

Dinnerview: Kaveh Akbar

written by Danielle Susi | August 16, 2017



Kaveh Akbar's poems appear recently in *The New Yorker*, *Poetry*, *APR*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. His debut full-length, *Calling a Wolf a Wolf*, will be published by Alice James Books in September. He is also the author of the chapbook *Portrait of the Alcoholic* (Sibling Rivalry). The recipient of a Ruth Lilly and Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg fellowship from the Poetry Foundation, Kaveh was born in Tehran, Iran, and currently teaches in the MFA program at Purdue University.

Here, he talks about pilgrimages to Persian restaurants, salty-sweet ice cream combos, and watching movies at a Chinese buffet.

On his all-time favorite meal:

It's not one specific meal, but as a boy I grew up largely in the Midwest, first in and around Milwaukee and then in Indiana. And every year, once or twice a year, we would make a pilgrimage to Chicago expressly to go to Reza's Restaurant, the only real Persian restaurant within driving distance of us (sometimes a four or six hour drive each way). I'd look forward to the trips for weeks ahead of time. I'd eat fessenjan, lamb shank, ghormeh sabzi, ghaimh—Persian food is just the perfect thing, I've never met anyone who hasn't loved it. Always, at the ends of meals, we'd get desserts, bahmieh and zoolibieh. My family was always so happy. The word for "cardamom" in Farsi is pronounced "hell," and my dad would always get a kick at the end of the meal out of asking the server for "hell tea." Those trips were my favorite things in the world, I'd get to just read the whole way there and usually pass out for most of the trip back home.

On snacking while writing:

For whatever reason, I write better on an empty stomach. I *do* drink pots and pots of tea—I like milk oolong and Paris breakfast tea, depending on how much caffeine I need.

On his go-to late-night snack:

Carrots and hummus or a sliced cucumber with a little salt, if I'm being good. Ice cream if I'm being real. Cookie dough is my go-to base flavor, but

I'm pretty adventurous. I had a goat cheese and olive oil ice cream in LA a couple weeks ago that was way better than it sounds. I generally enjoy salty-sweet ice cream flavors over fruity. Peanut-butter chocolate, pretzel.

On his food quirks:

One of my secret favorite things to do is to put a movie on my laptop, then go to a cheap Chinese buffet and just plant for two hours, watching my movie with headphones, slowly grazing on small plates of this and that. It's almost like a Zen thing for me. I shut off my phone and just fall into a beautiful peaceful place, slowly sipping egg drop soup and picking at bowls of fruit.

Tell me about your last meal request? Where are you eating it? Who are you eating with?

I've weirdly thought a lot about this. I think I'd be eating a bowl of the lamb noodles from Xi'an Famous Foods in New York, along with a hearty portion of fessenjan (pomegranate and walnut stew) from Reza's Restaurant served on my mother's tadig (a kind of Persian hard rice). For dessert, the entirety of one of my mother's Tollhouse pies. And some cardamom-heavy tea. Hopefully I'm eating it somewhere bright and surrounded by books and with my partner, who would also likely be eating fessenjan—with cookie dough ice cream and gummy bears for dessert. I think we'd be watching an episode of The Simpsons.