

LOKANTA STORIES

Beyti Güler Wrap

Beyti Güler, one of the most prominent representatives of Turkish meat culture, has been delighting his patrons with meticulously chosen Turkish meats prepared using traditional methods since 1945, when he first established a small restaurant in Küçükçekmece, and later in 1983 when he opened a restaurant in Florya that continues to thrive to this day. His restaurants, which also offer the best döner kebab, are famous for their Beyti kebab.

During his visit to Switzerland in 1961, Güler created the Beyti kebab, inspired by the meat prepared by the renowned butcher Möller. He prepared the eponymous dish by skewering and grilling lamb fillets wrapped in strips of lamb-chop fat, and it soon became a global sensation. We include the Beyti Güler Wrap in our menu as a tribute to the great chef.

Meatballs

The name “meatballs” refers to the method of preparation rather than the cooking method. The Turkish term is “köfte,” derived from the Persian word “küfte,” meaning “crushed” or “pounded.” While not invented by the Ottomans, meatballs (and their many variations) have been the most famous dish of Ottoman cuisine since the 15th century. Meatballs are an invigorating and healthy (easy-to-digest) meal. During the Ottoman period, the ground meat was kneaded after adding spices to the chopped pure mutton. With the addition of rice or bulgur instead of bread, the meatballs were wrapped in suet or caul fat and cooked on a rotisserie or in the oven. Starting in the 19th century, meatballs were ground finer in a meat grinder, and because of rising meat prices, other ingredients were added, which increased the variety of meatballs.

Külbastı

In addition to being nutrient-dense, meat, especially mutton, was considered the most prestigious food in Ottoman cuisine, as in many other cultures. Famous Turkish traveler Evliya Çelebi’s famous saying, “Meat strengthens the body; it is one of the best foods, along with bread,” highlights the significance of meat dishes and different types of bread in the Ottoman diet, as they were frequently enjoyed in combination. With külbastı, a cooking method in traditional Istanbul cuisine, the meat is first grilled, then placed in a covered pan and cooked for a second time in water with a little oil. This is one of the most unique cooking methods of Turkish cuisine.

Döner

Döner was influenced by the kebab dish prepared using a horizontal rotisserie, a cooking method documented by Evliya Çelebi during his visit to Crimea in the 17th century. Döner kebab is a flavor specific to Istanbul and, according to historical sources, was cooked and served in eateries and on the streets in the city in the 19th century. One visual source indicates the cooking of döner kebab on a vertical rotisserie dates back to 1855. In the traditional döner recipe, the lamb or mutton was marinated in onion juice, placed on a long rotisserie and cooked slowly over a coal fire in a vertical mechanism rotating around its own axis. It was then cut into thin slices and served with pita.

Soup

German traveler Hans Dernschwam, who came to Istanbul in 1553, mentioned in his diary how important soup was to the Ottoman food culture. Soup dates all the way back to the Central Asian Turks. Porridge-like stews made from various grains in those times inspired today's soups. After the Turks came to Anatolia, they continued the tradition of including soup in their diet and enriched their soup varieties over time. Due to its affordability and nutritional value, soup remains a popular choice across all segments of society. Soup varieties in Turkish cuisine have gradually increased to a wide range, including grain, lentil, beef, offal, yogurt, milk, egg and lemon, chicken, and vegetable soups.

Olive Oil Dishes

The emergence of olive oil as the cooking oil of choice came quite late for Istanbul cuisine in the Ottoman period, as butter, ghee and tail fat were more popular choices. Recipes for cold vegetable dishes cooked with olive oil were first included in cookbooks published at the end of the 19th century. Just like cooking dolma in olive oil, cooking vegetables in olive oil was a practice introduced by Christians living in Istanbul during Lent when they abstained from consuming animal products. Olive oil dishes are also common in Sephardic cuisine, which does not allow combining meat and milk. By the end of the 19th century, olive oil became widespread in Istanbul cuisine and a staple consumed by all communities. Turkish cuisine developed the absorption method technique, where vegetables were cooked slowly in extra virgin olive oil. This method reveals the true flavors of the vegetables and protects the nutrients in the vegetables.

