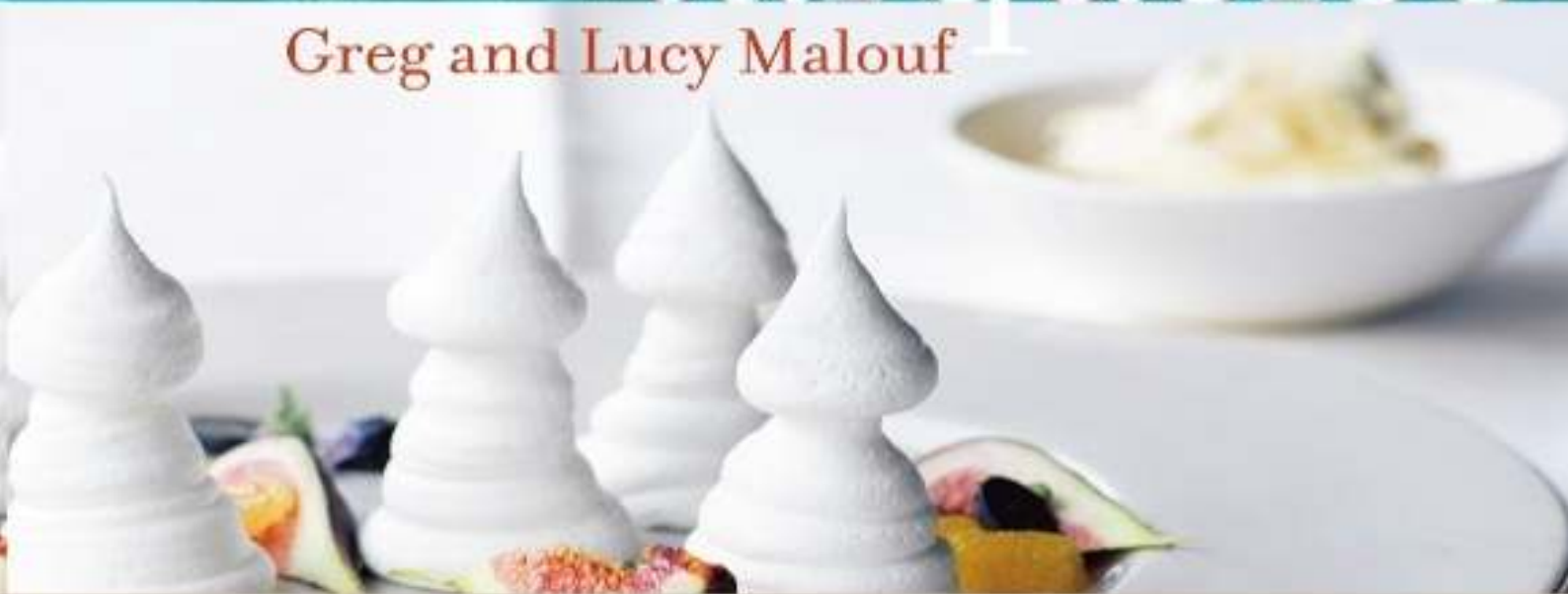




A chef's travels in Turkey

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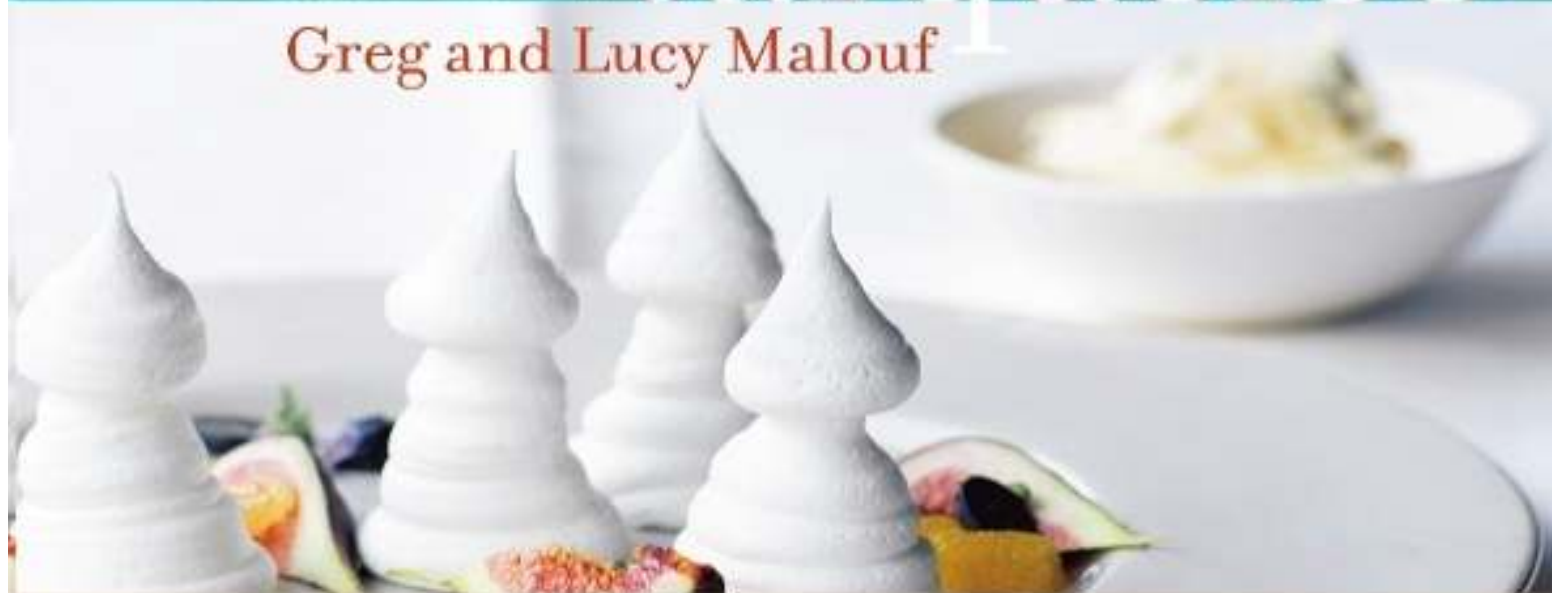




