

Nowruz Day in California: History, Recognition, and Community Impact

By

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Every spring, as the sun crosses the celestial equator and day and night stand in perfect balance, millions around the world welcome the ancient festival of Nowruz, the Persian New Year. In California, this day carries special significance not only for its ancient roots in Persian culture but also because it reflects the state's modern celebration of diversity, community, and renewal. California has officially recognized Nowruz Day as a state observance, honoring the many Iranian, Afghan, Kurdish, Azerbaijani, Central Asian, and other communities that call the Golden State home. The California State Observation of Nowruz highlights how an ancient festival can find fresh meaning in one of the most multicultural places in the world.

The official recognition of Nowruz in California began in 2018, when Governor Edmund G. Brown Jr. issued the first state proclamation declaring March 20 as Nowruz Day. This marked the beginning of an ongoing tradition in which each successive governor has renewed the observance annually. Governors Gavin Newsom and later state officials have continued the practice, issuing proclamations in subsequent years including 2022, 2024, and 2025. By 2025, California had thus observed Nowruz for eight consecutive years, demonstrating a sustained commitment to celebrating this ancient festival as part of the state's cultural calendar. In his 2025 proclamation, Governor Newsom praised the "rich traditions of Nowruz that symbolize renewal, hope, and unity," and commended the Iranian and Persian communities for their contributions to California's civic and cultural life. The proclamations often reference the *haft-sin* table an arrangement of seven symbolic items beginning with the Persian letter "s," each representing a facet of renewal and prosperity. Through this annual recognition, California has strengthened its reputation as a state that values inclusivity, global awareness, and cultural respect.

The term "Nowruz" derives from the Persian words *now* meaning "new" and *ruz* meaning "day," symbolizing the first day of the new year in the Persian calendar. Celebrated at the spring equinox, usually on March 20 or 21 it represents rebirth, renewal, and the victory of light over darkness. Nowruz's origins trace back more than three thousand years to the rituals of ancient Persia and Zoroastrianism, one of the world's earliest monotheistic religions. According to Persian legend and the great national epic, the *Shahnameh*, the mythical king Jamshid proclaimed the first Nowruz as a celebration of life and divine light returning to the world after the darkness of winter. Over centuries, the festival survived the

rise and fall of empires, religious transformations, and migrations, retaining its essential message of unity, renewal, and hope.

In 2009, UNESCO recognized Nowruz as part of the “Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity,” affirming its global cultural value. A year later, the United Nations declared March 21 as International Nowruz Day, encouraging member nations to observe it as a time of peace and reconciliation. Yet it was California, with its extraordinary cultural mosaic, that gave Nowruz one of its most vibrant homes in the United States. The state’s recognition of the holiday mirrors its deep connection to immigrant traditions and its longstanding commitment to celebrating cultural diversity as part of its identity.

California’s Iranian American community is one of the largest in the nation, concentrated primarily in Los Angeles, the Bay Area, Orange County, and San Diego. Over the decades, Iranian immigrants have established vibrant neighborhoods, businesses, and cultural institutions, helping to shape the social and economic landscape of the state. As their presence grew, so did the public recognition of Nowruz, which was once celebrated quietly in homes and community halls but is now embraced in city halls, universities, and public parks across California. The state’s observance represents a formal acknowledgment of both this cultural heritage and the values of renewal and inclusion that Nowruz embodies.

This recognition carries both symbolic and practical importance. On a symbolic level, it places Nowruz alongside other cultural observances such as Lunar New Year, Diwali, and Indigenous Peoples’ Day, reinforcing California’s identity as a state that honors all communities that contribute to its story. Practically, observance encourages civic institutions, schools, universities, libraries, and local governments to acknowledge and celebrate the holiday. In many cities, Nowruz displays appear in public spaces, from community centers to municipal buildings, offering residents the chance to learn about Persian culture and participate in its joyful customs.

The California State Observation of Nowruz also plays a role in strengthening intercommunity relationships. As the state’s cultural demographics evolve, celebrations like Nowruz serve as bridges between immigrant and non-immigrant populations. For many Californians, attending a Nowruz event may be their first introduction to Persian poetry, music, cuisine, or dance. For Iranian and Central Asian Californians, the observance provides an affirmation that their traditions are valued as part of the broader state identity. This reciprocal exchange enriches civic life, turning cultural recognition into shared experience.

