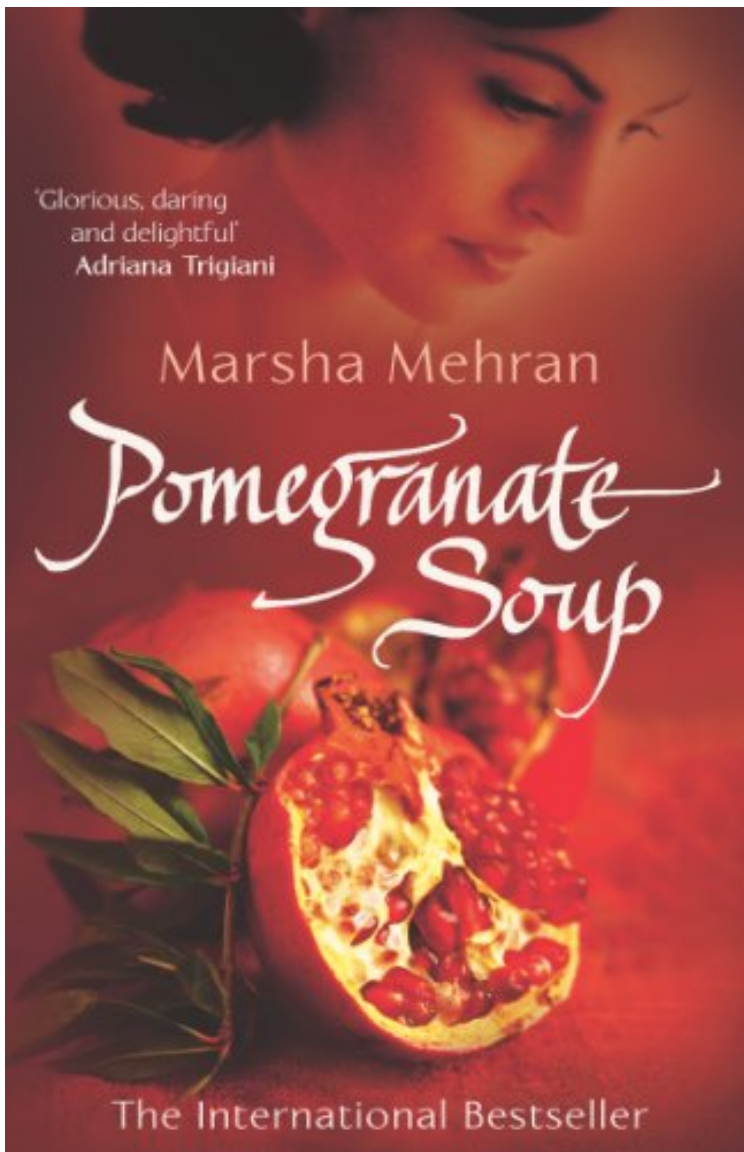


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Pomegranate Soup



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Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurFor the inhabitants of the damp little Irish town of Ballinacroagh, the repertoire of gastronomic delights has never extended farther than the limp meals of the local inn's carvery. But things are about to change when the beautiful Aminpour sisters -- Marjan, Bahar and Layla -- arrive, determined to share the magic of their kitchen with the friendly locals. Opening Babylon Caf, right in the heart of town, they begin serving up traditional Persian dishes and soon the townsfolk is lured to the new premises by the tantalizing aroma of fresh herb kuku, lamb abgusht and elephant ear fritters, washed down with gallons of jasmine tea from the old samovar. Not everyone welcomes the three women with open arms, though. The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, as they say, and the women of Ballinacroagh want their men

back ...Filled with recipes, mouth-watering fragrances and mysterious spices, Pomegranate Soup is a heart-warming tale of romance, friendship and exotic food.