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PHOTOGRAPHY BY LISA COHEN AND WILLIAM MEPPEM

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Preface

‘What on earth do you want to write a book about Turkish cooking for?’ asked my sister-in-law, when I told her that Greg and I were planning a trip to Turkey. ‘What’s it going to be called? “One-hundred and one ways with eggplant”?’

A quick poll of our friends revealed that most did indeed think of Turkish food as being limited to endless versions of oily braised eggplant, with a few sticky pastries and limp doner kebabs thrown in for good measure. Yet we had read plenty of books that described Turkish food as one of the greatest cuisines in the world, and numerous magazines and newspapers were busily printing stories about a revitalised Istanbul – the new ‘cool’ travel destination. It seemed that a trip to explore the country’s culture and cuisine was not to be missed.

Greg has vivid memories of holidaying in Istanbul while working as a young apprentice chef in Austria. Over the course of the many weeks we spent planning our culinary adventure, his eyes would light up as he described a city of crumbling ruins, glittering mosques and smoky tea-houses. He spoke too, of the mass of humanity that thronged the streets and alleyways of the Grand Bazaar; of the fishermen beneath the old Galata Bridge frying the day’s catch on portable grills in their old wooden boats; and of the simit sellers wandering among the crowds, pushing their little carts stacked with golden rings of bread. He had tales of pudding shops and pastries, a ferryride up the Bosphorus to the Black Sea and long nights drinking raki as the whirling gypsy music grew ever wilder.

It all seemed impossibly romantic, this dream of the Orient, and I couldn’t wait to see it for myself.

And it was all still there – well, nearly all. The rickety old Galata Bridge that Greg remembered so clearly has gone, replaced by a sturdier modern version, and 21st-century safety regulations mean that fish sandwiches are no longer cooked on those little old wooden boats, but instead are sold from a series of food stands along the Eminönü waterfront. But these were minor disappointments. During the five weeks we spent travelling across Turkey, we found it to be a magical place beyond our wildest expectations; a country that famously straddles continents – and even time itself.

This mingling of the past, present and future is perhaps most evident in Istanbul, where old neighbourhoods are steeped in memories of violence and glamour, decay and opulence. Yet it takes only a short stroll through crowded streets to newer suburbs like Beyoğlu and Nişantaşı – with their Modern Art Museum, cutting-edge design studios, glitzy nightclubs and vibrant café culture – to witness signs of the capital’s recent cultural revival and determination to reclaim its heritage as one of the world’s great cities.

While there’s a tendency to focus on Istanbul as being the beating heart of Turkey, the reality is that it forms only a tiny fragment of the country’s landmass and plays but one part in the country’s long and varied history. Outside Istanbul we discovered an ancient land layered with history and of extraordinary natural beauty – craggy mountain ranges, wide empty steppe lands and a vast coastline that touches three different seas. It’s a land washed in brilliant white sunshine, where a deep blue sky merges with a green sea to create a distinctive and memorable turquoise.

And what of the food? Well, ironically, there was very little eggplant to be found on restaurant menus during our visit, as Turkish cooking is by and large dictated by the seasons. So, instead of eggplant, we enjoyed the tail-end of winter’s finest produce: roasted chestnuts and hot, sweet, milky

