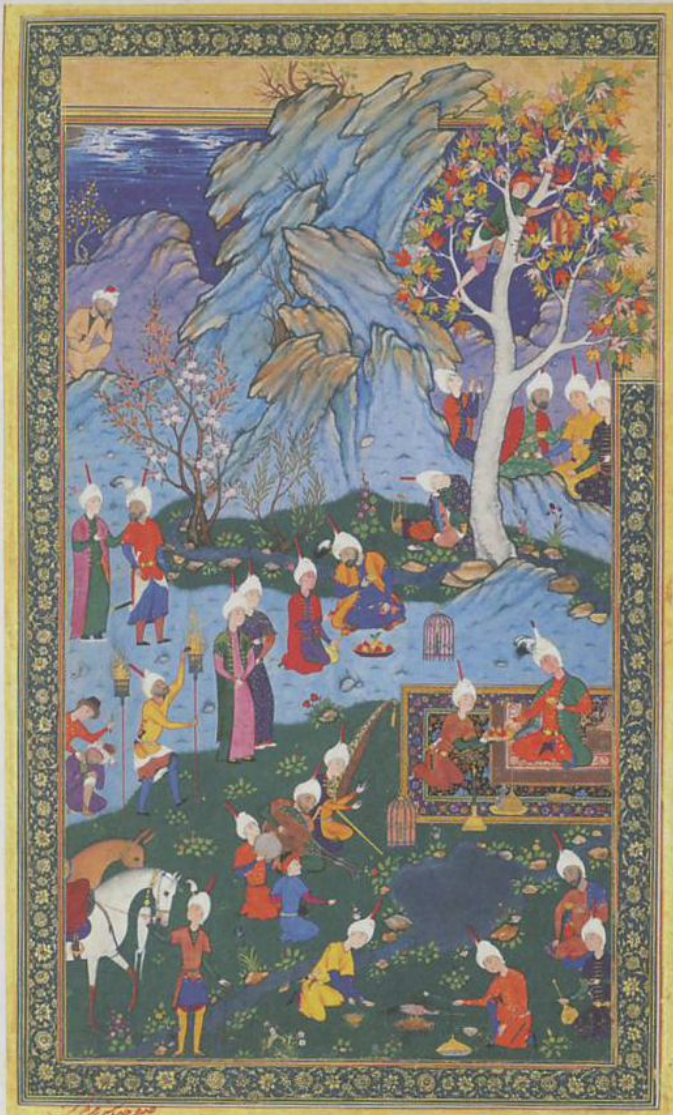


# Picnic: Iranian Style



Left: Ottoman night banquet, 15th century. Center: Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi of Iran and his wife Empress Soraya, outside of Baghdad, 1953. Right: Nasser-al-Din Shah picnic preparation, Sorkheh Hesar, 1893.

