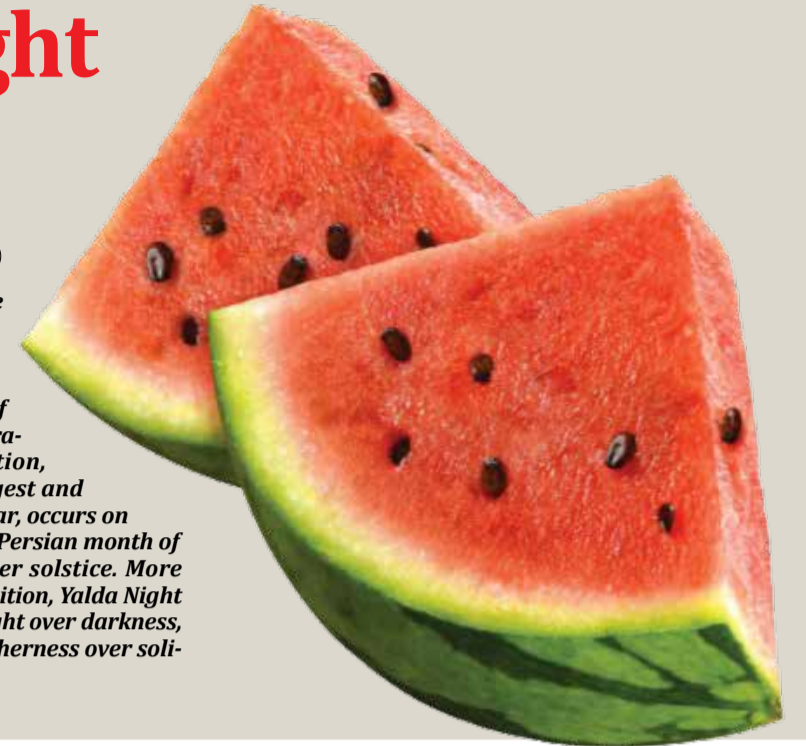


# Triumph of light over darkness on Yalda Night



## Iranica Desk

As winter blankets the Northern Hemisphere, Iranians around the globe eagerly prepare for Yalda Night, one of their most cherished traditions. This celebration, recognized as the longest and darkest night of the year, occurs on the final evening of the Persian month of Azar, marking the winter solstice. More than just a seasonal transition, Yalda Night embodies the triumph of light over darkness, warmth over cold, and togetherness over solitude.



## Significance of Yalda Night

Celebrated annually on December 20 or 21, Yalda Night (Shab-e Yalda or Shab-e Chelleh in Persian) is an ancient festival rooted in Zoroastrian traditions. It symbolizes unity, poetry, and hope as Iranians welcome the dawn of longer days. Families gather to share stories, recite poetry, and enjoy traditional foods, creating an evening filled with cultural warmth and spiritual renewal. The fruits of the season, particularly pomegranates and watermelons, are enjoyed for their symbolic representation of health and re-

newal, while the act of lighting candles adds to the warmth of the occasion.

This festive observance is not only significant in Iran but also in regions influenced by Persian culture, such as Azerbaijan, Afghanistan, the Kurdistan Region, and Tajikistan. It is also celebrated among diaspora communities in Canada, the United States, and beyond. The essence of Yalda lies in its celebration of light's victory over darkness, heralding a message of hope and renewal.

## Origins

Yalda Night has deep historical roots, intertwined with the ancient religion of Zoroastrianism. As the longest night of the year, it holds a unique place in Iranian culture, symbolizing the balance between light and dark, good and evil. Historically, it was believed that evil forces were at their strongest during this time, prompting people to stay awake all night to avoid misfortune until the sunrise signaled the return of goodness. This

ancient festival, which dates back over 7,000 years, reflects the beliefs of ancient civilizations, including the Aryans from India, Iran, and Europe, who recognized that following the first night of winter, the days would gradually lengthen and nights would wane. They celebrated this celestial event as the birth of the Sun (Mehr) and the arrival of a new year, a belief that may have influenced the origins of Christmas.