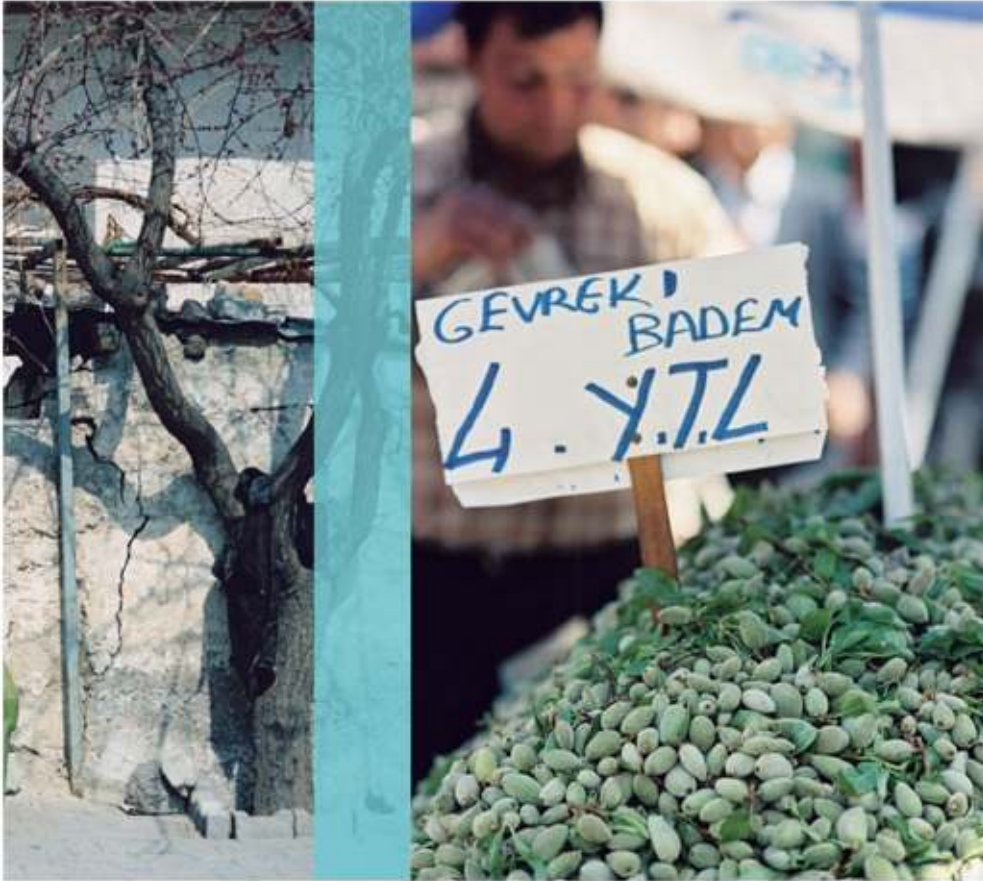
drinks of sahlelep from street vendors, firm white turbot, plump mussels and salty anchovies from the sea and, best of all, gorgeously perfumed amber quinces. Towards the end of our visit spring was beginning to make its presence felt: the markets were filling up with tender green almonds and spiky artichokes, while myriad varieties of wild greens were arriving from the gardens of the Mediterranean and Aegean, along with crisp cucumbers and a few tiny, sweet strawberries.

Food is, of course, both the product and expression of a culture, and in Turkey we found this to be profoundly different from and more exciting than anything we had been expecting. It has been said that one of the greatest qualities of the Turks has been their willingness to adapt, and through the centuries successive Turkish rulers – culminating perhaps with the Ottomans – have shown their ability to embrace diverse lands and ethnic groups, varying religions and different cultural mores. This quality is joyously expressed in Turkey's architecture and art, and in its food. The food that we enjoyed on our travels – whether in the smallest Anatolian village or cosmopolitan Istanbul – all help to tell Turkey's rich and varied history.

And it's a story that's still being told. While visitors to Turkey may bemoan the limited menus on offer in restaurants that cater predominantly for tourists, we implore you to search just a little further afield to discover the authentic regional food on offer all across Turkey. You'll find it in humble village restaurants, in city soup kitchens, crowded meyhanes and, most accessibly, on the streets. You just have to be bold enough to move off the well-trodden tourist path. There are definite signs of a slow-burning renaissance in the country's food scene. Growing numbers of chefs around the country although perhaps most obviously in Istanbul – seem to have a renewed pride in their country's broad food traditions and are drawing on the past to create a brilliant culinary vision for Turkey's future.

Now is perhaps the time to point out that this is definitely not a traditional Turkish cookery book – after all, there are plenty of these around, many of them written by people far better qualified than we are. In *Turquoise* we wish to share the story of our journey with you, to inspire you to learn more about this country and about the aromas, flavours and textures of its wonderful cuisine.

While some of the recipes generously shared with us by the new friends we met are definitely authentic, in the most part, they are Greg's recipes – inspired by the people, the ingredients and the dishes we discovered on our travels. As such, the tale we tell in *Turquoise* of the country and its food is highly subjective, reflecting our own particular passions and interests, but we hope that in some small way it captures the essence of Turkish food.





A COUNTRY OF MANY PASTS AND PEOPLES

Modern Turkey is surely one of the most intriguingly positioned countries in the world, linking, as it does, the two continents of Europe and Asia. Only around three per cent of the landmass is in Europe, however – the region of Thrace, which spreads from the northern shores of the Bosphorus Strait up into the south-eastern tip of the Balkan Peninsula.

The remaining geographically diverse landmass is in Asian Turkey, also known as Anatolia or, in ancient times, as Asia Minor. A glance at the map shows that Anatolia is a large peninsula, jutting westward out of Asia to nudge up close to European soil at the Gallipoli Peninsula and Istanbul. In fact, Anatolia and Thrace are separated by three bodies of water, the Bosphorus, the inland Sea of Marmara and the Dardanelles. At the closest point, in the city of Istanbul, the two continents are a mere 800 metres apart, and are linked by two long suspension bridges.

To those of us who are used to thinking of Turkey as a beach-holiday paradise, it comes as a surprise to learn that mountain ranges are Turkey's most distinctive geographic feature – rising from all four points of the compass to embrace the vast central steppes of Anatolia like a chunky necklace. On our recent visit, we rose early one morning to fly south-east from Istanbul deep into the Anatolian heartland. It was a clear sunny morning and the aeroplane flew for what seemed like thousands of kilometres over wildly dramatic, snow-drenched mountain ranges. Neither Greg nor I had made this trip before and we were stunned by the extraordinary magnificence of the country's landscape. There is a sense of danger lurking beneath these brooding peaks, too; around eighty per cent of the country sits in an active tectonic zone and earthquakes are a frequent and unpredictable menace.

