

OCTOBER 2008

# FOOD ARTS

AT THE RESTAURANT AND HOTEL FOREFRONT



EUROPEAN : BURN UP  
FLAVORS : THE TRACK

# DELIGHTS FROM TURKEY

**TRAVELING STOMACH** GAIL MONAGHAN TUCKS INTO AN OTTOMAN BANQUET IN ISTANBUL AND RETURNS WITH AN UPDATED MENU FOR AMERICAN CHEFS.

Early last October an invitation from **Engin Akin** to attend an Iftar feast at her home on the Bosphorus strait led me to set off for Istanbul with my daughter Tess. Each year during Ramadan, Akin, a cookbook writer, cooking teacher, and hostess extraordinaire, often described as the “Julia Child of Turkey,” hosts an Ottoman banquet—similar to our American Thanksgiving in sentiment, celebration, and feasting—for about 30 family members and close friends. We were thrilled to be included, especially as the dinner coincided with my birthday.

Iftar is the ceremonial “break the fast” meal that begins at sunset each evening during the month of Ramadan, a time when observant Muslims eat for the first time since before sunrise. Tess and I reached Akin’s around 6:30 p.m., just as the last rays of light disappeared and darkness fell. We had intended to arrive earlier but did not anticipate Istanbul’s bumper-to-bumper rush hour traffic. Thus by the time we drove up, very hungry people were already seated and beginning to eat. The evening was casual, and people continued to drift in, sit down, and dig in to whatever happened to be on the table at that moment. Tess was ushered to one of several smaller tables on the terrace, lively by then with a host of interesting young Türks, many of whom had attended college in America. I sat at the “grown-ups’ table” indoors, along with Akin, her husband, her mother, and various aunts, uncles, brothers and sisters, and their spouses.

Appropriately, and in accordance with custom, this special dinner began with Turkish breakfast foods. Dishes similar to those found on our hotel menu each morning were set out family-style on the tables. Included were Turkish *pastirma*, made from air-dried beef and flavored with fenugreek, garlic, cumin, and red pepper; *otlu börek*, a delicious baked pastry from Akin’s native Ula—a thin soft dough made with very little yeast filled with whey, parsley, dill, green onions, and either Swiss chard or a mixture of wild greens; and *pide*, a bread similar to pita but softer inside and sprinkled with nigella seeds. There were also various local cheeses; olives; homemade jams including wild fig, rose, and sour cherry; and a marmalade that included peels of both Seville oranges and bergamot.

“Breakfast” was followed by traditional *serai* (court-style) chickpea soup—a chickpea/chicken broth elevated to elegance by adding ground pistachios, peeling the chickpeas after cooking but before pureeing, and garnishing with pomegranate seeds and chopped pistachios. Final touches were a dusting of cinnamon and a squeeze of lemon juice.

Next came *keskek*, an Ottoman wedding feast dish of lamb neck meat and hulled whole wheat slow-cooked to a paste consistency, then drizzled with a hot pepper-spiked *beurre noisette* and strewn

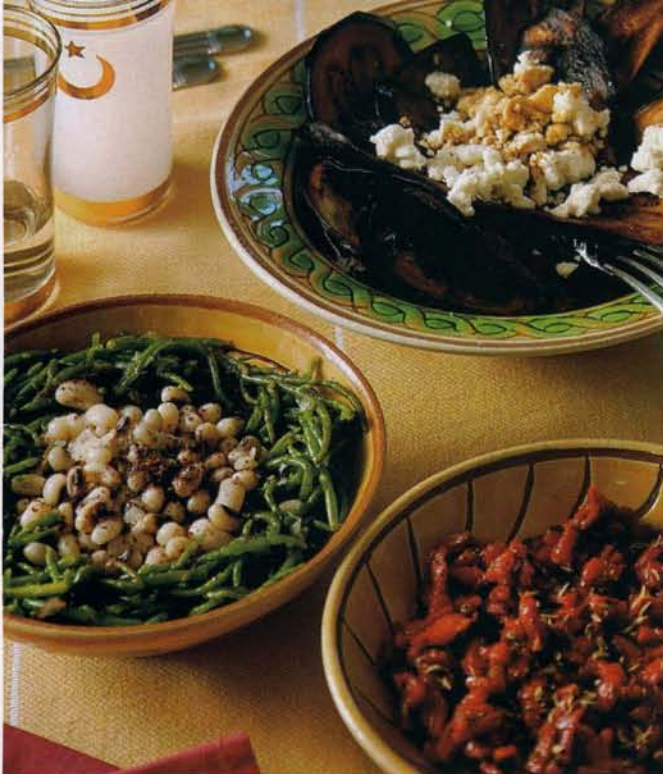


with toasted pine nuts. Akin veered from the traditional by adding currants to the *beurre noisette*.

Highlights of the dessert buffet were a delicate baklava, fig pudding, pumpkins in syrup, baked quince with apples, and *güllâç*, a beautiful dish of rice wafers soaked in rose-scented milk, then combined with almonds and topped with pomegranate seeds.

