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Albaloo Polo (Sour Cherry Rice with Meatballs)

16 ounces of frozen sour cherries or sour cherry preserves
2/3 cup of sugar
4 cups basmati rice
1 large white or yellow onion, diced
1 lb. ground beef
1/2 cup oil
1 white potato
1 cup shelled pistachios, chopped
1 tsp. paprika
1 tsp. cinnamon
Salt & pepper to taste
Saffron powder, or crushed saffron threads

For the sour cherries:

- Place the sour cherries in a saucepan. Add sugar and cook on medium-low heat uncovered for 30 minutes. Juices from the cherries combined with the sugar will create a cherry syrup that will be used later in rice.
- Strain the cherries and set the sauce aside.
- Return the cherries to the saucepan. Add butter and saffron water and gently mix over low heat for a couple of minutes. Remove from heat and set aside.

For saffron: there are two options...

1. "Bloom" saffron threads in a small bowl over a cube or two of ice
OR
2. Boil a small amount of water and pour about 1/4 cup into a small bowl. Crush saffron threads in a mortar and pestle and add to boiled water. Stir and allow to "bloom."

For the rice:

- In a large pot, bring 8 cups water and salt to a boil.
- While water is coming to a boil, rinse rice 3 or 4 times to remove some of the starch.

- Add the rinsed rice to the boiling water and boil on high heat, uncovered, for about 5-8 minutes, or until the rice has slightly softened and looks a bit “fuzzy.” Drain the rice in a colander, rinse with cool water, and set aside.
- Peel potato and slice lengthwise into about ¼” thick slices.
- In a small bowl, mix 1 cup of the lightly cooked rice with 2 tablespoons of saffron-water mixture.
- Pour about ¼ cup of oil into the bottom of the a 4 quart or larger pot with a tight-fitting lid.
- Bring the oil to a sizzle and add slices of potatoes to cover the bottom of the pot. Brown the potatoes a bit on one side and then flip over to brown the other side. Make sure potatoes are evenly spaced and not overlapping. This will become the crispy potato referred to as Tahdigh.
- Layer about 1/3 of the partially cooked rice and a 1/3 of sour cherries and a bit of the cherry juice into the pot. Repeat this layering until all of the rice and cherries have been layered in the pot.
- Wrap the pot’s lid with a clean kitchen towel and place on top of the pot. Allow the rice to steam over a medium-low to medium heat for about 30-35 minutes.

Koofteh Ghel Gheli (meatballs)

- Place ground beef, diced onion, paprika, cinnamon, and salt & pepper in a medium sized bowl and mix well with your hands, so that the mixture feels like a smooth paste.
- Take a small amount of the meat mixture and rolling small meatballs between the palms of your hands. These meatballs are typically about the size of a hazelnut.
- Once all the meatballs have been formed, heat a large frying pan, and add the remaining oil. Sauté the meatballs until they are fully cooked and crispy. This should take about 10 minutes.

•When the rice is ready, scoop it from the pan and gently spread out on a serving platter. Arrange the meatballs on the serving platter, around the rice and garnish all with pistachios and almonds. The potato Tahdigh can also be arranged around the edges of the platter.

Mirza Ghasemi (eggplant dip)

2 large eggplants

¼ cup olive oil, for brushing on eggplants

3 garlic cloves, crushed

1 large onion, chopped

1 tsp. turmeric

3 Tbsp. tomato paste or 1 cup of crushed tomatoes

Water

2 eggs

Salt & pepper

2 Tbsp. dried mint, optional

- Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
- Wash and dry eggplant. Using the point of a sharp knife or a skewer, prick the eggplant all over. Cut in half lengthwise and brush open portion with olive oil. Roast, open side down, on a foil-lined baking sheet in oven until soft. Allow to cool until you can comfortably touch the eggplant. Scrape the flesh out of the skin of the eggplant and chop with a sharp knife.
- Heat a good drizzle of oil in a frying pan over medium-high heat. Cook the onion until golden and crisp, then add in 2 Tablespoons of dried mint. Sauté for about a minute, being careful not to burn the mint. Remove from the pan and set aside.
- Heat another good drizzle of oil in the pan and add the crushed garlic. Stir over medium heat until the garlic is just starting to color. Stir in the turmeric.
- Add another drizzle of oil to the pan and place over medium heat. Add the chopped eggplant, tomato or tomato paste, and fried onions & mint mixture. Season to taste with salt & pepper. Stir to combine well, then cook for a few minutes until slightly thickened. If mixture seems too dry, add a Tbsp of water, a little at a time until it resembles a smooth dip.
- Using a spatula or wooden spoon, create two wells in the eggplant mixture. Break one egg gently over each well and cover the pan with a lid. Allow the mixture to simmer until the eggs harden.
- Serve with pita bread or rice.