As a peninsula, Turkey is surrounded on three sides by water and boasts more than 7000 kilometres of thickly forested and spectacularly beautiful coastline. To the north, Turkish fishermen catch turbot, tuna, mackerel and salty anchovies (hamsi) from the free-flowing waters of the Black Sea; to the west the Aegean Sea is dotted with islands, big and small, while the sunny Mediterranean shores to the south lure thousands of holiday-makers every year.

As well as being spectacularly beautiful, Turkey has a long and fascinating history. It is a country that has won and lost greatness, where successive empires have trampled each other underfoot in their determination to seize this jewel of the Mediterranean. There can be little doubt that its geographic location, straddling seas and continents, goes a long way to explaining Turkey's rich and varied history.

The Anatolian peninsula is criss-crossed by ancient trading routes from East to West, while control of the straits, which divide modern-day Istanbul, allowed successive empires to regulate the movement of ships between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean. It is little wonder that wave upon wave of invaders from all directions have washed through the country from the earliest days of civilisation.

Archaeological remains suggest that indigenous nomadic tribes roamed the mountains and central plains of Anatolia more than 8000 years ago, and the fertile plain around Konya is thought by many to be the original 'cradle of civilisation', the home of Catalhöyük, one of the world's oldest cities.

For many centuries before Turkic tribes from the Asian steppes began their incursions into Anatolia, nomadic herders wandered the high mountain plateaus and valleys with their flocks of sheep and goat. The first recorded inhabitants of the area were the Hittites, a highly successful Indo-European race who had migrated to Anatolia, Mesopotamia and Syria around 2000 BC. Then, from around 1200 to 500 BC, Anatolia was colonised by various races of peoples, including Phrygians from the north, Lydians from the east and Cimmerians from the west, while Greeks began establishing city states along Anatolia's Aegean coast.

The Persians swept into Anatolia around 550 BC and remained in control until around 334 BC, when the young Alexander the Great stormed across the Dardanelles in a burst of Hellenistic fervour. But Alexander's expansion was too swift and too ambitious and his empire was doomed to fail. When he died, the empire fragmented and Anatolia became a battleground of civil wars between his squabbling generals.

During the second century BC, the Roman Republic embarked upon its own eastwards expansion. After crushing their ancient enemies, the Carthaginians and the Greeks, they gradually moved in on Anatolia, establishing the Roman province of Asia in 129 BC, with its capital at Ephesus. Even though they had defeated the Greeks, the Romans were swift to absorb elements of Greek art and culture, which they spread throughout their empire, along with other benefits, such as law, medicine, hygiene and civil engineering know-how. Under Roman rule, Anatolia enjoyed the benefits of Greco-Roman culture, prosperity and relative peace for around 400 years.

The next major milestone in Turkish history occurred in 330 AD, when the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great decided to move his capital from Rome to the ancient town of Byzantium in Thrace. It was renamed Constantinople in his honour and, as the western half of the Roman Empire collapsed, began a long and glorious life as the capital of successive great empires.

The best of Roman and Greek culture and customs flourished during the Byzantine Empire and Christianity's foothold strengthened. Constantinople was for several centuries the richest city in the world and exquisite relics and monuments of the era, such as the splendid Hagia Sophia cathedral, remain to this day.

The Byzantine Empire reached its peak under Justinian I, who ruled from 526 to 565 AD; under his leadership the empire spread across Asia Minor, the Balkan Peninsula, Egypt, Syria and Palestine. He was also able to reclaim land lost in Italy, southern Spain and the north of Africa.

Because of its size and its economic and political strength, the Byzantine Empire for a long time was able to protect Europe from increasingly frequent attacks by invaders such as the barbarians from the north of Europe, Arab Muslims from the south and Turkic tribes from Central Asia. But Justinian's death opened the floodgates to a wave of attacks on all fronts against the empire, now teetering on the verge of bankruptcy.

By the eleventh century, a particularly ambitious tribe of Turks called the Seljuks had begun to invade and capture territories west of their homeland in the steppes of Central Asia. Having conquered Armenia, Palestine and most of Persia they moved in on Anatolia. In 1071, at the Battle of Manzikert the Seljuks defeated a Byzantine army, and that was the beginning of the end of Byzantine control of Asia Minor. The Seljuks were Muslim converts from Central Asia, east of the Caspian Sea, and they were the first Turkish people to rule in Anatolia. During their rule, the capital was moved to Konya in the south-west of Anatolia, and the Greek language and Christian religion were gradually replaced by Turkish and Islam.

Under Seljuk rule, Konya became a centre of learning and culture, attracting artists, musicians and

scholars from all around the Arab world. It was home to the Sufi mystic poet, Jalal al-Din Rumi, founder of the Whirling Dervish order. Another great hallmark of Seljuk culture was their monumental architecture, with its sculpted and carved stonework. They built mosques, hospitals, colleges and bridges, and, perhaps most famously, established a network of grand caravanserais – hostleries – to provide accommodation for merchants travelling across their country.

From the eleventh century, the Christians in western Europe became very nervous about the Turkish invaders, and the latter's successful capture of Palestine – the Holy Land – prompted a call to arms in the form of military expeditions known as the Crusades. This was a period of great turmoil for Anatolia, where rival armies of Seljuks and Crusaders battled it out for control, especially in the south.

For the great city of Constantinople, still teetering under Byzantine control, the twelfth and thirteenth centuries were turbulent times, swinging between fabulous wealth (and a flowering of the city's art and architecture), disastrous misrule and civil war. The city itself was even sacked by Crusaders – in a fit of fury about the city's failure to follow through on promises of support.

