

OF COURSE! In many areas of the Middle East and Central Asia, New Year's is celebrated, not in the dead of winter, but on the first day of spring, a tradition dating back more than five thousand years to ancient Mesopotamia. Called Nowruz, or New Day, in Iran, it is a long, happy holiday when you visit friends and family, receive gifts of money and special things you want, wear new clothes, and are served cookies and sweets everywhere you go.

Nowruz is not a religious holiday but celebrates the rebirth of earth and all life on it. The thirteen days of festivities begin the Tuesday evening before the spring equinox, on what is traditionally called *Chaharshambah Souri*, which means Wednesday Evening (or Wednesday Eve). In ancient Mesopotamia, each day ended, and a new day began, at six o'clock in the evening, instead of at midnight as we now observe. By this reckoning, Wednesday

Happy New Year! In Spring?

by Joan Issari

evening came before Wednesday morning—on what we now call Tuesday evening! But the holiday name hasn't changed.

On Chaharshambah Souri you jump over a little bonfire to purify yourself for Nowruz. The flame is supposed to remove all your sickness and bad luck. The fire is usually lit outside the house, using a few sticks, but sometimes it's just a candle placed on the floor inside. As you jump over the glowing flame you shout, *Zard-i man az toe,*

Sorkh-i toe az man, or in English, "My paleness to you, your healthy glow to me." There's a lot of joking and laughter. Be sure to jump high!

Nowruz is a time of peace and good will. *Ashtee*, making up and forgiving grudges held against another person, is important. The house has been cleaned top to bottom. You and your family put on brand-new clothes.

WHOA, WAITEVENING
WASBEFOREMORNING
IN MESOPOTAMIA?

SOWHENWOULDYOU
TAKEOURSATURDAY
NIGHT BATH—ON
FRIDAYNIGHT?OR
SUNDAYMORNING?



Celebrating Nowruz in Tajikistan in Central Asia





A table set to celebrate Nowruz

The sofreh includes a holy book for whatever religion your family observes. Sometimes there's a book of poems by Hafiz or Ferdowsi, the most revered poets of medieval Persia. A small bowl of live goldfish, a *samak*, is supposed to bring good luck, especially if you're looking at it the moment Nowruz arrives. There is a bowl of hard-boiled eggs, usually colored by the children—

To celebrate *ta'feel*, the moment Nowruz arrives, you sit around the *Sofreh Haft Seen*, a tablecloth set with seven or more symbolic items whose names begin with the letter *S* in the Persian language, Farsi. The New Year is greeted with prayer for the welfare of each other, the country, and the world.

at least one egg for each person present. A mirror reflects light, representing goodness; two or more candles are lit in front of it.

WONDER IF
"CHOCOLATE
CHIPCOOKIES"
STARTSWITH
AN "S" IN
FARSI...



The traditional Haft Seen, or Seven S's, are *sabzi* (green seed sprouts, symbolizing new life), *seeb* (apples, symbol of beauty), *seer* (garlic, medicine and good health), *serkeh* (vinegar, age and patience), *senjed* (fruit of the lotus tree, for love and happiness), *samanoo* (a creamy sweet pudding, prosperity), and *sumagh* (red sumac berries, joy). There are usually also *sekeh*, gold and silver coins, often in a small bowl of water, symbolizing wealth; *sombol*, or hyacinth, a spring flower for life and beauty; and perhaps a highly polished samovar for boiling water and making tea.

The Iranian New Year begins at the exact second of the spring equinox, when the sun crosses the equator and the length of day and night are about equal. ("Equinox" means "equal night.") Thousands of Iranians around the world celebrate Nowruz at the same instant, but at different times of the day in each time zone. This year the spring equinox will occur on March 20 precisely at 8:44 A.M. in Tehran, on March 20 at 1:14 A.M. in New York, and on March 19 at 10:14 P.M. in Los Angeles. Since it takes 365¼ days for the earth to circle the sun, the time of the equinox moves by about six hours—a quarter day—every year.

Some families lay the mirror flat on the table and place an egg on it. They watch

at the moment of equinox to see if the egg moves. It used to be said the earth rests on one horn of the bull Taurus, one of the twelve constellations of the zodiac. The bull becomes tired of his burden and once a year shifts the earth to his other horn. This creates a jolt that may make the egg roll on the mirror.

At the moment of equinox you sing out *Aid-e-shoma mobarak!* (Congratulations on your holiday!) and *Sal-e-noh mobarak!* (Happy New Year!) You jump up to hug and kiss everyone. Older members of the family give a coin to younger ones. In the past, before the Iranian Revolution, this was a gold coin with a picture of the shah on it; such coins are now rare and *very* expensive. In the United States many banks at this season have rolls of new quarters or silver dollars that have been gold-washed. You can buy these to give friends and family at Nowruz. It is said that as long as you keep the coin, your purse or wallet will never be empty—which is true! Other gifts are also exchanged, especially for children.

Dinner on the first day of the new year is a rice pilaf with dill and lima beans, served with

fried whitefish. The meal also may include chicken and lamb kabobs, salad, yogurt with chopped cucumber, mint, and spring onions, and many other tasty Persian dishes.

Everyone tries to spend the final, thirteenth day of Nowruz out of doors in a natural setting like a park. This event is called *Sizdah Bedar*, meaning Thirteen Outside. The number thirteen is unlucky in Iran, so everyone goes on a picnic to keep the bad luck outside the house. You take with you the bowl of sabzi, the green sprouts, from the Haft Seen. By now the sprouts are tall and probably turning yellow because, it is said, they have received all the bad luck in the house.

Traditionally, they would be placed in a flowing stream or river to be carried away, but today many families just put the sabzi in the trash.

Nowruz is a time of peace and joy, when everyone can celebrate the end of winter and the coming of spring. This Nowruz, why not join the New Year festivities by serving

tea and sweets to your family and friends? And don't forget to wish them a Happy New Year—in spring! 🐛



Jumping high on Chaharshambeh Souri