

Kookoo-Sabzi | کوکو سبزی | Persian Herb Kookoo



An old Persian proverb:

دستت چو نمیرسد به کوکو، خشک‌ه پلو را فرو کو

Literal Translation:

If your hand cannot reach the kookoo,
swallow a dish of dry rice.

Meaning:

If you cannot afford making kookoo,
eat yesterday's leftover rice.

Interpretation:

Be content with what you have.

Kookoos are a popular and large class of Persian egg-centric dishes. What is a kookoo? Well, the culinary names of well-known egg-centric dishes from around the world such as souffle, omelet, frittata, and quiche do not adequately describe the nature of Persian kookoos. Unlike souffles, kookoos do not fall. Unlike quiches, kookoos do not have a crust. Unlike omelets, kookoos are not folded and are much thicker than typical omelets. The vegetable or meat elements of kookoos are chopped into much smaller pieces than those of typical frittatas and the ratio of volume of egg to the volume of other elements of kookoos is higher than typical frittatas.

There are a wide variety of kookoos in the Persian cookery landscape. Most of them are vegetarian. They can be made with different types of herbs (cilantro, parsley, dill, fenugreek), different members of onion family (onions, garlic, chives, leeks), different vegetables (eggplants, zucchinis, celery, green beans, fava beans, beets, tomatoes), different starchy root vegetables (potatoes, sweet potatoes, yams), and even unripe green almonds. There are some meat-based kookoos where minced lamb, beef, poultry, or sea food are incorporated, possibly along with one or more vegetables.

Typically, once cooked, kookoos take the form of a thick flat disk about 2 to 3 centimeters (1 to 1.5 inches) thick and served in wedges. Kookoos are quite diverse. They can be served hot or cold, as a main, a side dish, an accompaniment, or as a snack, at home or for a picnic, and even made into a delicious sandwich.

Etymology, History, and Tradition:

The earliest known references to kookoos [Persian: کوکو] in the Persian culinary landscape are in the two oldest surviving Persian cookbooks from the 16th century. The fact the kookoos are referred to in both of these cookbooks could be an indication that kookoos had been well known in Iran in that timeframe.

Several food historians and culinary writers, including Heather Arndt Anderson and Alan Davidson, tell us that earliest omelets are thought to have been cooked in the ancient Persia and Arab worlds. Kookoos can then be considered as the evolution of those early omelets. The concept of those early omelets appears to have propagated throughout the Middle East and North Africa before reaching Europe, morphing into such culinary delights as Spanish tortilla and Italian frittata.

The closest well-known egg-centric dish from other food cultures is the famous tortilla de patatas (a.k.a. tortilla Española). Even there, although the cooking technique (including the flip) and the thickness of tortilla de patatas is somewhat similar to kookoos, the rest of it (particularly the size and variety of ingredients) are very different. Therefore, the best way to refer to this class of Persian egg-centric dishes is simply Kookoo. In the contemporary Middle Eastern cookery – particularly in Egypt – there is also a similar class of dishes known as Eggah.

Among tens of different types of kookoos, the most famous is Kookoo-Sabzi [Persian: کوکو سبزی] where the Persian word sabzi means green herbs. It is said that kookoo-sabzi originated from the Azari communities in northwestern Iran, not surprising as

kookoo-sabzi is popular in the country of Azerbaijan – the northeastern neighbor of Iran. These days, kookoo-sabzi is prepared across the entire country of Iran.

One reason for kookoo-sabzi's fame and popularity is that it is one of the key elements of the most important complete meal during Persian New Year. In that meal, herb-flavored steam rice – called Sabzi-Polow – is accompanied with wedges of Kookoo-Sabzi and pan-fried fish.

A Few Words About the Ingredients:

Herbs: Herbs play a critical role in Persian cookery as they are used across all types of savory dishes. Kookoo-sabzi uses a lot of herbs. Parsley, cilantro, and dill elements of kookoo-sabzi are commonly available in typical western grocery stores. The fenugreek and Persian leek elements, however, may need a bit of explanation.

