



I. AN INTRODUCTION TO TURKISH CUISINE

“Do not dismiss the dish saying that it is just food. The blessed thing is an entire civilization in itself!”

Abdulahak Şinasi

For those who travel to engage in culinary pursuits, the Turkish Cuisine is worthy of exploration. The variety of dishes that make up the cuisine, the ways they all come together in feast-like meals, and the evident intricacy of each craft involved offer enough material for life-long study and enjoyment. It is not easy to discern a basic element or a single dominant feature, like the Italian pasta or the French sauce. Whether in a humble home, at a famous restaurant, or at dinner in a Bey's mansion, familiar patterns of this rich and diverse cuisine are always present. It is a rare art which satisfies the senses while reconfirming the higher order of society, community and culture.

A practically-minded child watching Mother cook "cabbage dolma" on a lazy, grey winter day is bound to wonder: "Who on earth discovered this peculiar combination of sauteed rice, pine-nuts, currants, spices, and herbs all tightly wrapped in translucent leaves of cabbage, each



roll exactly half an inch thick and stacked up on an oval serving plate decorated with lemon wedges? How was it possible to transform this humble vegetable to such heights of fashion and delicacy with so few additional ingredients? And, how can such a yummy dish also possibly be good for you?"

The modern mind, in a moment of contemplation, has similar thoughts upon entering a modest sweets shop where "baklava" is the generic cousin of a dozen or so sophisticated sweet pastries with names like twisted turban, sultan, saray (palace), lady's navel, or nightingale's nest. The same experience awaits you at a "muhallebici" (pudding shop) with a dozen different types of milk puddings.

One can only conclude that the evolution of this glorious cuisine was not an accident, but rather, as with the other grand cuisines of the world, it was a result of the combination of three key elements, a nurturing environment, the imperial



kitchen, and a long social tradition. A nurturing environment is irreplaceable. Turkey is known for an abundance and diversity of foodstuff due to its rich flora, fauna and regional differentiation. Secondly, the legacy of an imperial kitchen is inescapable. Hundreds of cooks, all specializing in different types of dishes, and all eager to please the royal palate, no doubt had their influence in perfecting the cuisine as we know it today. The palace kitchen, supported by a complex social organization, a vibrant urban life, specialization of labor, worldwide trade, and total control of the Spice Road, all reflected the culmination of wealth and the flourishing of culture in the capital of a mighty empire. Finally, the longevity of social organization should not be taken lightly either. The Turkish State of Anatolia is a millennium old and so, naturally, is its cuisine. Time is of the essence, as Ibn'i Haldun wrote, "The religion of the King, in time, becomes that of the people," which also holds true for the King's food. Thus, the 600-year reign of the Ottoman Dynasty and an exceptional cultural transition into the present day of modern Turkey led to the evolution of a grand cuisine through differentiation, the refinement and perfection of dishes, and the sequence and combination of the meals in which they are found.

It is quite rare when all three of the above conditions are met, as they are in French, Chinese and Turkish Cuisine. Turkish cuisine has the



added privilege of being at the crossroads of the Far East and the Mediterranean, resulting in a long and complex history of Turkish migration from the steppes of Central Asia (where they mingled with the Chinese) to Europe (where their influence was felt all the way to Vienna). Such unique characteristics and extensive history have bestowed upon Turkish cuisine a rich selection of dishes all of which can be prepared and combined with others to create meals of almost infinite variety, but always in a non-arbitrary way. This led to a cuisine that is open to improvisation through development of regional styles, while retaining its deep structure, as all great works of art do. The cuisine is also an integral aspect of the culture. It is a part of the rituals of everyday life. It reflects spirituality, in forms that are specific to it, through symbolism and practice.

Anyone who visits Turkey or has a meal in a Turkish home, regardless of the success of the particular cook, is sure to notice the uniqueness of the cuisine. Our intention here is to help the uninitiated enjoy Turkish food by achieving a more detailed understanding of the repertoire of dishes and their related cultural practices as well as their spiritual meaning.



II. A NURTURING ENVIRONMENT

Early historical documents show that the basic structure of Turkish cuisine was already established during the Nomadic Period and in the first settled Turkish States of Asia.

Culinary attitudes towards meat, dairy products, vegetables and grains that characterized this early period still make up the core of Turkish thinking. Early Turks cultivated wheat and used it liberally in several types of leavened and unleavened breads either baked in clay ovens, fried on a griddle, or buried in embers. "Manti" (dumpling), and "buğra," (the ancestor of "börek," or filled pastries, named for Buğra Khan of Tūrkestan) were already among the much-coveted dishes of this time. Stuffing not only the pastry, but also all kinds of vegetables was common practice, and still is, as evidenced by dozens of different types of "dolma." Skewering meat as well as other ways of grilling, later known to us as varieties of "kebab," and dairy products, such as cheeses and yogurt, were convenient staples of the pastoral Turks. They introduced these attitudes and practices to Anatolia in the 11th century. In return they met rice, the fruits and vegetables native to the region, and hundreds of varieties of fish in the three seas surrounding the Anatolian Peninsula. These new and wonderful ingredients were assimilated into the basic cuisine in the millennium that followed.

Anatolia is the region known as the "bread basket of the world." Turkey, even now, is one of the seven countries in the world which produces enough food to feed its own populace and still has plenty to export. The Turkish landscape encompasses such a wide variety of geographic zones, that for every two to four hours of driving, you will find yourself in a different zone amid all the accompanying changes in scenery, temperature, altitude, humidity, vegetation and weather. The Turkish landscape has the com-

bined characteristics of the three oldest continents of the world (Europe, Africa, and Asia) and an ecological diversity surpassing any other country along the 40th latitude. Thus, the diversity of the cuisine has taken on that of the landscape with its regional variations.

In the eastern region, you will encounter rugged, snow-capped mountains where the winters are long and cold, along with the highlands where the spring season with its rich wild flowers and rushing creeks extends into the long and cool summer. Livestock farming is prevalent. Butter, yogurt, cheese, honey, meat and cereals are the local food. Long winters are best endured with the help of yogurt soup and meatballs flavoured with aromatic herbs found in the mountains, followed by endless servings of tea.

