

# The Cuisine of Turkey

## *An Historical Survey*

The Turkish people are descendants of nomadic tribes, who began moving westward from the semideserts of Mongolia and central Asia in the 6th century. Primarily herdsmen, they lived off their flocks and available vegetation. Throughout the slow advance across the continent, they acquired new food practices as they entered the cultural sphere of other kingdoms. Their developing cuisine was influenced by those of China and Persia and, when they arrived in Anatolia, by the Greeks.

Of the many Turkish states known to history, two made major advancements in developing the cuisine. The Selçuk Turks dominated much of Anatolia, that vast steppe of Turkey between the Black and Mediterranean Seas, from the 11th to 13th centuries. Two centuries later, the Ottomans ruled from İstanbul a vast territory of conquered lands in addition to Anatolia. Both had an enormous influence on the cuisine. Their reigns and food habits were richly entwined with the practices of Islam, the religion they had encountered in Persia and ultimately embraced.

### **Turkish Origins in Central Asia**

According to available records, the early Turkish peoples were nomads in the western region of China. Not much is known about the culinary habits of these early, wandering tribes; their diets apparently included venison and rabbit until herding replaced hunting. As herdsmen, their staples were meat, milk and milk products. Fruits, berries and vegetables were sporadic additions. Not surprisingly, these nomadic tribes grilled meat on makeshift skewers over a fire.

symbols to each unit. The loss of one during war marked the entire unit with disgrace and dismissal. It also served as a symbolic gesture to show dissatisfaction with the sultan or a high official in his court. An overturned kettle signified rebellion in the ranks, and sometimes a head rolled before order was restored.

Some of the officers in the corps held positions that bore names of food-related activities, but it is not clear they ever actually performed them. The top commanders were called soupmen. Others below them were the chief cook, scullion, pancake maker, bread baker and water carrier.

### Special-Occasion Foods

The Islamic calendar has a rich association with food. Religious holidays commemorate events that are marked with the preparation of special dishes for family and friends and are also a time when particular attention is directed toward feeding the neediest.

The first significant holiday of the Muslim year actually commemorates two events said to occur on the 10th day of the first lunar month, Muharrem. It is both the day that Imam Hüseyin, grandson of the Prophet Mohammed, was martyred and the day that Noah and his family were able to leave the Ark after the flood waters receded. A thick, sweet pudding called *aşure*, or Noah's pudding, is the traditional food made this day, using the same ingredients supposedly remaining in the Ark after it was able to land. The ritual preparation of this dessert, a complex mixture of fresh and dried fruits, nuts, legumes and grains, originated in the kitchens of the Bektaşî dervish sect. With solemn pomp



A confectioner, or *belvaci*, in official attire. He cooked in the *belvabane*, the section of the palace kitchen devoted to making *belva* and other confections, including jams and jellies.

# Regional Turkish Food

## *A Quick Tour of Turkish Foods and Their Regional Variations*

### **Turkish Food in a Nutshell**

Fresh is the best first adjective to apply to Turkish cuisine. Foods are enjoyed in season. It would be unthinkable to want winter's pale and mealy tomato, coaxed to grow under greenhouse conditions. The knowledge that one of spring's earliest offerings, the tart, green soul plum, or *can eriği*, can be fully enjoyed before ripening, seems to shorten the wait for the land to turn green again.

Turkey is one of a few nations able to feed all of her people. Food is abundant and healthful, grown without chemical additives.

As a whole, Turkish cuisine is not spicy. Exceptions are found in certain parts of the southeast, where several preparations reflect a peppery Arabic influence. The most typical seasonings are mint, dill, flat-leaf parsley, paprika, cumin and *sumak*, the dried and ground berries from an edible variety of sumac shrub, which imparts a tart, lemony flavor to dishes. Usage of garlic and onions is liberal. Sauces are simple and light, with a lemon and egg yolk sauce called *terbiye*, a yogurt and garlic sauce and "au jus" predominating.

