (all ground fresh in a coffee grinder), and fine strands of saffron, which I grind with a little salt for abrasion in a mortar and pestle (see photo at right). I never use ground cumin powder, as it doesn’t have the same taste and aroma as freshly ground cumin seeds. Saffron and cardamom, the world’s two most expensive spices, give the dish a distinctive aroma. I use two types of cardamom, brown and green, for more complex flavor, but you can use just green cardamom. I buy whole pods and break away the papery skin to leave just the black seeds (see photo above). You don’t need very much cardamom or saffron for this dish, but if you want to do without them entirely, increase the amount of cloves, cinnamon, and cumin a bit. Most of these spices are readily available in supermarkets, as well as in Indian markets.

**SETTING AN AFGHAN TABLE**

In an Afghan home, the rice is always placed in the center of the table, surrounded by the stews and salad. First the rice is served on individual plates, and then it is topped with either one or both of the stews. People serve themselves the Afghan *salata* and various chutneys, which are placed on the side of the rice and eaten together with the rice and stews. All meals are also accompanied by warm *nan*, a thin, baked bread that is eaten in both Afghanistan and India. If *nan* isn’t available, then I recommend serving pita bread, which has almost the same taste and texture. Fresh fruit and green tea flavored with ground cardamom seeds are a nice way to finish the meal.
Afghan royal meals are lavish and always include food for more than the number of invited guests. The recipes included here will serve ten people generously and still leave you with leftovers. Never fear, for Afghan food tastes better the next day, because all the juices will have had time to intermingle and penetrate the rice and vegetables.

Both the rice and eggplant do best when reheated in the oven. Pile up the rice in a mound, pour a cup or so of water over it, and heat for 20 minutes in a 350° oven. Lower the heat to 200° and continue baking for another 15 minutes, until the rice is steaming.

The eggplant should be warmed up in the oven at 350° until it starts to sizzle. Spread a fresh mixture of garlic and yogurt over it and top with more mint.

To warm up the potato stew, put it back in a pot with a little water and heat over medium heat until the water evaporates. Don’t use a spatula for mixing, as this would break up the potatoes. Instead, lift up the pot and shake it vigorously.

**Ishteya-e-khoob** (good appetite).

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### QABULI PALAU
*(Rice with lamb, carrots, and raisins)*

You can substitute beef or chicken for the lamb, or even leave the meat out altogether. Whichever meat you use, simmer it just until tender. Serves ten.

- 4 cups basmati or Carolina long-grain rice
- 1 Tbs. cumin seeds
- 1 tsp. whole cloves
- 1½ tsp. black peppercorns
- 1-in. piece of cinnamon or ¼ tsp. ground cinnamon
- 1 tsp. cardamom seeds
- ½ tsp. saffron threads
- Salt

1. **Wash and soak the rice**—Put the rice in a large bowl and fill it with warm water. Wash the rice by stirring it with your hands, being careful not to break the grains. Pour off the water and wash the rice again. Repeat until the water is clear, 3 to 5 times. Then fill the bowl completely with water (about three inches above the rice line) and let the rice soak for one to two hours.

2. **Grind the spices**—While the rice soaks, grind the cumin, cloves, peppercorns, cinnamon, and cardamom in a coffee grinder or a mortar and pestle until medium fine. Grind the saffron with a pinch of salt for abrasion in a mortar and pestle. Mix all the spices together and set them aside in a tightly covered bottle or bowl until ready to use.

3. **Cook the meat**—Heat the oil in a saucepan large enough to hold the meat. When the oil is hot, put in the onions and fry them over medium-high heat, stirring often so they don’t burn, until deep brown, about 30 min. Smash the onions a bit against the side of the pan with a large spoon. Then carefully add the meat, 2 Tbs. salt, and enough water to cover the meat (about 4 cups). Bring to a boil, then reduce the heat to a rapid simmer. Cook until the meat is slightly tender but still chewy, about 30 min. (If at any time the water evaporates, add more water, ½ cup at a time, until the meat is cooked to the desired consistency.)

   - Heat the oven to 500°F.

4. **Parboil the carrots and raisins**—Bring 2 cups water to a boil in a medium saucepan. Add the carrots and raisins and stir until the carrots are limp, about 3 min. Drain the carrots and raisins and set aside.

