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## Shish! This city serves more than kebabs

Istanbul's food was always good, but the choice was so limited. A new generation of chefs is changing all that, says Tina Walsh



### Change of taste: Mikla is helping change dining habits in Istanbul

I'm sipping Kavaklidere Egeo, a delicious Anatolian sauvignon blanc, in the Lebi-i-Derya restaurant in Istanbul.

The hot June sun shines through the huge plate-glass windows, which frame the Golden Horn, Topkapi Palace and the Blue Mosque. Before me is a plate of fava-bean purée with artichoke and citrus onion chutney – food was never this good when I lived in the city in the mid-1990s.

Back then, most, if not all, of my dining experiences took place in cheap and cheerful meyhanes (taverns), drinking raki and eating mezes and shish kebabs. The food was consistently good, but the choice was limited, and finding greater variety, unless you were prepared to spend a fortune, was a challenge.

Since then, a growing number of Istanbul restaurateurs and chefs – women among them – have quietly built on the more conservative elements of Turkish cuisine by rediscovering regional cooking and long-forgotten Ottoman recipes, and giving them a contemporary twist.

The Lebi-i-Derya is one example. Set on the top floor of the Richmond Hotel in the cosmopolitan Beyoglu district (with those iconic views), it's a smart, breezy affair, decorated in muted creams and beiges. As well as fava beans, the Ottoman-inspired menu lists irmik

muhallebisi, a mousse-like dessert made with semolina, crystallised pumpkin and lavender ice cream or rose sorbet – which the Ottomans drank gallons of as a palate cleanser between meals.

Owner Gamze Ineceli came to the restaurant business after working abroad, including a stint in New York's theatreland, and is one of this new breed of gourmets helping to transform the city's image to a destination for food, not just history and culture.

"Istanbul is an incredible melting pot with centuries of culinary influence, from Greece, Italy, the Balkans, North Africa and the Middle East," she says. "You could almost call it the first fusion food. I'm trying to stay faithful to that concept but blending traditional Ottoman tastes with contemporary culinary influences."

As we work through a tasting menu of aubergine cream with roasted red bell pepper, sesame-crusted salmon and pomegranate- and plum-infused lamb shish, Gamze switches the wine to a Kavaklidere Prestij Bogazkere – "a superb red that's great with meat dishes", she says – one of the up-and-coming Turkish labels.

At Kantin, in Nisantasi, an upmarket district in the north of the city, the approach is "new Turkish cuisine". So, it's out with the kebabs (which originated in Persia, anyway) and in with fresh, local produce and a menu that changes every day. This is a good place to find vegetable dishes such as kabak sarma (thinly sliced stuffed courgettes), and the artichokes served here are among the best in Istanbul.

The café-restaurant (a modern version of the esnaf lokantasi or "lunchtime canteen") closes at about 9pm and doesn't serve alcohol (not for any religious reasons, just because it hasn't got a licence), yet these factors don't seem to dent its popularity. On the Monday lunchtime when I visited, it was packed with business people, fashionable young guns and ladies who lunch, Ray-Bans perched on their expensively coiffed heads.

Chef and owner Semse Denizsel learnt to cook at her mother's knee. "The single biggest threat to Istanbul cuisine is Istanbul forgetting their roots," she says. "We must protect the food of everyday Istanbul as though it were the food of the sultans. Even the peasant food here was refined."

Back in Beyoglu, you'll find Mikla on the 14th floor of the Marmara Pera hotel. It's best to go in the evening, when Istanbul's skyline is lit up to show-stopping, 360-degree effect. It's worth stopping by for the view alone, but the food is excellent, too. Owner Mehmet Gurs is half Turkish, half Finnish and grew up in Sweden. He's obsessive about using only the best ingredients and he and his team (including a "food anthropologist") scour the country for foodstuffs. The menu at Mikla (which comes from Miklagard, the name given to Constantinople by the Vikings) is "Scandinavian via way of Istanbul", with dishes such as smoked istavrit (mackerel), olive oil-poached peas and chilled minted pea soup, along with pistachio and helva ice cream. The sommelier, Sabiha Apaydin, guides diners through an extensive wine list and only a dreadful wine snob would pass up on the fine Turkish labels. Though Mikla isn't cheap, it's well worth splashing out there for a special occasion.



### **Lamb Shoulder at Mikla Restaurant, Istanbul**

A former chef at Mikla, Didem Senol, has recently opened her own restaurant, Lokanta Maya. At just 33, she already has an illustrious past, having studied at the French Culinary Institute of New York and worked at Le Cirque and Eleven Madison Park. She's also written a recipe book, *Aegean Flavours*, a celebration of the region's markets and produce.

Ignore the inauspicious location behind Karakoy docks – this is Turkish cuisine at its freshest. Didem's excursions throughout the Aegean and Anatolia are reflected in the eclectic menu: konya blue cheese with lemon, caramelised sea bass with sautéed orange and roasted sardines with bulgur and pine nuts.

The surroundings are minimalist, the staff good-looking and sharply dressed. Those smoky old meyhanes belong to a bygone era.

### **Compact Facts**

#### **How to get there**

Turkish Airlines (020-7471 6666; [turkishairlines.com](http://turkishairlines.com)) offers return flights to Istanbul Ataturk Airport from Birmingham, Manchester, London Heathrow and Stansted from £171. A double room with breakfast at the Pera Palace (00 90 212 377 40; [perapalace.com](http://perapalace.com)) starts at €250 (£220) per night.

#### **Further Information**

Lebi-i-Derya, Istiklal Caddesi No 227 Richmond Otel, Kat 6 (00 90 212 243 43 75; [lebiderya.com](http://lebiderya.com));

Mikla, The Marmara Pera, Mesrutiyet Cadessi 15 (00 90 212 293 56 56; [miklarestaurant.com](http://miklarestaurant.com));

Kantin, Akkavak Sokagi 30 (00 90 212 219 3114; [kantin.biz](http://kantin.biz));

Lokanta Maya, Kemankes Cadessi No 35A (00 90 212 252 68 84; [loktanamaya.com](http://loktanamaya.com)).