An entire meal can be made of *meze*, the infinite variety of pre-dinner tidbits on small platters, and often is. *Meze* are meant to accompany *raki*, Turkey's anise-flavored national drink distilled from grapes. Cold dishes are followed by hot dishes and range from a simple plate of white sheep's cheese, or *beyaz peynir*, to shredded chicken in a pulverized walnut sauce and topped with paprika-flavored walnut oil, an elegant dish called *Çerkes tavuğu*, which is attributed to the Circassians.

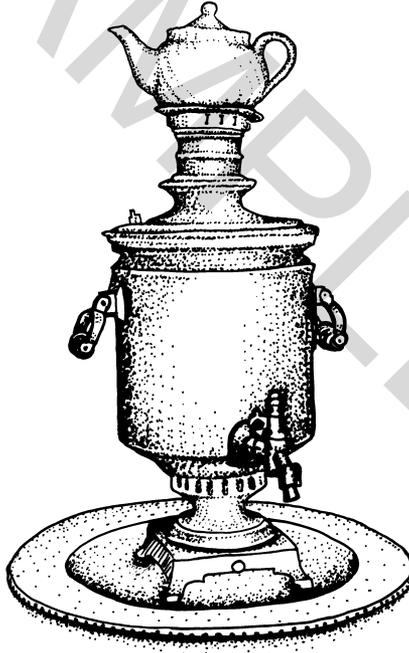
The most popular meat appearing on the table is lamb. Beef is a distant second and pork is uncommon because it is prohibited by the Muslim

*ekmek kadayıfi*, made from special bread dough presoaked in hot water to soften and swell it, and then baked in sugar syrup. Pieces are split and filled with *kaymak*, or simply topped with a generous dollop of it. This cream neutralizes the excessive sweetness of the dessert. Other local dishes are *mercimekli bükme böreği*, a *börek* filled with lentils, and *haşbaşı nokul*, or poppy seed rolls using seeds from Afyon-grown poppies.

The coastal town of Marmaris is known for the varieties of honey produced in the area. *Çam balı*, a dark, pine-scented honey, is most popular.

## **The Mediterranean**

The Mediterranean region includes the southern coast of Turkey from Fethiye extending eastward to the Bay of İskenderun. The principal coastal resort is the city of Antalya. An inland area up to about one hundred miles is



A tea samovar. Tea leaves in the teapot on top steep to make a strong infusion, which is diluted “to taste” with hot water in the samovar.

community, is a grape-growing region. One of its specialities is *Harput köftesi*, balls of minced meat and bulgur in tomato sauce.

Malatya, a rich agricultural center, is the apricot capital of Turkey and also produces an excellent crop of cherries. This city is especially known for its *dolma*, because they are prepared with so many different types of leaves. One of the local favorites is *Malatya usülü fasulye yaprağı dolması*. This “Malatya style” dish has green bean leaves wrapped around a stuffing of hulled wheat and bulgur, simmered in yogurt sauce and topped with sautéed onions.

Yogurt soup, *yoğurt çorbası*, is a traditional offering of the region. Other specialties include *kete*, a flaky pastry filled with browned flour, and *aksan*, a cold salad of potatoes flavored with mint and basil, and garnished with black olives. A regional version of *köfte* from the province of Bitlis is *Bitlis köftesi*, balls of minced lamb and bulgur stuffed with a mixture of rice and pomegranate seeds.

## Southeastern Anatolia

The southeastern region of Turkey is primarily hot and dry, but more arable land is being created by government irrigation projects. The often peppery cuisine of the region shows a strong Arabic influence. Some of the key cities in the region are Diyarbakır, Gaziantep, Şanlıurfa and Kahramanmaraş. This area also has a large Kurdish population.

Diyarbakır’s culinary fame derives from its delicious melons. Gaziantep, formerly Antep, is the pistachio capital of the country. Luscious dessert treats, especially of the baklava family, contain copious amounts of the tasty nutmeats. Nearby Şanlıurfa provides sheep’s butter of almost legendary quality and flavor to make these desserts. Another spectacular treat is *künefe*, made with fine strands of pastry dough called *tel kadayıf*. Fresh cheese is placed between two layers of butter-soaked pastry. It is baked, then drenched in syrup, sprinkled with chopped pistachio nuts and served piping hot.