Nowruz celebrations across California vary in scale and expression. In Los Angeles, where the Iranian American community is particularly large, the Persian New Year Festival

in Westwood—known informally as “Tehrangeles” attracts thousands. The event features traditional music, dance, crafts, and food such as *sabzi polo* (herbed rice with fish) and *samanu* (a sweet wheat pudding). The annual *Chaharshanbeh Suri* celebration, held a few days before Nowruz, includes bonfires that participants jump over while reciting a traditional verse wishing away sickness and misfortune. In the Bay Area, and specifically within Santa Clara County, several communities host Nowruz-themed events. For example, the Iranian Scholarship Foundation holds an annual Nowruz Festival in downtown San Jose, drawing crowds of families for music, dance, crafts, and food. Also in San Jose, the Children’s Discovery Museum of San Jose organizes a “Nowruz Around the World” day of interactive cultural activities for children and families in Santa Clara County. Local schools in the region have also begun acknowledging and teaching about Nowruz in classrooms. For instance, the Santa Clara Unified School District and neighboring districts include “Persian New Year (Nowruz)” on school calendars and integrate lessons or classroom discussions about cultural traditions during March. Teachers sometimes led art projects featuring symbols from the *haft-sīn* table, and some schools invite parents to share Nowruz customs through multicultural events. These efforts help students understand Nowruz’s themes of renewal, gratitude, and family, while strengthening the cultural literacy that defines education in Santa Clara County.

Even smaller municipalities throughout California are beginning to reflect the growing awareness of Nowruz’s meaning. Cities in Santa Clara County have seen the influence of Nowruz extend into educational and cultural spaces as families of Persian and Central Asian heritage celebrate privately or within community groups. These local gatherings often include the symbolic *haft-sīn* table, visits between family and friends, and acts of charity. As California’s recognition of the day becomes more widely understood, more municipalities are likely to adopt educational or celebratory initiatives to honor the observance, linking it to themes of renewal and agricultural vitality that are already part of the state’s cultural rhythm.

The agricultural symbolism embedded in Nowruz resonates deeply in California, a state whose identity and economy are tied to the land. Nowruz marks the moment when the world turns green again when life, crops, and flowers return after winter’s dormancy. For Californians, whose livelihoods and environment depend on seasonal cycles, this symbolism holds immediate relevance. It reminds residents of their connection to nature and the importance of sustainability, growth, and respect for the environment. In this sense, Nowruz aligns perfectly with California’s ecological consciousness and its broader ethos of renewal.

Moreover, Nowruz offers a framework for reflection on community resilience. In recent years, California has faced wildfires, droughts, social upheaval, and the lingering effects of the pandemic. The themes of rebirth and hope that define Nowruz mirror the collective desire to recover and rebuild. The festival's message that light overcomes darkness, that life renews itself is deeply resonant in a state that continuously adapts to challenge and change. The recognition of Nowruz within this context underscores not just cultural appreciation but a shared human aspiration toward renewal and perseverance.

The California State Observation of Nowruz also holds educational significance. It provides opportunities for schools to instruct students about ancient civilizations, world religions, and the global significance of equinox-based festivals. Lessons about Nowruz can encourage respect for cultural differences while illustrating shared human values family, renewal, and gratitude for nature. As California continues to diversify, such education fosters empathy and understanding among younger generations who will inherit the state's multicultural legacy.

On a broader scale, California's observance contributes to the normalization of cultural holidays within public life. Recognition at the state level signals to other states and to the nation that inclusivity and cultural literacy are strengths rather than challenges. It also provides visibility to groups that have long contributed to California's success yet may have felt underrepresented in public life. The public celebration of Nowruz thus becomes an act of civic affirmation: a statement that every culture has a place at the table of the California experience.

As Nowruz continues to take root in California's civic calendar, it also enriches the state's artistic and cultural landscape. The music, poetry, and art associated with the festival—from the verses of Hafez to the contemporary performances of Persian musicians find eager audiences across the state. Museums and theaters increasingly incorporate Persian cultural themes into their programming during March, reflecting a growing appetite for cross-cultural engagement. Through these artistic expressions, Californians experience Nowruz not only as a holiday but as a living bridge between the ancient and the modern, the global and the local.

In conclusion, the California State Observation of Nowruz stands as a testament to the state's enduring commitment to diversity, inclusion, and renewal. Rooted in ancient Persian tradition yet perfectly aligned with California's spirit of progress, Nowruz offers both historical depth and contemporary relevance. It connects communities through shared celebration, reinforces civic unity through cultural recognition, and reminds all who live in California that renewal of the earth, of the spirit, and of the community is a universal aspiration. As the sun crosses the equator each spring, Californians of every background

can look toward the new day together, embracing the promise that Nowruz has carried for over three millennia: the eternal return of light, life, and hope.