

Persian Halva

Halva, meaning 'sweet' in Arabic, is popular throughout the Middle East and Indian subcontinent. Unlike the tahini version often seen, Persian halva is made from a flour and butter dough, flavoured with two of Persia's most popular ingredients: saffron and rose water. It's always made for special occasions including weddings and funerals and often elaborately decorated. The process takes a while as the flour is toasted and has to be stirred constantly, but it can be made days in advance and keeps for up to a week. Wheat flour is most commonly used, but there are versions made with rice flour. This is another dish associated with Nazri, the giving of alms.

Serves 12 (or more)

INGREDIENTS

- ½ cup castor sugar
- ⅓ cup water
- ¼ cup rose water
- Pinch saffron stamens, dissolved in 2 teaspoons water
- ¼ teaspoon ground green cardamom
- ½ cup plain flour
- 120g ghee
- Slivered pistachios, for garnishing
- Rose petals, for garnishing



METHOD

1. Place sugar and water in a saucepan over medium-high heat and stir until sugar dissolves.
2. Bring to the boil then remove from heat.
3. Stir in rose water, cardamom, saffron and its soaking liquid. Set aside.
4. Sift flour into a frying pan and place over medium heat.
5. Stir constantly for about 10 minutes, reducing the heat as it starts to smell toasty, until pale caramel in colour.
6. Add ghee and stir for a couple of minutes to form a smooth paste; there may be a few hard grains, they'll soften as the halva cooks.
7. Add sugar mixture and stir constantly for about 8 minutes, until it thickens into a smooth paste that pulls away from the pan.
8. Lift the pan up and tilt it from side to side to roll the paste into a soft log; if it doesn't roll into a log, return to the heat and keep stirring.
9. Spread the dough into a disc on a flat serving plate, smoothing the top.
10. Indent the edges with your finger to form a scalloped rim and use a spoon to mark half-moon patterns in the top.
11. Decorate with pistachio and rose petals and set aside to cool then refrigerate until needed.
12. Remove from fridge half an hour before serving, cut into squares or wedges and serve at room temperature.