

Student

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Turkish Delights

Turkey, nestled on the Anatolian peninsula in Western Asia, is bordered by Greece and Bulgaria in the northwest, the Black Sea in the north, Georgia in the northeast, Armenia and Iran in the east, Iraq and Syria in the southeast, south by the Mediterranean Sea, and west by the Aegean Sea (Dewdney). This vast countryside contains everything from mountainous regions to sandy coastal beaches to desert-like areas pock-marked by volcanic activity. From quiet rural communities to the hustle and bustle of the largest city in Europe, Istanbul, Turkish people come from many, diverse situations and backgrounds. The cuisine is no exception with its diversity of flavors, although there are threads of similarity running throughout. **Let's travel virtually to Turkey to explore its flavorful Turkish cuisine through discovering traditional dishes and everyday meals, beverages and desserts, the Turkish etiquette and customs at a meal, and through the words of a local renowned Turkish Chef.**

Turkish traditional dishes and everyday meals vary greatly between the poorer country folk and the finer tastes of the city, although there are staples to be found throughout Turkish cuisine. Lamb, seafood, and ground meat, rice or bulger (ground wheat cooked much like rice), and a variety of greens can be found at every nearly every meal, though the manner of preparation can be so different, that the same ingredients are hardly recognized from dish to dish (Erdem). Vegetables are plentiful at the Turkish meal and commonly include tomatoes, peppers,

onions, eggplant, and zucchini (“Explore Turkish Cuisine”). These vegetables can be eaten sliced and raw, sautéed, or pickled. With $\frac{3}{4}$ of Turkey being surrounded by water, seafood is in ample supply and is typically marinated and grilled (Erdem). Meat and fish is often skewered on kebobs and grilled and many districts have their own special kebobs (“Turkish Cuisine”). Rice or bulgur is present at every hot meal and these are cooked with a variety of broths and spices (Erdem). Soups are a common comfort food for Turkish people and are often made with “legumes or lentils, seasonal vegetables, and topped with yogurt” (“NC Weekend”). Breads are often homemade and include pita bread, flat bread, and bread baked on a griddle (“Explore”). Every Turkish meal is prepared with olive oil, fresh aromatic spices and parsley, and a variety of cheeses, including feta. Fresh and dried spices are key to Turkish cuisine, tend to be warm and spicy, and often include all-spice, aniseed, cinnamon, cloves, cumin, dill, mint, oregano, and saffron (“Explore”). Breakfast in turkey is the highlight of the day and includes a cornucopia of colors that incorporates at least 6 cheeses, a variety of fresh vegetables, homemade jam and butter, fresh bread, olives, and fresh parsley (Erdem). Turkish everyday meals are a feast for the eyes as well as the palette, with vibrant colors and flavors that tickle the senses and leave the consumer full and satisfied.

Desserts and beverages are an important part of Turkish culture as well. A common winter beverage is Boza, a thick drink made from “fermented bulgur and sprinkled with cinnamon” (Magnarella). Salep, a warm and nourishing drink, is consumed in the cold months as well. It is made from ground orchid root and is “thick, milky, sweet, and dusted with cinnamon” (“Turkish”). Raki is an alcoholic drink that is aniseed-flavored and turns cloudy when water is added. Locals refer to this drink as “Lion’s milk” (“Explore”). Tea is also consumed throughout the day, thick coffee after a meal, as well as buttermilk called ayran (Magnarella). Turkish

desserts are famous throughout the world and include a variety of pastries, the best known of these is probably baklava, a layered dessert with honey, pistachio, and puff pastry (“Turkish”). Turkish women are skilled with flour and making their famous layered, buttery crusts (Erdem). Rice pudding, a creamy dessert made from rice, eggs, cream, and cinnamon is also a common, tasty treat for Turkish people. Desserts are often enhanced with the use of “pistachio nuts, walnuts, rose water, saffron, cinnamon, cloves, cheese, or clotted cream” (“Explore”). The perfect Turkish meal is never complete without a cup of strong black coffee and a yummy Turkish pastry to finish off the evening.

Turkish meal-time etiquette is quite unique. If offered a meal while visiting Turkey, refuse the first offer, “if it’s sincere it will be repeated at least twice and custom demands that you accept the third offer” (“Culture and Etiquette in Turkey”). When entering the home, remove shoes at the door, and be careful to conceal your feet under the table or drop cloth and never point them at anyone (“Culture”).

Etiquette Scholar has quite a bit of information about this. If you are offered coffee or tea, you must accept it as a gesture of hospitality and never refill your own cup, but once your neighbor’s cup is less than half full, it will be your obligation to refill it (“Turkey Dining Etiquette”). The host will sit at the head of the table farthest from the door, honored guests next to the host, and followed in descending order of importance. “The honored guest is served first, then the oldest man, then the rest of the men, then children, and finally women” (“Turkey Dining Etiquette”). Do not eat or drink until the oldest man has been served and begun to eat, and at the end of the meal, thank the host or hostess and say, “Elinize saglik” or “Bless your hand.” In restaurants, dishes are ordered one at a time, not all at once, and many times tables are shared by many guests. Wait staff must “be summoned by eye contact,” not by waving or calling out to

them (“Turkey Dining Etiquette”). *Rough Guides* mentions that though meals may be served on individual plates, many times they are communal and served on a large plate in a family style . Remember to use your right hand for serving yourself, as the left hand is reserved for personal hygiene (“Culture and Etiquette in Turkey”).

I had the opportunity to interview a local restaurant owner named Raci Erdem. Raci, (pronounced RAH-ZHEE), came to the United States from Turkey 30 years ago and grew up both in rural Turkey and later in Istanbul (Erdem). He worked in many New York restaurants before coming to North Idaho and starting his own restaurant named the White House Grill in 1996 (Erdem). His restaurant is renowned for traditional Turkish dishes including Bahce, which is a seasoned ground beef set over seasoned rice and topped with feta, tzatziki, lemon onion relish, and served with garlic green beans (“Whitehouse Menu”). Raci says, “Traditional Turkish food is diverse, with emphasis on ground meats and lots of veggies, even for breakfast!”(Erdem). His favorite childhood dish was rice pudding with ice cream and his current restaurant menu consists of over 200 recipes that were influenced by his youth and recipes his mother used to make. He uses many methods of preparation in his restaurant, but grilling and sautéing are the most common, and frying the least common (Erdem). His restaurant motto is, “You love garlic, we love you!” and his waitresses wear shirts that say, “I stink.” The reason, Raci says, is “The 300 pounds of garlic used at his restaurant EVERY week!” (Erdem). Sampling several dishes, I found the food extremely flavorful and colorful, with an emphasis on spice and garlic.

Turkey is a country rich with flavor and culture when it comes to traditional dishes and everyday meals, beverages and desserts, its etiquette and meal-time customs, and its Turkish-born chefs and restaurant owners. Definitely a country and culture that loves its culinary traditions and takes pride in the diversity of its food, beverages, and desserts, and the way it is

prepared and served. The Turkish people have a respect for food and it holds a very important place for them. Meal time isn't just a time to nourish their bodies, it is a time to come together with family and friends and enjoy the fruits of the earth. Turkish flavors come together like the colorful people it represents and showcases the best of what the country has to offer.

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