The heartland is dry steppe with rolling hills, and endless stretches of wheat fields and barren bedrock that take on the most incredible shades of gold, violet, and cool and warm greys, as the sun travels the sky. Along the trade routes were ancient cities with lush cultivated orchards and gardens. Among these, Konya, the capital of the Selçuk Empire (the first Turkish State in Anatolia), distinguished itself as the center of a culture that attracted scholars, mystics, and poets from all over the world during the 13th century. The lavish cuisine that is enjoyed in Konya today, with its clay-oven (tandır) kebabs, böreks, meat and vegetable dishes and helva desserts, dates back to the feasts given by Sultan Alaaddin Keykubad in 1237 A.D.

Towards the west, one eventually reaches warm, fertile valleys between cultivated mountainsides, and

the lace-like shores of the Aegean where nature is friendly and life has always been easy-going. Fruits and vegetables of all kinds are abundant, including, best of all, sea food! Here, olive oil becomes a staple and is used both in hot and cold dishes.

The temperate zone of the Black Sea Coast, to the north, is protected by the high Caucasian Mountains and abounds in hazelnuts, corn and tea. The Black Sea people are fishermen and identify themselves with their ecological companion, the shimmering "hamsi," a small fish similar to the anchovy. There are at least forty different dishes made with hamsi, including desserts! Many poems, anecdotes and folk dances are inspired by this delicious fish.

The southeastern part of Turkey is hot and desert-like offering the greatest variety of kebabs and sweet pastries. Dishes here are spicier compared to all other regions, possibly to retard spoilage in hot weather, or as the natives say, to equalize the heat inside the body to that outside!

The culinary center of the country is the Marmara Region, including Thrace, with Istanbul as its Queen City. This temperate, fertile region boasts a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, as well as the most delicately flavoured lamb. The variety of fish that travel the Bosphorus surpasses that of other seas. Bolu, a city on the mountains, supplied the greatest cooks for the Sultan's Palace, and even now, the best chefs in the country come from Bolu. Since Istanbul is the heart of the cuisine, a survey of the Sultan's kitchen is required to understand it.



III. KITCHEN OF THE IMPERIAL PALACE

The importance of culinary art to the Ottoman Sultans is evident to every visitor to Topkapı Palace.

The huge kitchens were housed in several buildings under ten domes. By the 17th century some thirteen hundred kitchen staff were housed in the Palace. Hundreds of cooks, specializing in different categories, such as soups, pilafs, kebabs, vegetables, fish, breads, pastries, candy and helva, syrups and jams, and beverages, fed as many as ten thousand people a day, and, in addition, sent trays of food to others in the city as a royal favor.

The importance of food has also been evident in the structure of the Ottoman military elite, known as the Janissaries. The commanders of the main divisions were known as the Soupmen, other high ranking officers included the Chief Cook, the Scullion, the Baker, and the Pancake Maker, though their duties had little to do with food. The huge cauldron used to make pilaf had a special symbolic significance for the Janissaries, and was the focal point of each division. The kitchen was at the same time the center of politics, for whenever the Janissaries demanded a change in the Sultan's Cabinet, or the head of a grand vizier, they would overturn

their pilaf cauldron. "Overturning the cauldron," is an expression still used today to indicate a rebellion in the ranks.

It was in this environment that hundreds of the Sultans' chefs, who dedicated their lives to their profession, developed and perfected the dishes of the Turkish cuisine, which was then adopted in areas from the Balkans to southern Russia, and even as far as North Africa. Istanbul was then the capital of the world and had all the prestige, so its ways were imitated. At the same time, it was supported by an enormous organization and infrastructure which enabled all the treasures of the world to flow into it. The provinces of the vast Empire were integrated by a system of trade routes with caravanserais for refreshing the weary merchants and security forces. The Spice Road, the most important factor in culinary history, was under the full control of the Sultan. Only the best ingredients were allowed to be traded under the strict standards established by the courts.

Guilds played an important role in the development and sustenance of the cuisine. These

included hunters, fishermen, cooks, kebab cooks, bakers, butchers, cheese makers and yogurt merchants, pastry chefs, pickle makers, and sausage merchants. All of the principal trades were believed to be sacred and each guild traced its patronage to the saints. The guilds set price and quality controls. They displayed their products and talents in spectacular parades through Istanbul streets on special occasions, such as the circumcision festivities for the Crown Prince or religious holidays.

Following the example of the Palace, all of the grand Ottoman houses boasted elaborate kitchens and competed in preparing feasts for each other as well as for the general public. In fact, in each neighborhood, at least one household would open its doors to anyone who happened to stop by for dinner during the holy month of Ramadan, or during other festive occasions. This is how the traditional cuisine evolved and spread, even to the most modest corners of the country.



IV. A REPERTOIRE OF FOOD FROM THE GREAT FOOD PLACES

A survey of the types of dishes according to their ingredients may be helpful to explain the basic structure of Turkish cuisine.

Otherwise there may appear to be an overwhelming variety of dishes, each with a unique combination of ingredients and its own way of preparation and presentation. All dishes can be conveniently categorized into grain-based, grilled meats, vegetables, seafood, desserts and beverages.

Before describing each of these categories, some general comments are necessary. The foundation of the cuisine is based on grains (rice and wheat) and vegetables. Each category of dishes contains only one or two types of main ingredients. Turks are purists in their culinary taste, that is, the dishes are supposed to bring out the flavor of the main ingredient rather than hiding it under sauces or spices. Thus, the eggplant should taste like eggplant, lamb like lamb, pumpkin like pumpkin, and so on. Contrary to the prevalent Western impression of Turkish food, spices and herbs are used very simply and sparingly. For example, either mint or dill weed are used with zucchini, parsley is used with eggplant, a few cloves of garlic has its place in some cold vegetable dishes, and cumin is sprinkled over red lentil soup or mixed in ground meat when making "köfte" (meat balls). Lemon and

yogurt are used to complement both meat and vegetable dishes as well as to balance the taste of olive oil or meat. Most desserts and fruit dishes do not call for any spices. So their flavors are refined and subtle.