The city of Gaziantep is on few itineraries, so its varied and exciting regional menu is practically undiscovered by travelers. One exceptional dish is *yuarlama*, a preparation of small meat and bulgur balls in a spicy tomato sauce, given a piquant taste by the addition of unripe plum paste. It also has flour and water dough balls that are slightly larger than chickpeas. *İçli köfte* are oblong, tapered patties of minced lamb and bulgur, poked with a finger

to low and return meat to pot. Add bouillon cubes and season to taste. Add chopped tomato, V8 juice and  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water. Cover tightly and cook on very low heat for about an hour. Meat should be very tender. Add another  $\frac{1}{2}$  cup water and green beans, with ends snipped. Place tomato slices on top of beans. Cover and cook on low heat until beans are tender. To enhance flavor, cook in advance and refrigerate a few hours. Reheat to serve.

### **Adana Kebabı**

*Spicy kebab, a specialty of the province of Adana in the eastern Mediterranean region of Turkey. Serves 2.*

The recipe for this dish was provided by Bora Özkök, from Adana, who heads Cultural Folk Tours International, a company in California specializing in tours to Turkey. You will need flat skewers with blades from  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch to  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches wide. See *Resources* (p. 57) for mail-order suppliers.

- 1 POUND GROUND LAMB
- 1 LARGE ONION, FINELY CHOPPED
- 1 CUP LOOSELY PACKED FLAT-LEAF PARSLEY, FINELY CHOPPED
- 1 CLOVE GARLIC, MINCED
- $\frac{1}{2}$  TEASPOON CRUSHED RED PEPPER FLAKES\*
- $\frac{1}{4}$  TEASPOON SALT
- $\frac{1}{8}$  TEASPOON BLACK PEPPER, FRESHLY GROUND
- 2 TOMATOES, QUARTERED
- 6 LONG, THIN GREEN PEPPERS
- TURKISH FLAT BREAD, OR *PIDE*†
- MELTED BUTTER

#### *Relish*

- 1 RED ONION, CUT IN PAPER-THIN SLICES
- FLAT-LEAF PARSLEY (USE A FEW UNCUT SPRIGS FROM ABOVE)
- $\frac{1}{2}$  TABLESPOON *SUMAK*††

Mix well the meat, onion, parsley, garlic, red pepper flakes, salt and pepper. Divide mixture into 4 balls; each will be about the size of a large egg. Place one of the pieces at the lower end of a skewer, which should be held upright. Squeeze the meat so it completely surrounds the blade. The object is to mold this ball into a long sausage shape around the blade. Begin by grasping the lower end of the ball with your hand, coaxing the portion within the hand to conform to the contours of the blade. Then move your hand a short distance up and squeeze the next portion

# Helpful Phrases

## *For Use in Restaurants and Food Markets*

### **In the Restaurant**

The following phrases in Turkish will assist you in ordering food, learning more about the dish you ordered, and determining what specialties of a region are available. Each phrase also is written phonetically to help with pronunciation. Syllables in capital letters are accented. For further insight into the language, read the comments on Turkish grammar in the introduction to the *Menu Guide* (p. 69).

DO YOU HAVE A MENU?

Menünüz var mı?

*Meh-new-newz vahr muh?*

MAY I SEE THE MENU,  
PLEASE?

Menüyü görebilir miyim, lütfen?

*Meh-new-YEW gur-reh-bee-LEER  
mee-yeem, LEWT-fehn?*

MAY WE ORDER A SAMPLER  
PLATE OF WHAT THE CHEF  
HAS MADE TODAY?

Şefin bugün yaptığı yemeklerden birer  
örnek getirir misiniz?

*Sheh-FIN BEW-gewn yahp-tuh-UH  
yeh-mehk-lehr-DEHN bee-REHR ewr-NEHK  
geh-tee-REER mees-see-nee?*

WHAT DO YOU RECOMMEND?

Ne tavsiye edersiniz?

*Neh tahv-see-YEH eh-DEHR-see-nee?*

**Acem köftesi** breaded and fried meatballs stuffed with a mixture of currants and pine nuts, Persian style.

**Acem yahnisi** ragout of chicken with walnuts and pomegranate juice, Persian style.

**acıbadem kurabiyesi** macaroon made with bitter almonds.

**açma** a type of puff pastry.

**Adana çorbası** a soup containing tomatoes, chickpeas and tiny meatballs, flavored with a touch of vinegar. It is a specialty of the province of Adana in the Mediterranean region of Turkey.

