

Portable Food



Picnicking in Iran: From Cemeteries to Ski Slopes, Caves, Traffic Circles, and Beaches

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In every Persian Garden there is a takht, or mud platform, in the shade of the trees, and if possible, near the running water [...]. A pleasant trait about Persians is that all are free to come and picnic in these retreats, the owner apparently being flattered when parties of merry-makers invade his solitude.¹

In addition to being great food lovers, people of Iran are admirers of the outdoors. They use any excuse – cultural events, certain religious occasions, holidays, social occasions – to get away from their homes and indoor spaces to enjoy food in an outdoor setting with friends, family, and even invite strangers in the vicinity of their picnic setting to join the festivities. References to Iranian picnic rituals fill Persian- and English-language literature, from nineteenth-century essays by European travellers to contemporary novels by Persian writers. Examples are sprinkled through this paper in italicized quotations.

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It is a charming trait in Persia that anyone you meet understands the pleasures of a picnic and will make the best of all the trees and brooks and grassy places that they have.²

To Iranians, picnicking is both an art and a craft. The Iranian picnic has its own culture that has developed over the centuries – its own rituals, its own paraphernalia, its own choreography. The study of Iranian picnics requires one to consider many dimensions and viewpoints. Given the strong relationships and overlaps among the relevant dimensions, it is impossible to arrive at a unique grouping of such facets. The discussion in this paper is based on one such categorization as depicted in Figure 1 and outlined below:

- Social, Cultural and Anthropological Dimensions
 - History of Iranian picnics dating back to the ancient Persian empire
 - Etymology of words in the Persian language used to refer to picnics
 - Important occasions in Persianate societies where picnics are key elements
 - Politics, regimes, wars, and religion that have impacted Iranian picnicking rituals
 - References to Iranian picnics in Persian- and English-language literature
 - Picnics as a subject of classical Persian and contemporary Iranian visual arts

- Culinary and Logistical Dimensions
 - Typical **participants** in Iranian picnics
 - Familiar and unusual **sites** where Iranians hold their picnics
 - Key **paraphernalia**, equipment, and supplies taken to Iranians picnics, and how they are choreographed
 - **Food**, beverages, and culinary practices associated with Iranian picnics
 - **Activities** that take place during a typical Iranian picnic
- Philosophical Dimensions
 - The relationship between Iranian picnics and the **classical elements** of earth, water, air, and fire
 - Importance of all five **human sensory** organs in Iranian picnics
- The Unforeseen Dimension
 - A unique **unforeseen** peril for today's Iranian picnics

I will touch lightly upon some of these dimensions and go into more detail for others. The focus, however, will be on physical locations where the picnics are held, the paraphernalia, equipment, and supplies typically used to choreograph the picnic – and of course, the food which is the core of Iranian picnics.

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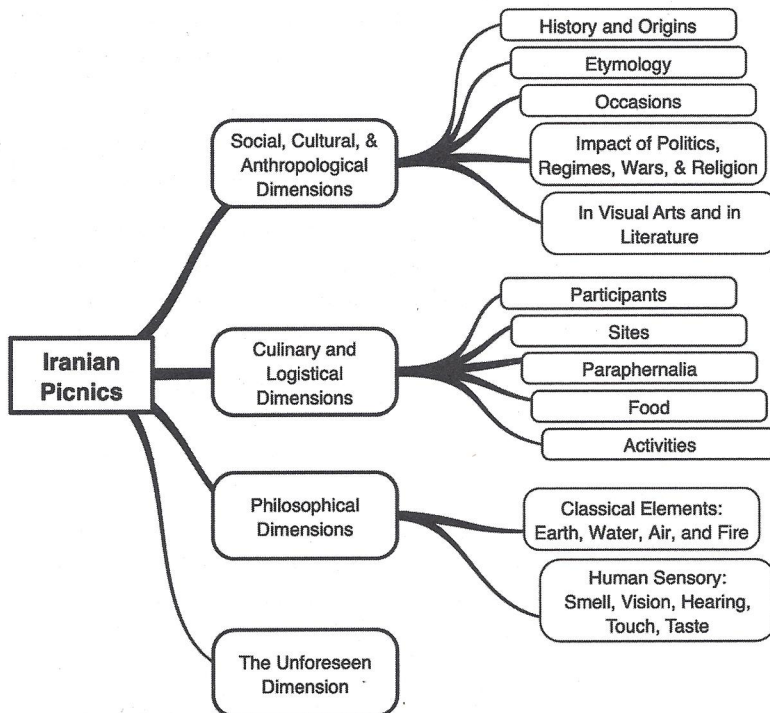


Figure 1. Dimensions of Iranian Picnics.