## Feast and decorations

An essential principle of Yalda Night is indulging in delicious food. Staying awake until after midnight requires ample tasty treats. In addition to an array of sweets and pastries, a variety of fruits and nuts are enjoyed. Pomegranates and watermelons are particularly significant; no true Yalda celebration is complete without them. Traditionally, these items, along with many others, are arranged on a *korsi* (a low table with a heater underneath) where families gather. In some regions, it is customary to serve up to

forty varieties of edibles during the Yalda celebration, making it a grand feast for the longest night of the year.

Decorating the gathering space with red colors and candles enhances the festive atmosphere. The vibrant red hues found in watermelon and pomegranate symbolize the crimson glow of dawn and the warmth of life, infusing the cold night with passion and energy. Candles play a crucial role, illuminating the darkness and adding to the celebratory ambiance.

## Customs and celebrations

On Yalda Night, families across Iran come together, often gathering in the home of the eldest family member. The atmosphere is festive, filled with laughter and the sharing of traditional foods, including the essential pomegranates and watermelons, which symbolize life and the glow of the sun.

A central element of the celebration is the recitation of poetry, particularly from the esteemed Persian poet Hafez. Families often consult his Divan of Hafez, a collection of poems believed to offer predictions and guidance for the coming year when opened randomly. To engage in this practice, individuals make a wish or pose a question about their current life or love situation in their hearts, seeking Hafez's wisdom. When the Divan is opened randomly, the poem that appears is interpreted as his answer to the question posed.

For those unfamiliar with the poetry, it is advisable to have a translated version of the book or an Iranian person present who can read and interpret the verses. Traditionally, the eldest family member, such as a grandparent, opens the book for each family member and reads the corresponding poem. This practice is

not only entertaining but also resonates deeply with many, as they find Hafez's responses remarkably accurate and relatable. Thus, if you plan to celebrate Yalda alongside Iranians, having a copy of Hafez's Divan on hand is essential!

The night is further enriched by storytelling, especially from the Shahnameh (the Book of Kings), as elders narrate tales of heroism and ancient wisdom to younger generations. These literary traditions not only entertain but also foster cultural transmission, anchoring the celebration in a rich cultural context and reinforcing communal solidarity.

Staying awake throughout the night is a key aspect of Yalda, symbolizing the triumph over darkness as days begin to lengthen. Many families light candles or small fires to represent this victory, echoing the warmth and vitality of life. In modern times, Yalda Night has expanded to include cultural events such as concerts and plays, both in Iran and in countries with significant Persian communities. This fusion of ancient traditions and contemporary festivities creates a unique and vibrant expression of cultural heritage and familial bonds.

## Role of Divan of Hafez

The Divan of Hafez is an integral part of Yalda Night celebrations. This collection of poems by the revered 14th-century Persian poet Hafez is deeply cherished in Iranian culture, often associated with themes of love, spirituality, and wisdom. Many believe that Hafez's poetry provides profound insights into one's life and future. Reading Hafez's verses is a cherished tradition during Yalda, with nearly every Iranian family owning at least one copy of the Divan of Hafez, and many having several editions. The practice of creating a *fal* from this book involves consulting Hafez's poetry for guidance, adding an element of divination to the celebration.

## Seasonal significance

Iranians also divide the year into seasons, each denoted by a name that translates to "forty days," known as a *chelleh*. The first *chelleh* occurs in summer, while the others, referred to as the *bozorg* (great) and the *khochak* (small) *chelleh*, occur in winter. The small *chelleh* spans from the tenth to the thirty-first day of Bahman (the second month of winter in the Persian calendar), comprising twenty nights and days



that contribute to the second forty-day period. The big *chelleh* begins on the first day of Dey, the first month of winter in the Persian calendar, and lasts for forty days.

The traditional Iranian festival of the winter solstice, Shab-e Yalda, is still observed by Iranians and other nations such as Azerbaijan, Tajikistan, Iraqi Kurdistan, Afghanistan, and Turkey. Yalda Night, or Shab-e Chelleh, derives

from Zoroastrianism and, in Syriac, means "birth." It marks the beginning of the gradual lengthening of the day, celebrating the birth of the sun as a sign of light triumphing over evil and good over darkness.

In conclusion, Yalda Night is a vibrant tapestry of tradition, culture, and familial love, weaving together the past and present as Iranians celebrate the longest night of the year.