5. **Parboil the rice**—Fill a large pot two-thirds full of water and bring it to a full boil. Drain the soaked rice in a colan-
Deep holes allow steam and air to bring the flavors together. During the hour the dish bakes, juices from buried mounds of lamb, carrots, and raisins intermingle with the spices and rice.

Each grain of rice should “stand and smile” after it has been cooked, a sign that it has been handled properly.

Order and rinse it with cool water. Then put the rice in the boiling water and stir it very carefully so as not to break the grains. I do this by using a flat spatula and turning the rice from bottom to top. Boil the rice until the outside of the grain is slightly soft, about 5 min. I test this by biting a grain. Remove the rice from the heat and drain it in the colander. Rinse it again with cold water.

Assemble the palau—Pour the rice into a large, oval-shaped roasting pan or Dutch oven with a cover. Lift the meat out from the onion mixture and set aside. Pour the remaining liquid and dissolved onions on the rice. Sprinkle on the spices and carefully mix it all together. Chew a few grains of rice to taste for salt and add more if necessary.

Dig a hole in one side of the pile of rice and bury the meat in it. Then open up the other side and put in the carrots and raisins. Cover it all up with rice, shaping it into a mound, in such a way that only the bottom of the pile is touching the pan and the sides and top of the rice are free of contact (this allows the rice to bake evenly). Using the handle of the spatula, make a deep hole in the center of the mound and surround that by four more holes. The holes allow the heat and steam to penetrate deeply. Touch the bottom of the pan with your index finger. The liquid level should cover the first joint of your finger. If it doesn’t, add more water.

Bake the palau—Cover the pan and put it in a 500° oven for 15 min. Then lower the heat to 200° and continue baking for another 45 min.

Present the palau—Take the pan out of the oven and remove the lid immediately to prevent moisture from forming on the rice and making it soggy. If you don’t plan to serve the rice immediately, either leave the rice in the oven on low heat or put several sheets of paper towels between the rice and the lid to soak up the moisture.

When serving, carefully uncover the buried carrots and raisins and transfer them to a plate. Do the same for the meat. Using a flat spatula, dig up rice from the bottom and fan it back on top. This mixes all the juices that are sitting on the bottom of the pan.

Spread about four or five spatulas of rice over the base of a large serving dish. Then place the meat on the rice and cover it with the rest of the rice, shaping it into a mound. Spread the carrots and raisins over the top and serve.

BANJAN BORANI
(Eggplant with tomato and yogurt)
The tangy, garlic-laced yogurt contrasts nicely with the sweet tomato sauce and tender eggplant. It’s garnished with dried mint, which you can find in the spice section of a supermarket or in a Middle Eastern market. Serves ten.

Vegetable oil
2 yellow onions, sliced thin (about 2 cups)
1 tsp. turmeric
32 oz. canned crushed tomatoes
6 oz. (1 small can) tomato paste
2½ tsp. salt
1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded and cut into four pieces
16 oz. plain yogurt
4 cloves garlic, minced
2 large eggplant (about 2½ lb. total), unpeeled, sliced into ½-in. rounds
2 to 3 Tbs. crushed dried mint

Heat ¼ cup oil in a large saucepan until hot. Add the onions and sauté them, stirring occasionally, until light brown, about 20 min. Sprinkle in the turmeric and stir to coat the onions. Add the crushed tomatoes, tomato paste, 1½ tsp. of the salt, and green pepper. Bring to a boil and then lower the heat to a simmer. Cook, stirring often to prevent the sauce from sticking to the bottom of the pan and burning, until all the water evaporates and the mixture thickens, about 30 min. Keep the sauce warm while you proceed.

Whisk together the yogurt and garlic in a bowl, add the remaining 1 tsp. salt, and set aside.

Cook the eggplant by either frying it on the stove or broiling it in the oven. To fry the eggplant, heat ½ cup of oil in a large frying pan. When the oil is hot, slide in as many eggplant slices as can fit in the pan in a single layer. Cook the eggplant until the bottom is soft and brown, and then flip the pieces over and brown the other side, about 4 min. per side. Once browned, remove the eggplant from the oil with a flat, slotted spatula and put the slices in the tomato sauce. Add more oil to the frying pan as needed and cook the rest of the eggplant in batches the same way.

