

# Cultural Significance of the Persian Pistachio



Damghan Pistachio  
innovation center



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Although no hard historical evidence has been observed, it is reported that Romans and Greeks learned the method of pistachio farming and irrigation at the time of the Achaemenids, which was known at the time as Persian ‘walnuts’. Upon the visit of the Romans and Greeks, Parthians were observed to habituate their children to eat the fruits of wild trees including pistachios. In fact, the consumption of pistachios in Pars to the extent that the Greeks ridiculed and taunted the Persians as ‘Pistachio eaters’.



In their reports, travel writers have mentioned the cultivation of various pistachio trees in the geographical expanse of Iran and the cultivation of various pistachio species in pistachio-rich regions. In particular, a number of travel writers have spoken of the fertility of the regions including Damghan, Kerman, and Qazvin region for the abundance and quality of its pistachios. During the Safavid period (1500-1723 AD), they considered Malayer pistachios to be the best in the world, where in addition to domestic consumption, a large quantity of it was exported to India. In the Qajar period (1892-1926 AD), there are also references to the export of pistachios to India when the pistachio product of Isfahan was one of the important export items of this city.



Pietro Della Valle, the Italian historian mentioned pistachios to be used as a primary condiment commonly eaten with rice in his observations in Iran. Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, the French merchant also mentioned Armenians in Isfahan who, during fasting days when they were not allowed to eat animal produce, crushed pistachio nuts and mixed the obtained oil with their food. In the report of Sir John Chardin's travels to Iran during the Qajar period, pistachios were mentioned as one of the dried fruits that were present in the banquets of the Iranians (p. 50). Apparently, during the Qajar period, pistachios were always considered luxurious snacks for the nobility and kings. For instance, the combination of pistachios and high-fat yogurt was one of the popular snacks prepared for Naser al-Din Shah. In all of these reports then, pistachio kernels were one of the staples of the Persian dishes.

In the historical reports, the initial tools for the harvest of pistachios in pistachio-rich regions were two large pieces of thick and stringy fabric. In the process of harvesting, the workers took these fabrics to the orchard, spread the fabric under the trees, and then poured the hand-picked pistachios into it. Then, men known as 'kooleh kon' (i.e. carriers, in Persian: کوله‌کن) would carry the gathered pistachios on their backs and transport them to an open field for hulling and cleaning. If the distance between the pistachio cleaning area and the harvest area was too long, the workers would put the loads on the backs of animals. The pistachios were poured into a small courtyard surrounded by half-walls called 'kooch' (کوچ) which means a corner or nook.

In Anar County in Kerman province, people used short, thick wooden sticks called 'kootino' (In Persian: کوتینو) to strike the pistachio branches so that the soft outer shell of the pistachio separated from the wooden shell. The task of cracking the non-split shells of the pistachios was also assigned to women and teenagers who would open the shells with their hands or pliers. Then, the pistachios with separated shells were poured into boxes with a wooden 'plaque' bearing the name of the orchard owner. These boxes were referred to as 'nomreh' (in Persian: نمره), and the workers would receive a fixed amount of money for each 'nomreh' they handed over.





### **Pistachio Sorting Mostly Done by Hand at the Orchard**

Due to the luxurious nature of pistachios and their high price, strict rules were enforced on the workers who removed the hulls of the pistachios. These rules were so strict that during the cleaning process, orchard owners would check the workers several times lest they would eat any pistachios. If they witnessed such an incident, a fine would be imposed on the worker, and if they suspected and the worker denied it, they would put a cotton ball in the worker's mouth. If the ball turned green, it indicated that the worker had consumed pistachio and ensued physical punishment. In addition to this, at the end of the working day when the workers were leaving, they would also check their shoes to make sure they hadn't stealthily taken any pistachios with them. If they detected any theft or cheating, they would physically punish the workers.

Female workers – who were situated in a separate area – would separate the shells from the pistachios and clean them. In Sirjan, the workers would wash the cleaned pistachios in oval-shaped



pottery containers called 'javieh' (in Persian: جاویه), then spread them on large screens called 'parse' (in Persian: پرسه) placed on pistachio cleaning platforms to dry in the sun. Pistachios that were not separated from their shells in the process were called 'kalo' (in Persian: کلو) and those with removed shells were called 'laqo' (in Persian: لاقو). Pistachios that could be separated from their shells without the need for washing were called 'pesteh-dastpoost', and were considered to be the best and most desirable type. Pistachios selected for planting were called 'pesteh-tokhmi' (i.e. seeds). Finally, The workers would often be placed into groups by the supervisors to delegate the work, and whoever had the most work done in this pact would receive additional pay or a reward. Worker wages were paid based on the amount of work completed. Some employers also provided pistachios to the workers in addition to their wages as rewards.



**Small-Scale Pistachio Cleaning and Dehulling Device**