There are major classes of meatless dishes. When meat is used, it is used sparingly. Even with the meat kebabs, the "pide" or the flat bread is the largest part of the dish alongside vegetables or yogurt. Turkish cuisine also boasts a variety of authentic contributions to desserts and beverages.

For the Turks, the setting is as important as the food itself. Therefore, food-related places need to be considered, as well as the dining protocol. Among the great food places where you can find ingredients for the cuisine are the weekly neighborhood markets ("pazar") and the permanent markets. The most famous one of the latter type is the Spice Market in Istanbul. This is a place where every conceivable type of food item can be found, as it has been since pre-Ottoman times. This is a truly exotic place, with hundreds of scents rising from stalls located within an ancient domed building, which was the terminus for the Spice Road. More modest markets

can be found in every city center, with permanent stalls for fish and vegetables.

The weekly markets are where sleepy neighborhoods come to life, with the villagers setting up their stalls before dawn in a designated area to sell their products. On these days, handicrafts, textiles, glassware and other household items are also among the displays at the most affordable prices. What makes these places unique is the cacophony of sounds, sights, smells and activity, as well as the high quality of fresh food, which can only be obtained at the pazar. There is plenty of haggling and jostling as people make their way through the narrow isles while vendors compete for their attention. One way to purify body and soul would be to rent an inexpensive flat by the seaside for a month every year and live on fresh fruit and vegetables from the pazar. However, since the more likely scenario is restaurant-hopping, here are some tips to learn the proper terminology so that you can navigate through the cuisine (just in case you get the urge to cook *a la Turca*) as well as the streets of Turkish cities, where it is just as important to locate the eating places as it is the museums and the archeological wonders.

GRAINS: BREAD TO BÖREK

The foundation of Turkish food is, if anything, dough made of wheat flour.

Besides "ekmek" (ordinary white bread), "pide" (flat bread), "simit" (sesame seed rings), and "manti" (similar to ravioli), a whole family of food made up of thin sheets of a pastry called "börek" falls into this category.

The bakers of the Ottoman period believed that after his expulsion from the Garden of Eden, Adam, the Patron Saint of Bakers, learned how to make bread from the Archangel Gabriel. Obviously, the secret is still held dear by present-day Turkish bakers. No other bread tastes like everyday Turkish bread. One realizes the wonderful luxury of Turkish bread only upon leaving the country. This glorious food is enjoyed in large quantities and is loved by all, rich and poor, simple and sophisticated. Every neighborhood has a bread bakery that produces the golden, crisp loaves twice a day, morning and afternoon, filling the streets with their irresistible and wholesome aroma. People pick up a few loaves on their way home from work, and end up eating the crisp ends by the time they get there. After a hard day's work, holding the warm loaf is the best reward, convincing one that all is well.

Ekmek, pide and simit are meant to be eaten the



same day they are baked, as they usually are. The leftover ekmek goes into a variety of dishes, becomes chicken feed, or is mixed with milk for the neighborhood cats.

Manti, small dumplings of dough filled with a special meat mix, are eaten with generous servings of garlic yogurt and a dash of melted butter with paprika. This is a meal in itself as a Sunday

lunch affair for the whole family, to be followed by an afternoon nap.

Börek is a dish for special occasions and requires great skill and patience, unless you have thin sheets of dough already rolled out bought from your corner grocery store. Anyone who can accomplish this delicate task using the rolling pin, becomes the most sought-out person in their circle of family and friends. The sheets are then layered or folded into various shapes before being filled with cheese or meat mixes and baked or fried. Every household enjoys at least five different varieties of börek as a regular part of its menu.

Along with bread, "pilav" is another staple of the Turkish kitchen. The most common versions are the cracked-wheat pilaf and the rice pilaf. A good cracked-wheat pilaf made with whole onions, sliced tomatoes, green peppers sautéed in butter, and boiled in beef stock is a meal in itself. Many versions of the rice pilaf accompany vegetable and meat dishes. The distinguishing feature of the Turkish pilaf is the soft buttery morsels of rice which readily roll off your spoon, rather than sticking together in a mushy clump.

GRILLED MEATS

"Kebab" is another category of food which, like the börek, is typically Turkish dating back to the time when the nomadic Turks learned to grill and roast meat over camp fires.

Given the numerous types of kebabs, it helps to realize that they are categorized by the way the meat is cooked. The Western world knows the "şiş kebab" and the "döner" introduced to them mostly by Greek entrepreneurs, who have a good nose for what will sell! Şiş kebab is grilled cubes of skewered meat. Döner kebab is made by stacking alternating layers of ground meat and sliced leg of lamb on a large upright skewer, which is slowly rotated in front of a vertical grill. As the outer layer of the meat is roasted, thin slices are shaved off and served.

There are numerous other grilled kebabs including those cooked in a clay oven. It should be noted that the unique taste of kebabs is due more to the breeds of sheep and cattle raised in open pastures by loving shepherds than to special marinades and ways of cooking. Therefore, you should stop at a kebab restaurant in Turkey to taste the authentic item. Kebabçı is by far the most common and the least expensive type of restaurant, ranging from a hole in the wall to a large and lavish establishment. Kebab is the traditional Turkish response to fast food and at the same time is not unhealthy for you. A generic kebabçı will have lahmacun (meat pide) and "Adana Kebab" (spicy, skewered ground meat, named after the southern city where it was



born), salad greens with red onions and baklava to top it all off. Beyond that the menu will tell you the speciality of the kebabçı. The best plan is to seek out the well-known ones and to try the less spicy types if you are not used to kebab. Once you develop a taste for it, you can have inexpensive feasts by going to the neighborhood kebabçı anywhere in the city.

"Izgara" (grilled), is how the main course meat dishes are prepared at a meat restaurant. Mixed grills are likely to include lamb chops, "köfte" or

"şiş." The way of preparing ground meat will be the "köfte." These are grilled, fried, oven-cooked or boiled, after being mixed with special spices, eggs, and grated onions and carefully shaped into balls, oblongs, or round or long patties. Another popular dish is raw meat balls, inspired by the nomadic Turks who carried spiced, raw meat in their saddles, and is known to Europeans as "steak Tartar." It is made of raw, twice-ground meat, by kneading it with thin bulgur and hot spices vigorously for a few hours. Then bite-size patties are made, and served with chilantro, known for its stomach-protecting qualities.

