

Iranian Festival offers glimpse into exotic Persian culture

By Kate Hubbard
The Asian Reporter

Conversations about Iran and the Middle East often dissolve into politics. The Andisheh Center seeks to change that, by celebrating the culture, diversity, and contributions of Iranian Americans. The center hosted its 15th annual Iranian Festival this month, an event that offered the Portland community a glimpse into a beautiful, ancient culture, with a focus on Iranian (also called Persian) art, music, dance, and literature.

The sunny park blocks next to Portland Farmers Market burst to life during the festival. Attendees were greeted with the smell of delicious food wafting through the trees. Booths were adorned with colorful banners of various architectural wonders of Iran. I had never heard of any of them except what is commonly called "The Pink Mosque." It felt like stumbling into a secret treasure-filled world that had been there all along.

Portland mayor Charlie Hales and Beaverton mayor Denny Doyle both addressed the crowd and thanked everyone for their contributions, and for sharing their cultural heritage. Mayor Hales commented that Portland is truly becoming a world city instead of the provincial town he moved to 35 years ago.

"Diversity makes us stronger, richer, better," Hales said, explaining that it's important to recognize the gifts and value of people from all over the world, and how it makes our city even better.

A charming vendor crafted my name in Persian calligraphy, and another let me photograph stunning examples of Persian handicrafts. I learned that *khatam* is wood inlay, an ancient art that has been perfected over centuries, while *mina* is copper-smithing that is enamelled and painted into brilliantly patterned works of art.

More familiar to many were plush Persian carpets and pillows as well as a roped-off section for games of chess and



AR Photo/Juan Landis



AR Photo/Kate Hubbard

EXPLORING IRAN. The 2014 edition of the Iranian Festival featured Persian dance, music, activities for kids, Persian food and desserts, a showcase of traditional outfits, vendors, and more. Pictured are young people dancing to live music (left photo) and an artist writing calligraphy (right photo).

backgammon. One vendor had a backgammon set that took an expert craftsman three months to create.

There was an information booth that had videos, music, and examples of costumes on display. Adults and children wore clothing that represented the wide variety of Iranian subcultures, all of which have distinct languages, arts, and forms of dress. There was even a table featuring items for the Persian New Year celebration: gold coffee carafes, deep jewel tones, and decadent desserts, all represented different New Year wishes.

I was greeted warmly and introduced around as though I belonged. The event was described to me as a rowdy, loving family reunion, and that was exactly how it felt. This was a chance for Iranian Americans to get together and celebrate their heritage, to show off their amazing culture, and focus on connecting as a community.

I walked around while eating a dessert called Fallodeh — a frozen noodle concoction topped with lemon juice. It was unlike anything I'd ever tasted, and perfectly refreshing on a hot summer day. Children ran around in the sunshine, giggling and sparkling in their finery. Freshly applied henna tattoos were everywhere; they need an hour to dry before the henna can be removed, leaving the distinctive reddish brown designs behind.

As I listened to the strains of exotic music and debated whether to have some chilled Sholeh Zard — a saffron infused rice pudding — a young woman came up, introduced herself, and aired her concerns.

"It's really hard to be 18 years old and Persian and see how people treat us," Bahar Bhboodi told me. "I'm terrified right now."

It's all too easy to point fingers, talk about wars and terrorists, and lose track of

the amazing people and culture of Iran. The Andisheh Center has done a brilliant job sharing a sample of Iran that the western world often does not have a chance to experience. The Iranian community is eager to connect through culture, and they have a lot of it.

For example, who knew that one of the largest adobe buildings in the world — the Bam Castle — was in Iran, and that it was designated a UNESCO World Heritage site? It was mostly destroyed by an earthquake in 2003, and is currently under extensive reconstruction. The Sio-Seh Pol Bridge in Esfahan is another gorgeous feat of engineering, and the list just goes on and on.

I highly recommend this festival for those who can attend next year. It was a rich cultural experience, and an important reminder to embrace our diversity and create a city — and world — that is culturally wealthy. And it's a great opportunity, as mayor Doyle put it, to "have a great time, eat well, and prosper."

To learn more about the Andisheh Center and the annual festival, visit <www.andisheh.org>.

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