

Almaden Resident March, 2004



Photograph by Erin Day

Party Planners: NoRooz Spring Festival San Jose organizers (from left) Niloufar Nouri, Matt Kamkar and Niosha Nafei-Jamali are hoping that the festival, which is part of the Iranian New Year festivities, will help bring together the Bay Area's Iranian-American population. By some counts, up to 10 percent of Almaden Valley is Iranian-American.

Cover Story



Photograph by Erin Day

Rehearsals: In preparation for this year's NoRooz Spring Festival, dance instructor Niosha Nafei-Jamali (center front) gets young dancers, including Almaden Valley resident Nilda Nejah (front left), 12, ready to perform traditional Persian dances.

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Persian Spring: Almaden's Iranian community prepares for NoRooz Festival

By Anne Ward Ernst

As the sun crosses the equator, all across the world, according to Iranian tradition, everything old becomes new again. Winter is ushered out and a fresh, unsullied new year arrives with the vernal equinox. In San Jose, greetings of "*Aid e shoma mobarak*," or "Happy New Year," will be exchanged as the clock strikes—not at midnight—at 10:48 p.m. And it is not on Jan. 1, but on March 19.

It is an ancient Iranian tradition that some say dates as far back as 3,000 years, and the Iranian New Year begins at exactly the same time around the globe, regardless of time zones, coinciding with a rebirth of nature.

"Most countries don't have a tradition like that," says Iranian-American Fred Perleschi, who owns the Shell service station at Almaden Expressway and Redmond Avenue.

"It's an ancient cultural practice."

This Iranian-favorite holiday, during which people fill the streets in Iran and which is rich with folklore and fun, will be celebrated in a big way in the Bay Area as several Iranian and Persian clubs, organizations and community centers have joined together to put on the NoRooz Spring Festival San Jose. In Almaden Valley, where some counts put the Iranian-American population at as high as 10 percent, participation in the NoRooz Festival will be high.

"All the community groups and nonprofit groups put their efforts together. Everybody had their own little party of 700 or 800 people. Now all groups are together for one event," said Niosha Nafei-Jamali of the Niosha Dance Academy, which includes several Almaden youth who will perform at the festival. One of the dances her students will perform is the *Baba Karam*.

"The girls will put on moustaches and hats and pretend they are guys," Nafei-Jamali says. "It's hard to translate, but they dance like they have a macho attitude. When the kids perform it, people love it."

Various organizations have held their own NoRooz festivities, but decided to combine their programs and hold one large event at the Mexican Heritage Plaza in San Jose. The venue was selected by organizing members for more than its location or size.

"We are so proud of the Mexican community to make that place happen. We want to use it as an example," said Matt Kamkar, an Almaden Valley resident and event organizer.

Kamkar, Nafei-Jamali and other organizers hope to use the NoRooz Festival—NoRooz means "new day" in Farsi—as a way to kick off a plan to band together Iranian-Americans to build and create their own community center.

Proceeds of the event will go toward their goal of developing an Iranian-American cultural and community center, much like the Mexican Heritage Plaza.

"These are just the building blocks of a larger plan and a larger goal," Kamkar says.

The hope is to unite Iranians living in the Bay Area to become a stronger voice in public, business, and social circles, and the event that revolves around everything new and fresh is being used as a launching pad.

Families prepare for days and sometimes weeks ahead of the NoRooz and begin the more than two-week-long merriment before the actual New Year's Day, which is usually on March 20, 21, or 22.

The seeds of wheat grass, or sprouts, are soaked and placed on a plate and allowed to grow. They will be placed on a ceremonial table for display and representation and then used on the final day of NoRooz—which can also be spelled "Norouz" or "Noruz"—in a ceremonial tossing away of the bad and welcoming of the new and good.

On the eve of the last Wednesday of the year, families put out the *Haft Seen*—or *Haft Sinn*—which must include seven specific items. Seven is considered a sacred number in the Persian culture.

"We put out seven things that start with the Persian letter 's'," says Pari Gilani, owner of Royal Café on Almaden Road.

The items include hyacinth, vinegar, wheat grass, dried fruit called *senjed*, the spice sumac, garlic and apples.

"Everything has a symbol," Nafei-Jamali says. "Each represents one good thing."

For example, the wheat grass represents rebirth, vinegar and garlic represent ingredients used in ancient medicines, apples represent health and beauty, and the sumac represents the color of the sunrise.

Other meaningful items found on every *Haft Seen* include eggs—which are usually colored in similar fashion to the American custom at Easter and represent fertility—flowers, pastry, goldfish, coins and a mirror. Additional items placed on the table will depend on the faith of the family.

