

The
pleasure of
some months'
stay
in Istanbul
in 1994

was much enhanced by the variety and quality of food and drink in the excellent company of friends, old and new. I got to know many restaurants and the way Istanbul classified them into distinct genres. I was guided in this pleasurable pursuit by a number of friends, most consistently by Tuğrul Şavkay, the gourmet and distinguished food writer. I venture here a sketch of this classification, with some examples.

ESNAF LOKANTASI

These are the old market restaurants, located in the bazaars and the commercial centres. Esnaf means craft guilds, that is to say, these were the restaurants for market workers and traders. Their repertoire consists of "traditional" urban dishes of meat, chicken, vegetables and rice, almost never fish. Some will offer a few grills, notably a rotating skewer of döner kebab. They tend to cook in the morning for the lunch trade (their most active

period); in the evening they have the same food re-heated. They don't serve alcohol, even when some of them, like Hacı Abdullah (off İstiklal Caddesi), have become tourist attractions. Hacı Baba, near Taksim, now more of a tourist restaurant, is one of the few exceptions.

The repertoire includes soup: at least two every day. A typical pair is mercimek (lentils) and paça, theoretically head and feet of lamb, but in fact now mostly a head soup. Another regular feature are soslu stews of vegetables and meat: tas kebab, stewed meat, etli (with meat) vegetables, such as bamya (okra), patlıcan (aubergine) or kabak (courgette), stuffed vegetables, notably kabak or sarma of leaves (yaprak), which could be vine-leaves, fresh or salted, depending on the season, or various cabbage and chard leaves, such as kara lahana, or pazı (of the cabbage/chard family).

Pilavs feature regularly in this repertoire; plain white pilav and often iç pilav ("stuffing" pilav, garnished with fried onions and chopped liver). Some days, a restaurant may have special dishes; incik (lamb knuckle or shank), stewed then covered with slices of fried aubergine and finished in the oven, served in parcels of the meat, on the bone, surrounded by the aubergine slices, is a dish sometimes found in Hacı Abdullah in Beyoğlu. I once ate a delicious fıstık pilavı, dripping with butter and aromatic with pistachios at the Levent branch of Konyalı. Kanaat in Üsküdar, in my opinion the best of the genre, one day offered Özbek pilavı, rice cooked in meat juices and tomato, with chick-peas and lumps of meat on the bone.

Kanaat is a large restaurant. The entrance hall is lined with display counters of sweets and puddings, followed by another displaying cold foods. In one corner of the main dining area are the kitchens, displaying the daily variety of hot foods in trays and pots, which is the general style of these restaurants, only Kanaat has a wider variety. The offerings include a distinguished range of sweets. Typical is tavuk göğsü made of chicken breast with flour, sugar and milk (you wouldn't know it was chicken), best as kazandibi when slightly burnt and caramelised. At Kanaat, it is

delicious combined with their plain creamy ice-cream, called kaymaklı (kaymak being thick, almost solid, cream, traditionally extracted from buffalo milk).

FISH RESTAURANTS AND MEYHANES

These are two overlapping genres, which share many characteristics. Meyhanes are taverns, serving alcohol and meze. This form of food is usually translated as hors d'ouvres, which is misleading. Hors d'ouvres in French, or antipasti in Italian, typically constitute a first course in a multicourse meal in the European style of eating. Meze, in Middle Eastern conceptions, is not a course but a set of dishes eaten with drink. Drink, typically rakı/arak/ouzo, but now also beer, wine or European spirits, is a necessary element in the concept of meze and inseparable from it. It may or may not constitute a meal in itself, it could be a few knick-knacks like olives or nuts to arouse or maintain a thirst. The nearest European equivalent is tapas.

Until recent times, these taverns were for the most part run by non-Muslims (though their clientele was mostly Muslim), typically Greeks and Armenians. Fish restaurants were also, for the most part, run by Greeks and Armenians, and overlap with the Meyhane in that they typically served alcohol and mezeler (plural of meze).

