

# Postcard from Istanbul

Yes, there are kebabs, Turkish delight and street food, but there's a contemporary scene, too – if you know where to look

Words MARINA O'LOUGHLIN Photographs DAVID THOMAS

We're sitting at a stainless-steel counter on the pavement, just us and eight or so brooding, moustachioed chaps. The trough-like construction is inset with containers of pickles: chillies, cucumbers, and, erm, other stuff. And sheets of polythene. We haven't a clue what's going on.

We watch and learn: the tiny stall, **Ayten Dürüm** (33 Muhafazacılar Sok; 0090 212 527 4728), only sells one product, an adana dürüm kebab – soft fluffy lavaş bread wrapped round spiced minced lamb, savoury and greaseless. Ismail, the silver-haired proprietor, mans his wood-smoke oven with speed and grace.

The polythene is a 'plate' for pickles and fresh herbs. The kebabs are ambrosial: smoky and rich, spiked with the vinegary crunch of the vegetables: this is no late-night guilty pleasure. We drink salgam suyu, black carrot and fermented turnip juice, inky and sour. It's supposed to cure hangovers; I'd rather have the hangover.

The stall abuts Istanbul's legendary Grand Bazaar, an ancient, un-navigable warren of small shops and stalls, spices and bewildering quantities of gold. The sensory overload is as potent as a hit of LSD. It's ridiculously easy to get carried away – I exit, dizzied, laden with spice pastes from mellow to tongue-searing; teas made with flowers 'from my own garden'; a phial of saffron that costs a king's ransom. We eat supremely sweet kerhane tatlıs – 'brothel cake' – so-called because of the, er, lift it's supposed to

give, and Ottoman favourite tavuk göğsü, a weird, elasticky pudding made from pounded chicken breast. Bleurgh.

Even outside the dazzling bazaars, the shops can astonish: beautiful, 200-year-old **Şekerçi Cafer Erol** (sekercicafererol.com), for instance, near the Spice Bazaar, with its jars full of satiny boiled sweets flavoured with everything from bergamot to violet. Candied fruit and vegetables; chestnuts from Bursa; bottles of grape molasses, musky mulberry jam and white mastic, the aromatic resin. And, of course, Turkish delight of every variety imaginable; enchanting.

We're exploring with our new best pal, chef Gençay Üçok. His restaurant, **Meze by Lemon Tree** (mezze.com.tr), opposite Agatha Christie's beloved Pera Palace hotel, is small and intimate, a contemporary re-imagining of the Turks' beloved meyhane – 'wine-houses'. His dishes are playful and delicious – 'Holy Mackerel', the fish served with a little soy and pickled plum; or roast peeled green peppers oozing cheese and pistachios. The freshest fish comes with vivid yellow butter or dried fruit; and organic baby lamb sirloin with homemade mustard is preternaturally tender. We're starting to develop a taste for aniseedy raki.

Like London, Istanbul is a selection of villages. We go cocktailing in vibrant Beyoğlu, in the narrow, alluring streets just off the Oxford Street-ish drag of İstiklâl Caddesi; or the top of the Richmond Hotel for groovester



**'We drink şalgam suyu... It's supposed to cure hangovers; I'd rather have the hangover'**



**Marina O'Loughlin is Metro's incognito, award-winning restaurant critic. She travelled to Istanbul with the Turkish Culture & Tourism Office (gototurkey.co.uk), staying at a Stories Apart studio in Beyoğlu (from €90; storiesapart.com) and flying with Pegasus (from £115; flypgs.com).**

**Leb-i Derya** (lebiderya.com). Istanbulites love rooftop bars, and no wonder with these gasp-inducing, minaretted views.

For breakfasts, we head to rich, riverside suburbs – people-watching paradises. We sit in the tea garden of **Kale Çay Bahçesi** near the Rumeli fortress (36 Yahya Kemal Cad; 0090 212 257 5578), looking out over the glittering Bosphorus while dipping simit – like Turkish bagels – into menemen, eggs with peppers and spices, and trying not to Hoover up whole bowls of blindingly delicious buffalo milk kaymak (clotted cream) with honey.

In Karaköy, formerly the edgy dockland area, there are traditional businesses, like sprawling **Karaköy Güllüoğlu** (karakoygulluoglu.com), famous for its fragile, flaky baklava and addictive börek. But the area's beginning to be colonised by the forward-thinking, too: celebrity chef Didem Senol, for instance, with her **Lokanta Maya** (lokantamaya.com). The food may be nouvelle-organic-Turkish – mücver (courgette fritters fried in hazelnut oil with dill yoghurt); bonito with beet and horseradish; mastic pudding; wonderful pomegranate mojitos



eat away  
marina o'loughlin

**Parchment-wrapped sea bass with apricots and almonds**

40 minutes ■ Serves 1 ■ EASY

*This simple recipe from Gençay Üçok (chef at Meze by Lemon Tree) uses Turkish dried apricots as flavouring for the fish.*

**butter** 1 tbsp  
**dried apricots** (not the sun-dried brown ones but the softer orange/yellow ones) finely chopped to make 1 tbsp  
**white wine** 4 tbsp  
**sea bass** 2 small fillets  
**toasted flaked almonds** a few for the top

■ Heat the oven to 200C/fan 180C/gas 6. Put the butter, apricots and wine with some seasoning in a pan and simmer together until thickened. Lay one fillet skin-side down on a piece of baking parchment and pour two thirds of the mix on top. Lay the other fillet on top skin-side up and add the rest of the mix and the almonds.

■ Fold up the parchment to make a parcel around the fish, put it in a baking dish and bake it for 30 minutes. Serve with potatoes or rice.

■ PER SERVING 400 kJ, protein 43.3g, carbs 6.9g, fat 18g, sat fat 8.7g, fibre 1.3g, salt 1.6g

ILLUSTRATION: MARK WATKINSON; PHOTOGRAPH: ALAMY; RECIPE PHOTOGRAPH: LARA HOLMES; STYLING: POLLY WEBBILSON; FOOD STYLING: KATE CALDER