Some restaurants specialize only in grilled meats, in which case they are called meat restaurants. The fare will be a constant stream of grilled meats served hot in portions straight off the grill, until you tell the waiter that you are full. The best one is Beyti in Florya, Istanbul, and the best way to get there is to take the commuter train from Sirkeci, the main train station on the European side, rather than negotiating the highway traffic. This way you can also see the local folk, especially the kids who seem to use the train to the fullest, out for their summer holiday adventures of fishing and possibly some variety of mischief.

VEGETABLES

Along with grains, vegetables are also consumed in large quantities in the Turkish diet.

The simplest and most basic type of vegetable dish is prepared by slicing a main vegetable such as zucchini or eggplant, combining it with tomatoes, green peppers and onions, and cooking it slowly in butter and its own juices. Since the vegetables that are cultivated in Turkey are truly delicious, a simple dish like this, eaten with a sizeable chunk of fresh bread, is a satisfying meal in itself.

A whole class of vegetables is cooked in olive oil. These dishes would be third in a five-course meal, following the soup and a main course such as rice or *börek* and a vegetable or meat, and before dessert and fruit. Practically all vegetables, such as fresh string beans, artichokes, celery root, eggplants, pinto beans, or zucchini can be cooked in olive oil, and are typically eaten at room temperature. They are a staple part of the menu with variations depending on the season. Then there are the fried vegetables, such as eggplant, peppers and zucchinis, that are eaten with a tomato or a yogurt sauce.

"Dolma" is the generic term for stuffed vegetables, being a derivative of the verb "*doldurmak*" (to fill). There are two categories of dolmas: those filled with a meat mix and those with a rice mix. The latter are cooked in olive oil and eaten at room temperature. The meat dolma is a main course dish eaten with a yogurt sauce, and a very frequent one



in the average household. Any vegetable which can be filled with or wrapped around these mixes can be used as a dolma, including zucchini, eggplant, tomatoes, cabbage, and grape leaves. However, the green pepper dolma with the rice stuffing, has to be the queen of all dolmas, a royal feast to the eye and the palate.

In addition to these general categories, there are numerous meat and vegetable dishes which feature unique recipes. When talking vegetables, it is

important to know that the eggplant (or aubergine) has a special place in Turkish cuisine. This handsome vegetable with its brown-green cap, velvety purple skin, firm and slim body, has a richer flavor than that of its relatives found elsewhere. At a party, a frustrating question to ask a Turk would be "How do you usually cook your eggplant?" A proper answer to this question would require hours! Here, too, it will have to suffice to mention just two eggplant dishes that are a must to taste. In one, the eggplant is split lengthwise and filled with a meat mix. This is a common summer dish, eaten with white rice pilaf. The other one is "Her Majesty's Favourite," a delicate formal dish that is not easy to make but well worth trying. The name refers to Empress Eugenie, the wife of Napoleon III, who fell in love with it on her visit to Sultan Abdülaziz.

To taste these dishes, look for a "*Lokanta*," a word borrowed from the Italian "*Locanda*," describing the type of establishment where traditional cooking is prepared, usually for those who work nearby. The best examples are the *Borsa*, *Hacı Salih*, and *Konyalı* Restaurants in Istanbul and *Liman* and *Çiftlik* in Ankara. The tables are covered with white linen, and the menu comprises soups, traditional main dishes and desserts, including fresh fruit. Businessmen and politicians frequently visit these places for lunch.



“MEZE” DISHES TO ACCOMPANY THE SPIRITS

In Turkey, despite the Islamic prohibition against wine and anything alcoholic, there is a rich tradition associated with liquor.

Drinking alcoholic beverages in the company of family and friends, both at home as well as in taverns and restaurants, is a part of special occasions. Similar to the Spanish tapas, “meze” is the general category of dishes that are brought in small quantities to start the meal off. These are eaten, along with wine or more likely with “rakı,” the anise-flavoured national drink of Turks sometimes referred to as “lion’s milk,” until the main course is served.

The bare minimum meze for rakı are slices of honeydew melon and creamy feta cheese with freshly baked bread. Beyond this, a typical meze menu includes dried and marinated mackerel, fresh salad greens in thick yogurt sauce and gar-



lic, plates of cold vegetable dishes cooked or fried in olive oil, fried crispy savoury pastry, deep-fried mussels and squid served in a sauce, tomato and cucumber salad, and fish eggs in a sauce. The main course that follows such a meze spread will be fish or grilled meat.

When the main course is kebab, then the meze spread is different. In this case, several plates of different types of minced salad greens and tomatoes in spicy olive oil, mixed with yogurt or cheese, “humus” (chick peas mashed in tahini), bulgur and red lentil balls, raw köfte, marinated stuffed eggplant, peppers with spices and nuts, and pickles are likely to be served.



SEAFOOD

Four seas (the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara, the Aegean, and the Mediterranean) surround the Turkish landscape.

Residents of the coastal cities are experts in preparing fish. However, the best of the day's catch is immediately transported to Ankara, where some of the finest fish restaurants are located. Winter is the premium season for eating fish. That is the time when many species of fish migrate from the Black Sea to warmer waters and when most fish reach their mature size. So, the lack of summer vegetables is compensated by the abundance of fish at this time. Every month has its own preferred catch, along with certain vegetables which complement the taste. For example, the best bonito is eaten with garlic and red onions, blue fish with lettuce, and turbot with cos lettuce. Large bonito may be poached with celery root. Mackerel is stuffed with chopped onion before grilling, and summer fish, which are younger and drier, will be poached with tomatoes and green peppers, or fried. Bay leaves always accompany both poached and grilled fish.

Grilling fish over charcoal, where the fish juices hit the embers and envelope the fish with the smoke, is perhaps the most delicious way of eating mature fish, since this method brings out the delicate flavor. This is also why the grilled fish sold by vendors right on their boats is so tasty.



