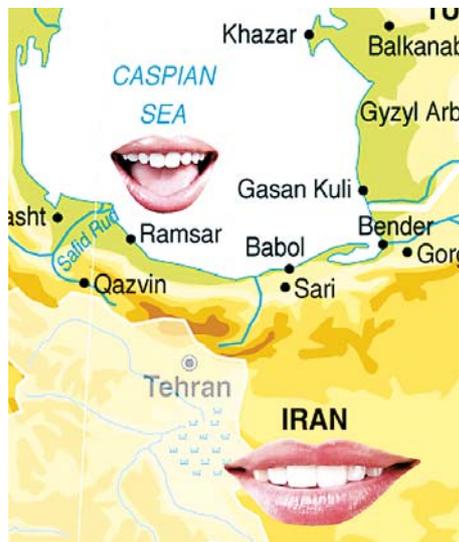


The Mouth

By Nanci Tangeman

It's all Farsi to me

Restaurant Caspian
Marnixstraat 198, 620 5566
Open daily 17.00-23.00
Cash only



What I do remember is that all five people at our table loved Caspian's food.

I cannot read my own handwriting. It's one of the hazards of writing about restaurants. I try to jot notes surreptitiously, under the table or when the waiter's back is turned, but usually when I reread my comments I can't tell a stealthily written 'tasty soup' from 'tastes like soap'. Add a couple of glasses of wine, there really is no hope.

Some food writers get around this by sneaking off to the lavatory stall with their pads and pencils. Others rely on their memories. I'm usually lucky if I remember where my table is after I visit the loo, so neither of these methods works for me.

I sense I'm in trouble as soon as we enter Restaurant Caspian. Our host is Iranian, speaking in Dutch. I'm American, listening in Dutch, remembering in English. I don't recognise a single dish on the menu. When Partner-in-all-things-investigative begins to pour the wine, I know I'm toast (one of the few legible foodstuffs I can make out in my notes later—even though I don't remember being served any). What I do remember is that all five people at our table loved Caspian's food.

One of the few scribbles I can read says: feta, mint, radish, basil, parsley, anise, walnut on traditional Iranian bread (€3.50). Suddenly I recall the Iranian toftoon, a bread plumper than lavash, but thinner than Indian naan. The next indecipherable scrawls

turn out to be mirza ghasemi (€5), a dish from the shores of the Caspian in Northern Iran made from roasted aubergine, tomatoes, garlic, eggs and onions; then kashk bademjan (€4.50), another grilled aubergine dish, this time with mint.

Somewhere in my notes I learn that 'sabzi' means green and it all begins to make sense: koekoe sabzi (€4) is a sort of egg souffle with roasted leek, parsley, spinach and dill; koekoe sibzamini (€4) has potato and eggs; salad olwiese (€5) is a sort of Iranian huzaren salad. A plate of naan with the Iranian cheese pannier sabzi (€3.50), along with plates of spicy pickles, rounds out our starters.

I'm certain I've jotted down that the Caspian is turning out to be a vegetarian's paradise. (I just can't read it.) Then comes the parade of kebabs.

In my notes I can decipher dish #24 (€30 for two people). Its name on

the menu begins with a G, but I seem to have written the rest in Farsi. The combo includes kebab koebideh (minced meat) and kebab barg, a common kebab pairing in Iranian cuisine called soltani. The meat is served off the stick on a bed of saffron rice. Other combos include the Persian favourite kebab djeoedje: chicken marinated in onion, saffron and lemon juice. The kebabs are accompanied by mounds of rice with saffron and sumac strips and a fragrant plate of grilled onions and lemons.

The last sentence in my notebook claims that Caspian serves a 'completely cat-free side dish of fava beans and lemon.' Maybe I'm just being lazy, but I decide to leave that line as it stands. My guess is, it's probably true.