

Gourmet's Safari

Turkey

ON A PLATE



With its turquoise waters, battlegrounds, ruined castles and palaces of legendary empires, the country has everything a 'voracious, all encompassing' traveler would expect.

The culinary landscape of Turkey makes it worthwhile to go there exclusively for food. A ten minute boat ride to Asia for a cup of tea, a gentle ferry to the serene Princes' Islands for a seafood lunch, Gaziantep where baklava was born and Gallipoli where you get the best of garlic-oozing clams and fresh salads which are had with chill Truva beers; like they say, tourists come to Turkey for its glorious history, but they stay back for its incredible cuisine.



► The Meal Structure

A sumptuous Turkish meal consists of starters and main course which are made of grains, meat, seafood and vegetables, desserts and beverages. The lack of a specific dominant dish in Turkey like pasta in Italy or a French Croissant is simply because Turks believe in retaining the flavour of the principle ingredient rather than mollifying it with strong spices or sauces. Unlike what most people believe, authentic Turkish dishes are seasoned with herbs and spices scantily; for instance, eggplants are topped with parsley, while zucchini is served with mint or dill, cold vegetable platters normally come with garlic cloves and cumin is used in soups or ground meat dishes like kofte. Turks use plenty of yoghurt and lemon to balance the taste in both vegetarian and meat dishes. Meat dishes like kebabs come with ‘pide’ or flat bread with vegetables and yoghurt on the side.

Turkish Meze

Drinking along with food is an integral part of the dining culture in Turkey. Social gatherings are marked by families and friends drinking alcohol along with their food either at their respective homes or restaurants.

Meze platter ideally has nibbles of honeydew melon served with velvety feta cheese and fresh bread, spinach in a yoghurt-garlic dip, cold vegetables boiled or fried in olive oil, crunchy savoury pastries, deep fried mussels and calamari served with tomato sauce and caviar. Although, meze served before kebabs are a bit different than the usual, with green salads, cut tomatoes in herbs infused olive oil, **humus**, a popular dip made from boiled chickpeas, **tahini** (sesame paste), olive oil, bulgur and red lentils and raw **kofte**, a stuffed dish with marinated aubergines and peppers along with spices, nuts and pickles.

Much like the Spanish tapas, meze is a selection of small portions of dishes which are first brought to the table along with wine or anise flavoured spirit known as raki.



► Staple Dishes

Turkey has a reputation for baking the finest of breads. Apart from ekmek, which is a common white bread, the region boasts of other dough varieties like **pide**, **simit** (sesame rings), **manti** (ravioli look alike) and borek, which are thin sheets of pastry. Ekmek, pide and simit are best consumed fresh and dishes are made from leftover ekmeks. On a typical Sunday afternoon, Turkish families lunch on mantis, which are essentially dough dumplings stuffed with meat, along with garlic yoghurt and paprika filled melted butter. **Boreks** are ideally served at special occasions and family functions and it is very difficult to make such thin sheets of dough with a rolling pin. After the dough has been rolled out, it is stuffed with various meats and cheeses and then it is baked or fried.

Pilaf is another Turkish staple, which is either made from cracked wheat or rice. Pilaf made out of a whole onions, chopped tomatoes and green peppers sautéed in butter and brewed in beef stock, makes for a sumptuous meal by itself. Rice pilafs are gently tempered with butter and are had with vegetable and meat dishes.

Turkey is known for its world famous kebabs which also go back to a time when Turkish nomads learnt how to grill meats over fire. Typically, there are two kinds of kebabs – the **sis kebab** and the **doner kebab**. While the former is grilled cubes of skewered meat, the latter is an alternating stack of minced meat (usually lamb) skewered upright; thin slices are shaved off and served as the outer layer is well done.

Dolmas – cabbage wraps filled with sautéed rice, pine nuts, currants, herbs and spices, are another popular favourite among the locals and tourists in Turkey. They are stacked generously on a huge platter and are served with lemon wedges and a yoghurt dip.



► Seafood Bowl

Turkey is flanked by sea on all three sides and hence offers the best of seafood. Locals who live by the coastlines prepare the finest sea treats, however, Ankara is home to some of the celebrated seafood restaurants in Turkey. Every month is significant for a specific catch which are had with different vegetables; for instance bonitos are had with arugula and red onions and blue fish with lettuce. Mackerels are filled with onions before they are grilled and a relatively dry summer fish are poached with tomatoes. But the best of fishes in Turkey is the **hamsi**, which can be cooked in 41 different ways including hamsi borks and pilafs.



A Sweet Land

Turkish **baklava** is normally had with tea or as a snack after a hefty meal of kebabs. But Baklava is really not considered as a dessert by the locals in Turkey. Seasonal fresh fruits like strawberries, cherries, melons, peaches and apricots are also had after main course. Other desserts include, the milk puddings from the famous Muhallebi family, grain based pastries, other variants of baklava which are thin baked pastry sheets filled with pistachios and walnuts, served with heavy cream and helva which is made from semolina flour.



► Beverage Galore

Turks take great pleasure in drinking tea considering it is a major source of caffeine for them. Every nook and cranny has a tea joint or a tea garden. They are concocted over boiling water and are served in elusive glasses so that one can see the beautiful auburn liquid through the glass. Tea is also a beverage that symbolizes a sense of hospitality since guests are served with tea at homes and restaurants to begin with. Turkey is dotted with such tea houses in the little village squares, on hill tops which has a breathtaking view of the sea, roadside markets or even by a waterfall or the woods. There are plenty of pretty tea gardens in Istanbul like Emirgan, Camlica of Bosphorus, the popular Pierre Loti Café and Uskudar tea garden.

Boza is a classic Turkish beverage which is sold by the wandering merchants door to door. It is a thick, fermented drink made from wheat berries, which is ideally consumed with cinnamon and roasted chickpeas. Salep is another hot drink made with milk and Salep powder and is had in vast quantities by the locals.

► The Tale of Raki

Raki is a beverage which is twice distilled and then brewed with ethyl alcohol. One can draw a close parallel of raki to that of alcoholic drinks from the Balkans and other Mediterranean regions such as pastis and ouzo. The drink is usually had with water and the addition of water causes the drink to fade into a milky white colour.

Raki is a traditional, non-sweet, anise flavoured beverage Raki is best served cold along with meze or small portions of meat and vegetable starters.

Markets for Fresh Produce

For Turks, a place of dining is literally like a place of worship. The food setting here, be it a restaurant or a market is very atmospheric. Ingredients which go into making a sumptuous Turkish meal are often found in weekly neighbourhood markets known as '**Pazar**' or the permanent markets. The Spice Market in Istanbul is a popular example of the latter, which has been thriving since the pre-Ottoman days. The stalls emanating strong aromas are nestled within the antiquated dome shaped structures, which was once the Spice Road depot. However, the epitome of Turkish culture and civilization can be found in the weekly markets where the locals and villagers put up stalls to sell fresh ingredients, fruits, vegetables, meat and seafood.