Fenugreek: Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) [Persian: شنبلیله, Romanized: Shanbelileh] is an annual plant. Its leaves consist of three obovate (teardrop-shaped) leaflets with stems attached to the tapering end. Its leaves (fresh or dried) have been used as an herb and its seeds as a spice since ancient times. Fresh fenugreek leaves are slightly bitter, but once cooked, they take on a subtle bitter-sweet flavor and a pleasing aroma that fills the entire kitchen. It is the herb that defines not only the most famous Persian kookoo but also the most famous Persian braised-meat dish ghormeh-sabzi. Fresh fenugreek becomes available for a short period between late spring and midsummer. It is very difficult to find fresh fenugreek in North America or Europe. Some specialty Persian, Afghani, or Indian markets may carry it during its short growing season. Dried crushed fenugreek leaves, however, are readily available in ethnic aisles of well-stocked supermarkets, in practically all specialty middle eastern, Mediterranean, and Indian markets, as well as a variety of online sources such as <https://www.amazon.com/Sadaf-Fenugreek-Leaves-2-oz/dp/B071GMRZX7/>. Please note that this dish uses fenugreek leaves, not fenugreek seeds which is a popular spice in Indian cookery. Practically speaking, all Persian home cooks use dried crushed fenugreek leaves for this dish. It is a powerful dried herb, so a small amount goes a long way.

Persian Leek: Persian leeks (*Allium ampeloprasum* ssp. *persicum*) [Persian: تره; Romanized: Tareh] have a mild oniony flavor. They somewhat resemble the top half of common leek in appearance (folded flat leaf sheaths) but are much thinner and smaller. They are often incorrectly labeled garlic chives or spring onions but are different from those plants. Large amounts are used, along with other herbs, in traditional Persian soups, meat braises, meat dumplings, and stuffed vegetables. Persian leeks are often available year-round in specialty Persian, Afghani, and middle eastern markets. If you do not have access to these specialty markets, you can easily substitute an equal amount (in weight) of chives, or green parts of scallions, or the middle third section of regular common leeks. Although dried Persian leeks are readily available in Persian and Middle Eastern markets, they lose much of their flavor when dried.

Dried Barberry: Barberries (*berberis*) [Persian: زرشک; Romanized: Zereschk] are the tiny, bright red fruit of a spiny shrub. Rich in vitamin C and pectin, they have a pleasant tangy flavor. In Persian cookery, barberries are used widely as a souring agent in rice dishes, braises, and egg-centric dishes where they provide brilliant dots of vivid red as well as bursts of intense flavor. In metropolitan areas of the United States, Canada, and Europe, where there are significant Iranian communities, you will find dedicated Persian markets that carry dried barberries. If that option isn't available to you, the next best brick-and-mortar sources are Middle Eastern, Afghani, and Mediterranean markets, followed by Indian or Turkish stores. There are also online stores that specialize in Persian ingredients, such as [Kalamala Persian Grocery](#), [Sadaf](#), [Persian Basket](#), and [Tavazo](#) – and of course on [Amazon](#).



Fresh and Dried Crushed
Fenugreek Leaves (Shanbelileh)



Fresh Persian Leeks
(Tareh)



Dried Barberries
(Zereschk)

A Few Words About the Method and Equipment:

Generally speaking, all kookoos are made by beating a good number of eggs (as many as 8), mixing a good amount of finely chopped raw or lightly cooked ingredients and panfrying the mixture in a sauté pan or skillet until firm on the bottom and at the edges of the pan, but still a bit runny in the center and top. The partially cooked kookoo is then flipped (in one piece or in manageable segments) to cook the other side. Since both sides of the kookoo are in touch with the hot surface of the pan, a very thin, somewhat crunchy, delicious skin is formed on both sides of the kookoo.

With regards to equipment, when it comes to making kookoos, I dust off my rarely used nonstick skillet.

The only semi-tricky part of making kookoos is the flipping of the partially cooked kookoo. The oldest somewhat detailed recipe for kookoo is in Persian cookbook that was published around 1520 covers this task. It directs the cook to cut the partially cooked kookoo into segments (typically four quarters) and flipping each individually. This is the most common (as well as easiest and safest) flipping method among Persian home cooks and is consistent with my own childhood memories of family members making kookoos. The other method, which is a bit tricky and risky, is to flip the entire partially cooked kookoo in one piece. Do **not** attempt to flip into the air with a single flick of the wrist and then trying to catch it back in the skillet. It is too heavy and the middle of it is too runny for such TV-centric action. I have two proven recommendations if you decide you want to flip your kookoo in one piece.