History and Origins

There are several secular and religious narratives about the origins of Iranian picnic rituals, all dating back to the first millennia BCE. Iranians' fascination with picnicking has roots in Zoroastrian beliefs as well as from the legendary Pishdadian King Jamshid of prehistoric Iran who celebrated outdoor festivals together with his people.³

One of the most well documented of these early picnics is grounded in the annual practice of *Sizdah-bedar* (Persian: رجب هجری) which literally translates to Hi on the spring equinox. The literary masterpiece *Shahnameh*, the Persian Book of Kings, is the national epic of Greater Iran.⁴ Written by the tenth-century Persian poet Abolghāsem Ferdowsi, it is of central importance to Persian culture. It narrates the mythology, legend, and history of ancient Persia from the creation of the world to the Muslim Arab conquest of Persia in the seventh century. It is stated in *Shahnameh* that the legendary King Jamshid, after having saved mankind from a severe winter, on the thirteenth day of spring advised his people that the weather was suitable and to spend a whole day happily in nature.⁵ According to another legend, since thirteen is considered an unlucky number, people should leave their homes and spend that day outside for fear that something bad might happen to them inside.

There is a considerable amount of historical information – both textual and pictorial depictions – about the royal picnics of ancient Persian kings. This is because details of their activities – even the most minor ones – were well recorded. Examples of such records include the ancient expedition of Kāmbeez II (King of Persia 530-522 BCE – son of Cyrus the Great) to Ethiopia in search of the so-called Table-in-the-Sun; nineteenth-century picnics of Nasser al-Din Shah (King of Iran, Qajar dynasty, 1848-96 CE) which were more like outdoor banquets, often accompanied by hunting activities, where servants and cooks would go in advance to select and prepare a site and prepare the food; and modern era photographs of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Shah of Iran, 1941-1979 CE) and his second wife, princess Soraya, picnicking (Figure 2).⁶

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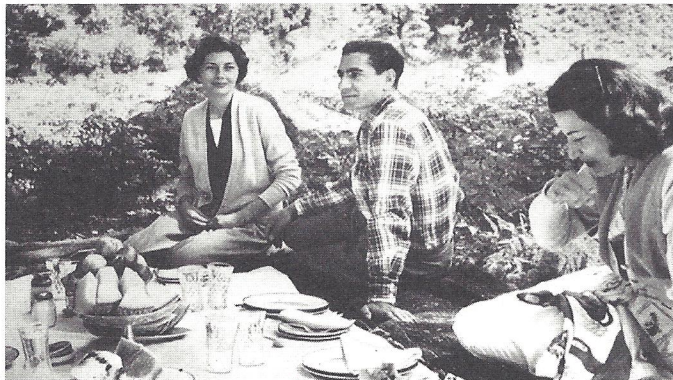


Figure 2. Mohammad Reza Pahlavi (Shah of Iran, 1941-1979 CE) and his second wife, princess Soraya (1st from left), picnicking (photograph courtesy of Faryar Javaherian).

Etymology of Persian Words for Picnic

There are two different words for picnic in the Persian language – a classical (historic) word and a contemporary (popular, modern) word. The classical Persian word for picnic is ‘تشگلگ’ (Romanized: *golgasht*), which literally means recreating/spending time/enjoying/roaming in a flower garden.⁷ This classical Persian word for picnic is rarely used in today’s conversational language. It is this word, however, that points to the importance of gardens in Persian culture and to their relationship with picnicking in Iran.⁸ Historically, Persian gardens are a representation of paradise which become a backdrop for picnics and associated feasts and activities.⁹ The contemporary word for picnic in the Persian language is ‘کین کیپ’, which is simply pronounced *picnic*. It is a word that infiltrated into Persian from the French ‘*pique-nique*’.

Occasions

Although Iranians will use any excuse for a picnic, there are some key occasions which are the most popular. Without a doubt, the most important, the most historic, and the most popular of Iranian picnic occasions take place nationwide on the thirteenth day of the Persian New Year, as mentioned earlier. This day is referred to as the *Sizdah-bedar* which marks the end of the annual *Norooz* celebrations. *Norooz* (Persian: زورون), which literally means



Figure 3. Iranian picnicking on *Sizdah-Bedar* in Netherlands (photograph courtesy of Persian Dutch Network, CC BY-SA 3.0).