By the thirteenth century, another force emerged. Mongol armies swept into Anatolia, crushing everything and everyone in their path. With the Mongol defeat of Seljuk forces, Anatolia fragmented into a number of independent Turkic-ruled states. The most significant of these was overseen by a warlord called Ertugrul, whose son, Osman, founded the dynasty known as the Ottomans, which would become one of the greatest empires the world has ever seen.

By the end of the fourteenth century, the Ottomans had conquered most of western Anatolia and Thrace, Greece and much of the Balkan Peninsula. The jewel in the crown, Constantinople, finally fell to Ottoman forces led by Mehmed II in 1453, bringing to a close forever the Byzantine era.

The fall of Constantinople and the establishment of the Ottoman Empire sent shockwaves of fear around Europe. It was a fear that came to be tinged with awe and respect, though; and to this day the West is still dazzled by the very idea of the Ottomans. It was an era that came to mean opulence and excesses beyond our wildest dreams – grand mosques, luxurious palaces and lush gardens, lavish feasting, jewels, harems and massive armies.

Within fifty years the city of Constantinople had risen to even greater heights under Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. While his achievements led him to be known as 'Magnificent' in the West, within his own empire he was called Suleiman Kanun – 'the Lawgiver'. But he was recognised, in both the West and the East, as one of the great rulers of the sixteenth century. An effective legislator and administrator, he was also a poet and philosopher, a patron of the arts and a great spiritual leader. His reign was seen to be a time of great cultural achievement and religious and ethnic tolerance.

Suleiman was an extremely successful military leader, under whose leadership the Ottoman Empire nudged its way right up to the city walls of Vienna. By the time of his death in 1566, the empire's extent was some 15,000 square kilometres, spanning three continents, including much of the Middle East and North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula and Persia, Greece and the Balkan States and reaching as far north as Slovakia and Austria.

Sadly, the Ottoman dynasty had peaked. Suleiman's successors were not of his calibre. A series of mediocre sultans, such as the infamous Selim the Sot, focussed their energies on enjoying the riches of their territories, rather than ruling them, and by the eighteenth century the empire had lost many of its European territories. It continued to slowly spiral into decline, becoming increasingly susceptible to external forces, and further weakened by nepotism, bureaucracy and the dangerously corrupt Janissaries. This powerful and elite corps of Imperial guards was ostensibly there to guard the sultan

but, like a modern-day military junta, they ruled the roost with an iron fist.

During the nineteenth century, the winds of nationalism began to blow from Europe into the Ottoman Empire, threatening the country's well-established and successful 'millet' system of local government – a system that allowed ethnic and religious minorities to self-govern, side by side with their Turkish neighbours. For many centuries Turkey had been a country where diversity was tolerated, and even encouraged (if largely for reasons of economy). Now, amid bitter fighting, the empire started to fracture as its minority peoples began to seek their independence. In 1832 the Kingdom of Greece was created, and soon the Serbs, Bulgarians, Albanians, Arabs and Romanians all sought their own freedom.

Then the Armenians in the east of Anatolia decided it was their turn to claim independence. In 1914 the Ottomans joined World War I on the side of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and Germany, so the Armenians decided to align themselves with neighbouring Russia in the hope of securing their own republic.

These events provided the backdrop for what is still one of the most bitterly contested events in Turkey's recent history. A series of Armenian uprisings led to a massacre of the local Muslim population. Retribution came in the form of deportation and massacre of the Armenians by the Turkish government. To this day, the subject provokes heated disputes and denials: the Turks call the Armenians traitors, while the Armenians claim they were victims of an official policy of genocide. The exact number of deaths on each side remains unclear, with each offering up its own set of 'proof' to support its cause. From an outsider's perspective, the whole painful episode seems likely to remain a thorn in the country's side for many years to come.

Despite a flurry of internal reform initiatives, implemented in a vain attempt to halt the empire's slow decline and to make it more 'European' and modern, the crumbling wreck of the Ottoman Empire was finally finished off in the aftermath of the Great War. Despite a few isolated successes for the Turks, such as driving back the British from the Dardanelles during the notorious Gallipoli campaign, the Allies ultimately won the war in 1918.

Having assumed control of Istanbul, the Allies planned a devastating carve-up and redistribution of the Ottoman Empire's remaining lands. For the Turks, one of the cruellest outcomes of defeat was the Allies' proposal to hand over Smyrna (İzmir) to Greece, and in 1919 the Greeks duly invaded to claim their prize.

This insult was the straw that broke the camel's back and a backlash was inevitable. Bitterly resentful of the broken government's inability to defend the country, Mustafa Kemal, a highly ambitious military hero, decided to take matters into his own hands. His dissatisfaction with Ottoman governance had been bubbling along even before the Greek invasion and this was to be his moment of glory. In the face of Greek invasion, Kemal's nascent resistance movement garnered support from the Turkish people, leading to the Turkish War of Independence and the eventual formation of the Turkish Republic, with Kemal himself as president.

With the ousting of Greek forces, the Allies' ambitions for divvying up the Ottoman Empire faded fast and the re-energised Turks found themselves in a position to renegotiate their borders and territories. Perhaps most famously, the Treaty of Lausanne in 1923 instigated a series of population exchanges between Turkey and Greece. As a result around 1.25 million Greeks who had lived happily along the Aegean coast of Turkey for hundreds of years were forced to move to Greece, and nearly half a million Muslims were repatriated from Greece back to Turkey.