For both methods, after about 5 or 6 minutes of cooking the first side when the batter (mixture of eggs, herbs, and barberries) is distinctly thicker, use a pliable (silicon) spatula and run it in all around the skillet. Repeat a couple of times more every minute or two. You know it is time to start the flipping process when the edges of the kookoo are set and center third is still slightly runny.

The first flipping method is as follows: Take the skillet over a sink, overturn a large plate (or some other heatproof vessel such as a flat baking sheet or heatproof cutting board) on top of the skillet. Put a dish towel on top of the plate, place your hand on top of the dishtowel, and, in one rather quick motion, invert the skillet causing the kookoo to fall into the plate. Return the, now empty, skillet to heat, add the remaining 1 tablespoon of set-aside oil to the skillet, and carefully slide the kookoo from the plate onto the skillet. Continue the cooking process.

The second flipping method is a bit easier but requires you having two approximately same size skillets. When it is time to flip the kookoo, evenly spread the remaining 1 tablespoon of set-aside oil onto the second skillet. Take the skillet that has the partially cooked kookoo over a sink, overturn the second skillet on top of it. Put a dish towel on top of the second skillet, place your hand on top of the dishtowel, and, in one rather quick motion, invert the bottom skillet causing the kookoo to fall into the second skillet. Continue the cooking process with the partially cooked kookoo in the second skillet.



Total Time: 1.5 hours**Active Time:** 1 hour**Yield:** 8 servings**Ingredients:**

Ingredients	Amount	Purchasing and Ingredient Preparation Guidance and/or Pointers to Informative Material
Eggs	8 large	
Diamond Crystal Kosher salt	2 tsp = 6 gr = 0.2 oz	Or half as much by weight of table salt
Dry barberries	0.5 cups = 35 gr = 1.3 oz	
Fresh dill	100 gr leaves and most tender stems	Buy approximately 200 gr in bundles sold at greengrocers to yield 100 gr of leaves and most tender stems.
Fresh flat leaf parsley	100 gr leaves and most tender stems	Buy approximately 200 gr in bundles sold at greengrocers to yield 100 gr of leaves and most tender stems.
Fresh coriander	125 gr leaves and most tender stems	Buy approximately 280 gr in bundles sold at greengrocers to yield 125 gr of leaves and most tender stems.
Fresh Persian leeks	100 gr	Good substitutes: equal amount (in weight) of chives, or green parts of scallions, or the middle third section of regular common leeks.
Crushed dried fenugreek leaves	1 tbsp 2.5 = 2.5 gr = 0.09 oz	
All-purpose flour	1 tbsp = 7.5 gr = 0.26 oz	
Baking powder	½ tsp = 2 gr = 0.07 oz	
Ground black pepper	1 tsp = 2.8 gr = 0.1 oz	
Butter, ghee, olive oil, or your favorite cooking oil	4 tbsp = 60 ml ≈ 56 gr = 2 oz	Separated in to 3 tbsp and 1 tbsp.

Method:

1. In a large mixing bowl, beat eggs and salt until frothy. Set aside.
2. Wash all fresh herbs. Spread over a kitchen towel and gently roll to remove excess water
3. . Alternatively, use a salad spinner to achieve the same results. Harvest the leaves and most tender stems from the bundles of parsley and coriander. (If you wish, save the scraps and longer and tough stems for other purposes such as making broth.) Chop all fresh herbs (including chives or leeks) as finely as you can. Feel free to use a food processor to chop the herbs. HOWEVER, never chop the chives or leeks in the food processor by themselves – otherwise they will turn into a nasty green unpleasant mess. Either mix them with the parsley and coriander to be chopped in the food processor or simply chop them separately the good old fashion way with a sharp knife on a cutting board.
4. Beat the eggs again to re-froth, then add the chopped herbs, crushed dried fenugreek, all purposes flour, baking powder, and ground black pepper. Stir until thoroughly combined.
5. Add 3 tablespoon butter (or ghee or oil) to a skillet and set over medium hear.
6. Once the butter melts, pour the contents of the mixing bowl into the skillet and cook, gently swirling and sliding the skillet back and forth for the first few minutes of the cooking. Cover, reduce heat to medium-low, and continue cooking for another 10 to 15 minutes until it the kookoo is ready to be flipped. You know it is time to start the flipping process when the edges of the kookoo are set and center third is still slightly runny.
7. See the notes above in the “A Few Words About the Method and Equipment” section to decide your preferred flipping method. If you decide to cut the partially cooked kookoo into segments (say, quarters), after you have flipped half of the segments, add the remaining tablespoon of butter to the skillet. Finish flipping the rest of the segments and cook, uncovered, for another 5 minutes.

