

Turkish Delights

Because Turkey was once at the center of the Ottoman empire, its cuisine had an enormous influence on the dining styles of many other nations. And, as the Turks in turn borrowed a great deal from their neighbors, modern Turkish cookery is influenced by the Greeks, Iranians, Kurds, Armenians, Romanians and Albanians. If one were to seek the archetypal Eastern-Mediterranean cuisine, that of Turkey would surely qualify.

Dining-out is important in Turkey, where both restaurants and street vendors are an important part of the culture. In Istanbul, many restaurants stay open all night, and the better known places are frequently crowded, even at three or four in the morning. Even streetside food vendors may be found in the wee hours of the morning. At large are itinerant peddlers, selling anything from *cooked rice*, spit roasted lamb, white cheeses, grilled fish, spiced chickpeas or candied fruits. Whether in the fanciest of restaurants, or at the *simplest peddler's cart*, one finds that lamb and mutton are almost always good, and nearly all other meat, including poultry, is dubious at best.

Among better known Turkish specialties are *kilis kushari*, lamb with a meat and walnut stuffing; *donner kebab*, pieces of lamb or mutton grilled on a large vertical spit; *Imam Bayaldi*, a dish of eggplant stuffed with tomatoes and onions, then baked in olive oil; *midye dolmasi*, steamed mussels stuffed with rice and pine nuts; *shish kebab*, marinated cubes of lamb grilled on a skewer; and *lokum*, better known as "Turkish Delight."

As recently as five years ago, the mere mention of Turkish wine was enough to bring a sneer to the face of most wine lovers. Even though Turkey is the second largest grower of grapes in the world, and has been producing wine since Noah planted his vineyard on the slopes of Mount Ararat, the ability to make high quality wine has, until recently, somehow eluded the Turks. Happily, after 6,000 years of wine production, at least two *wineries* are now turning out acceptable wines on a regular basis.

A Turkish Evening

Author-playwright Truman Capote once described Turkish meals as "a remarkable combination between the best tastes of peasants and caliphs." Capote was right, and dining Turkish style has elements of styles that are both complex and simple. Tables, for example, should be set with a combination of rough wood bowls and fine silver; at least one low serving bowl on the dining table should contain a mixture of fresh, chopped herbs; and wine should never be served from the bottle but from decanters. In fact, no bottles should ever be placed on the table, even beer being poured at a small side-table and brought to the table in glasses.

One measure of success in the eyes of many Turks is that the table will be as crowded as possible, with plates of food so close together that they are actually touching. Although flowers are rarely found on Turkish dining tables, it is traditional to place bouquets of flowers on small, low tables near where diners are seated. Any empty spaces on the actual dining table should be filled with flower petals or the leaves and stems of fresh herbs.

Keep in mind in planning dinner that Turks adore nothing more than inbetween courses, that is to say sorbets or light salads between heavier courses.

First Course

Imam Bayaldi

or

Stuffed Mussels

InBetween Course

Strawberry Sorbet

Soup

Yogurt Soup with Noodles and Meatballs

InBetween Course
Orange Salad

Main Course
Lamb with Meat and Walnut Stuffing
or
Quail Baked in Eggplant

Dessert
Apricots Stuffed With Marzipan