The locations of Meyhanes and fish restaurants are typically the old "cosmopolitan" (i.e. with considerable Greek, Armenian, Jewish and European presence) areas of Istanbul: Galata, where the superb Balık pazarı, the fish market, is located; Kumkapı, an old Armenian quarter on the Sea of Marmara which comprises a fishing harbour and a fish market (now pedestrianised, prettified and a tourist trap), and, of course, the villages of the Bosphorus.

The meze repertoire includes the whole range of zeytinyağlı dishes, called after the olive oil supposed to go into their preparation. Olive oil also has Greek connotations: It is typically used in the Aegian region where it is most copiously produced and where Greek culinary culture was dominant. Traditional Anatolian and Istanbulu cookery, including the Ottoman court

cuisine, were based on butter. It is interesting that as butter cookery declines (for cost as well as health considerations) it is replaced not by olive oil but ordinary tasteless industrially-produced oils. Padoxically, it is hard nowadays to find zeytinyağlı actually prepared with olive oil. Whatever its origins, zeytinyağlı is now part of modern Turkish cookery and of the meze repertoire.

Typical zeytinyağlı items are vegetables cooked in oil, often tomatoes and onions. Barbunya, for instance, are red dried beans cooked in oil, tomato and onion. Fresh green beans (*taze fasulye*) and other vegetables can be similarly prepared. Aubergines occupy an important corner in this genre: *Patlıcan Salata*, roasted, mashed aubergine dressed in oil and seasoning, *Patlıcan Tava*, fried slices dressed in yoghurt and garlic, and *İmam Bayıldı*, the famous dish of aubergines stuffed with onions, tomatoes and pine nuts and baked in an oil and tomato sauce. Other stuffed leaves and vegetables also feature, typically with meatless stuffing and served cold (in contrast to the hot meaty stuffings of the *esnaf lokantası*, though nowadays both are often offered in the same place).

One or two old *meyhanes* in *Beyoğlu* offer some unusual items, now mostly unknown. My own favourite of these is *topik*, an Armenian preparation, consisting of small stuffed cakes, the outside being mashed potatoes and chickpeas with *tahin* paste and seasoning, stuffed with onions, pine-nuts and raisins (also distinguished by the absence of the ubiquitous tomato: What did they do before the appearance of this fruit in the late eighteenth century?).

I have missed out the simplest, most common and most loved items of meze: White cheese and melon. Purists insist that these are the only appropriate meze for *rakı*. Another common (and internationally renowned) item is *cacık* of yoghurt with cucumber, garlic and dill (or mint), in Turkey always consisting of liquidy yoghurt served in a bowl like soup. A similar dish but made with thick, drained yoghurt is *haydari*.

Famous *meyhanes* include *Hasır* in *Beyoğlu*, established by a

Greek and continued by his Turkish apprentice, a labyrinthine basement dive with ambience, which offers some distinctive specialities. Bucak is an Armenian meyhane, also in Beyoğlu, on Nevizade Sokak (a street lined with meyhanes, well worth a visit), with a loyal clientele who enjoy its particular meze, including the afore-mentioned topik. The Çiçek Pasajı, part of the fish market in Galata consists entirely of meyhane/restaurants, now sadly primarily devoted to pleasing tourists. In the evenings it features loud music played by rival itinerant bands in the various establishments. Musical entertainments are offered by an increasing number of Beyoğlu (and Kumkapı) establishments, some classical Turkish music, called fasıl played by two or three instrumentalists who also chant. One of the most enjoyable such meyhanes during my stay in the city was Süheyla, run by the eponymous patronne and her daughter, and at which at some point in the evening the drinkers join in in the singing of golden oldies.

The establishments of the Bosphorous villages and of Kumkapı on the Sea of Marmara now have the character of fish restaurants, though often with similar ambience and meze repertoire to the Meyhanes. At the entrance, many of them display the fresh fish of the day in a refrigerated cabinet. Istanbulus are very fond of fish, and there is a whole lore around fish eating. Many a conversation is dominated by the qualities of the different fish and where to eat them. Surrounded by water, the city was always privileged in the variety and quality of fish supplies from the Mediterranean, the Black Sea, the Sea of Marmara and the Bosphorous. This latter is now almost totally depleted, and the other waters suffer from the pollution and overfishing known everywhere.