Chapter One

For Marjan Aminpour, the fragrances of cardamom and rosewater, alongside basmati, tarragon, and summer savory, were everyday kinds of smells, as common, she imagined, as the aromas of instant coffees and dripping roasts were to conventional Western kitchen corners. Despite having been born in a land of ancient deserts, where dry soil mingled with the crumbled remains of Persepolian pillars, Marjan had a great talent for growing plants. She had learned from an early age how to tempt the most stubborn seedlings to take root, even before she could spell their plant names in Farsi. Guided by the gentle hands of Baba Pirooz, the old bearded gardener who tended the grounds of her childhood home, young Marjan cultivated furry stalks of marjoram and golden angelica in dark mounds of earth. The dirt drew its moisture from melted mountain snow, which trickled down from the nearby Alborz into Tehrans wealthier suburbs, before flowing into the Aminpours large octagonal fountain. Bubbling at the center of the walled garden, the pool was lined with turquoise and green Esfahani tiles. While Marjan trained her eye to spot the first yellow buds of tarragon, or to catch a weeds surreptitious climb up the stalk of a dill plant, Baba Pirooz would recount the long line of celebrated gardeners who had been born on Persian soil. Avicenna, Baba Pirooz began, clearing his throat, Avicenna was the most famous plant lover of them all. Did you know, Marjan Khanoum, that this wise physician was the first man ever to make rosewater? He squeezed the soft petals for their oils then bottled the precious liquid for the world to enjoy. What a Persian, what a man! the old gardener would exclaim, pausing only long enough in his lectures to ignite the strawberry tobacco he smoked in a knobby little pipe. As an adult, Marjan carried the warm memories of Baba Pirooz and her childhood garden with her wherever she went. Not a day passed by that she was not on the lookout for some mound of soil to plunge her fingers into. Using her bare knuckles, engraved with terra-cotta dust and mulch, she would massage her chosen herb or flower into the soils folds, whispering loving encouragements along the way. And no matter how barren that slice of earth had been before, once Marjan gave it her special attention, there was no limit to all that could blossom within its charged chambers. In the many places she had lived and there had been quite a few in her twenty-seven years Marjan had always planted a small herb garden, consisting of at least one stem each of basil, parsley, tarragon, and summer savory. Even in the gloomy English flats she and her sisters had occupied for the last seven years since leaving Iran, Marjan had successfully grown a rainbow of cooking herbs in the blue ceramic flowerpots lining her kitchen windowsill. Always the consummate professional, she could not be tempted to give up planting by any amount of rain. Marjan tried to keep her past perseverance in mind now as she stood in the old pastry shops kitchen mixing a second batch of dolmeh stuffing. She wished she had more time to cultivate a healthy ensemble of fresh tarragon, mint, and summer savory to add to the dolmeh that she and her younger sisters, Bahar and Layla, were making. Perhaps if she had planted something here in Ballinacroagh, she could have avoided the anxieties that were now creeping up her spine. But then, Marjan reminded herself, it was best not have such regrets, especially when she couldnt do anything about them. There was still one more batch of the stuffed grape leaves to go not to mention a half dozen other mouth-watering delicacies and Time, that cantankerous old fool, was not on her side. The Babylon Caf was set to open in less than five hours. Five hours! In this new town whose name she could hardly pronounce, let alone spell. Ballinacroagh. Ba-li-na-crow. A whole town full of people who would come to taste her fares with questioning eyes and curious tongues. And unlike her other stints in the kitchen, this time she would be responsible for everything. Marjans heart quickened as she browned the ground meat and onions together over the low, dancing flame. The satisfied pan hissed as she introduced dried versions of her precious herbs, the only sort she had been able to buy at such late notice. Even in Iran, there had been times when Marjan had had to resort to cooking dolmeh with dried herbs. By soaking them overnight, she had discovered, they worked almost as well as their fresher relatives. Using her entire torso, Marjan mixed the herbs with the cooked rice, fresh lime juice, salt and pepper. She stirred with all her might despite the unrelenting ache in her shoulders, for such strong rotations were necessary to the dolmehs harmony. Pausing to rub her tired arms, Marjan glanced across the kitchen at her sister Bahar, who was rolling up the first batch of dolmeh. With her wide and piercing eyes, Bahar always looked intense when she worked with food as if her life depended on whichever vegetable or herb was being sacrificed on the chopping block before her. Surprisingly, of the three Aminpour sisters, it was petite Bahar who possessed the greatest upper arm strength. Fragile in most every other way, Bahar had shoulders and arms that were as powerful as those of a man twice her size, which came in handy whenever jars needed to be opened or there was mixing to be done. Marjan picked up the wooden spoon and returned to the dolmeh. Her sister looked