This was only one of a series of changes that swept through the country as a result of Kemal's

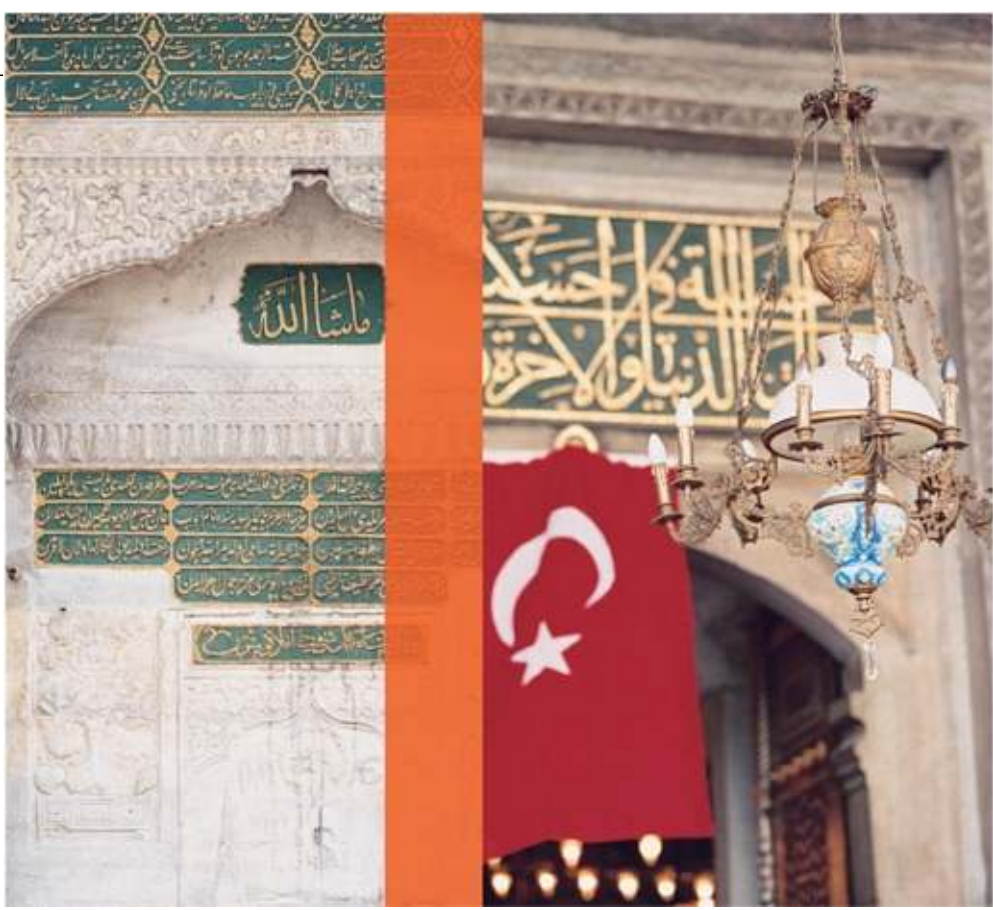
leadership. He had a vision for rebuilding Turkey and dragging it into the twentieth century. What he considered to be ‘backward’ Islamic traditions were outlawed – the fez was banished, as was the Arabic alphabet and the practice of polygamy. Islam lost its status as the state religion, with secular law replacing Islamic law. All Turks were ordered to choose a family name, instead of the traditional single given name. Kemal himself was given the name Atatürk – father of the Turks – as a mark of respect and honour.

Today the ghost of Atatürk still walks the land and his image is a constant presence – sometimes benign, sometimes stern, but always there. Luridly tinted photographs of the former leader peer down from every carpet shop, tea-house and posh hotel; his bronze torso dominates every village square and his face stares up at you from every Turkish lira. And yet, as visitors, our impression was that Turkish people seem to have mixed feelings for their former leader. They revere, admire and grumble about him, all in the same breath, uncertain as to whether all his moves have taken Turkey in the right direction.

At the moment, though, Turkey is experiencing something of a cultural and economic re-birth, largely fuelled by current government reforms aimed at hastening the country’s move towards Europe. It still remains to be seen whether Turkey will succeed in its bid to secure a European-oriented future for itself, or whether it will return to political Islam.

Regardless of how its story unfolds, these are unquestionably exciting times for Turkey. Long dreary decades of nationalism and stultifying parochialism are at last being swept away and it feels very much like a country poised on the brink of greatness. At the very least, it seems to be rediscovering a new sense of confidence in its own identity – an identity that will hopefully embrace the best of East and West instead of pitting these different forces one against the other.





THE FOOD

From the research and reading we did before our trip, and from the places we visited on our travels through Turkey, we found that there's a definite tendency to divide Turkish food into two camps: Ottoman and Anatolian. In other words, a distinction between the food of the urban rich and the food of the rural poor. The reality, of course, is far more complicated. Turkish cooking today is an interweaving of many different but complementary strands that together create a gorgeous and vibrant culinary tapestry.

Both rural Anatolian and sophisticated Ottoman cuisines are a legacy of the country's rich and varied history; the complex interchange and cross-fertilisation of culinary traditions and influences that have washed through the country down the centuries. Their ingredients and recipes are drawn from such diverse parts of the world as Central and Far East Asia, Persia, Arabia, the Balkans and the Mediterranean.