‘new day’, is the annual observance of the Persian New Year which begins on the spring equinox. Iranians begin preparing for *Norooz* several weeks before, and associated rituals and celebrations continue for two weeks afterwards, culminating with an epic picnic on *Sizdah-bedar*. It is such an important picnicking occasion that Iranians living in other parts of the world also picnic on this day (Figure 3). *Sizdah-bedar* picnics are all-day events preceded by days of preparation and cooking.

*Everyone goes on the obligatory picnic ... everyone except the mullahs, that is, who'd just as soon do away with this pagan festival, which dates back over 3,000 years – well before the advent of Islam and its variants.*¹⁰

Aside from the *Sizdah-bedar*, there are other picnicking traditions driven by nature. In spring, when fruit trees begin to bloom (starting with almonds followed by citrus, cherry, pomegranates, stone fruit, and apples), Iranians like to picnic in the shade of these blooming trees and breathe in the aromas of the fragrant blossoms. In summer, when fruit trees are bearing fruit, Iranians have another seasonal excuse to linger in the shade of these trees and possibly participate in communal fruit picking activities. Most

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beautiful – and most delicious – of these is mulberry picking, when younger members of the group climb the huge mulberry trees, shake the branches, and encourage the super sweet mulberries to fall on sheets that have been laid on the ground underneath the tree.

In Iran, the workweek is from Saturday to Thursday in almost all public and governmental offices, and the one-day weekend is Friday – making Fridays, throughout the year, another very popular and desirable day for picnicking.

References to Picnics in Classical Persian and Contemporary Iranian Arts and Literature

Picnics have been a popular inspiration for the creation of exceptional works of art by Iranian visual artists – painters, photographers, mosaic artists, ceramic artists, and Persian miniaturists. There are well preserved artifacts, dating as far back as the fourteenth century, depicting picnics of royalty as well as common people. There are historic Persian visual art artifacts depicting Iranian picnics in permanent collections of museums around the world (Figures 4-8).



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Figure 4 (top left). A depiction of friends picnicking by an Iranian contemporary painter (photograph courtesy of F. Javaherian). Figure 5 (top right). A depiction of a family picnic by an Iranian contemporary painter (photograph courtesy of F. Javaherian). Figure 6 (bottom). Seventeenth-century ceramic tile panel depicting picnic scene in Iran (photograph courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum).



Figure 7 (left). Sixteenth-century Persian miniature painting depicting a royal picnic (photograph courtesy of Harvard University, Fine Arts Library). Figure 8 (right). black and white photograph depicting early nineteenth-century family picnic in Iran (photograph courtesy of Women's Worlds in Qajar Iran Collection, Harvard University).

In 2017, an extensive exhibition of such artifacts titled 'Iranian Picnic' (Persian: *نارای تشگلگ*, Romanized: *Golgasht-é-Eerani*) was held in the Golestan Palace Museum in Tehran. The exhibition contained historic and contemporary visual arts showing Iranian picnics spanning a period of 3000 years. The site of the exhibition, Golestan Palace, is one of the oldest historic monuments in the city of Tehran and a UNESCO world heritage site. Two picnic-centric facts had contributed to the selection of the exhibition site. The name of the exhibition site, *golestan* (Persian: *ناتسلگ*) which literally translates as 'flower garden', is directly related to the classic word for picnic in Persian language as was discussed earlier. Moreover, the museum already had a permanent collection of Persian miniatures depicting picnic scenes.

There are many occurrences of the classical word for picnic in Persian language 'تشگلگ' (Romanized: *golgasht*) in Persian poetry dating as far back as 1100s.¹¹ These poets primarily used the word in the sense of its literal meaning for a most pleasant outdoor site for recreating, spending time, and roaming in a garden and often next to a stream:

ارالصم تشگلگ و دباآن کر بآرانک / تفای یهاوخن تن ج رد مک یق اب یم یق اس هب
O butler, bring what is left. Even in Paradise, you will not find the purity and
freshness of this promenade.¹²

Familiar and Unusual Sites Where Iranians Hold Their Picnics

Selecting the site for picnics is not taken lightly by Iranians. Much thought and consideration go into the selection process – who is coming, who is not coming, the occasion, the season, the length of the outing, the predicted weather, the budget, the

