





Shandiz

This is the story of how I was nearly murdered by hospitality.

The restaurant business is known as the hospitality industry, and many cultures pride themselves on their hospitality to guests, but they take it to another level in Iran. The Persian culture has a concept called “ta’arof”. It is a code of etiquette governing things like being a good host or worker or even a customer in a shop. It is a bit like the typically English performance involved in offering to pay for the bill when you are out with someone senior to you and you know they are going to pick up the tab, but you feel obliged to fumble about for your wallet anyway. The process of ta’arof is much more ritualised, though, and just offering a cup of tea involves a series of refusals, counter-offers and refusals that would embarrass even Mrs Doyle from Father Ted. Similarly with food, there is an obligation to decline an offer of food several times no matter how hungry you are, while your host insistently piles up a huge plate of food, which you will then eat no matter how full you are and then, when you think you could not possibly eat any more, the process begins again with another plate. Which you will also eat. And then dessert.

I had no idea about all of this before I visited Shandiz, an Iranian restaurant in the smart corner of Hove. But I had a much better understanding when I rolled out after a delicious feast, several hours later and several stone heavier.

My would-be assassin was the restaurant’s frontman, Ashkau, who runs Shandiz with his older brother, Amir. A kind of Persian version of James Bond, Ashkau is a cheeky presence in love with his licence to kill with kindness. After our interview, he summoned forth a kingly banquet of Iranian food that would have felled six people. And we were halfway through when he revealed that this was just the starter...

Ashkau moved to England from Iran when he was five years old. “I was a good kid, actually. I was a good kid. I think so. You can quote my mum on that!” His mother was from the capital, Tehran but his father was from Ahvaz in the south where his business was importing and exporting homeware and kitchenware. “It was much better for him there but then we moved over here and slowly, slowly started getting into the takeaway game. Of course, when you first come here from any country you first go into a kitchen, most people do.”

Ashkau’s father started working with his uncle in the old Open Grill takeaway in Brighton’s Preston Street, which he eventually bought and started running himself. A succession of takeaways in Brighton followed, including Bodrum and Nayeb, but young Ashkau was

never interested in joining the family business. “I was younger then and I wasn’t really into work. I was a mummy’s boy so I could get money off her and never work but now it’s time to get to work. It’s a bit late now! I’m twenty five. I got away with it for a very long time. It’s been a week now I haven’t taken any money from her. No, I’m joking...” he says, laughing. Ashkau has a mischievous sense of humour about his own history. “I went to university for a year but I didn’t attend many lessons so I thought if I’m not gonna do this properly then I might as well not waste my own time. I only went to university cos my mum said she’d buy me a car if I went. So I went to university and I got the car and then I stopped going. So that was it.” He leans in to the microphone and adds “I hope she doesn’t listen to this!”

When I asked him what he studied at university, Ashkau smiled. “Business. Like any other Iranian.” There was no interest in food or cooking before he started working at Shandiz. “Not at all, no, no. The only reason I really clicked with this place was not because I am a chef or anything, it’s just that I like to talk to people. I like to be around people. That’s the thing I like about it. I couldn’t work in



◀ **A desert of paloodeh, delicious noodles in a syrup of rose water and lime**



▲ **A bowl of ruby-coloured barberries, the sweet and sour berries used in Iranian recipes**

the kitchen. I couldn’t make any of the food. I only like socialising with people when they come here, having a good time. That’s how I pass time. I work most of the day, twelve to twelve, but I don’t get bored. Cos there’s always new people coming in, new people to talk to, and most people that come in here are fun and not moody or anything. Well if they come in moody they’re not leaving moody, so...” he laughs again and points towards the counter. “I have a guitar there. I don’t know how to play but I do bring it out sometimes and pretend to play. Just strum it along, just tap it a few times, that’s it. I create my own songs. Just having fun. But it’s good to have fun, it’s a whole experience. When you wanna go somewhere, you wanna have fun. Let their hair down, have a nice time, sit down. It’s really fun when it’s someone’s birthday: everyone in the whole restaurant, we have some lights as well, get fireworks going off in here, clapping, everything.”

Shandiz prepares traditional Persian cuisine cooked on a charcoal grill. They employ a noted chef from London whom they bring down to Brighton every day to the kitchen. The restaurant has a mixture of bright tables near the bar by the front windows and cosier booths at the back for more intimate dining. It is decorated throughout with fine Persian



tablecloths and paintings and there are neat little touches like the Polaroid wall by the dumb waiter and the samovars in the wooden shelving.

It was Ashkau’s father who originally came up with the vision for the restaurant two years ago. “We had a load of takeaways before but this was the first proper restaurant we opened so it was a bit different for him. He had a lot of experience before with this kind of business, though. That’s what the basic thing is: if you don’t know how to do something then you don’t get into it really, do you? If you don’t know how to cut hair, you don’t open a hairdressers do you? Well, some people do but it doesn’t last very long, does it?”

