

sizzle

SUMMER
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THE AMERICAN CULINARY FEDERATION QUARTERLY FOR STUDENTS OF COOKING

pies on
the menu

recipes for
salmon a
la nage

ahh, the life
of a yacht
chef

Q&A with culinary
entrepreneur
Faz Poursohi



Pie jars are one of High 5

the interview

Faz Poursohi

By Ethel Hammer



born

Soh, Iran

resides

Danville, Calif.

learned the trade

Met Rich Melman while in college; worked his way up the line at Chicago restaurants R.J. Grunts, Great Gritzbe's Flying Food Show, Jonathan Livingston Seafood, Pump Room, 1974-1980; earned systems engineering degree, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1979; attended a year of graduate school, University of Illinois, Chicago, 1980; opening chef, MacArthur Park, Palo Alto, Calif., 1981-1984.

career path

Chef/owner, Cafe Latte, San Francisco, 1984-1991; chef/owner, Original Faz, San Francisco, 1985-1989; chef/owner, Circolo, San Francisco, 1986-2006; chef/owner, Sante Fe Bar and Grill, Berkeley, Calif., 1987-1997; chef/owner, Cafe Latte II, San Francisco, 1988-2004; food and beverage operator, Bechtel Corporation, San Francisco, 1990-2005; chef/owner, Faz Restaurant, Danville, Calif., 1991-present; chef/owner, Faz Restaurant, Sunnyvale, Calif., 1996-present; chef/owner, Faz Restaurant, Pleasanton, Calif., 1997-present; chef/co-owner MacArthur Park, Palo Alto, Calif., 2008-present; chef/owner, Faz Restaurant, Oakland, Calif., 2011-present.

If you're interested in opening a slew of your own restaurants, Faz Poursohi offers one inspiring lesson. After all, he has opened and run as many bustling California restaurants as a human has fingers or toes.

"I went from living on a farm in Iran to being a chef in a corporate company to opening my own restaurants," he says. "You may not do everything right, but make sure you have an education so you can work with open eyes. Be passionate about what you do. Make sure you understand numbers. Then put your talent into operation by taking calculated risks." Poursohi advises students to work in other people's restaurants initially. "They give you a \$2 million or \$3 million dollar restaurant to run, so treat it like your own," he says. "If you cannot do it for someone else, you can't do it for yourself."

Poursohi currently runs four California-based Faz Restaurants in Danville, Oakland, Sunnyvale and Pleasanton, with the latter two in hotels—the best place to get your training, in his opinion. "In hotel food and beverage you get the full package—corporate events, social

events, meeting planning, room service, breakfast, lunch and dinner.”

In 2008, Poursohi rounded out his current mini-empire when he became co-owner of MacArthur Park, the very restaurant that brought him to California in the first place.

Poursohi is part no-nonsense rationalist who relies on his knowledge of mathematics and systems, and part dreamer, infused with the perfumes of his Persian heritage. He grew up surrounded by the beauties of nature, and, with an early talent for numbers and a desire to learn, came to Chicago to study systems engineering.

While in school, Poursohi met Rich Melman, restaurant icon and founder of Lettuce Entertain You, just as Melman was beginning his spectacular rise. How lucky that Poursohi could observe Melman building his restaurant empire not from a distance, but right in the thick of it.

Enamored by the restaurant business and realizing it could be lucrative, Poursohi switched his career sights. By 1981, he was California dreamin’. He left the Windy City to work for three years in Palo Alto as opening chef of MacArthur Park with Spectrum Foods, planning to one day branch out on his own.

“By the mid ’80s, I was the king of downtown San Francisco,

“I love my job. I have the opportunity to feed a lot of people three times a day. Food is the most important thing in life.”

but I didn’t know how successful I was,” he says.

Infused with Poursohi’s love of nature, art and history learned in childhood, today, the four Faz Restaurants all share a common Mediterranean/Near Eastern theme. Some dishes reflect the contributions of the Greeks who conquered Persia under Alexander the Great, while the Italian pizzas and pastas—the latter prepared right before guests—show the culinary imprint of Persia’s second conqueror, the ancient Romans. Between 500 and 600 kabobs, common in Persia and Greece, are sold daily in Sunnyvale, while diners in Danville prefer brick-oven roasted chicken with pomegranate sauce. Lamb shank with fava beans and fresh herbs is featured throughout. *Kufteh tabrizi*, the famous giant Persian meatball, recently went on the menu at Sunnyvale, while only Oakland sports a rotisserie straight from Mesquite, Texas.

Meanwhile, as Poursohi swoons over the subtleties of saffron, mint and quince, the history of Persia lives on his menu, where former foes transform into allies and friends.





top: A sampling of the Mediterranean/Near Eastern food offered at Faz Poursohi's four California restaurants.

bottom: Mesquite fire-roasted kabobs with saffron basmati rice.

tell us about your childhood.

fp: It was a simple life, full of beauty. My father was a farmer who had plenty of land. I grew up in a big house in the country. We had sheep and goats by the thousands that we kept up in the mountains.

