

Shabe Yalda – Celebrating the Longest Night of the Year  
By Fariba Paknejad

Shabe Yalda (Yalda night) is amongst the most special nights in the Persian culture. At the sunset of the last day of fall – the longest day of the year – Persians gather at the house of the eldest member of their families to eat delicious food and colorful fruits, drink sweet drinks and spend their time together until dawn to celebrate the rebirth of the sun.

My first memory of this celebration is from my childhood when like many other Persian families, my parents and siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins and friends went to my grandparents' house. Upon our entry and before greeting the other members of the family, a glimpse of their happy faces and the warm atmosphere was a sign of the beginning of a magical night. Everyone was sitting next to each other around the korsi (a wide table with short feet covered by a thick blanket on top of a heater) waiting for us to arrive. I immediately went to the kitchen and gave my grandmother the biggest hug that I could. Next, I went and joined others and waited for the best part of the night to begin.

After a few minutes, my grandmother and aunties welcomed us with dishes full of watermelons, pomegranate, pistachios, and dried nuts on their hands. The way my grandmother had decorated the dishes and how they looked next to each other on top of the korsi, was nothing short of extraordinary.

After finishing eating the fruits, it was time for us to follow the other traditions of Yalda. As a way of remembering our long-lasting culture and ancestors, my grandfather began to read the Shahnameh – The Book of Persian Kings by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. His deep but calming voice kept the attention of the entire family for a long period. I didn't understand what it was really about, but I knew that my favorite part was just about to start.

On this night, Persians also read from the book of the poems of Hafez named The Divine Hafez. We use it as a way to tell our fortune. First, we close the book and wish for anything we want. Then we randomly open a page and start to read. Everyone reads one page out loud and then passes it to the next person. Depending on which page is chosen, the rest give their verdict of whether it's good or not. I realized that my fortune was not very positive, but others tried to cover by telling me that it was indeed great as a way not to break my heart. Since, my younger brother had already cried, I believe they didn't want to make the same mistake again.

Looking back, I realize that Yalda is about bringing the family together, it's about harmony and delight. Spending a cold winter night with the people closest to you, is an experience like no other. The young and old coming together, eating and drinking together, talking together, and creating memories together is what Yalda night is all about.