"Hamsi" is the prince of all fish known to Turks: the Black Sea people know forty-one ways of making hamsi including hamsi börek, hamsi pilaf and hamsi dessert!

Another common seafood is the mussel, eaten deep-fried, poached, or as a mussel dolma and mussel pilaf. Along the Aegean, octopus and squid are added to the meze spread.

The places to taste fish are fish restaurants and taverns. Not all taverns are fish restaurants, but most fish restaurants are taverns and these are usually found on the harbors overlooking the sea. The Bosphorus is famous for its fisherman's

taverns, large and small, from Rumeli Kavağı to Kumkapı. The modest ones are small with wooden tables and rickety wooden chairs, nevertheless they offer delicious grilled fish. Then there are the elaborate, fashionable ones in Tarabya and Bebek. Fish restaurants always have an open-air section right by the sea. The waiters run back and forth between the kitchen, perhaps located in the restaurant across the street, and the tables on the seaside. After being seated, it is customary to visit the kitchen or the display to pick your fish and discuss the way you want it to be prepared. The price of the fish is also disclosed at this time. Then you swing by the meze display and order the ones you want. So the evening begins, sipping rakı in between samplings of meze, watching the sunset, and slowly setting the pace for conversation that will continue for hours into the night. Drinking is never a hurried, loud, boisterous, or lonely affair. It is a communal, gently festive and cultured way of entertainment. In these fish restaurants, a couple of families may spend an evening with their children running around the restaurant after they are fed, while the teenagers sit at the table patiently listening to the conversation and occasionally participating, when the topic is soccer or rock music.



THE REAL STORY OF SWEETS: BEYOND BAKLAVA

The most well-known sweets associated with Turkish Cuisine are Turkish Delight (Lokum), and "baklava," giving the impression that these may be the typical desserts eaten after meals.

This, of course, is not true. First of all, the family of desserts is much richer than just these two. Secondly, these are not typical desserts served as part of a main meal. For example, baklava and its relatives are usually eaten with coffee, as a snack or after a kebab dish. So, to further our education in Turkish cuisine we will survey the various types of sweets.

By far, the most common dessert after a meal is fresh seasonal fruit that acquires its unique taste from an abundance of sun and old-fashioned ways of cultivation and transportation. Spring will start with strawberries, followed by cherries and apricots. Summer is marked by peaches, watermelons and melons. Then, all kinds of grapes ripen in late summer, followed by green and purple figs, plums, apples, pears and quince. Oranges, mandarin oranges, and bananas are among the winter fruits. For most of the spring and summer, fruit is eaten fresh. Later, it may be used fresh or dried, in compotes, or made into jams and preserves. Among the preserves, the unique ones to taste are the quince marmalade, the sour cherry preserve, and the rose preserve (made of rose petals, which is not a fruit!). The most wonderful contribution of Turkish cuisine to the family of desserts, that can easily be missed by casual explorers, are the milk desserts - the "muhallebi" family. These are among the rare types of guilt-free puddings made with starch and rice flour, and, originally without any eggs or but-



ter. When the occasion calls for even a lighter dessert, the milk can also be omitted; instead, the pudding may be flavoured with citrus fruits, such as lemons or oranges. The milk desserts include a variety of puddings, ranging from the very light and subtle rose-water variety to the milk pudding laced with strands of chicken breast.

Grain-based desserts include baked pastries, fried yeast-dough pastries and the pan-sauteed desserts. The baked pastries can also be referred to as the

baklava family. These are paper-thin pastry sheets that are brushed with butter and folded, layered, or rolled after being filled with ground pistachios, walnuts or heavy cream, and then baked, after which a syrup is poured over them. The various types, such as the sultan, the nightingale's nest, or the twisted turban differ according to the amount and placement of nuts, size and shape of the individual pieces, and the dryness of the final product. The "lokma" family is made by frying soft pieces of yeast dough in oil and dipping them in a syrup. Lady's lips, lady's navel, and vizier finger are fine examples.

"Helva" is made by pan-sauteeing flour or semolina and pine nuts in butter before adding sugar and milk or water, then briefly cooking until these are absorbed. The preparation of helva is conducive to communal cooking. People are invited for "helva conversations" to pass the long winter nights. The more familiar tahini helva is sold in blocks at corner grocery shops.

Another dessert that should be mentioned is a piece of special bread cooked in syrup, topped with lots of walnuts and heavy cream. This is possibly the queen of all desserts, so plan to taste it at the Ikmal Restaurant on the Ankara-Izmir highway at Afyon.

There are shops where baklava, börek, or muhallebi are sold, exclusively or together with other things. People come to these places for take-



away or to sit down at one of the tables tucked away in a corner of the shop. The baklava shops also usually feature "water börek," an especially difficult börek to make. Most börek shops also make milk puddings. These are excellent places to eat breakfast or lunch at any time of the day, since the regular restaurants may stop serving at two o'clock in the afternoon. Many pudding shops also serve chicken soup. In any event, it is possible to feast on börek and milk pudding for an entire holiday, if on a tight budget. Perhaps the most well-known shop of this type is Saray on Istiklal street in the Beyoğlu district of Istanbul, in addition to the entire village of Sarıyer on the Bosphorus.

You have to be in Turkey to get the real and the best taste of the above desserts. However, in addition to the variety of Turkish Delights, there is a lesser-known type of dessert that can be taken back home in a sweet box. These are nut pastes - marzipan made of almonds and pistachios. The best marzipan is sold at a tiny, unassuming shop in Bebek in Istanbul. A few boxes usually will last for a month or so and bring delight after dinner. Finally, candied chestnuts, a speciality of Bursa, are among the most wonderful nutty desserts.



BEVERAGES: BEYOND TURKISH COFFEE AND "AYRAN"

Volumes have been written about Turkish coffee; its history, its significance in social life, and the ambiance of the ubiquitous coffee houses.