Still, the fish restaurants offer lüfer, a kind of small bonito with distinctive texture and flavour, levrek, a sea-bass, and the king of all Istanbul fish, the kalkan, a Black Sea turbot of wonderous richness. The best kalkan are the large ones served in slices, now, alas, increasingly rare. Most of the kalkan on offer are the small turbot (the French turbotin), much inferior. Mersin, a

sturgeon, is not so common, and only found in the more sumptuous establishments.

The most common ways of cooking are frying or grilling. But a distinctive Turkish method of cooking some fish is *buğulama*, fish poached/steamed in a broth with vegetables and served in its cooking liquid.

A wide range of such establishments are found on the Bosphorous, from simple *meyhanes* to grand restaurants. I should mention a few I have known and liked: *Çınar Altı* in *Ortaköy*, *Kuyu* in *Arnavutköy*, *Pafuli* in *Kuruçeşme* (Black Sea specialities, including many dishes with *hamsi*, the much loved Black Sea anchovy), *Aleko's* (now known as *Deniz*) in *Yeniköy* (with a terrace right over the Bosphorous, now rare, most establishments are on the other side of a busy road), and some sumptuous establishments in *Yeniköy* and *Tarabya* catering for a cosmopolitan rich clientele.

Yeşilköy is a suburb on the Sea of Marmara near Istanbul Airport which also boasts many of the richest and largest fish restaurants. Indeed, many grand restaurants, including meat cuisines, are now dotted around the airport.

KEBABCIS AND OCAKBASIS

Kebabcis are a regular feature of Istanbul, as of many Middle Eastern cities. Modest street or market stalls with a brazier and a display of skewered meats, to large saloons with comfortable seating, they are all basically grill houses, with a known repertoire of *şiş*, cubed meat on skewers, *köfte*, ground meat formed into sausage shapes, *çöp şiş*, small pieces of fatty meat. Grilled liver, kidney, heart, sweetbreads and testicles also feature in many, as well as grilled onions, tomatoes and peppers. These are always served with bread (rarely rice, in contrast to Iranian kebab traditions), often salad and pickles. These are mostly fast food outlets for working people, and share the same clientele with the *Esnaf Lokantası*.

More recently, perhaps from the 1970s, a new genre of restaurant, the Anatolian or *Gaziantep ocakbaşı* (literally "head of

the hearth”, indicating the brazier/grill) developed and spread in Istanbul. The core of its offerings are grills, but with some elaboration on the common kebapci, and much else. Gaziantep is known as a gastronomic centre of southern Anatolia, with extensive pistachio production and distinguished pastries based on that nut. The region also boasts many dishes, ingredients and methods (some shared with neighbouring Syrian cuisine, especially that of Aleppo), and many kinds of bread. The regional restaurants in Istanbul draw on this repertoire to supplement their grills. They offer a distinctive set of meze to accompany the drinks they serve (in contrast to the dry traditional kebapci), which includes some of the items already listed, but with many modifications and additions.

Typically, the first items to appear on the table as you order are a basket of bread, pide, flat bread like the Iranian or Indian naan/nun and/or lavaş, thin sheets of bread, baked or heated over a saç, a concave metal pan, and a plate of tulum peyniri, a distinctive Anatolian sheep’s milk cheese (unlike the beyaz peynir typical of Istanbul meze). Other items include lahmacun, pizza-like thin crusts covered in spiced mince meat, now a universal offering as street food and quick snacks in many European cities, içli köfte, “stuffed köfte”, a croquette of ground meat and bulgur (cracked wheat), the kubba/kebe of neighbouring Arabs, çiğ köfte, balls of raw ground meat and bulgur with strong spices, the kebe niye of the Syrians, and various aubergine, courgette and beans mezes which overlap with the meyhane repertoire, but are distinguished by stronger spicing.

