

## Persian paradise by Stephen Waldron

I was awarded my RIBA fellowship in the first new tranche in 2017 at Portland St. This was for my work both in the UK and overseas in community-based development including emergency responses, charitable schemes, estate regeneration and refurbishment, with an emphasis on simple renewables and water saving technologies.

The dish of the day comes from my time as a World Relief Country Director in Iran for the post - earthquake response in Bam in southern Iran, deep in the desert. On Boxing Day 2003 Bam suffered one of the worst earthquakes of my lifetime with a very high percentage of its occupants killed; I led a team of about 25 young volunteers who did an amazing job in average temperatures of 46°C in both feeding refugees in the camps within the town, as well as managing self-build construction of an earthquake resistant to design that I generated using local materials and techniques.

The team were mostly Iranians but others came from other countries, and of course I came from the UK, and it speaks to me of the power of food to bridge every type of division and opposition. The team were entirely made up of committed Christians working in an intensely Muslim context: this was the first Christian team to be allowed to work in Iran under the Ayatollah since the fall of the Shah, and I was conscious that just 11 years previously church leaders in Iran were being beheaded and their heads put on poles on various city walls. And so we faced challenges and sensitivities that no one had prepared us for. I especially was on a steep learning curve. Somehow this dish made all the problems fade away.

As a farewell celebration in my honour a young married couple prepared a meal of the traditional Persian dish which I call 'Chicken Pomegranate & Walnut Stew'. This meal was so utterly delicious and amazing that every birthday since then my wife has cooked it for me. It conjures up the quite intense friendships that developed within a tiny but massively committed group of people to the service of others in the most difficult conditions. One day the temperature on site reached 54°C! Every time I eat it I get quite emotional!

### Ingredients

3 tbsp vegetable oil  
2 large onions, diced  
8 chicken joints, bone in and skin removed  
1 tbsp plain flour  
600g/1lb 5oz de-shelled walnuts, finely ground  
3 tbsp caster sugar  
450ml/16fl oz pomegranate molasses  
sea salt and freshly ground black pepper  
500g/1lb 2oz basmati rice  
drizzle of light olive oil  
60g/2¼oz butter

### Method

1. Heat a large saucepan and pour in the vegetable oil and fry the onions until translucent and lightly browned.

2. Season the chicken on both sides and add to the pan. Stir well under a higher heat to seal the joints all over, turning them. Once they are browned set aside.
3. Heat another large saucepan over a medium high heat and heat the flour until it turns slightly brown. Add the ground walnuts and cook the mixture through.
4. Add 1.2 litres/2 pints of water to the pan, stir well and bring the mixture to a slow boil, then cover and cook for an hour over a low-medium heat.
5. Add the sugar and pomegranate molasses and stir well for a minute ensuring the molasses fully dissolves.
6. Add the chicken and onions to the walnut and pomegranate mixture, cover and cook for about 2 hours, stirring every 30 minutes to stop the walnuts sticking to the pan.
7. For the rice, bring a large saucepan of water to the boil. Add the rice and salt. Boil for 7 minutes until the rice is par boiled. Drain the rice and rinse under cold running water for a couple of minutes.
8. Line the bottom of the saucepan used to cook the rice with non-stick baking paper. Return to the hob and pour in the oil, butter and a tablespoon of crushed sea salt. Scatter the rice in the saucepan.
9. Wrap the pan lid in a tea towel to give a tight seal.
10. Cook the rice on a low heat for 45 minutes-1 hour. The grains should be puffed up when cooked. Flip the rice onto a serving plate, then scrape out the crispy rice at the bottom of the pot and place on top.
11. Serve the chicken alongside the rice topped with pomegranate seeds.