Börek

Wheat was the main grain consumed in Ottoman cuisine. Wheat flour was primarily used in bread making and was the main ingredient of bagels, buns, and various böreks. Phyllo is a technique that was brought to Anatolia from Central Asian Turkish cuisine. It is essential for various types of böreks and baklava. In addition to phyllo dough and pastries such as gözleme, katlama, noodles, mantı and tutmaç in Central Asian, Turkish and Anatolian Seljuk cuisines, the Ottoman period introduced longer and more elaborate böreks. The dough utilized for böreks and pastries was made from a simple mixture of flour, water, and salt, then rolled out into thin phyllo sheets. The dough was occasionally enriched with eggs and clarified butter. In Istanbul cuisine, böreks were a staple prepared in palaces, mansions, and houses, and provided by börek shops. Many traditional recipes suggest using lye when preparing börek dough. Similar to the present day, börek fillings were made with ground meat, cheese or vegetables, such as leeks. Böreks were also made with chicken or lamb's feet, varieties that are now long forgotten. Böreks prepared in trays were cooked over the fire or in the oven, böreks such as puff, lalanga and fincan were fried in oil, and gözleme was cooked on an iron plate. Water börek, which can be made both by boiling and fire cooking, remains the most elaborate börek.

Rice Pilaf

Rice, a product that was both hard to obtain and expensive, was initially introduced from China through the Mongol invasions of the Far East during the 13th to 15th centuries. It first became popular in the palace and among the aristocrats of the Safavids in Iran. Starting in the 15th century, the consumption and social reputation of rice in the Ottoman palace cuisine gradually increased, and it became the main dish of rich and luxurious Ottoman tables.

Rice pilaf had a special place in palace banquets. It was served separately and almost as valued as kebabs. At a feast hosted by Mahmud Pasha, the grand vizier of Mehmed the Conqueror, rice pilaf with golden chickpeas was served, and whoever had the chickpeas on their spoon was believed to have good fortune. Palace kitchens devised various rice pilaf recipes, including varieties with meat, chicken, vegetables, dried fruits, almonds, and spices. There were also rice pilaf varieties in different colors. “Dane-i yeşil” was made with green vegetables or herbs, “dane-i Sarı” was made with saffron and “dane-i kırmızı” was made with pomegranate juice. These combinations were a sight to behold, especially when served with white rice pilaf. These vibrant rice pilaf dishes were among the culinary offerings served to the Sultan and pashas during an Imperial Festival held in 1539.

Meat and Vegetable Dishes

There are several different methods used to cook the traditional meat and vegetable dishes of Istanbul cuisine. Although these dishes, known as bastı (stew), silkme (shaken), musakka (roasted), and oturtma (mashed), have slight variations in practice, their common feature is that they are all pot dishes. They are prepared with various seasonal vegetables, but while stewed and shaken dishes are made with meat cubes, roasted and mashed dishes are made with ground meat. In addition to these cooking techniques, the “kapama” (covering) technique involves leaving the meat in larger pieces. After initial cooking, it is often covered with leafy green vegetables and cooked again, and the name “kapama” is derived from this. In a recipe for a chicken kapama dish found in Nedim bin Tosun’s book “Aşçıbaşı,” published in the year 1900, the meat is upside down at the bottom of a pot, then stuffed into a bowl and cooked. Serving as an oven, this method is also used in cooking tas kebab, another one of our traditional dishes. Nothing beats a stew prepared with seasonal vegetables and lamb, sealed with dough around the rim of the casserole.

Yogurt

Despite the limitations of transportation in those times, residents of old Istanbul would journey to places like Kağıthane or Kanlıca solely to savor yogurt, highlighting the significance of this dairy product. In the old days of Istanbul, even yogurt had its designated season. The arrival of spring meant it was time for fermentation. For some Istanbulites, the best method for fermentation was using the dewdrops from the leaves in the early hours of the Hıdırellez morning. If yogurt sets, it would mean that the wishes made will also come true. There were districts that people visited just to eat yogurt, as Kağıthane, Sütlüce, Sarıyer, and Kanlıca had yogurts with unique flavors. Yogurt appealed to Istanbulites because of both its taste and its health benefits.

Kanlıca yogurt, one of Istanbul’s famous yogurt varieties, was first sold in the mid-1600s and immediately recognized for its distinctive flavor. The cream is not separated from the milk when producing Kanlıca yogurt. Traditionally, it was exclusively cooked in a copper cauldron over an open wood fire. Selling Kanlıca yogurt also requires skill; the trick lies in being able to evenly distribute the cream on top, the solid middle part, and the watery bottom of the yogurt onto a plate.