Irrespective of the origin of a dish, the same principles of respect and enjoyment apply to cooking and eating. As is the custom in most countries around the Middle East and eastern Mediterranean, Turks enjoy taking time over their food. Families eat together rather than in shifts, as is so often the case in Western countries. Meal times are for togetherness and sharing, not for eating with one eye on the television. Food is on the table to be savoured and lingered over, rather than rushed through. And even in big, modern cities like Istanbul this attitude is still present more often than not.

Growers, sellers and consumers all share a respect for the food they eat. Turks are fussy about the quality of their food and demand that it be the best, the freshest, the most intensely flavoured. This means that produce markets are almost always limited to what is seasonally available – you won't find expensive strawberries in Turkish market stalls in the middle of winter.

And when it comes to food preparation, the same respectful approach applies. As one Turkish food writer told us: Turkish food is not about experimentation, it is about technique – about cooking a particular dish in the time-honoured way, in the very best way you can.

Turks have no fear of simplicity either, and many dishes are pleasingly unfussy. Some of the best meals we ate on our travels were the simplest: a spanking fresh piece of turbot hot from the pan and topped with a wedge of lemon; a cold salad of wild greens braised in olive oil; a piece of white cheese accompanied by a little cube of honeycomb. In Turkey, eating is about enjoying the essential nature of an ingredient, rather than masking it with fancy sauces or garnishes. Which is not to say that Turks don't make good use of fresh herbs and spices – but they are used judiciously, to enhance rather than overwhelm.

This simplicity is perhaps the hallmark of what we in the West know as *cucina povera* – the cooking of the poor. It's a style of cooking and eating that makes the most of very little, and is typical of village – Anatolian – cooking. Until the last ten years or so, regional dishes were virtually unknown outside their place of origin, but with the constant daily influx of rural Turks into the big cities (as many as a thousand people are said to move to the capital every day) regional dishes are becoming better known. And there are increasing numbers of chefs, such as Musa Dağdeverin from Istanbul's Çiya restaurant, who recognise the importance of preserving these ancient cooking traditions in the face of the inevitable Westernisation of the food industry.

Part of the pleasure of eating in a country with a genuinely seasonal kitchen is the discovery of the different regional ingredients and dishes. Turks respect that food follows the natural rhythm of the seasons and the expectation is that produce will have been grown or reared within a few hundred metres (or at the most a kilometre or so) of their own kitchen. So it's not unusual to find dishes that vary widely from region to region: in south-eastern Anatolia they make pilav from bulgur wheat rather than rice; along the Aegean coast baklava is made using olive oil, rather than the traditional clarified butter; and near the Black Sea bread is made from corn, rather than wheat.

As well as broad-brush regional variations, there are also endless variations from village to village. On our travels we tasted dishes in central Anatolia and in Gaziantep that our Istanbul friends had never heard of, let alone tasted. Musa Dağdeverin, who travels the length and breadth of the country sourcing and recording traditional dishes, has an ever-increasing repertoire of more than a thousand recipes drawn from his research. It is said that you're unlikely to eat the same dish in his restaurant twice in one year.

While it's likely that some Turkish dishes can trace their origins back to the pastoral nomads that roamed the mountains and valleys of Anatolia thousands of years ago, many more have been brought to the country by successive waves of occupiers. The famous Turkish dumplings known as mantı, for instance, are believed to have been brought to Turkey by the Uyghur Turks, who ventured into Anatolia in the eighth century from their kingdom, in what is now Xinjiang, northern China. The predilection for stuffing vegetables as well as pasta is a widespread feature in both cuisines today. Another shared invention was the concave iron cooking pan that the Chinese call a wok and which is known in Turkey as a çin tavası.

Another group of Turks to bring their culinary habits to Anatolia were the Seljuk Turks from Central Asia. They were horse-riding nomads who enjoyed a meat-heavy diet of game animals such as hare and rabbit, deer, horse and camel, as well as sheep. It's generally believed that methods of spicing, pressing and then air-drying lumps of meat hung from saddles originated with these Turks, as did the method of spearing small morsels of meat on any kind of makeshift skewer and cooking it quickly over a fierce open fire.

Fermented dairy products, such as yoghurt and cheeses, were also believed to have been brought to Anatolia by the Seljuks, as were flat breads and bulgur wheat dishes. When the ambitious Seljuks reached Persia in the eleventh century, they encountered another highly sophisticated culture and cuisine. From the Persians they learnt about combining fruit with meat – a method that survives in many Turkish yahnı (stews) to this day. The Seljuks also learnt how to cultivate rice, offering the Persians bulgur wheat by way of exchange.

On their travels westward, the Seljuks took with them all the culinary lessons learnt along the way. And in Anatolia they experienced yet another new range of ingredients, such as seafood, olive oil, herbs, fruits and vegetables, quickly making them their own. This was a time of great creativity in the kitchen, producing a varied and increasingly complex cuisine.

It was a few hundred years later, though, that things really began to get interesting on the Turkish food scene – when another tribe of nomadic Turks, the Ottomans, captured Constantinople and established the most powerful and successful Islamic empire the world had ever seen. From the beginning it was clear that food was important to the Ottomans. The conquering sultan, Mehmet II, had a massive four-domed kitchen installed in his new Topkapi Palace, which was gradually extended over successive centuries to form the complex that remains today.

As well as feeding the sultan and his family, the Topkapi kitchens fed the government and cabinet

ministers, foreign ambassadors and the Janissary Corps, all of whom lived within the palace grounds. On average this amounted to 5000 hungry people every day. The quantities of food prepared were staggering. Meticulously maintained kitchen records list items like '60,000 sheep', '100,000 pigeons', '2000 pounds of cloves and nutmeg' and '206 pounds saffron' – all of which were simply gathered in from the provinces by imperial command.