There are many such restaurants now in many parts of the city. One of the first was Şiribom in Moda, on the Asiatic side. My own favourite during my stay was Bahçe Ocakbaşı in Levent. There are several grand restaurants with extensive menus of Anatolian cooking, notably Kaşibeyaz in the airport area.

Distinctive Anatolian restaurants in Istanbul were part of the “Anatolian invasion” of the city. In the 1980s, lahmacun salonu, like Arabesk music, were seen by the Istanbul bourgeoisie as part of this alien invasion, of the orientalisation of

European/cosmopolitan Istanbul. On the culinary front, spices were the boundary markers. To the Istanbul bourgeoisie, spices represented Arab/oriental tastes, verging on the barbaric, distinct from their civilised supposedly superior ingredients and purity of taste. Friends and colleagues would refer to the Anatolian restaurants contemptuously as “kebabcis”, and would always prefer the meyhanes and fish restaurants as superior and authentic Istanbul tastes.

MODERN AND EUROPEAN RESTAURANTS

From the early decades of this century Istanbul, and Ankara, witnessed a growing number of European restaurants, “a la Franca”. Many of the early examples of these establishments were started and staffed by White Russians, and featured such international restaurant items as Boeuf Strogonof and Chicken Kiev. It is related (conversations with friends Deniz and Rıfat Kandiyoti and Tuğrul Şavkay) that Atatürk himself was instrumental in encouraging the opening of such restaurants as part of his cultural thrust to place Turkey in the European world and distance it from oriental associations. The Russian restaurant in Beyoğlu is, perhaps, a survival from that wave, but many others continued as European/French restaurants.

Another genre of modern restaurant combined and adapted elements from the Turkish repertoire to European styles, the most notable being Pandali’s, now housed above the entrance to the Mısır Çarşısı (the Spice Bazaar) in Eminönü, still distinguished for its atmosphere and decor. This kind of adaptation, however, has more recently been taken up on a grand scale by the new Istanbul hotels.

Globalisation, including international tourism, are commonly supposed to be a force for uniformity and standardisation. In the endless search for variety and authenticity, however, this is far from being the case. One concern of tourist managements, including those of grand hotel chains, is to give the customer a wide choice of food styles including, crucially, the “authentic” national style of the country. To that end, most of the major

hotels include European restaurants, as well as Turkish, or in some cases "Ottoman" restaurants. One of the most distinguished was that of the Ciragan Palace Hotel in Besiktas, part of the Kempinski chain, where the manager of its "Ottoman" restaurant at one point explored historical cookbooks for recipes which he adapted for modern restaurant preparation. The Divan Restaurant near Taksim, though not part of a hotel, is one of the best restaurants in that style, serving a distinguished range of Turkish dishes.

These, and an increasing number of modern restaurants catering to a diverse urban and international clientele, are eclectic and do not observe the boundaries of traditional restaurants. They serve meat and fish and mezze, grills and stews, and include many international restaurant items. This is, no doubt, the trend for the future, as it is everywhere else. But let us hope that the concern for "authenticity", as well as the attachment of Istanbulers to their restaurants, will be factors in preserving the traditional specialised establishments.

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** The editors (autumn 1997) would like to add their own favourite haunts to SZ's choices. At a newish fish restaurant in Cihangir, the Doga Balık, try the monkfish casserole; at the Yengec Balık Lokantası at Kumkapi, mezze, fried haddock, gypsy music and exquisite belly dancer; and in a small corner of Tunel, by Ismail's bar, Kelif, a three-table inside, two outside cafe: dishes change every night. Look and taste before you order your meal for the cost of a beer at the Pera Palace. Late night in Beyoğlu, after poor man's Moulin Rouge at the Olimpia, sober up across Istiklal Caddesi at the Lale Iskembecisi on tripe soup (plain, thick or thicker) or lamb trotters. Open 24 hours. For good pils beer, The Mini Meyhane where you can read Cavafi's poem in Turkish on the wall opposite.*