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After years of flirting with the life-extending Mediterranean diet, I finally experienced the real thing by living on a small chartered boat for a week that sailed the turquoise waters near the ancient Lycian ruins off the coast of southwestern Turkey.

I won't bore you with the exquisite pleasures of jumping into the crystalline sea four times a day; swimming to deserted rocky shores and poking around the remnants of a three thousand year old civilizations (aqua socks required); or strolling through small coastal villages with cobblestone streets, cascading bougainvillea and a bountiful outdoor markets.

No, I'm going to describe what it was like to eat fresh, mostly vegetarian, home-style Turkish food three times a day, prepared by an energetic cook in a wooden galley of a 90 foot gulet called the Elifsu II. Seven of us chartered this lovingly maintained mahogany and teak boat through Blue Odyssey (www.blueodyssey.com), a tour company run by husband and wife team Jale Boga-Robertson and Perry Robertson, who live half the year in Kalkan, a charming coastal town in the middle of this enchanted Turquoise coast, and the other six months in Oakland. I cannot vouch for any other than the crew that coddled us, but these four men were inspired professionals. After several years of dealing with macho captains who refused to work with a woman, Jale found Ahmet, the captain/owner of the Elifsu II, and his devoted crew. These are the people you want to take care of you.

Every morning our cook put out a huge spread of melons, grapes, plums and other fruits; thick Turkish yogurt; aromatic honey; local jams like sour cherry and rosehip; feta and sheep's milk cheeses, sliced tomatoes, olives, fresh baked bread, soft boiled eggs and strong Turkish tea. (We brought Peet's coffee and brewed it ourselves in an electric pot that our cook pulled out of the depths of a screen-enclosed larder. He dusted it off for us.)

Shortly after breakfast we would smell the mouthwatering aromas of lunch being prepared. At lunch the table was filled again, this time with the likes of a huge round low sided metal pan of long skinny eggplants stuffed with ground meat in a juicy sauce of peppers and tomatoes; or these same eggplants just cooked with long peppers and tomatoes; plump fresh shell beans flavored with bits of beef sausage; garlicky green beans braised with onions; purslane (a slightly bitter green) or shredded fried carrots or cucumbers folded into thick, garlicky yogurt; okra stewed with tomatoes and fragrant red Maras pepper flakes; always two starches-- pasta with a little tomato sauce and grated sheep's milk cheese or rice cooked with fresh octopus beaten on a rock on the shore until tender or potatoes fried in olive oil or bulgur pilaf; always two crisp, bright vegetable salads usually including tomatoes, cucumbers, arugula, romaine and other greens and herbs, both simply dressed with vinegar and olive oil. Platters of cut and peeled fruit appeared at the end. This meal was repeated at dinner--two warm dishes, two salads, two starches--with vegetables as the center of every dish. Somehow, we never ate the same dish twice. The crew caught fresh fish using a long nylon line with a couple hooks and an empty water bottle as a buoy. They threw the line into the water as the boat motored along early in the morning and caught one small silver-blue bonito after another. The cook sliced them through the bone, making small, thick steaks, and sautéed them until golden brown in olive oil. He served them with a tasty yogurt and mayonnaise based tartar sauce. Meaty and succulent, the plastic-bottle caught bonito tasted like the fanciest fish.

One morning our cook made a luscious breakfast pizza in the flat metal pan, the crust really a warm yeasty flat bread, the topping a mild mozzarella-like fresh sheep's milk cheese with tomatoes and roasted peppers and thinly sliced sausage. Another morning a small wooden boat pulled up with a woman at a coal-fired griddle. She rolled out thin crepes, draped them on the griddle, smeared them with honey and bananas and sour cherry jam and handed them up to the boat.

Though we ate mostly fruit for dessert, our cook made an occasional rice pudding. And one night, tel kadayif, threads of dough drizzled with butter, baked till golden brown and then soaked in lemony sugar syrup. Everything was served family style in long ovals and set out at the same time. We ate enormous amounts and never felt stuffed or uncomfortable. The food came directly from the land and the sea around us and it suited the climate--a perfect 75 to 80 degrees in late September--and our stomachs.

As for drink, we bought Turkish white, red and dry rose wines before we boarded the boat and though simple, they were delicious with the food. I suppose the one deviation from the pure Mediterranean diet were cocktails (other than the local, anise-flavored raki) made with hard liquor we brought with us which is high taxed on in Turkey. But I could hardly feel guilty about my favorite drink at cocktail hour--freshly squeezed orange juice and pomegranate juice with Meyers rum, a drink that matched the sunset. I regarded it as a health food elixir.

During the week we ate one lunch off the boat at the superb Koru-nun Yeri, (183 E1, tel. 0242 844 3848) a traditional local restaurant on the road above the village of Kalkan. We sat outside on wooden chairs under a trellis as an array of exquisite dishes made by mother and daughter were served by the men in the family. Tiny rice and meat stuffed dolmas had the texture of silk. Manti, tiny hand formed dumplings filled with ground meat seasoned with dried mint and sumac came in a yogurt sauce drizzled with butter and dried red Maras pepper. I could have eaten them all day. Big, creamy eggplants were stuffed with chicken and mushrooms; skinny shiny eggplants were braised with long green peppers, tomatoes and onions, fittingly called imam bayildi, the 'priest fainted,' they were so seductive. I watched a woman seated on a rug by a small fireplace with a griddle, rolling out gozleme, crepes, which she filled with chopped onions, parsley, spinach and a little feta; and borek, crescents of the thinnest dough filled with gorgeous minced meat and onions, deep fried till puffy. They were the best turnovers I've ever tasted. For dessert, the we ate hosmerim, a warm, and dark brown, thick, creamy semolina pudding sweetened with molasses, studded with walnuts.

The difference between the elegant, highly skilled cooking of the women and our simple, bounteous cooking on the boat represented the contrast between home and restaurant. The boat cooking was exceedingly clean, barely salted (we added lots of it ourselves) and unherbed; the food we ate at the restaurant, was richer, layered with herbs and spices, and refined in texture. Yet, it too was easily digestible and mostly vegetarian. This was party food, celebratory. Many of the same Anatolian dishes are widely available in different versions, but not at this high level.

If you ever find yourself near Kalkan, you must take a detour to charming Koru-nun Yeri where a meal with Turkish wine costs \$10 a person. The boat trip costs around \$1500 per person for six nights and seven days--exclusive of air fare, tips and booze. It's the ultimate spa week with exoticism and adventure thrown in, and you'll come back with a new understanding about the benefits of the Mediterranean diet.