too busy now to help her beat the remaining stuffing, for not only was Bahar concentrating on rolling her own grape leaves but she was also keeping Laylas work in check. No matter how many times Marjan was reminded of the differences in her younger sisters personalities, there was nothing like the simple act of rolling dolmeh to show her how poles apart Bahar and Layla really were. Bahar, guided by a stern inner compass, smartly slapped each grape leaf (vein side up) on the chopping block. It was a consistent, methodical march that started with a no-nonsense scoop of stuffing with her left hand, followed by a skilled right-handed tuck of the grape leaf. Then, bringing the dolmeh to a clean surrender, she briskly rolled the grape leaf from the bottom up. Despite her rather gruff manner, Bahars method for rolling dolmeh was always successful; she ensured that her little bundles of good fortune were secure on the road up, lest all that she had gathered should fall asunder. Rolling was always where Layla faltered, for her method was more carefree and altogether too trusting. Although Marjan and Bahar demonstrated the right way endless times, Layla would still leave her dolmeh vulnerable to the elements. One could always tell which bundles were hers, for if neither of her older sisters was quick enough to catch the spill of stuffing, rerolling the grape leaf while shaking her head, the moment of truth came forty-five minutes later with the opening of the oven door. Among the neat, aromatic green fingers expertly tucked by Marjan and Bahar would be the younger girls unmistakable burst parcels of golden filling. And for some strange reason, they always smelled of Laylas signature scent rosewater and cinnamon. It was a familiar enough smell, this faint perfume that accompanied Laylas every move, but odd for a recipe that did not contain either ingredient. The cinnamon-rose dolmeh never really surprised her sisters, though. Layla had a way of raising expectations beyond the ordinary. When Thomas McGuires spits and curses hit the pavement outside the old pastry shop, Bahar was in the middle of removing a ready tray of dolmeh from the oven. After forty-five minutes they were as perfectly symmetrical as the greatest Persian carpets, the tray a clean loom upon which the stuffed grape leaf fingers were lined in even clusters and patterns. Although the kitchen was at the back of the shop, the sound of Thomass vulgar excretions carried clearly to Bahars sensitive ears. Gasping with surprise, she reached for the hot tray of dolmeh with bare hands and paid dearly for her distraction with the start of smoking blisters. Quick! Get under the cold water! Layla! Aloe vera! Bahar, stop squeezing your thumb like that! Marjan yelled, pushing her sister toward the sink. As the eldest of the three, Marjan was accustomed to directing her sisters in emergencies. Bahar shuddered as the cold water ran over her scorched thumb. In the upstairs flat, a small one-bedroom residence that the Delmonicos had used as an office and storage area, Layla scrambled through open cardboard boxes looking for the green bottle of soothing gel. I cant find the aloe! Are you sure you packed it? she yelled down to the kitchen. Yes! Marjan hollered. Look in the small box that says Miscellaneous! Dont worry. Its stopped already. See? Ill just put an ice cube on it, said Bahar, sticking out her hurt thumb so Marjan could see the rising welts. Bahar tried to put on a brave face, but inside she felt a lot like that thumb of hers. Born, as her name indicated, on the first day of the Persian spring, she had the superstitious nature of people whose birthdays fall on the cusps of changing seasons. She was forever looking over her shoulder for fear that she had stepped on cracks or wandered under a ladder. Bahars inherent nervousness had escalated to a deeper malaise in recent years, the result of unspeakable events that had left indelible scars. Although her neurotic tendencies often irritated the more hardy teenager Layla, Marjans heart just softened a bit more every time she saw her sister jump so. Are you sure youre all right? Listen, Ill finish the dolmeh. Just mix the rice for me, okay? Marjan gave Bahar an ice cube wrapped in a torn piece of newspaper and placed the piping tray of dolmeh on a low wooden island in the middle of the kitchen. Made especially for a man of Napoleonic measurements, this rectangular table had been the centerpiece of Luigi Delmonicos kingdom, where he rolled, powdered, slapped, and whipped the exquisite paninis and chocolate-filled brioches he would later showcase in his beloved Papas Pastries. It was also where Estelle, his bride of forty-five years, had found him dead three hours after the bowl of meringue he was preparing had stiffened into a pink, cotton-candied tutu. Of course, Estelle had failed to mention this last point when she had shown the three sisters around the place five days ago, though in reality, it probably would have made little difference. The girls battered boxes were already shipped over and waiting to be picked up in Castlebar. Besides, the shop, complete with all the appliances and utensils of a working kitchen (albeit outdated and a bit rusty), was perfect for what Marjan had in mind. And it came at a bargain price. My niece told me that you are the best chef she has ever seen. Gloria, shes a very good girl, no? Mrs. Delmonico had stood in the kitchen after the grand tour, the dying afternoon rays entering lazily through a narrow, stained-glass partition in the back door. The sun rays illuminated the dust particles floating above her peppery hair. All surfaces, from countertops to the stacks of pots and dishes, were cloaked in a good inch of