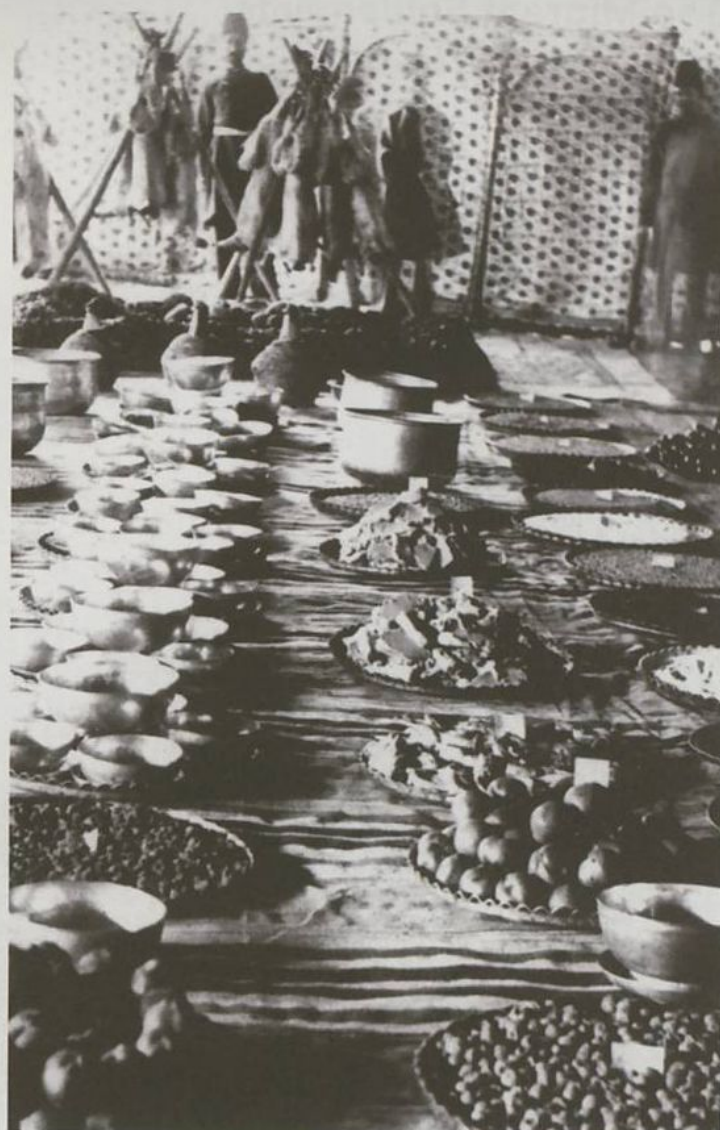
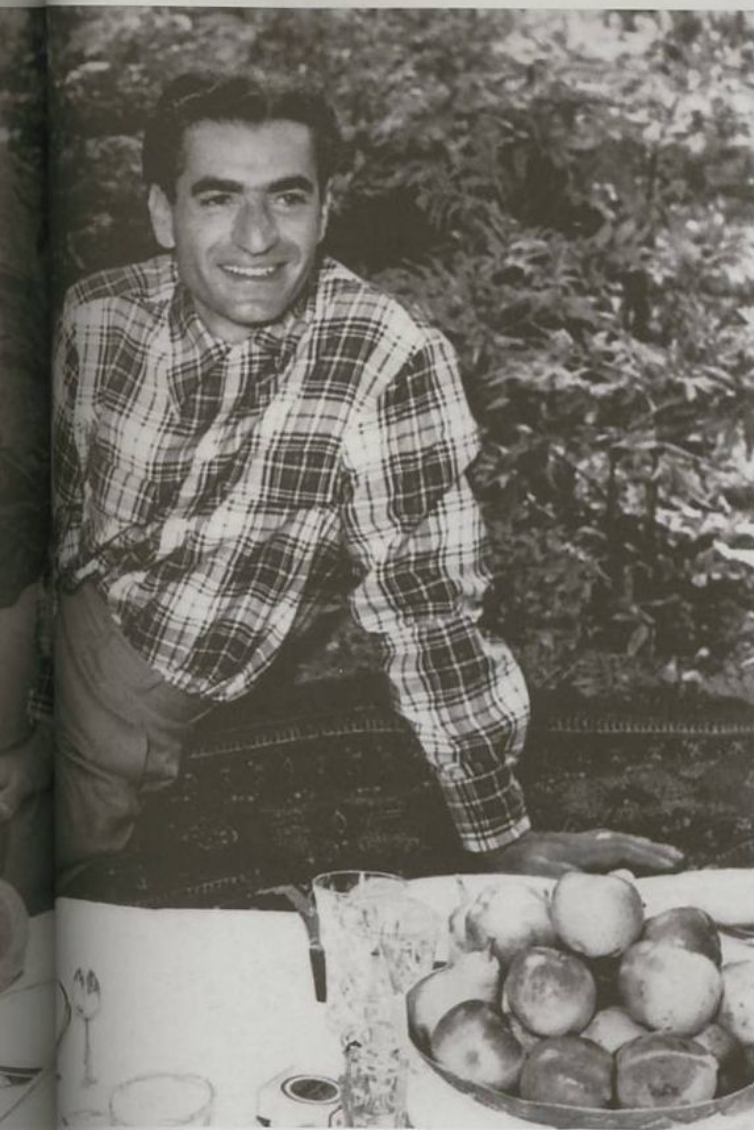


In a scene from *Out of Africa* (1985) Robert Redford and Meryl Streep sit in folding chairs, looking out at an expansive savannah, an ice bucket with a bottle of champagne to the side. And then a lion passes by. When I saw the film for the first time, the scene reminded me of life in the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially during the war with Iraq from 1980 to 1988. It 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.