There was a beautiful garden in the middle of the house with sour cherry trees, apricot trees, white peach trees, walnut trees, quince trees and trees full of big white mulberries, which I climbed. We grew grapes, apples, pears, almonds and walnuts in gardens that surrounded the house, giving us a wonderful sense of ownership.

so you were born like a prince of nature?

fp: I am proud to have been born in the country to great parents in a place called Soh. In fact, "Sohi" at the end of my name means "from Soh." We had four seasons, with winters full of snow. We had tons of flowers, especially pink roses that we used to make rosewater. We had acres and

acres of whole wheat, the best and milkiest of which was saved to make flour for the house. Our extended family owned a separate watermill, so we would grow the wheat in our fields, turn it into stone-ground flour in our watermill, then make it into dough and bake it in the house in our own bakery using natural fuel, no gas. Everything we ate, from fruit to protein to vegetables to herbs, was grown in our garden. And, let me tell you, that's beautiful.

When I was 11, my father sent me to study for a year in Esfahan, once Persia's capital. What a shock, coming from the country. I saw lots of historical temples, with work by artists from Greece and Italy, and beautiful intricate art all around me, from mirror work to domes to brickwork to wood.

nature and art infused your boyhood. What else has formed your culinary concept?

fp: Persia has had lots of conflict over its history, but one of the things that lives on is the influence on the food. The Greeks and Persians have similar kabobs. Both our lamb shanks have tomato broth. And Persian pasta and the pasta from Southern Italy are both handmade.

Great yogurt takes me back to my childhood. Today, lemon, basil, pepper watercress and mint grown in California transport me back to a certain moment in my youth. I remember the whole extended family in a garden picking grapes. The women would gather them. The men would carry them in loads. The kids would place them in piles.

We would butcher a lamb and make kabobs. We would also cook the lamb in copper pots on a stove in our garden, making a stew with tomatoes, herbs, onions and potatoes, all grown in our garden. Then, at night, we would lay a cloth on the ground and the whole family—aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters—20-40 people, would sleep outside under the stars.

some Americans don't know a lot about their history. Do you?

fp: At 13, my father sent me to a fine school in Tehran where I majored in mathematics. After I graduated, I spent two years in the army. It was great, because at that time, they were celebrating 2,500 years of Iranian history. This was during the time of the Shah, and they sent us to Persepolis, the Persian capital in Zoroastrian times, where I spent one magnificent year training. We had to learn the ancient music and dress in historical costumes. I grew a beard and a mustache. They sent us to special tailors to make our outfits, including a turban and silk or cotton pants that tucked into our boots. They taught us what others did in the army throughout history, so I learned to use a sword and a scabbard. For the celebration, we paraded in front of heads of state from around the world, including the American vice president. Then, in 1974, I came to Chicago to study systems engineering.

what luck to come just then.

fp: A friend introduced me to Rich Melman, who only had R.J. Grunts at that time. I didn't know how to cook, but my uncle ran the most popular

restaurant in Tehran. When Rich Melman met me, he said, "I want to use you." I was not familiar with cooking. I was from a different culture. But he put me right on the line as a broiler man, and I found it easy.

Soon, Rich got to like me very much and asked me to work at Great Gritzbe's Flying Food Show, which was famous for its clambake, frog's legs and veal scallopini. The waitresses used to say they loved it when I was working, because they made \$100 more in tips because the food came out on time. I went on to work at Jonathon Livingston Seafood and became a loyal, key employee. I climbed up the ladder fast. By the time I got to the Pump Room, I was the night chef.

One day, early on, Fred Joast, one of Rich's partners, told me that I was going to open my own restaurant in 10 years. I was making \$7.50 an hour, working in a 250-seat restaurant owned by other people, but his wisdom was right. Ten years later, I opened Cafe Latte.

I love my job. I have the opportunity to feed a lot of people three times a day. Food is the most important thing in life.

what about love?

Yes, it's important, too. But if you have no food, how can you love? ■

Ethel Hammer is a writer, lecturer and cartoonist based in Chicago.

it's all about the attitude

We asked Iranian-born culinary entrepreneur Faz Poursohi to compare Persian and American attitudes toward food. Here are his thoughts:

"It all depends on how food is introduced to you. In America, you can see someone buying an apple or an orange, but they could be buying something at the hardware store. With food, you really have to feel it. Then again, Americans are becoming more conscientious about their food, more involved in the organic movement and assuring that food is clean. I hate antibiotics. Food has to be natural."

persian pick

When it comes to favorites, Faz Poursohi doesn't shy away from picking his most-loved Persian dish. He votes for *koreshes*, "down-to-earth, healthy stews."

His top pick is *ghormeh sabzi*, which is made by combining chopped green onion, parsley and fresh fenugreek with garlic, onion and chicken or lamb. The dish can easily be made vegetarian by using mushrooms.

LEARN MORE

Learn more about Faz Poursohi and his California restaurant empire at fazrestaurants.com.