POUR tahina into the strained lemon/garlic juice.

STRAIN the crushed garlic and lemon juice.

WHISK in ice water bit by bit into the stiff tahina.

TASTE as you go for salt and cumin.

CONSISTENCY should be creamy, light, and fluffy.
You can almost always tell what's inside a boreka by its shape: triangles with sesame seeds for potatoes, rectangles with poppy and sesame seeds for Bulgarian cheese, half moons with poppy seeds for mushrooms.
Laffa and Pita
Both breads are made from the same dough and are baked on the back of a baking sheet in the home oven, left. Laffa, far left, puffs nicely, then gets a pour of olive oil and a sprinkling of za‘atar. Disks of pita dough inflate beautifully, above.

Laffa
The key to making great tahina is to drive away as much water and fibrous material from the sesame seeds as possible. The key to drive away as much water and fibrous material from the sesame seeds as possible.
WHEN AVI MOR married my half-sister Merav (my father’s daughter from his first marriage), my father had been living in the United States for several years. The first time he met Avi’s family was on the Sabbath before the wedding. Avi’s sister made the rice that day and she had taken it a bit too far. The tahdig had gone from crispy and tender to hard and chewy. But it was too late to do anything about it, so the rice was served. My father was a lone Bulgarian in a crowd of 50 Persian men that he was meeting for the first time. There were 50 suspicious pairs of eyes on my father, watching to see what this outsider would do with the challenging rice. When my father swallowed it down without blinking, he was immediately accepted into the family.

At Zahav, we regard the rice as so special that we serve it with our Mesibah (party) menu, to give you an idea of just how cool it is. The method for cooking it is very different from what we’re used to in America.

Instead of steaming the rice in just enough liquid to tenderize the grains, this method calls for blanching presoaked rice in a large amount of salted water until it’s barely al dente. The rice is drained and then added to a heavy-bottomed pot that has been lightly oiled. The pot is covered with a lid that is wrapped in a kitchen towel and set over very low heat for the rice to finish steaming. The towel helps regulate the moisture inside of the pot, allowing the rice to take in only as much as it needs. This is similar to the “fuzzy logic” employed by fancy rice cookers. But a rice cooker is much more expensive than a kitchen towel. And far less absorbent.
“At home rice pilaf is the perfect thing to make when you have absolutely nothing to eat in your kitchen.”
WITHOUT A DOUBT, pilaf is my favorite way to prepare rice. The method takes something as plain as steamed rice and turns it into party time with a handful of ingredients that even a poor, overworked cook would have in his or her home kitchen. The beauty of the pilaf method is that it manages to pack the rice with flavor while maintaining the integrity of the individual grains. Every step in the process is specifically designed to achieve this platonic ideal.

I prefer jasmine rice for its firm texture and the small size of the grains. First I wash the rice to remove excess starch that will cause the grains to stick together. Then I soak the rice to shorten the cooking time, so the interior of the grain finishes cooking before the exterior begins to fall apart. And I toast the rice in oil or fat before adding the liquid; this coats each grain in a protective jacket that helps it retain its individuality. Finally, I cook the rice in the gentle, even heat of the oven, rather than the violent bottom-up heat of the stovetop.

When we first opened Zahav, I imagined that we would make rice in batches throughout the night, which would allow us to serve the freshest rice possible. Before dinner service, we would make up kits of premeasured rice, water, and seasonings to have ready when called upon. Besides being completely impractical in a busy restaurant, I quickly realized that this idea actually did a huge disservice to the rice: Rice needs to rest after it’s cooked. The moisture needs time to evenly distribute throughout the grain and the starch needs time to set up—if you handle rice too quickly after cooking, the grains easily break apart and you can end up with a gluey mess. I recommend resting it for at least 15 to 20 minutes, or longer if you have the time and patience.

Another advantage of the pilaf method is it gives you three opportunities to add flavor: toasting the rice; choosing the cooking liquid itself; and fluffing and seasoning the rice before serving. The recipes are far less important than the technique.

At home rice pilaf is a great thing to make when you think you have absolutely nothing to eat in your kitchen. Thinly slice those last few stalks of celery in the bottom of your vegetable bin and sauté them in olive oil with some garlic while toasting the rice. Add a package of frozen peas on top while the rice is cooling (covered) and finish with grated Parmesan cheese. Even leftover orange juice or V8 (or both together) will give you intensely flavored rice. And if you brown some ground beef before you add the rice, you’ll have a soulful one-pot meal. Fold a handful of sunflower seeds and raisins (rehydrated in water) from the back of your pantry into a rested pilaf to create an addictive sweet and salty pot of rice fit for royalty. Once you master the technique, you’ll likely never settle for plain steamed rice again.

“The beauty of the pilaf method is that it manages to pack the rice with flavor while maintaining the integrity of individual grains.”
“Friends matter most at a big table. Or is it the roast chicken, Zahav lamb shoulder, Persian rice, and grilled fish?”
“Pastries are so much fun for a savory chef to make. They offer so many possibilities for fillings and flavors.”
RUGELACH

The dough comes together quickly and once rolled out, becomes a canvas to experiment with fillings such as dates, apricot jam, and pistachio, even peanut butter and Marshmallow Fluff.