



Ruby

SEEDS ON A
SATIN BED

THE ROYAL, MYSTICAL
POMEGRANATE

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE PETERSON

An ancient Greek myth tells the story of Persephone, daughter of Demeter and Zeus. Wherever Persephone and her mother walk, flowers bloom. During one of their walks in the countryside, they stop to rest by a stream. Hades spies Persephone and immediately falls in love. He kidnaps her and brings her in his chariot to his underworld lair. Demeter, goddess of agriculture, is so enraged by her brother's act that she causes the earth to stop yielding produce, thereby threatening famine. When the other gods plead with her to lift the curse, she agrees only on the condition that she can see her daughter again.

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Hades agrees to let Persephone go back to her parents, but first gives her a pomegranate seed to eat. While the reunion of mother and daughter is a happy one, Demeter understands that the simple act of eating the seed has bound Persephone to Hades forever. Luckily, Zeus negotiates a compromise, in which Persephone will spend part of the year with her parents, and part with Hades. Her time above ground once again brings sunshine and spring flowers, while in the underworld with Hades it is the cold, dark winter.

Aside from the rather icky issues surrounding parentage among the gods, what is it about the pomegranate that it has attracted such adoration and been endowed with such mystical power? Granted, it is gorgeous with its ruby-colored seeds set in a creamy satin bed, and the sweet-tart juice of the pulp is delicious. But a fruit that can hold a goddess hostage?

The ancient Greeks weren't the only people to hold the pomegranate in such high regard. The fruit is one of the Seven Species mentioned in the Torah with which the Land of Israel was blessed and was among the fruits brought back by the Twelve Spies. And, almost 200 years before the first Greek myth was ever composed, the Hebrews incorporated the pomegranate design into the construction of the Temple's pillars and wove it into the high priest's robes. As described in

Exodus 39:24, "They made pomegranates of blue and purple and scarlet (material and) twisted (linen) on the hem of the robe. They also made bells of pure gold and put the bells between the pomegranates all around on the hem of the robe, alternating a bell and a pomegranate all around on the hem of the robe for the service, just as the Lord had commanded Moses."

Christians often set dishes of seeds at funerals, representing eternal life, the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the grave, and as a symbol of the sweetness of heaven. Buddhists consider the fruit, along with the peach and citrus, to be one of the three blessed fruits, while Hindus believe that the pomegranate signifies prosperity and fertility because of its many seeds. Lord Ganesha in particular is said to be fond of the many-seeded fruit. And the fruit is a symbol of beauty for Muslims, who believe that they grow in the gardens of paradise. The Prophet Muhammad reportedly advised pregnant women to eat pomegranates in order to have beautiful children. Ironically, Hippocrates prescribed its seeds to prevent conception.

The fruit also features in plenty of non-religious literature, from Homer's "Odyssey" in the 5th century BCE to Shakespearian tragedy in the 16th century CE. In "Romeo and Juliet," a good half century after King Henry VIII planted his first pomegranate, Juliet beseeches her lover to stay with her, saying,

Wilt thou be gone? It is not yet near day. It was the nightingale, and not the lark, That pierced the fearful hollow of thine ear.

Nightly she sings on yon pomegranate tree.

As we all know, Juliet was wrong. It was the lark, and Romeo skedaddled.

With origins in the region that extended from ancient Persia to Northern India, the pomegranate traveled eastward to China and westward to Italy via Carthage. The Moors brought the fruit to Spain around 800. In fact, the city of Granada was named for the pomegranate (in Spanish, *granada*), and the fruit is Spain's national emblem. Due to its crown-like top, the berry (yes, it's a berry) is also considered a symbol of royalty. Perhaps that is why, in the 16th century, King Henry VIII is reputed to have planted the first pomegranate bush in Britain.

Then, in the 18th century, the Spanish conquistadors brought the pomegranate with them to their American missions in California. In fact, the majority of pomegranates grown in the United States today are grown in that state.

The fruit's name has a long history. Originally, it was called *malum granatum* (apple with many seeds). The *malum* came from the Greek *melon* (apple), the *granatum* from the Latin for seed. But, because *malum* means bad in Latin, the name changed to *ponum granatum*. Once the French saw the fruit, they called it *pomme granate*, which ultimately evolved into the name by which we know it today. Curiously, there is also some etymological relationship with the gem garnet, whose deep red color resembles that of the pomegranate seed.

Aside from its beauty, the pomegranate has enjoyed a reputation for millennia as a symbol of health. Even without the benefit of modern medical and nutritional research, a remedy for tapeworm was made from its boiled rind as early as the 3rd century. But, given Americans' constant search for the next great cure, the pomegranate has enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in recent years, becoming a health food craze. And for good reason. Loaded with antioxidants, vitamins, potassium, folic acid and iron, its juice is thought to prevent heart disease, cancer and problems associated with aging.

And, as Americans who operate on the theory that if something is good, making it ubiquitous must be even better, there's pomegranate juice, vodka, salad dressing, salsa, tea, lollipops and candy. On the nonfood front, there's pomegranate-infused hair conditioner, as well as perfume and skin cream. While a mere 10 years ago it was difficult to find pomegranates in supermarkets, display cases piled high with the fruit now take center stage in grocery stores' produce departments.

I wonder what the hair conditioner tastes like.

Kufteh-ye pesteh-o anar (Persian Pistachio and Pomegranate Meatballs)

Pomegranates have been grown in southwestern Asia for about four millennia, making it one of the oldest cultivated fruits on earth. Ranging in taste from sweet to sour-sweet, the arils and their tart juice have a special place in Persian cuisine. This recipe can be doubled, tripled, or quadrupled for a large crowd.

Ingredients for Meatballs:

- 1 small onion, peeled and cut into 4 pieces
- 1½ cups pistachios or hazelnuts, shelled
- ¼ cup breadcrumbs
- 2 cups chopped fresh parsley
- 1 cup chopped fresh tarragon
- 1 cup chopped fresh cilantro
- 1 tablespoon fresh lime juice
- 1 teaspoon red pepper flakes
- 1 teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- 1 tablespoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons sea salt
- 2 pounds ground lamb
- 1 egg
- ½ cup oil, for cooking

Glaze:

- ¾ cup pomegranate molasses
- ¼ cup honey
- 1 teaspoon salt
- ½ teaspoon freshly ground black pepper
- ½ teaspoon red pepper flakes

Garnish:

- 1 cup fresh pomegranate arils
- Chopped pistachios

Directions:

In a food processor, blend the first eleven ingredients into a grainy paste.

Transfer to a large mixing bowl and add the meat and egg. Lightly knead with your hands for a few minutes.

Cover and place in the refrigerator overnight.

Preheat the oven to 500 degrees. Oil a

large baking dish.

Remove the meat mixture from the refrigerator and shape into balls (about 2 tablespoons each). Place the meatballs in the baking dish and brush well with oil.

Bake for 10 minutes, then remove from oven for the next step.

Meanwhile, combine all the ingredients for the glaze in a bowl.

Taste the mixture. If it's too sour, add more honey. If too sweet, add more pomegranate molasses.

Reduce the oven to 400 degrees.

Pour the glaze over the meatballs and bake for another 5 minutes.

Keep warm in the oven until ready to serve.

Place the meatballs with the sauce in a deep serving dish and garnish with the chopped pistachios and pomegranate arils. 🍷



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