Culinary Istanbul is a small world. Speaking with Akin during dinner, it came up in conversation that she had shared the cooking of that night’s feast with local food authority **Vedat Besaran**, well-known for reintroducing Ottoman cuisine to Istanbul’s luxury hotel **The Çiragan Palace Kempinski** (for more on Besaran and an extensive history of Ottoman Cuisine, see “The Ottoman Umpire,” *Food Arts*, October 2003, page 58, and “Ottoman Cuisine Reclaims the Palace,” *Food Arts*, September 1993, page 74). Tess and I coincidentally had prearranged a food-focused walking tour with Besaran for the following afternoon. ▶

## Engin Akin's Updated Ottoman Menu for *Food Arts*



Previous page: Bulgur pilaf with black-eyed peas and caramelized onions. Above, a trio of mezes: *tulum peyniri* cheese with grilled eggplant dressed with *pekmez* (reduced grape juice); black-eyed peas and sea beans in garlic *tarator* sauce; grilled peppers with hot pepper flakes, cinnamon seeds, oil, and vinegar. Photos by Bekir Iscen.

I also learned from Akin during dinner that her new cookbook, *Turkey's Delights*, covers Ottoman cuisine yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Having just finished *Lost Desserts*, my own piece of culinary archaeology, I was particularly fascinated by Akin's project and wanted to know more. Akin sees cuisines as living organisms, always changing. Over the centuries, she postulates, people's palates have shifted with exposure to new tastes made familiar through travel and the importation of new ingredients. Recently with accelerated globalization, this process of change through exposure is affecting cuisine everywhere.

In addition, cuisine is dramatically affected by lifestyle. People worldwide are busier now, with less time to cook and little or no household help. A few Turkish towns continue to serve huge banquets as in the Ottoman days—often 40 or more courses on the table at once, sweets intermingling with the savory. But Akin knows food preparation must be streamlined to fit into today's hectic schedules. Thus for her book, with today's diner in mind, Akin intends to update and simplify both menus and recipes while retaining original concepts and flavor combinations. Most Ottoman dishes had fairly short ingredient lists anyway, but, Akin explained, there are some techniques that must be learned to properly create the food. In her new book Akin will simplify these techniques, most of which concern making and handling the various doughs on which the Ottoman kitchen depends, including *yufka*, *pide*, *börek*, and *manti*, the latter a noodle from which pasta descended.

I suggested that for *Food Arts* Akin use her new book as a jumping-off point and put together an updated Ottoman menu for American restaurant chefs—a menu appealing to the contemporary American palate, pace, and visual sensibility.

**FAVA BEAN PUREE WITH TURKISH CAVIAR & PURSLANE SALAD.** Mold a puree of cooked dried fava beans, onions, and olive oil. After unmolding, thinly slice the pâté and serve it with toasts, a garnish of radishes, and shavings or tiny dice of *havayar*, Turkish caviar. Alternatively, mix diced *bottarga* into the puree before molding. Either way, serve with a salad of purslane, cucumbers, walnuts, mint, and dill dressed with olive oil and lemon juice. If desired, mash some garlic with thick yogurt and add it to the dressing or dollop it on top. As a variation, toss fresh fava beans with diced *bottarga* and dress with olive oil, lemon juice, and a sprinkling of fresh mint. To showcase the *havayar* specifically, omit the fava beans and serve thinly sliced *bottarga* accompanied only by toasts and the purslane salad.

**OTTOMAN FISH SOUP.** Place a whole small cooked fish fillet (grill for extra flavor after marinating in "saffron water") in the bottom of individual soup plates. Over the fish pour a saffron-infused golden fish broth enriched with *terbiyeli* (a lemon juice and egg yolk emulsion similar to the Greek *avgolemono*) and flavored with mint, parsley, celeriac, fried onions, and a bit of Sherry vinegar. Dust with cinnamon and cayenne or crushed dried medium-hot peppers and sprinkle with chopped parsley.

**BÖREK MANTI WITH SWISS CHARD, GARLIC/YOGURT DRESSING, BEURRE NOISSETTE & FRESH MINT.** Other than being meat-filled dough, this dish has very little in common with the tiny meat-filled *manti* triangles made ravioli-like with noodle dough (see "The Full Manti," *Food Arts*, September 2005, page 84). The baked *börek manti* is made with *yufka*, which can now be purchased in its dried form in America and is perfect to use when modernizing a Turkish meal. Soften dried *yufka* by sprinkling it with warm water, fold over, and wrap in a kitchen towel for about 30 minutes. Then roll up with a spiced meat filling and bake. *Börek manti* is served hot, the long *manti* roll cut into individual portions that are placed in the center of each plate. To update, serve the *börek manti* on a sauté of Swiss chard and onion that has been dressed with garlic/yogurt sauce. Sauce the *manti* itself with red pepper *beurre noisette* and sprinkle with both dried and julienned fresh mint.

**SAFFRON & ROSEWATER FLAVORED RICE ICE CREAM WITH CHOPPED PISTACHIOS & JULIENNED ORGANIC ROSE PETALS.** *Zerde* is a traditional Turkish rice pudding flavored with rosewater and colored with saffron. To update, create a rice ice cream with identical flavorings. Garnish with julienned organic rose petals and coarsely chopped green pistachios (or pomegranate seeds when in season). Alternatively, instead of rosewater, the bright yellow ice cream can contain dried currants, pine nuts, and pistachios. A tangle of spun sugar is lovely crowning this version, its crunchiness a welcome complement to the soft ice cream and chewy currants.

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**Gail Monaghan** is a New York-based cookbook author and teacher.