

❖ Savoir fare

Where Turkey meets Scandinavia

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CHEF AND BUSINESSMAN Mehmet Gürs is combining his own hot and cool cultures to produce a sizzling new take on Turkish cuisine.

At just 36, the half-Turkish, half-Finnish, U.S.-trained chef has managed to become a television celebrity, a cookbook author, the majority owner of a cutting-edge restaurant company, a husband and the father of a month-old son.

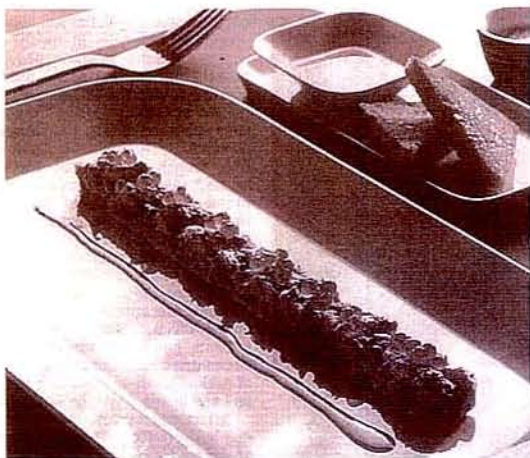
But Mr. Gürs shows no signs of slowing down. His Istanbul Food and Beverage Group has just launched the most talked-about eatery in Istanbul, Mikla, atop the fashionable Marmara Pera hotel in the heart of the city's entertainment district. In mid-March it's scheduled to open Erguvan, which will serve Turkish meze and seasonal fish dishes in the new waterfront Radisson SAS Bosphorus Hotel in the trendy Ortaköy neighborhood.

In 2001, Mr. Gürs' company opened NuTeras, which twice won the best-bar award from TimeOut Istanbul. The restaurant Lokanta, a catering business and a beach club were up and running in 2002, followed by a casual burger joint named numnum in 2003.

Mr. Gürs' first gourmet effort was a place called Downtown, where from 1996 to 2002 he worked to fuse Mediterranean and Scandinavian cuisine. That helped launch "The Downtown Cookbook" and two weekly cooking shows on Turkish television, in which he shared recipes that offered alternatives to time-consuming preparations.

Mr. Gürs credits part of his success to having been raised in Scandinavia, where the hard-work ethic is assumed at a young age, and to having spent many summers on his Turkish grandfather's farm, learning about the best meats, fruits and vegetables.

On top of that, his path has been smoothed by his ability to move seemingly effortlessly between the Turkish, English, French and Swedish languages, and his culinary arts training at Johnson and Wales Uni-



Left, Mehmet Gürs in the kitchen at Mikla. Above, his crayfish Skagen and right, fennel pear terrine. Below, the restaurant's dining room.

a year in a small hotel in Sultanahmet, in Istanbul. "In Turkey, people from 'good' families are not supposed to work until they finish college. But it was good for me," he says. "Everybody in Sweden works because everybody has to contribute to the family even if you are the daughter of a king. I started working very early, when I was 12 or 13, on the weekends, babysitting or baking bread and selling it."

Mr. Gürs didn't imagine then that he would become a chef. "My plan in high school was to go back to Sweden and become a pediatrician," he says. "I was accepted into the medical school, but then I decided I didn't want to study for that long." So he went to culinary school in the U.S. instead.

He says he was drawn to cooking because his grandparents on

both sides of the family loved to cook. "On the Finnish side, you go out hunting and get the deer, then you start chopping it up and skinning it. Use the heart for that, the tongue for that, save the loin or the rack for special occasions. There was always food cooking on the stove in my grandparents' house in Finland," he says. "In Turkey, my grandmother cooked a lot and my grandfather, who is 95 now, traveled a lot, working in agriculture, growing very high-quality fruits and vegetables on a large scale. I grew up seeing farms of that type and used to spend one month on their farm every summer."

Those experiences did much to color his creativity. "I learned about the Scandinavian ways of preparing fish, the hot and cold smoking processes, the marinating, the curing. They prepare it in ways very different from in the Mediterranean," he says. "Then, coming to Turkey and being on the farm, I remember we used to go out to a fig tree and they'd say, 'No not that one, pick this one. It's so ripe it's just dripping.' So I also grew up picking and cooking with fruits and vegetables at their absolute peak and also with eating lots of the lamb so popular and so available in Turkey."

Mr. Gürs tries to combine these sharply different ways of cooking at his recently opened venture, Mikla. "What I try to do is to use almost only ingredients from Istanbul and the surrounding area, often humble and even inexpensive ingredients such as potatoes, but use some more sophisticated preparations that come from the Scandinavian or French traditions," he says. "My philosophy here is to serve very few, but high-quality, ingredients on a big plate."

So he takes a piece of Bosporus mackerel and whips it into a small pillow of mousse. "First I hot-smoke it like they do with a lot of fish in Scandinavia," he says. "It doesn't take longer than half an hour and it's like a cooked fish with a very strong smoked flavor to it. Almost like a barbecued meat that has been given a classier preparation as a mousse."

Or he uses five tiny slices of



hamsi, a sort of anchovy that Mr. Gürs says "suffers such a low esteem that I feel sorry for it," on olive-oil toast to make a \$13 snack.

"No one wants to admit to loving that little fish, but it tastes so good," he says. "I think it deserves to have that price because it has such a special taste."

Lamb also plays a big role on the menu. "I use *Trakya kivrak* (a curly-haired lamb from Thrace) because they are the breed that in my opinion taste the best," he says. "They are skinny, but they are completely natural. They eat the oregano and the thyme that mixes in with the grass in the fields and you can actually taste that in the meat."

He also pays homage to Turkey by using local spices such as bay leaves and local nuts and fruits, such as walnuts in a pesto or pomegranate seeds with poultry. Another dish that combines the Turkish and Scandinavian is his marinated salmon with horseradish *cacik*. "It's a saucy, soupy type of thing," he says. "We peel and juice small, flavorful cucumbers from the Cengelkoy neighborhood and with that we make a very good yogurt and mix in just a little horseradish. We make a foam out of it and serve it in a bowl with a small, perfect chunk of salmon and a little bit of dill."

He points out that dill is an herb that is widely used in both cultures, but in very different ways—in Scandinavia with seafood, in Turkey in rice pilafs or cheese-filled phyllo dough.

At Mikla, unlike at numnum with its hefty burger meals, Mr. Gürs is taking a risk by charging premium prices for attractive but skimpy portions.

"Customers who have traveled a lot and eaten in perhaps New York or Paris recognize that we are a world-class restaurant," he says. "It's true we are requiring a little re-

education of the Turkish audience." He says Turkish diners are used to seeing their restaurant tables covered in dishes—at a traditional *meyhane* restaurant one chooses five or six cold appetizers and several hot starters. "There is food everywhere, even between the ashtrays and the raki bottles," he says. "So when they come here and see the sizes of our portions, sometimes they don't understand that the idea is to order one thing from each category on the menu to build the meal."

Mr. Gürs says one of the factors in his restaurant company's financial success is his centralized production kitchen, located in a cheaper-rent neighborhood with state-of-the-art equipment—including computers to keep it all organized. There he has more than 10 chefs who take supplies from wholesalers and fill the individual restaurants' needs while maximizing efficiency and controlling quality.

"The central kitchen is where we bring in all the ingredients and prep them," he says. "A cook at any of our restaurants can place his fish order online, and the next morning, he receives exactly the number of portions freshly cut to his needs."