Without some understanding of this background, it is easy to be disappointed by the tiny brew with the annoying grounds, which an uninitiated traveler (like Mark Twain) may accidentally end up chewing. A few words of caution will have to suffice for the purposes of this brief primer. First, the grounds are not to be swallowed, so sip the coffee gingerly. Secondly, don't expect a caffeine surge with one shot of Turkish coffee; it is not strong, just thick. Third, remember that it is the setting and the company that matter; the coffee is just an excuse for the occasion.

Tea, on the other hand, is the main source of caffeine for the Turks. It is prepared in a special way, by brewing it over boiling water and served in delicate, small, clear glasses to show the deep red color and to transmit the heat to the hand. Drinking tea is such an essential part of a working day, that any disruption of the constant supply of fresh tea is a sure way to sacrifice productivity. Once upon a time, so the story goes, a lion escaped from the Ankara Zoo and took up residence in the basement of an office building.



It began devouring public servants and executives. It even ate up a few ministers of state and nobody took notice. It is said, however, that a posse was immediately formed when the lion caught and ate the "tea-man," the person responsible for the supply of fresh tea! A park without tea and coffee is inconceivable in Turkey. Thus, every spot with a view has a tea-house or a tea-garden. These places may be

under a plain tree overlooking the village or town square, on top of a hill with majestic view of a valley or the sea, by a harbor, in a market, on a roadside with a scenic view, by a waterfall, or in the woods. Among the typical tea-gardens in Istanbul are the Emirgan on the European side, Çamlıca on the Anatolian side of the Bosphorus, the famous Pierre Loti cafe, and the tea-garden in Üsküdar. But the traditional tea-houses are beginning to disappear from the more tourist-oriented seaside locations, in favour of pubs and "Biergartens".

Among the beverages worth mentioning are excellent fruit juices. But, perhaps the most interesting drink is "boza," traditionally sold in neighborhood streets by wandering vendors on a winter's night. This is a thick, fermented drink made of wheat berries, to be enjoyed with a dash of cinnamon and a handful of roasted chick peas. Boza can also be found year-round at certain cafes or dessert shops. Finally, "sahlep" is a hot drink made with milk and sahlep powder sprinkled with cinnamon. It is a good remedy for sore throats and colds, in addition to being delicious.

V. FOOD PROTOCOL FOR THE CULTURALLY CORRECT

Eating is taken very seriously in Turkey. It is inconceivable for household members to eat alone, raid the refrigerator, or eat "on the go" while others are at home.

It is customary to have three "sit-down meals" a day. Breakfast or "kahvaltı" (literally, 'under the coffee'), typically consists of bread, feta cheese, black olives and tea. Many work places have lunch served as a contractual fringe benefit. Dinner starts when all the family members get together and share the events of the day at the table. The menu consists of three or more types of dishes that are eaten sequentially, accompanied by salad. In summer, dinner is served at about eight. Close relatives, best friends or neighbors may join in on meals on a walk-in basis. Others are invited ahead of time as elaborate preparations are expected. The menu depends on whether alcoholic drinks will be served or not. In the former case, the guests will find the meze spread ready on the table, frequently set up either in the garden or on the balcony. The main course is served several hours later. Otherwise, the dinner starts with a soup, followed by the main meat and vegetable course, accompanied by the salad. Then the olive-oil dishes such as the dolmas are served, followed by dessert and fruit. While the table is cleared, the guests retire to the living room to have tea and Turkish coffee. Women get together for afternoon tea at regular intervals (referred to as the "7-17 days") with their school friends and neighbours. These are very



elaborate occasions with at least a dozen types of cakes, pastries, finger foods and böreks prepared by the hostess. The main social purpose of these gatherings is to gossip and share experiences about all aspects of life, public and private.

Naturally, one very important function is the propagation of recipes. Diligent exchanges occur while women consult each other on their innovations and solutions to culinary challenges.

By now it should be clear that the concept of having a "pot-luck" at someone's house is entirely foreign to the Turks. The responsibility of supplying all the food squarely rests on the host who expects to be treated in the same way in return. There are two occasions where the notion of host does not apply. One such situation is when neighbors collaborate in making large quantities of food for the winter such as "tarhana" - dried yogurt and tomato soup, or noodles. Another is when families get together to go on a day's excursion into the countryside. Arrangements are made ahead of time as to who will make the köfte, dolma, salads, pilafs and who will supply the meat, the beverages and the fruits. The "mangal", the copper charcoal burner, kilims, hammocks, pillows, musical instruments such as saz, ud, or violin, and samovars are also loaded up for a day trip.

A picnic would be a pale comparison to these occasions, often referred to as "stealing a day from fate." Küçüksu, Kalamış, and Heybeli in old Istanbul used to be typical locations for such outings, as numerous songs tell us. Other memorable locations include the Meram vineyards in Konya, Lake



Hazar in Elazığ, and Bozcaada off the shores of Çanakkale. The May 5 Spring Festival (Hidirellez) commemorating two Saints: Hızır and Ilyas (representing immortality and abundance), would mark the beginning of the pleasure season (safa), with lots of poetry, songs and, naturally, good food.

A similar "safa" used to be the weekly trip to the Turkish Bath. Food prepared the day before, would be packed on horse-drawn carriages along with fresh clothing and scented soaps. After spending the morning at the marble wash-basins and the steam hall, people would retire to the wooden settees to rest, eat and dry off before returning home.

Nowadays such leisurely affairs are all but gone, spoiled by modern life. Yet, families still attempt to steal at least one day from fate every year, even though fate often triumphs. Packing food for trips is so traditional that even now, it is common for mothers to pack some köfte, dolma and börek to go on an airplane, especially on long trips, much to the bemusement of other passengers and the



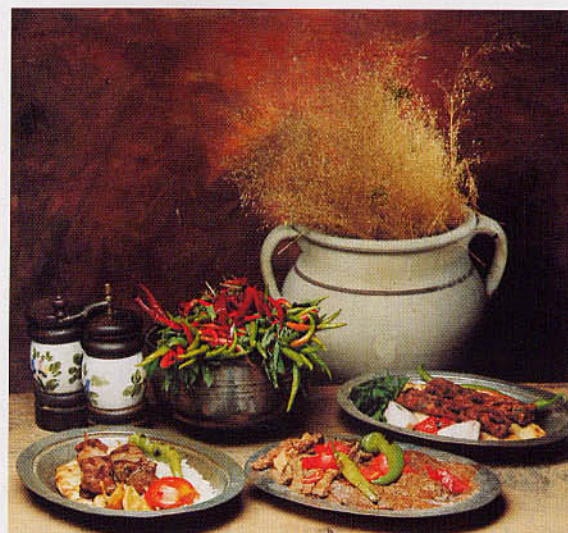
irritation of flight attendants. But seriously, given the quality of airline food, who can blame them?