Supplementary Notes:

- If you are not able to use fresh herbs, there are two alternatives. The best option is to use commercial bags of frozen chopped herbs that might be available in your local supermarkets and definitely in Persian brick-and-mortar markets. The other option is to use dried versions of each of the herbs. If using frozen herbs, substitute 1-to-1 by weight. If using dry herbs substitute 4-to-1 by weight as dry herbs are much more potent.

Your Kitchen Notes:

Minor Flavoring or Preparation Alternatives/Variations:

- The most popular variation of Kookoo-Sabzi involves addition of about one-half cup of crushed walnuts to the batter. It adds a bit of crunch to the texture of the kookoo as well as making it into a more complete – and higher calorie – dish. This variation is so popular that many Persian home cooks consider this variation as their basic recipe for Kookoo-Sabzi.

Vegetarian/Vegan/Gluten-Free Variations:

- Kookoo-Sabzi is a vegetarian dish to begin with. Using commercially available vegan egg substitutes (such as Just Egg brand) and using your favorite vegetable oil (instead of butter or ghee) results in an acceptable vegan Kookoo-Sabzi. The easiest way to make a Gluten-Free version of Kookoo-Sabzi is to eliminate the 1 tablespoon of all-purpose flour that is called for in the basic recipe, resulting in a slightly denser and thinner kookoo but otherwise the same flavor. With regards to the baking power that is asked for in the basic recipe, these days most baking powders are gluten-free, as its typical ingredients are an acid, baking soda, and a gluten-free starch like potato or corn.

Make-Ahead, Leftover Use, and Storage Ideas:

- You can prepare your herbs (including chopping them) a day or two ahead of time, as long as you store them in the refrigerator in an airtight container that has been lined with a sheet or two of paper towels. I do not recommend making the batter ahead of time as the batter will become overly watery and the beaten eggs will not cling to the vegetables, resulting in a kookoo that has a layer of egg and a layer of herbs, which is not what you want.
- Kookoo-Sabzi is very leftover friendly. Any leftovers can be stored for about a week, as long as they are stored in the refrigerator in an airtight container. Cooked Kookoo-Sabzi is a tasty snack as well as an excellent primary ingredient for a sandwich. Persian love Kookoo-Sabzi sandwiches. Make-ahead Kookoo-Sabzi is also a popular picnic food.
- The best way to warm up left-over Kookoo-Sabzi is to use your toaster oven or your standard kitchen oven (particularly if your oven is on for some other reason). Put the kookoo segments on an oven-safe plate (or simply on a double-folded sheet of aluminum foil) at 300°F for about 20 minutes, or until you see tiny oil bubbles forming on the top and/or where they touch your warming vessel. The quickest way to warm them up is to zap them in your microwave oven for 2-3 minutes – but they will be a bit soggy. My favorite way to warm them up is to zap them in the microwave oven for 1-2 minutes – to warm up the inside – and then put them in a 300°F toaster oven for 10-15 minutes to restore some of its surface crunchiness.

Serving Suggestions:

- Since most often Kookoo-Sabzi (and all other types of Persian Kookoos) are made in a round frying pan, they are typically served in wedges.
- Wedges of Kookoo-Sabzi (and all other types of Persian Kookoos) can be served as a starter or the main component of a meal when accompanied with, for example, with a bowl of yogurt and some flat bread. Kookoos are also popular as an accompaniment for a rice-based meal. The oldest Kookoo-Sabzi recipe from 16th century suggests it be served along with traditional Persian steamed rice, Chelow. And of course, as mentioned previously, it is served as part of the Persian New Year special meal.