Another delicious yogurt from Istanbul is the Silivri yogurt, occasionally referred to as “fire yogurt.” This yogurt is cooked on a wood fire, hence its name. A thick layer of cream forms in the yogurt made in low and flat clay pots, which is why street vendors selling Silivri yogurt would yell, “Creamy yogurt, get your creamy yogurt!” During transportation to Istanbul, the thick layer of cream served a dual purpose: it protected the yogurt and infused it with a unique flavor.

In earlier times, individuals would often consume a spoon or two of yogurt to aid digestion, particularly in conjunction with or following meat-based meals. This is why dishes like kebab are commonly accompanied by yogurt, cacık, or ayran in our country. The health benefits of yogurt speak for themselves. An excellent illustration of the health benefits of yogurt is Zaro Ağa (1774–1934), who consumed yogurt daily and is believed to be the oldest person ever recorded in Turkey.

Cacık

The word “cacık” was likely derived from the Persian word “jaj,” which refers to an “edible herb that grows on its own.” Some sources claim that it refers to an herb used to season cheese. In his “Book of Travels,” Evliya Çelebi describes cacık as an edible herb. According to a source from the 1940s, it is also a generic term used for self-growing grasses, encompassing plants like karavuluk, summer savory, cichorium, chickweed, erodium, or rack. Finally, in Ahmet Vefik Pasha’s dictionary *Lehce-i Osmâni*, which was published in 1876, cacık is described as a vegetable salad prepared with yogurt. This clarifies the trick for making cacık: the ingredients added to the yogurt must be raw.

In a radio show episode dedicated to this topic, Aylin Öney, a celebrated food writer, emphasized that the ingredients incorporated into the yogurt should be fresh, tender, succulent, and invigorating. Another important thing to consider when making cacık is to use seasonal products. Cacık is not always made with cucumber. It can be made with different ingredients, such as finely chopped lettuce in the winter and plums, green almonds and common purslane in the spring.

Neşet Efendi, a blacksmith who migrated from Shumen to Istanbul after the Russo-Turkish war (1877–1878), was renowned for his passionate penchant for cacık as an accompaniment to rakı. Hundreds of yogurt containers from Silivri, along with cucumbers cultivated in Istanbul’s renowned Langa orchards, were transformed into cacık for Neşet Efendi. For Cacıkçı Neşet Efendi, nicknamed after cacık itself, the best season was when fresh garlic grew, as he made cacık by throwing pieces of ice into the marble pool in the middle of the arbor in the garden of his house on summer evenings.

Hoşaf

Hoşaf or compote has been a traditional beverage consumed alongside rice pilaf since the Ottoman period, but it is now one of the forgotten flavors of our time. A perfect Ottoman banquet always ended with hoşaf, meaning “pleasant water,” which was served before the obligatory Turkish coffee. Everyone would use ivory or boxwood spoons to drink from the hoşaf, which was placed in the middle of the tray. Hoşaf was made from fresh or dried fruits and was enriched with musk or rose, orange blossom, or peach blossom water to add flavor.

How about a hoşaf story? Even though this story is told in many different ways, one of the best versions is the one told by Ekrem Muhittin Yeğen, one of our noted cookbook writers of the early Republican era.

Shaykh al-Islām Dürriyade Abdullah, renowned for his hospitality and the delectable meals prepared in his mansion, extended an invitation to Mahmud II, the reigning Sultan at that time, for an iftar meal during Ramadan. In the midst of splendid dinnerware and exceptionally delicious dishes, after savoring the compote served as the final course, as they were about to rise from the table, the Sultan turned to the Shaykh al-Islām and said,

‘Effendi, amidst these opulent and extravagant dinner sets, could you not find a crystal bowl worthy of containing that delightful compote?’ To this, the Shaykh al-Islām replied, ‘Instead of spoiling the taste by adding ice to cool the compote, we carved the ice into the shape of a bowl and served the compote within it.’”

