

Orchid dishes bloom

Hearty beef and chicken stews, dolmas and, yes, kebabs, keep fans of Persian food coming back.

- C. Thi Nguyen

Fesenjan - the Persian stew of poultry, ground walnuts and pomegranate - isn't easy to make. The walnut oils scorch easily, and making it right takes two hours of constant stirring and attention. The result at **Orchid Grill & Kabob** tastes like glowing, homey heaven, a blast of pomegranate tang and nutty warmth and savory chicken.

The murky brown of *fesenjan* conceals a wild union of opposites - savory almost sweet walnut and meat against the searingly floral sour of pomegranate. It's like a peanut butter and jelly sandwich that put on a glass slipper and was transformed into a Persian festival stew.

Orchid Grill & Kabob, co-owned by Abbas and Sarah Mohammadi (who are also co-chefs), has been in the same Tarzana strip mall for 17 years, but it's slowly grown from a tiny stall to full-sized restaurant. It's been doing business for nine months since the last expansion. The newest incarnation is bright and open and cheerful, with big windows and an enormous steam table for lunch buffets. Family members seem to be constantly wandering in and out of the kitchen. It can feel like you've been sucked into an Iranian family party.



Stuffed grape leaves, fesenjan, gormeh sabzi, rice and kashke bademjan.

Fresh, from scratch

An aroma of constantly grilling meat and toasting spices and simmering fresh herbs hits you the moment you enter the door. The dishes hit beautifully strident flavors - bursts of bright dill and mint and dark spinach bitters. “There are no secret ingredients or additives,” manager Matthew Forutan says. “We just make everything fresh, from scratch.”

There are three basic categories of dishes here: appetizers, grilled meats and stews. The first instinct of many non-Iranians might be to get stuck in kebab-land, and, admittedly, the kitchen has a superb, light touch with the grill. But the most intense experiences are lower down on the menu, down among the stews.

Most aromatic of them all is *baghaly polo*. It comes in two parts: first, a simple, ultra-tender stewed lamb, and second, a brilliantly green platter of basmati rice, baked in enough dill to drown a cat. It's suffused with fragrant greenness, every kernel of rice coated in bright melted dill. Mix the lamb and dill-rice together, and you get a union of opposites: the meaty lamb and the smack in the face of more fresh dill than you ever knew you wanted. Glorious.

Try the *ghormeh sabzi* - a fascinatingly bitter stew of beef and many, many greens. If the *fesenjan* is the brash youngster of stews, then this is the thoughtful elder stew, full of long-cooked herbs and the essence of spinach. It has the thoughtful, unfolding bitterness of those old-man habits: cigars and scotches and stouts. High-concept perfumer Christopher Brosius makes a perfume that's supposed to smell like his memory of his grandfather - sawdust and motor oil and sweat and Old Spice and love. There's a kinship between that perfume and this stew.

Every stew at **Orchid Grill & Kabob** comes with a huge platter of steamed rice and beautifully massive hunks of toasted rice crust. This is *tahdig*, the crusty browned rice from the bottom of the pot, intense in its crunch. Here's a secret: With the volume of catering they do, the kitchen generates more *tahdig* than they could ever give away. You can have as much extra *tahdig* as you'd like, free. Just ask.



Owner Abbas Mohammadi, seated, and son-in-law and restaurant manager Matthew Forutan.

Try the eggplant

Pretty much everything on the menu is great - made with care and nuance. The grilled meats are crisp and excellent, particularly the startlingly intense chicken *barg* kebab, a kebab of excellently gamey chicken breast. The dolmas are beautiful: soft, sensuous affairs of tender grape leaf and melting, moist, warm rice.

But the best dish of all might be Orchid's *kashke bademjan* - a mash of baked and sauteed eggplant topped with a pool of yogurt and a tinier pool of sauteed mint. Of the many Middle Eastern eggplant dips in Los Angeles, Orchid's *kashke bademjam* may be the most devoted to the singular taste of unadulterated eggplant: slightly bitter and resonant with deep vegetal sweetness.

The texture is profoundly sensuous: an unctuous, mouth-coating stickiness. It feels a little like a vegetarian steak tartare.

For more information, please visit www.orchidgrillandkabob.com. To view the article on the LA Times website - [click here](#).

In addition, the original article as published can be viewed [here](#).