

Bridging the Love of Four Cultures

Eugene's newest specialty store is small but mighty BY VANESSA SALVIA

While Eugene does not yet have ethnic markets and restaurants on every corner, our little town is becoming a bit more "big city" thanks to a growing receptiveness to specialty food stores. Eugene's ethnic markets offer a Park Avenue shopping experience with an abundance of colors, textures and flavors for the adventurous cook or those yearning for the flavors of home.

Eugene's newest ethnic market, Pomegranates, specializes in the flavors of Persia, Lebanon, Italy and Spain. Husband and wife owners Julie Lenox-Sharifi and Babak "Bobby" Sharifi have enjoyed a steady stream of customers attracted to their international fare since they opened in November of 2006. The couple met in Venice Beach, Calif., 14 years ago, when Bobby worked at a skateboard shop. Sharifi's family is Iranian, and as the relationship blossomed, so did Lenox-Sharifi's love for all things Persian. The pair left successful careers with Starbucks to go into business for themselves. "We felt there was a need and a desire for this type of market in Eugene," Lenox-Sharifi says. "We wanted to bring these foods to Eugene and we wondered why it hadn't been done."

Lenox-Sharifi talks freely about the commingling of cultures whose culinary history is represented in the jars of roasted eggplant and tins of *tortas* dusted with sugar and anise. "These foods are from the old Persian dynasty," says Lenox-Sharifi. "One of the things Persians used to do when they came into a new area was plant agricultural fields to sustain their soldiers." One thing they planted was the pomegranate, which today grows wild throughout Spain and Italy. The store stocks a delectable hazelnut stuffed olive, Lenox-Sharifi's "homage to Eugene, combining Spain and Eugene in one mouthful!"



Our fertile valley here in the Pacific Northwest is able to produce many of the ingredients used in Persian cooking, making it possible to eat local, seasonal Persian meals, Lenox-Sharifi notes. For the uncommon spices — angelica, sour grape, sumac, dried lime — Pomegranates has an abundant supply.

Walk into a specialty store, though, and it's easy to be overcome by the unfamiliar labels and the many choices — bomba, jasmine, arborio or basmati rice? Most specialty shop owners are only too happy to answer questions about their products. Lenox-Sharifi delights in explaining that salted capers are much more flavorful than the common brined variety, or that nothing but Italian arborio rice will do for the creamiest risotto.

Being the newest and smallest of Eugene's specialty stores is no disadvantage for Pomegranates. While Plaza Latina has a few shelves of Middle Eastern food thanks to the Lebanese heritage of one of the owners, Pomegranates is the only store

that specializes in the food of that region. There are some you-won't-find-it-anywhere-else items, like two-foot long ziti. "Competition is good," says Sharifi. "But no one else has the selection of Spanish and Italian food that we do."

More and more, Eugeneans are trading long lines at the corner mega-mart for a more satisfying food shopping experience. The Sharifis have taken that sensory experience out of the store and made it even more personal with in-home cooking demonstrations. The couple provides the food, instructions and variations of preparation and stories of both ancient and modern traditions for your intimate dinner party or employee event. A sample menu might feature Naaz Khatoon (eggplant with pomegranate appetizer), lamb kababs, saffron rice, yogurt dip, a drink and dessert. "You get to see it, experience it and have the full meal experience," says Sharifi.

Pomegranates is located at 2833 Willamette Street, Suite F. 242-0705.

MORE SPECIAL SHOPS

Long's Meat Market

81 E. 28th Ave. 344-3172.

Since 1927, Long's has purveyed high-quality, free-range and organic meats from the predictable (beef, poultry, lamb and pork) to the unusual, like ostrich, Guinea fowl, quail and poussin (Cornish game hen). Expanded offerings include potatoes, fine cheeses and local breads, making dinner one-stop easy.

Plaza Latina

1333 W. 7th Ave. 344-6101.

This 11,000 sq. ft. Mexican market features a full service carniceria (meat counter), a bakery, produce department and take-out taqueria. The fresh-from-the-oven handmade tortillas are amazing. Owned by a married couple (the husband is Latino and the wife is Lebanese), the market features a couple of aisles of Middle Eastern, Indian and Asian foods.

Pho Yi Shen Market & Restaurant

1075 Chambers. 683-9386.

An Asian market with restaurant attached, this shop specializes in Vietnamese products. Pho cooking was influenced by both Chinese, which contributed noodles and spices, and French cooking, which popularized red meat. The term "pho" is thought to originate from "pot au feu," a French dish. Try the restaurant's delicious chicken noodle soup with bean sprouts and lime, or purchase ingredients for a DIY version.

King's Asian Market

2100 W. 11th Ave. 343-7333.

This market is half food and half gifts, with row after row of ceramic serving dishes, paper lanterns, flower pots and beautiful carved wooden furniture. King's has a nice selection of fresh produce, including exotic root vegetables like taro and yucca and endless varieties of teas.

Sunrise Asian Market

70 W. 29th Ave. 343-3295.

Sunrise distinguishes itself from other Asian markets by renting Asian videos and offering a hot foods bar and prepared sushi. The store offers a large selection of fresh ingredients, frozen seafood and hard-to-find flavors from Korea, Japan, China, Southeast Asia, the Philippines and India.

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