### REGIONAL CLASSIC

**Adana kebabı** spicy, flattened sausage-shaped kebabs of minced lamb, which are grilled on broad, flat skewers. They are served on top of pieces of *pide* bread and garnished with roasted tomatoes and peppers. A relish of thinly sliced onions, broad-leaf parsley and *sumak* typically accompanies this dish. It is a specialty of the province of Adana in the Mediterranean region of Turkey.

**alamenda salata** a salad of beets, potatoes and raw onions.

### REGIONAL CLASSIC

**Ali Nazik kebabı** purée of roasted eggplant mixed with yogurt and topped with a seasoned, minced lamb mixture. This dish is a variation of *hünkâr beğendi* (see this *Guide*).

**Ali Paşa pilâvı** buttered rice pilaf containing pine nuts and very small meatballs.

**altın sarısı dil filetosu** breaded fillet of sole.

**Antep fıstığı ezmesi** see *fıstık ezmesi*.

### REGIONAL CLASSIC

**Arabaşı çorbası** spicy tomato and chicken soup with red pepper paste. Regional variations include serving this dish with cold cubes of a cooked batter of flour and water to complement the piping hot, zesty soup.

**Arap kadayıfı** see *yassı kadayıf*.

**Arap köftesi** small balls or patties of a fried bulgur mixture, which was traditional food for travelers because it kept well.

### NATIONAL FAVORITE

**Arnavut ciğeri** an appetizer of fried lamb's liver, Albanian style, garnished with a relish of raw, sliced onion laced with chopped flat-leaf parsley and crushed red pepper. Usually served hot, it is one of the most popular appetizers enjoyed with *rakı*, Turkey's anise-flavored national liquor distilled from grapes. In fact, their tastes are considered so compatible that the liver is sometimes soaked in *rakı* before it is dredged in flour and fried.

### REGIONAL CLASSIC

**asma yaprağında sardalya** sardines baked in grape leaves.

**aspurlu pilâv** a safflower-flavored rice pilaf with minced meat; also called *haspirli pilâv*.

**gümüş balığı** smelt; also called *çamuka*.

**güneşte** sun-cooked.

**güveç** an earthenware casserole. A strip of dough is used to seal its lid during cooking. It is also the name of a vegetable mixture sometimes containing meat, poultry or shrimp.

**habbe** grain; the plural form of the word is *hububat*.

**ham** unprocessed, unripe or green.

**ham şeker** brown sugar.

**hamsi** an anchovy-like fish, used fresh in numerous dishes. This fish is extremely popular in the Black Sea region.

**hamur** dough. At its simplest, it is a mixture of just flour and water, such as the tiny dough balls in *yuvarlama* (see *Menu Guide*) or the thread-like strands of *tel kadayif* (see this *Guide*).

**hamur açma sofrası** the low, round table at which Anatolian women traditionally sit and roll dough called *yufka* into thin sheets with a long, thin rolling pin called an *oklava*.

**hardal** mustard.

**hardal tohumu** mustard seed.

**harnup** carob; also called *keçi boynuzu*.

**harnupiyе** a drink made from carob.

**haspir** safflower; also called *aspir*.

**haşhaş tohumu** poppyseed; also called *gelincik tohumu*.

**haşlama** boiled; another word for boiled is *kaynama*.

**haşlanmış yumurta** hard-boiled egg; also called *lop yumurta*, *hazırlop yumurta* and *kati yumurta*.

**havuç** carrot.

**havyar** caviar.

**haya** testicle. Also called *husye* and *yumurta*.

**hazır yemek** ready-to-go food.

**hazırlop** hard-boiled.

**hazırlop yumurta** hard-boiled egg; also called *başlanmış yumurta*.

**hedik** boiled wheat.

**helva (halvah)** a dessert made with semolina, sesame paste or flour, mixed with sugar and nuts.

**hesap** the bill or check.

**hespir** safflower; also called *aspir*.

**hıyar** cucumber; also called *salatalık*.

**hindi** turkey.