Weddings, circumcision ceremonies, and holidays are celebrated with feasts. At a wedding feast in Konya, a seven-course meal is served to the guests. The "sit-down meal" starts with a soup, followed by pilaf and roast meat, meat dolma, and saffron rice - a traditional wedding dessert. Börek is served before the second dessert, which is typically the semolina helva. The meal ends with okra cooked with tomatoes, onions, and butter with lots of lemon juice. This wedding feast is typical of Anatolia, with slight regional variations. The morning after the wedding the groom's family sends trays of baklava to the bride's family.

During the holidays, people are expected to pay short visits to each and every friend within the city, visits which are immediately reciprocated. Three or four days are spent going from house to house, so enough food needs to be prepared and put aside to last the duration of the visits. During the holidays, kitchens and pantries burst at the seams with böreks, rice dolmas, puddings and

desserts that can be put on the table without much preparation.

Deaths are also occasions for cooking and sharing food. In this case, neighbors prepare and send dishes to the bereaved household for three days after the death. The only dish prepared by the household of the deceased is the helva which is sent to the neighbors and served to visitors. In some areas, it is a custom for a good friend of the deceased to begin preparing the helva, while recounting fond memories and events. Then the spoon would be passed to the next person who would take up stirring the helva and continue reminiscing. Usually the helva is done by the time everyone in the room has had a chance to speak. This wonderfully simple ceremony makes the people left behind talk about happier times and lightens their grief momentarily, strengthening the bond between them.





VI. FOOD AND SPIRITUALITY

Food and dietary practices have always played an important part in religion.

Among them, Islam is perhaps known to impose the most elaborate and strict rules in this respect. In practice, these rules have been reinterpreted in regional adaptations, particularly in Turkey, where it is harder to find strict Muslims. In Anatolia, where a variety of Sufi orders once flourished, food gained a spiritual dimension above dry religious requirements, as seen in their poetry, music, and practices.

Paradoxically, the month of Ramadan, when all Muslims are expected to fast from dawn to dusk, is also a month of feasting and charitable feeding of all those who are in need. Fasting is to purify the body and the soul and at the same time, to develop a reverence for all blessings bestowed by nature and cooked by a skillful chef. The days are spent preparing food for the breaking of the fast at sunset. It is customary to break the fast by eating a bite of "heavenly" food such as olives or dates and nibbling lightly on a variety of cheeses, slices of sausage, jams and pide. This would be followed by the evening prayers and then the main meal. In the old days, the rest of the night would be occupied by games and conversations, or going into town to attend the various musicals and theaters, until it



was time to eat again just before the firing of the cannon or the beating of the drums marking the beginning of the next day's fasting. People would rest until noon, when shops and work places opened and food preparation began.

The other major religious holiday is the "Sacrifice Festival," commemorating Abraham's readiness to sacrifice his son to God. But God sent him a ram instead, sparing his son's life. Some of the meat of the butchered animal is sent to neighbors and to the needy. The sheep is

revered as the creature of God that gives its life for a higher purpose. The henna coloring on the sheep is a symbolic way of showing this respect and so are the strict instructions for slaughtering.

Several occasions commemorating prophets also involve food. The six holy nights marking events in Mohammed's life are celebrated by baking special pastries, breads and lokma. The month of "Muharrem" occurred when the flood waters receded, and Noah and his family were able to land. It is believed that then they cooked a meal using whatever remained in their supplies. This event is celebrated by cooking "aşure", or Noah's pudding, made of wheat berries, dried legumes, rice, raisins, currants, dried figs, dates and nuts. You can also taste this most nourishing pudding at certain muhallebi shops.

The feast of Zachariah is prepared upon being granted one's wish. This feast consists of a spread of forty-one different types of dried fruits and nuts served to guests. Prayers are read and everyone tastes all forty-one foods. A guest can then burn a candle and make a wish. If the wish comes true, one is obligated to prepare a similar "Zachariah Table" for others.



Beyond these practices, examples of a religious tradition imbued with food metaphors are found in Sufism in general, and in the poetry of Mevlana Celaleddin Rumi in particular, as well as in the verses of classical Turkish poetry and music. In fact, to understand the full meaning of this spiritual tradition would be impossible without deciphering the references to food and wine, cooking, eating, and intoxication. Mevlana, who lived in Konya in the 13th century A.D., represents an approach to Sufism that follows the Way of Love to Divine Reality, rather than Knowledge, or gnosis. As mentioned earlier, the food-related guilds and the Janissaries also followed the Sufi Order. A clash of philosophies on food is told in a story about Empress Eugenie's French chef, who was sent to the Sultan's kitchen to learn how to cook an eggplant dish. He soon begged to be excused from this impossible task, saying that when he took his book and scales with him, the Turkish chef threw all of them out the window, because "an

Imperial chef must learn to cook with his feelings, his eyes and his nose" - in other words, with love!

Asceticism, rather than hedonistic gluttony is associated with Sufism, and yet food occupies an important place. Followers of the Order began with the simplest menial duties in dervish lodges which always included huge kitchens. After a thousand and one days of service, the novice would become fully "cooked" and become a full member of the Brotherhood. In other words, being "cooked" refers to spiritual maturity. One wonders if the Turkish tradition of cooking everything until it is soft and well-done has anything to do with this association (cooking *al dente* has no meaning to Turks).

