

Yalda

Iranian Winter Solstice

The Iranian festival of Yalda is celebrated on the longest and darkest night of the year, the Northern Hemisphere's winter solstice. It is based on an ancient Persian Zoroastrian religious festival, but with the conquest of Islam Yalda has become a social event. It's a time when friends and family gather together to eat, drink, tell stories, play music, and read poetry (especially Hafiz, also spelled Hafez) until well after midnight. Fruits and nuts are eaten and pomegranates and watermelons are particularly significant. The red color in these fruits symbolizes the crimson hues of dawn and glow of life. The poems of Hafiz, a 14th-century mystic, can be found in the bookcases of most Iranian families and are read or recited.

Yalda is symbolic of many things in Persian poetry, especially separation from loved ones, loneliness, and waiting. Young men send seven varieties of fruits and several gifts to their fiancées.

Poetry excerpts by Saadi (13th century Persian medieval poet):

The sight of you each morning is a New Year
Any night of your departure is the eve of Yalda.

With all my pains, there is still the hope of recovery
Like the eve of Yalda, there will finally be an end.

Beautifully decorated platters in the MIA's collection speak of spending time together, eating and drinking, and waiting for the long night to end.