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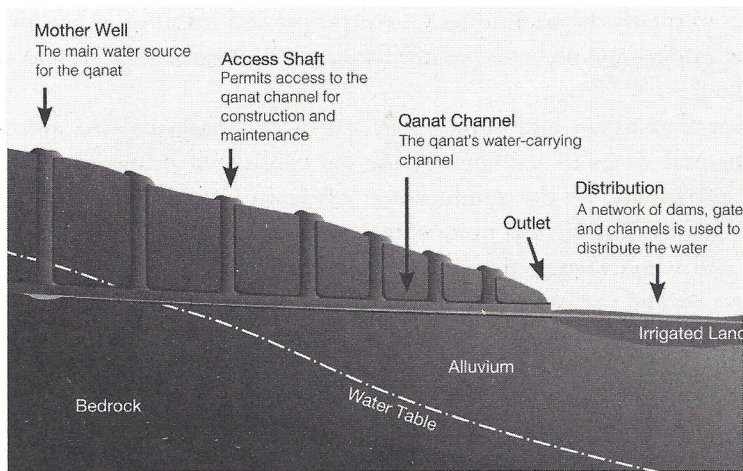


Figure 9. Cross-section of a typical Iranian qanat system (courtesy of Samuel Baily, CC BY 3.0).

distance to travel, the desired type of food, how much equipment to take, available transportation, etc. In fact, the selection process itself is a ritual of its own.

Iran is full of wonderful urban picnic areas, city parks, and roadside green spaces with their lawns, trees, and flowers faithfully taken care of by municipal gardeners and landscaping personnel. In the countryside, there are magnificent orchards, many open to the public for picnicking. There are also luscious oases in dry regions of the country. The existence of these green spaces is not only because of Iranians' love of outdoors and their obsession with picnicking but also due to ancient agricultural necessities.

On the Iranian Plateau, water is scarce and considered sacred. Sometime in the early first millennium BCE, the people of what would become Iran developed an ingenious method for transporting water over long distances in hot and dry climates without loss due to evaporation called *qhanāt* (Persian: تانق).¹³ The underground structure of *qhanāts*

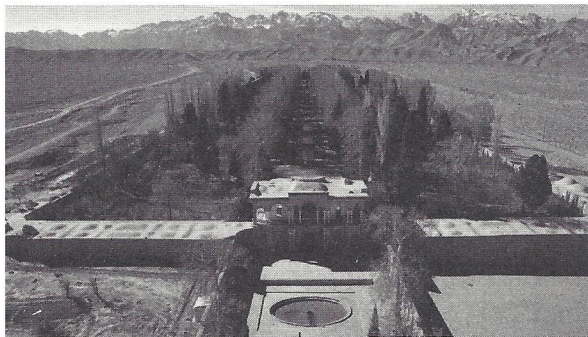


Figure 10. Shazdeh Garden outside the city of Kerman in Iran fed by water that comes from a qhanāt originated 70 km away (photograph courtesy of S. H. Rashedi).

is made up of a collection of vertical shafts, connected by a very low sloping underground tunnel which carries the water to the surface at a distance (Figure 9). Traditionally formal gardens and orchards were placed over *qhanāts* close to where the water would emerge from the underground system (Figure 10). The water would flow through the garden on its way to irrigate farms. Although the primary role

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of *ghanāts* is to supply drinking water for the people and irrigation water for agriculture, the resulting gardens and orchards became lovely oases for gatherings, recreating, roaming, and picnicking.

In addition to urban and rural green spaces and oases created around *ghanāts*, shores of natural rivers in the countryside are considered prime picnicking sites for Iranians – particularly in the summertime where the cool flowing water serves as a natural refrigerant. In fact, it is quite common for the picnickers to immerse beverage containers and whole watermelons in the flowing water to cool. The same is true not only for sites around natural rivers but also for areas around man-made water canals.