the snowy stuff. Oh, Gloria was very good to us when we arrived in Lewisham. A great friend, Marjan said. Behind her, Bahar and Layla both nodded in agreement. But I think she was exaggerating a bit about my abilities. I was only a sous chef. She was the real talent at the restaurant. Yes, Gloria knows how to cook parmigiana and manicotti, but who doesn't? Maybe to those English that is gourmet, but you should have seen my grandmother cook! Pfff! If she was still alive today she would be rich from her cooking, I tell you! Estelle Delmonico laughed and placed her chubby hands on her hips. The good-natured widow cocked her head and offered a smile to each of the three young women. Fate had it that, although blessed with the welcoming girth of childbearing hips, she had never been able to give Luigi a baby of their own. It was one of her few regrets in an otherwise fortunate and colorful life. But her barrenness had never turned to resentment, a blessing Estelle often accredited to her niece, on whom she was able to practice all the loving criticisms her own mother had lavished upon her. Gloria was a great source of release for Estelle Delmonico, and now she had sent her three darlings to look after as well. Okay, then? You will take the store, eh? Marjan turned to Bahar and Layla, both of whom appeared to be asleep standing up. Their drawn, exhausted faces had the look of torshi, pickled onions that have been pulled from their bed of vinegar and salt. Who could blame them, really? It had been a long four days since they left London, shipping off their hastily packed boxes and throwing a few personal belongings into two worn plaid suitcases, the same suitcases that had seen them through the Iranian desert a long time ago. The plane ride from London to Knock had been painfully tedious, immigration and customs even worse. Answering the same questions about their religion and ethnic background over and over again. Then two days holed up in a backpackers hostel in the nearby town of Castlebar, waiting for their boxes to arrive while they survived on white bread and some hard cheese that Marjan had bought from a corner grocery. Layla, of course, had complained all the way (such was the prerogative of her age), but Bahar had remained sullen, her big doe eyes wet with frightened tears. But, thought Marjan, the worst certainly seemed behind them. Especially now that they were standing in this dusty little kitchen, with this generous Italian woman. It was time for a new start, time for them to take all the money they had in the world and finally make something of those years of hardship. You stay, yes? Estelle Delmonico pulled a heavy, corroded key from a hidden pocket in her black dress. Toothy and archaic, it was the kind of key that would have released Pandora's own demons. Yes. Marjan nodded, accepting the key. Well stay. How would you like the rent paid? Monthly or weekly? Agh, don't worry about that now. You give it to me whenever you have it, yes? I think what is more important is to get you a big bowl of my minestrone soup. That would put some energy in this pretty face, eh? Mrs. Delmonico walked over to Layla and lightly patted her left cheek. Marjan, determined to keep up the momentum that had carried them from London over the Irish Sea and into this land of crazed sheep and dizzying roads, shook her head, more to her sisters than to the jolly widow. From the Hardcover edition. From Publishers Weekly Beautiful strangers bring exotic recipes to town in Mehran's foodie-lit debut. The Irish hamlet of Ballinacraigh is the unlikely new home for three Iranian sisters and their new Babylon Cafe. Twenty-seven-year-old Marjan, the most skilled in the kitchen; Bahar, the tentative middle sister; and Layla, the charming teenager, fled the Iranian revolution and, after some years in London, have arrived determined to succeed. Initially wary natives soon fall under the spell of the cafe's cardamom- and rosewater-scented wonders, with kindly Estelle Delmonico (the stereotyped Italian widow who formerly owned the storefront) and friendly Father Mahoney leading the pack. But town bully Thomas McGuire, who loathes "feckin' foreigners," and gossip Dervla Quigley, who thinks "they're all sluts," will do anything to drive the sisters away. As Marjan cements alliances through her recipes and Layla falls in love with McGuire's son, Bahar continues to be troubled by the violence in her past. Can the provincial Irish welcome the "foreigners"? Will the sisters triumph? But of course! Mehran's mauve prose gets especially purple sometimes (Layla feels love "like the ecstatic cries of a pomegranate as it realized the knife's thrust"), but fans of *Chocolat* and other cooking-overcomes-cultural-differences stories will savor the tale, not to mention the 13 recipes, including one for pomegranate soup. (Aug.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.