It hardly seems surprising that the palace kitchens were run with ruthless efficiency. At its largest there was a team of almost 1400 specialist cooks and assistants, and specialist cooking guilds emerged, each highly protective of their own particular trade and craft.

The Ottoman Empire was vast, spanning at its height three continents, and the chefs in the palace kitchens were the beneficiaries of exciting foodstuffs that flooded into the capital every day from all corners of the empire. In what was surely a forerunner to today's 'fusion' cooking, hundreds of new and exotic dishes were created in the palace kitchens, many with equally exotic names, such as Sultan's Delight, the Imam Fainted, Ladies' Thighs, Harem Navels and Nightingale Nests. Some were inspired by cultures that had been absorbed into the Ottoman Empire, such as Arabic and Persian; others were a legacy of the previous Seljuk reign, while others still emerged from the great melting pot of peoples that was Constantinople in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Feasts at the palace were famously lavish and extravagant. Visitors to the court would be overwhelmed by the feasting. As many as 300 dishes were presented upon exquisitely embroidered cloths and eaten from silver dishes; meals would be eaten against a background of music by the light of a thousand flickering candles. Indeed, the rituals surrounding the meal, the manner of presentation and the surroundings were almost as important as the food itself. This style of banqueting was about total surrender to sensual pleasures.

As the Roman Empire had discovered to its cost several hundred years earlier, this sort of over-indulgence can only lead to trouble in the end. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Ottoman Empire slowly declined, amid stories of madness, murder and mayhem within the palace and a gradual fragmentation of its territories.

From the nineteenth century onwards, the increasingly corrupt and inefficient Ottoman government earned itself the title 'Sick Man of Europe', and within the country pressure grew to implement Western-style economic and political reform. What this meant for the food scene, in the cities, at least, was the emergence of a new 'restaurant' culture, something almost unheard of in traditional Ottoman society. With this 'Westernisation', neighbourhoods such as Pera (now Beyoğlu) and Galata came into their own. Pera, which had always been home to the city's minority communities and European merchant classes, now began to attract even more foreign travellers, as well as the city's Ottoman elite who flocked there in droves to patronise new European-style cafés and eating houses. The Turkish word for restaurant, lokanta, came into use around this time, taken from the Italian word locanda, meaning inn.

Outside influence on the food itself, though, remained very limited, apart from a bit of 'Frenchification'. When Atatürk began his reforms of the new Turkish Republic in the 1920s, the emphasis shifted back towards unification and nationalisation and 'foreign' foods were very definitely off the menu. To this day Turks are famously conservative in their eating habits and deeply resistant to any messing around with their traditional dishes. And who can blame them when so much of it is so good? There has been some inevitable Westernising of Turkish restaurant menus, of course; in recent times returning emigrants and new 'workers' in the country have brought with them their favourite items. Italian gelati, German schnitzel and the ubiquitous French fries are all commonplace now, but

thankfully, the 'Golden Arches' have yet to make a significant impact on the Turkish culinary landscape.

While Turks may well be determined to preserve and protect their food traditions, it seems that it is not entirely at the expense of innovation. The winds of change do seem to be blowing – or at least wafting gently – through the country's food scene. In recent years, for instance, a small number of passionate chefs have been introducing Istanbul to the pleasures of rural 'peasant' food, while still others have taken the first tentative steps towards experimenting with classic dishes and ingredients. There will always be purists who are horrified by this sort of 'messing around' with traditional dishes of course, but we are all for progress and evolution in the kitchen. And, in the end, perhaps the most important culinary legacy that the Ottomans left to modern-day Turkey is the importance of taking risks and a willingness to experiment. After all, has it not been demonstrated that out of such boldness and creativity, greatness has come?





Istanbul — Turkey's delight

[soups]



Greg had meticulously detailed lists of the dishes he intended to sample in the coming weeks ... ‘The Imam swooned’, ‘Sultan’s delight’, ‘Something for the

husband', 'Nightingale nests' and the irresistibly named 'Harem navels'.

On the early-morning flight to Istanbul from London's Luton Airport, Greg and I compared notes. In my scruffy journal were the names of ancient mosques and museums, palaces and spice bazaars. In his own smart black travel diary, Greg had meticulously detailed lists of the dishes he intended to sample in the coming weeks. I peered over his shoulder and read at random, 'The Imam swooned', 'Sultan's delight', 'Something for the husband', 'Nightingale nests' and the irresistibly named 'Harem navels'. Further down the page I saw listed: Turkish tea, fried-fish sandwiches, chicken breast pudding and, naturally enough, Turkish delight. My mouth watered in anticipation, made keener by the fact that I was actually very hungry. Our pre-dawn start had meant we'd missed breakfast, and the 'no-frills' flight offered nothing at all worth spending our remaining few English pounds on. But, we agreed, it would probably be all to the good that we'd land hungry; we had a lot of eating ahead of us.

Then, Asia was beneath us: the dreary, brown plains of north-western Turkey. Our plane landed, seemingly in the middle of nowhere, at Istanbul's new Sabiha Gökçen Airport. It was a good bone-shaking hour by mini-bus to the splendours of the great Ottoman city and our sense of excitement grew as we bumped along at breakneck speed through the barren landscape. Gradually the terrain changed to thickly forested hills, then a scattering of satellite apartment complexes broke the monotony and finally we were nearing the vast sprawling suburbs of Istanbul.

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