One of the most intriguing traditions of Iranians is to spread their picnic in cemeteries and the grounds of religious sites. One nineteenth-century visitor noted this long-standing practice: “The shrine and tower are said to be 782 years old, and are kept in wonderful repair. And the place is often visited by Persians as an agreeable rendezvous

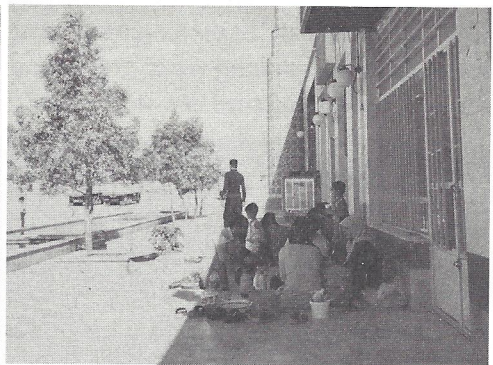
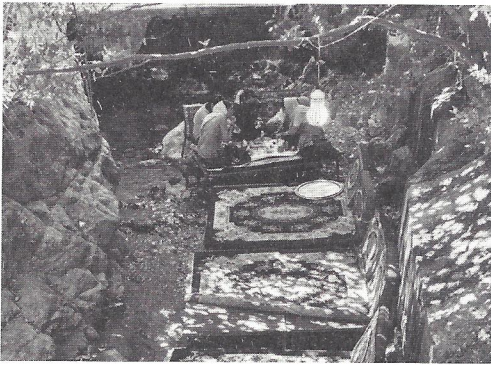
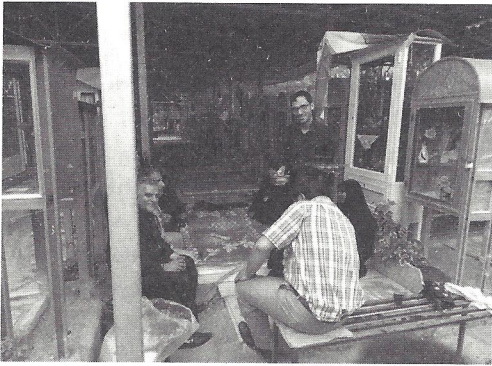


Figure 11 (top left). Picnicking at a cemetery (photograph courtesy of Zohreh Bayatrizi). Figure 12 (top right). Picnicking on the frozen grounds on the edge of ski slopes (photograph courtesy of Nader Mehravari). Figure 13 (bottom left). Picnicking in a deep river ravine where simple flat platforms are built into the side of the mountain (photograph courtesy Diego Delso, delso.photo, License CC-BY-SA). Figure 14 (bottom right). A family picnicking at a roadside truck stop (photograph courtesy of Lois Pryce).

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for a picnic.¹⁴ In such settings, picnics begin by with a prayer in remembrance for family members and friends who have passed away. It is then that eating and relaxing begins (Figure 11). Symbolically, eating nourishes not only the body but also the soul, and hence diminishes sorrow. Finally, food is offered to others who might be in the cemetery.

Frozen or muddy ground, lack of greenery, and other obstacles do not stop Iranians from having their picnics. Picnicking on frozen ground on the edges of ski slopes is quite popular in Iran where picnickers can rent a simple flat wooden platform to throw their picnic rug on, protecting them from the frozen ground (Figure 12). Wherever there are bodies of water, Iranians find a way to picnic. For years, entrepreneurs have constructed very simple flat platforms on the muddy grounds on the edges of rivers or in the deep rocky ravines to facilitate picnicking close to the water (Figure 13). When desperate, any out of the way piece of flat ground will become a picnicking site – traffic circles, caves, and even truck stops (Figure 14).

Or a picnic may be arranged for a moonlit night in the summer, when a cold supper or even a hot dinner may be served in a cave, of which there are many in the hills a few miles from the city.¹⁵

Paraphernalia, Equipment, and Supplies Taken to Iranian Picnics

When it comes to paraphernalia taken to picnics, Iranians are not stingy. They often bring along a full set of equipment and supplies to provide day-long comfort, nourishment, and entertainment. Iranians are famous for not only fully loading their car trunks but also cleverly tying a slew of picnic necessities to the roofs of their cars. Some of the key items are discussed below.

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Carpet

The choreography of Iranian picnics begins with spreading a 'carpet' (rug, mat, blanket, tarp, a thick piece of cloth) on the ground (or on a simple wooden platform) – several of them if necessary. It could be as simple as a blanket or as precious as a handwoven Persian carpet. Iranian picnics don't exist without first laying out a carpet. The carpet represents the foundation on which the picnic is staged and where food and comfort are experienced. It softens the hardness of the ground. It is a representation of openness, hospitality, sharing, and reception. Since it is spread on the ground, it is also a sign of closeness of Iranians to nature.

