

Meze at Istanbul
innovator Kebapci
Etler; (opposite)
cuisine meets
culture at Fenix bar
and restaurant



ISTANBUL,
TURKEY

Meze? That's only the start...



GQ joins local restaurateur Umut Ozkanca at the crossing point of a new culinary revolution, where roving cuisines are drawing the global dining set

Story by Jennifer Bradley

The big misconception about Turkish cuisine is that it's all about garlic-mayo doners and cheap kebabs," says Umut Ozkanca. "And we don't even eat garlic mayo."

As the owner of Ruya, the slick Anatolian restaurant in London and Dubai, Ozkanca thinks it's now Turkey's turn to be taken seriously in the international arena. "If you'd asked someone five years ago if there would be a high-end Turkish restaurant in the heart of Mayfair, they'd have laughed," he says.

And yet, thanks to easier international travel, new cookery schools and social media, the restaurant business in Istanbul has been transformed in the past decade.

"When I first moved back, 25 years ago, the dining scene was really dull for a cosmopolitan city," Ozkanca admits. Turkish people are – in Ozkanca's words – "conservative" when it comes to food, so the fashion is to play within the boundaries of tradition. "New restaurants are being opened by young, ambitious chefs with international experience and they're celebrating classic ingredients and cooking techniques," he says. "When you do the dishes right, Turkish cuisine is in the Champions League. This is one of the oldest cuisines in the world and an accumulation of cultures, empires, trade and travel. The infrastructure is more or less ready now – we just have to sell it."

To his point, Istanbul's Beyoglu district is famous for its street food, so on every corner you'll find delicacies such as simit (like a Turkish pretzel), wedges of su boregi (a creamy, layered pie) and steamed mussels stuffed with rice, cinnamon and currants. But street

Above: Kebapci Etler; (below, from top) Ulus 29's kuzu kusleme and kitchen



food sits alongside a buzzing restaurant scene that spans the city, from the refined Mikla (miklarestaurant.com) – Mehmet Gurs' contemporary "Istanbullu" venue that is currently No44 on The World's 50 Best Restaurants list – to more casual grilled-meat specialists, such as the must-book Zubeyir Ocakbasi (zubeyirocakbasi.com.tr) or Kebapci Etler (etilerkebapci.com.tr) in Besiktas, an area now as famous for its food as its football.

As the name suggests, Kebapci is an homage to the kebab. The mezze dishes here include fresh green pistachios, lightly soaked to puff them up and served with pomegranate seeds, spicy lahmacun (like little lamb pizzas) >>



'It's one of the world's oldest cuisines, an accumulation of empires, trade and travel'

>> and tabbouleh bursting with chopped herbs and tomatoes. But the main player is the meat. The doner – curls of roasted lamb, the fat caramelised by the smoky heat – is served simply with warm bread and a squeeze of lemon; the mixed (karisik) kebab is a foot-long feast of grilled chicken and lamb, decorated with blackened green chillies.

Kebapci is just one of the restaurants in the Dream group, of which Ozkanca is the CEO. Dream has 40 individual brands worldwide, including Ruya, Zuma and Coya, but has a particularly strong presence in Istanbul, and each restaurant has its own identity – compare Ulus 29 (ulus29.com), a fine-dining destination and lively club in the Ulus hilltops, to the internationalist kitchens of Fenix (fenixistanbul.com) and La Viña (lavinarestaurant.com). “Dream is the only group in the world that has this diversity,” says Ozkanca. “You have fish restaurants, fast food, a palace, a nightclub and Zuma. It’s a great power.”

Another Dream restaurant, Lacivert (lacivertrestaurant.com), has a prime position on the Asian banks of the Bosphorus, a 17-mile-long channel linking the Black Sea with the Sea Of Marmara and the source of much of its seafood. This is, Ozkanca says, a favourite spot for a languorous Sunday brunch (another growing trend in Turkey). Fresh fish, caught by local fishermen, is delivered twice daily at 6.30am and 8.30pm and we arrive for dinner just in time to see a sizeable sea bass being hauled, still wriggling, from a boat.

‘Our biggest muscle currently is culinary. It’s time to show the world what we’re all about’



Above: Lacivert's terrace and (below) fisherman's salad; (bottom) La Viña



To start, there’s marinated sea bass – presumably not the one we’ve just seen making its entrance – served with fennel, blood orange and apple vinegar. The main course, chosen fresh from the counter and shared, is a whole John Dory, delicately baked, filleted at the table and presented without fuss alongside a salad of tomatoes, spring onions and radishes. If it’s not in season, you won’t see it on the menu.

Simple, traditional food may be Istanbul’s calling card, but luxury still abounds. This coming year will see the opening of Galataport, an expansive new cultural development, costing almost 10 billion lira (£1.3bn)

and aiming to revive the Karakoy and Tophane districts by targeting cruise passengers. As construction continues, many restaurants in the area have closed, but the arty Karakoy Lokantasi (karakoylokantasi.com) remains, still buzzing, but dwarfed by the exoskeleton of the future Peninsula Istanbul hotel. Karakoy is handsomely decorated in teal-blue tiles, while a spiral staircase twists through its centre. Here, dinner is meze, but if you turn up for lunch you can get a taste of rustic Turkish home cooking – and it’s a delight. Aubergine rice, wilted spinach with yoghurt and a hearty bean hotspot pave the way for tender liver, finely sliced and briefly sautéed, then lamb and beef meatballs with a white-bean salad.

Delicate, smoky, fresh, steeped in history: every bite in Istanbul is a far cry from that garlic-mayo doner. As Ozkanca says, the spotlight should now shine on Turkish cuisine. “The biggest muscle we have at the moment is culinary,” he says. “It’s time for us to show the rest of the world what we’re all about.”

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