The word *pique-nique* first appeared in French in the 16th century to designate a meal to which all diners contribute. But events similar to what today we know as the picnic have existed since antiquity. Not many references to picnics are extant in Western history books, but in Persia, where even the most minor of activities by kings were recorded, many descriptions of royal picnics exist. Typically, during the travels and hunting parties of kings and princes, a band of sentinels, servants, and cooks would set out ahead of the king's entourage to choose an ideal site on which to pitch tents and prepare food.

In 18th-century France, like in Persia, picnics were reserved mostly for aristocrats, especially during hunting parties. Paintings depict picnics at Versailles and other palaces. Their playful and sensual qualities, along with

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a Rousseauistic twist, reflect the idealization of life in nature, to which the aristocratic lifestyle of idleness and entertainment common in prerevolutionary France was prone.

During the 19th century many phenomena combined to give the picnic greater significance, not just in France, but throughout Europe: urbanization, industrialization, transportation systems (making it possible for people to travel by train to suburbs and to more distant venues), regulation of work hours, and democratization. Indeed it can be said that the motto of the French Republic—*Liberté, égalité, fraternité*—is embodied in the picnic.

The founding ritual of picnics in Iran is *Sizdah Be-dar*, a celebration of the rebirth of nature. Picnicking in other periods in Iran reflects the course of nature: the blossoming of almond, cherry, peach, nectarine, apple, and finally pear trees. When these trees bloom, Iranians picnic and nap in the perfumed air. Picnics also take place in cemeteries, mausoleums, and other religious sites. People say prayers and mourn deceased family members, they then eat and relax, and finally they distribute offerings of food to the people around. Eating diminishes grief; it is a symbolic way of giving nourishment for both the body and the soul.

At every level of society, picnicking denotes the quest for freedom: freedom of space, freedom of behavior, and freedom from constraints.

No social barriers exist. None of the usual rules of courtesy and polite society apply. A new form of sociability develops.

In Iran, the picnic is a family affair: it is an occasion for extended family members to come together in a new configuration. The most important accessory of the picnic choreography is the cloth that is laid out on the ground—the picnic blanket. This cloth is the symbol of closeness to nature since the earth is so directly felt underneath; it is also the symbol of conviviality, generosity, sharing, and opening up to others. At the table, elders would usually sit at the head, but around the cloth on the ground, hierarchies shift; in fact, male and female roles are reversed. It is mostly women who plan the picnic. They make the decisions and the men implement them. The men drive. They make the barbecue. They carry the equipment and supplies. The women show the way. The mother is the axis of the picnic. She observes and maintains the traditions. She brings the family members together and anchors the festivities. She settles in around the tablecloth and typically remains there throughout the day, while the others come and go.

In Iran, where there are strict rules of public-private penetrability, during the picnic day what is otherwise forbidden is allowed. In Chitgar Park—one of the biggest green spaces in Tehran—bicycle paths for women were established, but otherwise women are not allowed to

ride bicycles. In urban contexts, women and men are segregated—on buses, in the metro, at the entrances of government buildings; but at the picnic, segregation gives way to leniency, practiced by the people as well as by the authorities. This temporary suspension of rules—particularly as it relates to the physical body—enables light flirting as well.

Because codes of conduct are relaxed at picnics, today's Iranian youth take advantage of the picnic as a space for engaging in all sorts of forbidden activities and expressing their anti-regime sentiments: they dress in daring and colorful fashions, they play loud music, drink alcohol, consort in mixed company, and flirt.

But the picnic is an ephemeral situation, enabling a brief taste of fleeting freedom, a momentary union with nature. In life in Iran, the picnic is a moment to come up from the bottom of the polluted well to take a breath of fresh air, and this too has its dangers. 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. However, to reverse Ralph Waldo Emerson's quote—"as soon as there is life there is danger"—I believe that where there is danger, there is life.