“A sit-down restaurant is quite different to a takeaway, as when you get a takeaway and you get the food home it doesn’t feel the same, so

it’s much better when you have it here hot, in front you. By the time you get takeaway food home it’s cold, so it’s not the same experience. It’s got a different feel to it. Some people say, when they come in here, they say they feel like they’re somewhere else anyway, they don’t feel like they’re in Brighton. And they say the service is really good. So that’s down to me, I think! I’m the frontman. I speak to the customers, welcome them in. That’s a whole little thing. It doesn’t matter how good the food is, some people come for the service. You have to be very nice to people. It doesn’t matter if you got really good food but bad service, people are not gonna come back. Good service keeps the people coming back for more.” Ashkau runs the restaurant with his brother, who is older by five years. In Iranian culture the older brother has quite a lot of seniority to the younger siblings. “In Iranian culture, yes, but we’re in England right now,” laughs



► Amir, the “serious one”, mans the bar by the Polaroid wall



Ashkau. “We have to adapt to English culture!” The brothers have a clear separation of duties that avoids conflict. “His role is to keep the money so I don’t spend it! He’s like a back office kind of guy but he still works here in the front sometimes. He’s the more serious one. But you do need that in business, don’t you? You need someone that’s fun but then you need the more serious one. He’s more serious.” I asked him if they were like Lennon and McCartney, with him as the more light-hearted McCartney figure but he decided that he wanted to be John Lennon instead “I think I’m more John Lennon because he was the wild one, wasn’t he? I’m the wild one in that way.”

When his father and brother sat him down to pitch the concept of a new Iranian restaurant, Ashkau was unconvinced. They really wanted it to happen but he told them he didn’t think that it would work. He told them that there had been a number of Iranian restaurants in Brighton before but none of them had endured. “So I didn’t think it would work. But it has. And we’re still here. Two years, four months, three days, two hours and thirty seconds later!” It is strange that none of them had succeeded before, because there is a well-established community of Iranians living in Brighton and Hove and you might think it should be a certainty, but Askhau said that several establishments floundered after the

► Ashkau, the John Lennon of the pair





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▲ Iranian
tea and
baklava

► Farah
and Shintya
preparing
for the
Persian feast



first six months when business dropped off. “They start well but then they just go really bad downhill. But in my opinion since we opened up, we been going uphill. Our standard of food has even got better. And that’s not from me saying it, it’s from other people.” He says that the other places run by Iranians in the town are either Arabic-style takeaways or actually Italian restaurants, an anomaly that has puzzled the Italian-run restaurants we have interviewed but which includes some very popular destinations.

So what has been the secret of their ability to endure as an Iranian restaurant where the others have failed? Ashkau responds with a twinkle in his eyes that it is all down to his management. “I don’t get bored here, that’s the thing. I do work a lot and it is fun. That’s why I think it’s still open, cos after two years of that, if you get bored of it then you lose the passion. But no, I like it still. And it all depends on the management, how the restaurant is run. If I act bored or act tired then everyone else is gonna do that. But I act happy and then everyone else is gonna be happy. I treat my staff well, they’re gonna be happier. They’re gonna set the food down better. If I want to start going up to the



kitchen and shouting and being horrible to them, the quality of the food gonna go down. It all depends on it. We’re all a family here. It’s not like staff here. We don’t have staff here, it’s like a family.” This is borne out by the workers in the kitchen who have been with them since the start, something quite unusual in the world of hospitality which is so characterised by high turnover and employee dissatisfaction. “It’s cos we treat them very well. When they first came here they didn’t think they were gonna stay very long as well, cos of their previous experience in other places, but here it’s good.”

Ashkau does not remember his early childhood in Iran but he likes to visit his family when he can. He does like to preserve some traditions from back home, however, including the idea of ta’arof. “My favourite dish here is the Shandiz Feast but I’ve never done it on my own yet. It comes with four starters and naan and then you get a selection of the charcoal grill. You get lamb chops, you get the koubideh, you

get the joojeh, you get the barg. You get a lot of things. You get one stew as well, ghormeh sabzi, gheymeh, gheymeh bademjan bamieh or fessenjan. All of them nice. And then you get a mixture of the rice with the barberries, with the barley and some plain saffron rice. Accompanied by some piaz and salad. It’s making me hungry just thinking about it!”

I visited Shandiz with our intrepid photographer, Shintya and long-term community champion, Farah Mohebati so fortunately I had some help tackling the banquet ahead. Is this going to be like the American gluttony TV show Man vs Food, I asked?

“No, there’s four of us,” said Ashkau. “It will be like Come Dine With Me!”

Shandiz Persin Cuisine, 118 Church Road, Hove, BN3 2EA

