



Tahmourez, One of Akhavan's employees shows off one of the greatest selection of nuts in the city of Montreal.

Akhavan brings a taste of Persia to Montreal; Two stores offer exotic food & restaurant

The two Akhavan retail outlets (Sherbrooke St W in NDG and another in Pierrefonds) bring a taste of Persia (Iran) to Montreal. Stopping at the restaurant of the Sherbrooke

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St. store, I mused out loud that it looked like a scaled-down version of the popular Amir restaurants. "No, not at all!" responded Ozhen behind the counter. "Persian cuisine is very different from Arabic cuisine. Our food is less spicy and you can taste the meat more. The main spices we do use are cinnamon, saffron and sumac and they are very distinct. And we cook our food differently than in Arabic restaurants." Still, I was not totally convinced, gazing at kebabs of beef and lamb, together with rice plates.

"Look at the menu," commented Robert Gabbay, office manager from the head office in Ville St. Laurent. "A 12-inch sandwich starts at \$5 here and the tea is free with meals. The food is tasty, healthy, and inexpensive." Some 20 items are offered on the menu. He continued that future plans include building a restaurant on the

second floor of the Sherbrooke Street building to meet anticipated demand for this cooking.

The clientele at Akhavan consists of many customers of Middle-Eastern heritage, but also many French and English-Canadians who are apparently attracted by the unusual tastes and offerings found here, not to mention some of the inexpensive weekly specials. Gabbay explained that many people wander into the stores to try new taste experiences. "And then they become addicted!" he chuckled.

A short walk around the store reveals that not all of the food comes from Persia; some of it comes from India, Pakistan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Syria, and so on... Akhavan has tremendous selection on items like: tea (about 50 varieties), spices, olives (18 kinds are available at the olive counter), dates, pistachios (six different kinds offered in bins), and exotic fruit juices. Not only is there a lot of selection of different brand names and varieties, but also with the size of containers; there are many 2kg cans of olives here. There is a large display of Turkish pastries such as baklava. For health nuts seeking antioxidant-rich drinks, look no further than Akhavan's many brands of pomegranate

juice. You can find many dried fruits and herbs here including packs of dried limes. There is guava jelly, too, and grape molasses, black currant syrup, domadakia (grape leaves stuffed with rice), big jars of mango chutney, roasted buckwheat, Chinese pine nuts, and cans of coconut water.

There are also large sheets made from pastes of dried fruit, sort of like giant Fruit Roll-Ups. The best known of these are sweet apricot pastes from Syria, but Gabbay made me try a dark-coloured apple paste from Persia instead. The taste was surprisingly tangy and I wonder if sour apples were used. "A lot of fruit is grown in Persia and the sun is hot, so it's perfect for making dried pastes," he explained. Another tangy taste, sour cherry seems very popular in Persia; Akhavan offers this flavour in pastes, jam, and juice.

The whole store is 'halal' meaning that the food conforms to Muslim doctrine and that you will not find any pork here. A butcher counter does serve choice cuts of beef,

chicken, lamb, and even quail. Some of the meats are already marinated so they can be put directly on the BBQ. Among the marinades, I noticed tandoori chicken and shawarma beef, the first is Indian cuisine and the second is Turkish. Gab-

swears by. There is also a wide choice of tzatziki sauces. The bread section has many flat breads baked in special ovens. Some of them are up to 24 inches across and the types offered include sangak (whole wheat, sour dough), barbari, afghan, and sesame bread.

The first Akhavan store in Montreal opened in 1989 on Sherbrooke Street, but not at the current NDG location. Four brothers from the Ajabi family own the company (Ali, Hassan, Mohamad, and Nasser) and 'Akhavan' means 'the brothers' in Persian, hence the name. Apart from the two retail outlets and lunch counters, there is also a wholesale business based out of the head office in Ville St. Laurent. The wholesaling business imports directly from Persia and distributes mainly to grocery stores in Canada. And there's also a website. Today, the company has over 100 employees between all of its operations.

Akhavan's retail and restaurant locations:

6170 Rue Sherbrooke Street W (at Grand) Montreal, (514) 485-4744

15760 Pierrefonds Blvd (between St. Jean and St. Charles), Pierrefonds - (514) 620-5551 www.akhavanfood.com/



Akhavan Manager Robert Gabbay with pomegranate, sour cherry juice

bay pointed to pre-packaged Maple Leaf sausages made from beef. "I served these at a party recently and everybody said that they were the best 'hot dogs' they'd ever eaten." And because Akhavan is halal, you cannot find any beer, wine, or other alcohol products here.

There are about a dozen different types of feta cheese at the dairy counter, including one from Bulgaria that Gabbay