The story of the chick pea told by Mevlana in his "Mathnawi" is a superb example of this idea. When the tough legume is cooked in boiling water, it complains to the woman cooking it. She explains to it that this is necessary so that it can be eaten by human beings, become part of human life and thus be elevated to a higher form. The fable of the chick pea describes the



suffering of the soul before its arrival at Divine Love. The peasant eating helva for the first time symbolizes the discovery of Divine Love by the dervish. There is also the image of Allah preparing the helva for the true dervishes. In this particular verse, the whole universe, as it were, is pictured as a huge pan with the stars as cooks! In other verses, the Beloved is described as being as tasty as salt, or as a Friend who has "sugar lips." Wine also represents the maturation of the human soul, similar to the ordeal the sour grape endures. So many mystical meanings are attributed to wine that the name "tavern" stands for the Sufi hospice and experiencing Divine Love is described by the metaphor of "intoxication".

These mystical ideas are still very much alive in present-day Turkey, where food and liquor are enjoyed with recitations of mystical poetry and dignified conversation. Often these gatherings provide an occasion for people to distance themselves from earthly matters and transcend into mysticism and promises of a better life hereafter.



VII. CONTEMPORARY CONCERNS: DIET AND HEALTH

As modernity takes hold, traditions are falling to one side. Spirituality as a guide for conduct in everyday life is something of the past; now we turn to science for answers.

Ironically, as McDonald's and Pizza Huts are popping up everywhere, the traditional way of eating is also making a come-back. What our grandmothers knew all the time is now being confirmed by modern science: a diet which is fundamentally based on grains, vegetables and fruits with meat and dairy products used sparingly and as flavoring, is a healthy one. Furthermore, some combinations are better than others, because they complement each other for balanced nutrition. Turkish cuisine sets an example in these respects. The recent "food-pyramid" endorsed by the United States Department of Agriculture resembles age-old practices in ordinary households. Even the well-known menus of boarding schools or army kitchens, hardly known for their gourmet characteristics, provide excellent nutrition that can be justified by the best of today's scientific knowledge. One such combination, jokingly referred to as "our national food," is beans and pilaf, accompanied by pickles and quince compote - a perfectly nourishing combination which provides the essential proteins, carbohydrates and minerals. Another curious practice is combining spinach with yogurt. Now we know that the body needs calcium found in the yogurt to assimilate the iron found in the spinach.

Yogurt, a contribution of the Turks to the world, has also become a popular health food. A staple in the Turkish diet, it has been known all along for its



detoxifying properties. Other such beliefs, not yet supported by modern science, include the role of the onion, used liberally in all dishes, in strengthening the immune system along with garlic for high blood pressure and olive oil as a remedy for forty-one ailments. The complicated debate concerning mono- and polyunsaturated fats and good and bad cholesterol is ridiculously inadequate to evaluate olive oil. Given what we know about health food today, one could even envy the typical

lunch fare of the proverbial construction worker who eats bread, feta cheese and fresh grapes in the summer and bread and tahini helva in the winter. The variety of pastry turnovers with cheese or ground meat, meat pide, or kebabs are fast food for millions of working people. These are all prepared entirely on the premises using age-old practices.

One of the main culprits in the modern-day diet is the snack, that horrible junk food designed to give a quick sugar-high to keep one going for the rest of the day. Again, modern science has come to the rescue, and healthy snacks are now being discovered. Some of these are amazingly familiar to the Turks! Take, for example, the "fruit roll-ups." Visit any dried-food store that sells nuts and fruits, and you will see the authentic version, such as sheets of mashed and dried apricots and grapes. In these stores, there are many other items that await the discovery of some pioneering entrepreneur from Western markets. Another wholesome snack, known as "trail mix" or "gorp," is well-known to all Turkish mothers, who traditionally stuff a handful of mixed nuts and raisins in the pockets of their children's school uniform to snack on before exams. This practice can be traced to ancient fables, where the hero goes on a diet of hazelnuts and raisins before fighting with the giants and dragons, or before weaving the king a

golden smock. The Prince always loads onto the mythological bird, the "Zümrüt Anka", forty sacks of nuts and raisins for himself, and water and meat for the bird that takes him over the high Caucasus Mountains.

As far as food goes, it is reassuring to know that we are re-discovering what is good for our bodies. Nevertheless, one is left with the nagging feeling that such knowledge will always be incomplete as long as it is divorced from its cultural context and metaphysical traditions. The challenge facing modern Turkey is to achieve such continuity in a time of genetic engineering, high-tech mass production and the growing number of convenience-oriented households. But for now, the markets are vibrant and the dishes are tastier than ever, so enjoy !



FESTIVALS, FAIRS AND EVENTS

Name	Place	Date
Traditional "Mesir" Festival	Manisa	April
Karadeniz Ereğli Ottoman Strawberry and Culture Festival	Zonguldak	June
Mengen Chefs and Tourism Festival	Bolu	August
Grape Harvest Festival	Ürgüp, Nevşehir	September
Akçakoca International Culture, Tourism and Hazelnut Festival	Düzce	July
GAPFOOD 2005 Fair	Gaziantep	September
Food Competition	Konya	September
Food Competition for Cultural and Tourism Purposes	Göreme, Nevşehir	September

Non - Governmental Organizations

Name	Address	Phone	Fax	Website / E-Mail
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Mengen Association of Chefs and Tourism	Atatürk Cad. Belediye İş Hanı 2. Kat No : 15 Mengen Bolu	+90 374 356 17 08	+90 374 356 17 08	eucuncuoglu@ascilarbaskenti.com mozturk@ascilarbaskenti.com
Association of Professional Culinary Directors	Altunkum Mah. 460. Sokak Erçetin Apartmanı No : 16/1 070070 Antalya	+90 242 228 28 02	+90 242 228 09 12	www.pmyd.com info@pmyd.com
Antalya Chamber of Restaurant Operators, Kebap Sellers and Chefs	Kızılsaray Mah. 64. Sokak No : 9/2 Antalya	+90 242 248 48 14	+90 242 248 48 14	
Association of Turkish Cuisine Lovers	Mumhane Cad. No : 171 Karaköy İstanbul	+90 212 249 96 80	+90 212 249 96 80	mutfakdostlari@superonline.com

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