It is considered improvident to travel without a carpet, which is an essential feature of a picnic, to lay the dust or cushion the roughness of the ground.¹⁶

Sofreh

Before modern times, Persian society ate all their meals on the ground. *Sofreh* (Persian: سفره) is the term used to refer to a cloth on which the food is served on, and that people sit around to eat. It is equivalent to a tablecloth but can be spread on any surface

– not necessarily on a table. The word *sofreh* is both a noun and a verb. When used as a verb, it refers to the concept of setting-the-table, that is, getting ready for the food to be served. Typically, it is a thin (simple or luxurious hand-embroidered) square or rectangular piece of cloth dedicated for meals. Once the picnic carpet has been put on the ground, the *sofreh* is spread on the middle of the carpet. People can walk on the carpet but not on the *sofreh* – the only things that go on the *sofreh* are the food and the associated plates, bowls, glasses, and utensils. Normally, in one's home, a *sofreh* is spread right before eating and folded and taken away right after the meal is finished; *sofreh* is spread several times a day. For picnics, however, most families spread the *sofreh* once at the beginning of the picnic and let it stay out for the duration of the picnic. This is another indication of the centrality of food in Iranian picnics.

Cooking Gear

Although a good portion of food served at a typical Iranian picnic is cooked and prepared ahead of time at home, certain cooking gear is almost always brought along. Traditionally, the most popular of cooking gear is the Persian-style grill called *manghal* (Persian: لقم). *Manghals* are typically used to grill meat on skewers, and therefore, unlike western-style grills, do not have grates. In addition, there is also some type of heating gear to warm up prepared food or, more importantly, to boil water for making tea. These days, small portable propane tanks with a single burner on top serve this purpose. Such portable heating tools are now so popular now that a new word for it has infiltrated the contemporary Persian language: *gāz-é-picnicki* (Persian: یکیںکیپ ز اگ) which literally translates into 'picnic gas'. Unlike western parks with picnic tables and elevated barbecue grills, regardless of whether it is a *manghal* or a modern-day portable propane-based burner, they are put on the ground where people squat down to use them – another sign that everything happens on the ground.

'Let's go for a walk in the woods', I suggested. 'What, a picnic?' she asked. 'No', I said, 'people go for walks here without taking half the kitchen with them'.¹⁷

Tea Making Provisions

Tea is the most popular and most consumed beverage among Iranians, so it is not surprising to see complete sets of tea making and tea drinking gear carried to picnics to make the gallons of tea that will be consumed. These could be as simple as a metal kettle to boil water and a ceramic teapot to brew the tea, all the way to a magnificent kerosene-based samovar that has been lugged into the picnic site even on the hottest days of the year.

At one time we lived in a house outside the city of Shiraz which had a lovely old garden [...]. It was a common thing for people to come and ask if they might spend the day in the garden, and we were only too glad to allow them to do so. They would come carrying a samovar and tea pot, a kalyan, a large bundle of lettuces and a bottle

of sekunjabene, a syrup made of sugar, vinegar and mint; this they sprinkle over the lettuces, which they consider a necessary adjunct to a picnic. There was often a good deal of simple merriment among the people, but the great joy was to be sitting in a garden, and compared to the hot dusty, noisy road outside it was a veritable paradise.¹⁸

Comfort and Relaxation Necessities

Picnicking in Iran does not mean a lack of comfort. Although the carpet provides some level of softness, more comfort is often desired for the after-meal naps. It is not uncommon for picnickers to bring along a complete set of bedding including futon-type mattresses, large comfortable pillows, sheets, and blankets. For some – men and woman alike – full relaxation is not achieved without a few puffs from a hookah water pipe (Persian: نایلق, Romanized: *ghalyān*). Typically, hot coals from cooking *kabābs* over the *manghal* are used to put on the head of the hookah.

Other Equipment for Entertainment

Playing games is a common element of Iranian picnics – both those that can be played relatively quietly while relaxing on the carpet and those that require running around a field. Backgammon sets, playing cards, kites, a soccer ball or two, and small musical instruments are among the most common gaming paraphernalia that one finds used during Iranian picnics.