Pickles

Pickling is a traditional preservation method that has existed for hundreds of years. The Turkish word for pickle is “turşu,” in Turkish, derived from the Persian word “turş,” meaning “sour,” “salty,” or “mouth-burning.” In the Ottoman palace, various kinds of pickles were made in the confectionery kitchen (helvahane), where desserts were made. Pickles were made from capers, onions, garlic, apples, pears, quince, sumac, eggplants and beets with mustard in the first half of the 15th century, and from zucchini, rose, mint, carrots and leeks in the 16th and 17th centuries. When making pickles, nowadays forgotten spices like fresh mint, parsley, mustard, and fennel seeds were used. During the Ottoman period, pickles were served as appetizers and enjoyed throughout the meal.

Milk Desserts

A fondness for desserts dates back centuries in Ottoman cuisine. While desserts were historically significant, they were also an important part of social life. In the 19th century, puddings made by combining milk with rice, starch, rice flour, and sugar were popular. Dating back hundreds of years, milk pudding was one of the favorite desserts of the Ottoman palace. It was sold both in shops and by street vendors in Istanbul. Famous milk pudding shops in various districts of Istanbul had a special place in the hearts of Istanbulites, as they were the ideal places for dates.

Another well-known dessert is rice pudding, which is a pudding made from rice mixed with milk. The first records about the rice pudding called “uwa” are found in the 11th century in Kaşgarlı Mahmut’s dictionary *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*. It is one of the most popular desserts of the Ottoman palace, and it was included in the palace records starting in the 15th century. In her book *Sherbet and Spice: The Complete Story of Turkish Sweets*, food researcher Priscilla Mary Işın mentions that Turkish rice pudding entered Italian cuisine in the mid-16th century under the name “riso tuchesco” (Turkish rice). Fried marzipan desserts filled with rice pudding were served at the wedding of Ercole I d’Este, Duke of Ferrara, one of the prominent figures of the time. It is also known that Bartolomeo Scappi, one of the most important chefs of Italian culinary culture and the cook for Pope Pius V, served rice pudding topped with sugar and cinnamon at a banquet.

Sherbet Desserts

Desserts were essential in Ottoman cuisine, and a dinner table without dessert was unheard of. The dessert culture started when the Turks accepted Islam under the Arab influence, and it developed rapidly. Kadayif, one of the oldest sherbet desserts in Ottoman cuisine, is originally an Arabic dessert. The word “kadayif” is derived from the Arabic word “kataif,” meaning “velvet.” Until the 18th century, the most popular sherbet desserts in the palace were lokma, lalanga, and kadayif. Baklava, a dessert that demanded considerable skill in its preparation, started as a humble sweet given to the Janissaries on the 15th day of Ramadan. Gradually, it gained immense popularity within the palace and among affluent households, evolving in both its cooking techniques and flavors over time. Hans Dernschwam, a German traveler who visited

Istanbul in 1553 and meticulously documented his experiences with baklava, praised the delectable desserts he sampled during his sojourn.

Fruit Desserts

Ottomans consumed all kinds of fresh fruits in every season. In addition to the various fruits cultivated within the palace gardens and in Istanbul, the most exquisite seasonal fruits from all corners of the empire were regularly delivered to the palace. The method of cooking fresh fruits with honey or sugar, which helps preserve them, led to the emergence of various delicious desserts in the palace kitchens. Hoşaf, jelly, elmasiye, jam and other fruit-based desserts, especially sherbet and syrup desserts, were some of the dessert varieties cooked in the confectionery (helvahane) and jam (reçelhane) sections of the palace kitchen. The confectionery and jam kitchen sections were connected with an internal passage but were separate from the kitchens where other dishes were cooked. Few cultures during this period employed this system, and it helped prevent cooking odors from permeating the desserts.

Halva

Derived from the Arabic word “hulviyat,” halva means “sweet,” but it is much more than a sweet treat. Halva is seen as a means of charity in Islamic societies. It can be made when a vow or wish is fulfilled, to show appreciation or to celebrate a particular occasion. Today, it stands as a symbol of somber moments, crafted to provide a touch of solace through sweetness in the aftermath of loss. Regardless of the reason for its preparation, the core tradition connected to halva involves gathering around a table and enjoying it together. As Istanbulite writer Artun Ünsal eloquently states in his book “İstanbul’un Lezzet Tarihi” (History of Tastes of Istanbul), “Halva is a sacred food that consistently unites people and symbolizes social cohesion.”