If you choose to broil the eggplant instead, brush the rounds with oil and arrange them in a single layer on a baking sheet. Broil until browned and soft on top, flip them over, brush with more oil, and brown the other side, about 4 min. on each side. Put the cooked eggplant in the tomato
sauce. When all the eggplant is in the tomato sauce, hold the handles of the saucepan and shake the pot from side to side until most of the slices are covered with sauce. If you like, remove the green pepper. Keep warm over low heat.

To assemble the eggplant, spread one-quarter of the yogurt mixture on the bottom of a deep, flat serving dish or platter. Using a flat spatula, dish out the eggplant and sauce mixture and spread it over the yogurt. Drizzle the rest of the yogurt mixture on top. Sprinkle the dried mint over the yogurt and serve.

SALAND-E-KACHALOO
(Potato stew)
Start this stew well ahead of time—it takes about an hour and a half to cook, and the flavor only improves the longer it sits. I often make this into a heartier dish by first stewing two pounds of beef in the onions until tender before adding the potatoes. Serves ten.

1 cup vegetable oil
4 yellow onions, sliced thin (about 4 cups)
1 tsp. turmeric
4 cloves garlic, crushed, or 1 Tbs. garlic powder
3 beef bouillon cubes (optional)
5 lb. potatoes (about 12), peeled and cut into 2-in. cubes
16 oz. canned crushed tomatoes
1 cup water
1 green bell pepper, cored, seeded and cut into 1-in. rings
3 Tbs. coriander seeds, ground fine, or 2 Tbs. ground coriander
2 tsp. salt
1 tsp. ground black pepper
Leaves from 1 bunch fresh coriander (cilantro), chopped coarse (about 2 cups, lightly packed)

In a large, heavy saucepan (preferably nonstick), heat the vegetable oil. When the oil is hot, add the onions and sauté over medium heat until golden, about 15 min. Sprinkle the turmeric, garlic, and bouillon cubes over the onions and stir a few times.

Add the potatoes, crushed tomatoes, and ½ cup of the water. Cook over medium heat for 25 min. (the potatoes will be half-cooked). Carefully scrape the bottom of the pot with a spatula every few minutes to prevent the potatoes from sticking. Add the bell pepper, ground coriander seeds, salt, and pepper. If the mixture looks too dry, add more water, ¾ cup at a time. Continue cooking and scraping until the potatoes are soft, about 45 min. more. To prevent the potatoes from being crushed by too much stirring, lift the pot from the burner every now and then and shake it vigorously to redistribute the liquid and spices. If any water remains, reduce the heat to low and simmer until it evaporates.

Just before serving, stir in the fresh coriander.

SALATA
(Afghan salad)
You can mix the tomatoes, onions, and coriander together ahead of time and keep the salad chilled in the refrigerator until you’re ready to serve. Add the lemon and salt right before serving to prevent the salad from getting soggy. Serves ten.

3 large tomatoes, cut into ⅛-in. dice (about 4 cups)
2 onions, cut into ⅛-in. dice (about 2 cups)
Leaves from 1 bunch fresh coriander (cilantro), chopped coarse (about 2 cups, lightly packed)
½ cup lemon juice
½ Tbs. salt

Toss together the tomatoes, onion, and coriander, pour in the lemon juice and sprinkle on the salt. Toss again and serve.

Putting it all together

1 DAY BEFORE DINNER
✦ Caramelize the onions and cook the lamb for the palau
✦ Make the tomato sauce for the eggplant stew

DAY OF DINNER
✦ Wash, soak, and parboil the rice
✦ Grind the spices for the palau
✦ Cook the eggplant
✦ Whisk the garlic and yogurt together for the eggplant stew
✦ Cook the potato stew
✦ Assemble the palau
✦ Chop the vegetables for the salata

1 TO 2 HOURS BEFORE SERVING
✦ Bake the palau

THE GUESTS ARE WAITING
✦ Dress the salata with lemon juice
✦ Reheat and assemble the eggplant stew
✦ Add the fresh coriander to the potato stew
✦ Assemble the cooked palau on a platter

Prince Ali Seraj inherited his passion for cooking from his grandfather, King Habibullah of Afghanistan. Seraj always makes plenty of food in case family and friends drop by his Milford, Connecticut, house.