Food, Beverages, and Culinary Practices Associated with Iranian Picnics

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The central focus of Iranian picnics is food that ranges from simple to elaborate. Picnic meals include a full range of food items: cold and hot; savoury and sweet; many prepared ahead of time at home, some bought on the way, and some cooked on-site, including snacks, starters, mains, desserts, and fruit. To illustrate the breadth of the food items that one might experience in an Iranian picnic, I have listed the most popular of such food items by categories:

- Snacks and starters:
 - *Ajeel* (mixtures of salted and unsalted nuts, seeds, and dried fruit)
 - *Kahoo-va-Sekanjebeen* (hearts of romaine lettuce dipped in a thick vinegar and mint-flavoured sweet syrup)
- Dishes prepared at home and served at room temperature:
 - *Māst-ó-Khiār* (yogurt, chopped cucumber, and mint)
 - *Kotlet* (pan-fried patties of ground lamb, mashed potatoes, and eggs)
 - *Kookoo-é-Sabzi* (chopped fresh herbs and egg frittata-like crustless-quiche-like dish)
 - Traditional Persian sandwiches using the Persian bâtard-like bread called *bolki*, stuffed with a variety of cold ingredients – the most famous being mortadella (*kālbās*) sandwich

- o *Sālād-é-Olivieh* (one of the most popular salads with Iranian people comprised of a medley of chopped chicken, potatoes, eggs, and sour cucumber pickle mixed with a bit of mustard, some mayonnaise, and lots of olive oil)
- Dishes prepared at home and served warm (either kept warm during transport or warmed up at the picnic site):
 - o *Āsh* (an extensive class of thick porridge-like soup of chopped fresh herbs and a medley of legumes; in particular, *Āsh-é-Reshteh* which is a variety that has Persian wheat-based noodles)
 - o *Polow* or *Tāhchin* (an extensive class of Persian steamed rice dishes where the rice is combined with other ingredients during the steaming phase.)
- Cooked onsite:
 - o Variety of traditional Persian grilled *kabābs*
- Accompaniments:
 - o Varieties of Persian flat bread such as *sangak*, *barbari*, *lavash*, or *taftoon* (in Iran, often purchased fresh from neighbourhood bakeries on the way to the picnic)
 - o Persian feta-like brined white cheese
 - o Plate of fresh herbs (mint, tarragon, watercress), scallions, and radishes
 - o Homemade pickles

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Impact of Politics, Regimes, Wars, Religion, and the Risk of Unforeseen

Picnicking in Iran has successfully endured centuries of national upheavals and triumphs such as geographical expansions and shrinkages, winning and losing wars, economic expansions and stagnation, and personal freedoms and restrictions. In fact, picnics have always been a means to provide comfort during times of societal stress.



Figure 15. Contrasting images of Iranian picnics: 1976 on the left and 2019 on the right (left photograph © Bruno Barbey/Magnum Photos. Right photograph courtesy of Jan Cornell).

It [war] evokes an ominous sense of imminent danger, which makes the picnic all the more thrilling and exciting – just as during the war we would party every night because we did not know where or when the next bomb would fall in Tehran.¹⁹

At the same time, however, there have been visible impacts on some aspects of Iranian picnics due to religious interpretations of the day. The most visible of such changes are due to the strict government-imposed social behaviours and codes of conduct since 1979, as contrasted in the two parts of Figure 15.

Picnicking for people of Iran has and continues to be more than just relaxing in nature, eating delicious food, and enjoying the company of family and friends. For some, the picnic is an analogy for returning to tribal and nomadic life. It is also a pursuit of a degree of freedom – regardless of how short-lived or risky that freedom might be. It is a freedom from the constraints of daily life, social and class barriers, religiously interpreted restrictions, guidelines of societal courtesies, and strict government-imposed social behaviours and codes of conduct – unless disrupted by an uncertain emergence of the moral police.

Picnics have an unforeseeable dimension in all cultures – rain might fall, wind might gather – but in today's Iran this is even more so, because the Basij, the militia that controls social behavior, might, like the lion in the savannah, spring up from any corner and disrupt the feast.²⁰

Closing

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The act of picnicking is ingrained in the souls of Iranian people. It is one of the key characteristics of the Iranian people, one which has historically been, and which continues to be, independent of age, sex, income, position, religion, and ethnicity. It epitomizes the love Iranians have for nature, and some even believe it has been ingrained in Iranians from nomadic times. Iranian picnics and the accompanying feasts and activities are unique to the culture of Persianate societies. Iranian picnics celebrate long-held values ingrained in Persianate societies – friendship, family, nature, hospitality, and food. Eating in the open air is one of the Iranian customs, a tradition established thousands of years ago. In picnics, food becomes much more than the daily necessity of feeding the body. It becomes the central vehicle for enjoyment, relaxing, contemplating, and feeding one's soul.

Notes

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