"Some add the Koran, some add a Bible or a poetry book," says Niloufar Nouri. "Because I'm Muslim, I put a Koran on the table."

Nouri is the director of the Bay Area Iranian-American Voter Association (BAIVOTER) a nonprofit, nonpartisan, volunteer organization that is working to grow the Iranian-American voter base and promote participation in politics and civic activities. The association will have a booth set up at the festival to help people register to vote and understand the process and importance of voting.

Nouri, along with other Bay Area Iranian-Americans, believes that the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau counts of Iranian-Americans in America are grossly underestimated. One recent article in an Iranian-American newspaper, *Pezhvak of Persia*, attributed new estimates of 691,000 Iranian-Americans to "a research by the Iranian Studies Group, an independent academic organization at Massachusetts Institute of

Technology," stating that previous estimates were more than half that number.

Nouri, Kamkar, Nafei-Jamali, Gilani, and Perleschi all agree that in the Bay Area, many Iranian-Americans can be found in Almaden Valley neighborhoods.

"On my street alone—and it's only about 1,000 feet long—there are at least seven Iranian families living there," Kamkar says. "That's like every third or fourth house."

Many of his neighbors and expatriates across Silicon Valley and beyond are expected to attend the NoRooz festival. Kamkar says at least 3,000 people will show up for the festivities, which will include food booths, singing and dancing performances, myriad activities—such as face painting, balloon art, soccer skills game, and water balloon toss—for children, and backgammon for adults.

"The event is open to the public. As a matter of fact, we'd like the public to come," he says.

The organizers are hoping to exhibit their culture and holiday to other Americans and hope that people of all ethnicities will embrace their ancient traditions. They also hope to pass on the customs to their children.

"I'm hoping to keep this alive for our kids," Nouri says.

She says Iranians of all backgrounds and ethnicities, such as Kurdish, Persian or Jewish, celebrate the Iranian New Year—which is also called Persian New Year—and that it is a Zoroastrian tradition.

"Zoroastrians were close to nature and worshiped the sun and the water," she says.

The tradition and customs may have evolved over time, but many of the practices are based on ancient concepts of good and evil.

The Iranian New Year concludes 13 days from its start, and in the Bay Area, the gathering place for the traditional picnic is Vasona Park in Los Gatos, where many will perform the custom of tossing the wheat grass into the water. Young women of marrying age will tie together pieces of the grass for good luck in finding a husband in the coming year.

Because it is a celebration of the New Year, new clothes are worn as families gather at the eldest family members' homes for a visit and a meal, which always includes a fish and rice dish.

"Everything you wear from toe to head must be new," says Vahid Daneshvar, owner of Meridian Market, a Persian grocery store in Princeton Plaza.

In a custom that has some variations depending on ethnicity, age, and region, some families give gifts to their children, or as family members are leaving the eldest members' home, they will receive crisp paper money that has been kept in the Koran.

Perleschi says the tradition in his family has always been to give a fresh dollar bill that has recently come from a bank to the youngest family member.

During the following two weeks after the New Year, Daneshvar says the eldest family member, who held the initial party, repays the visit to family members who joined in NoRooz.

Daneshvar says another symbolic practice, and one he held at his market on the eve of the last Wednesday of the year, is to jump over fire while singing a song that essentially says, "I take from you the fire, your red; and I give to you my pallor, or yellow."

It's a custom Almaden Valley resident Yassaman Jalali says she enjoys setting up in her backyard for her son and his friends.

"They are, of course, small fires," she adds.

Jalali recently wrote and published a children's book—which is written in English—called *Celebrating Norouz* to satisfy a need she found as she was trying to explain her culture's holiday to her son's classmates.

Daneshvar agreed that the need for explaining the holiday in English is there because, though he and his wife are fluent in Farsi, his children are not.

Children in Iran practice a custom somewhat similar to the American custom performed at Halloween.

Daneshvar and others say children will cover their heads and faces with a veil or other fabric and go from door to door, receiving candy from their neighbors.

Organizers of the NoRooz Festival hope to further educate and enlighten their non-Iranian friends and neighbors in practices such as these, they say, to help bring more awareness of their culture and to get Iranian-Americans more involved in the community.

Kamkar says San Jose has the second-largest concentration of Iranians in the United States.

"I know San Jose needs to bring business back to the city. If Iranians are a big part of the population, that's a place to start," he says.

But Kamkar and others are not overlooking the cultural aspect of education and involvement and have aspirations of more widespread awareness.

"Hopefully we'll see [the Iranian New Year] on the calendars like you see the Chinese New Year," says Nafei-Jamali.

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