

On a pleasantly warm Sunday afternoon in October, seemingly half of Istanbul was strolling along the Bosphorus, picnicking, pouring into waterside fish restaurants and playing soccer. Though a frenetic, cosmopolitan city with a complicated 5000-year history, Istanbul is blessed with one of the most dramatic settings in the world. Much like San Francisco, it is built on hills and around water, with a skyline punctuated by mosques and skyscrapers.

Istanbul also happens to be a great food town, as most port cities tend to be. Cross currents of local and foreign culture eddy, and the pull of European modernity against traditional values expresses itself even at the table. The tension means that inspired regional cooking has been made accessible to everyone, with amenities and aesthetics that please both the melting pot Turkish society as well as a sophisticated international clientele.

After a spa-like week on 90-foot boat off Turkey's Turquoise Coast, our little group hit the ground running. We checked into the romantic Yesil Ev (Kabasakal Caddesi No. 5 Sultanahmet fax 0212 517 67 80, ph 0212 517 6785), a small, lovingly refurbished hotel in a converted 19th century wooden Istanbul mansion, just steps from the Aya Sofya and the Blue Mosque. We walked through the manicured park between these two great monuments, and wound our way downhill, following the tram tracks, to the Galata Bridge, which crosses the Golden Horn, the place to get one of Istanbul's legendary \$1 fish sandwiches.

Follow the smoke to a gaily-painted boat tied up to the railings along the water. Bonito filets and tomatoes sizzle in olive oil in big flat pans. The cooks slap the fish on soft, crusty rolls dressed with the juicy tomatoes and long, skinny, and peppers. Patrons add their own raw onion wedges, salt, pepper and lemon from a crude wooden shelf on the railing and join the throngs milling about the ferry landing, enjoying these delicious sandwiches.

At the opposite end of the dining spectrum, every city deserves a restaurant like Balıkci Sabahattin, (Cankurtaran/Sultanahmet, tel. 0212 458 1824) a short but tricky, walk from the Yesil Ev Hotel. This outdoor restaurant, reached from a stairway off a quiet street, has been cooking fish since 1927. On the night we attended, soft pashmina shawls were draped over the backs of chairs, in case anyone needed one, and a brazier on a metal table with lemon halves strewn on it glowed cozily nearby. Candlelit tables were covered with pliant, pale yellow linen. The wait staff spoke very little English but they didn't need to because they dealt with no menus and no wine list. Customers merely specified the color, and a fruity, aromatic Turkish white or a pretty beaujolais-like Turkish red appeared, wines for seafood. We chose first courses from a tray laden with creamy, smoky, eggplant; the sweetest roasted red peppers; small shrimp in lemon and olive oil; tiny marinated fish filets; a rice and mussel salad scented gently with cinnamon; and a chopped salad topped with long pickled yellow chiles. Then the waiter brought two hot starters, rings of calamari fried in olive oil with yogurt dipping sauce; and a ramekin of tiny shrimp in a buttery, red chile-infused sauce.

We selected fish from a display that looked as if it came straight from the fish market. In fact while we were eating, the restaurant's little delivery truck drove up and poured a plastic jug of live, flapping fish and seawater into a tub on the cobblestone street in front of the restaurant. Of course we chose one of them and others--small, fried rouget which are not local, white-fleshed bluefish and a delicious bonito, which are.

Watermelon and aromatic black grapes ended the meal accompanied with a honey soaked semolina cake. All the food tasted bright and alive; full flavor had been coaxed out of every

ingredient. The meal cost \$35 a person, with lots of wine and tip, about three times the price of most restaurant dinners in Turkey.

Istanbul is full of intriguing eating opportunities on all levels from the street on up, but perhaps my favorite of all is Ciya, an informal cafeteria-like restaurant where patrons choose dishes from hot and cold display kitchens, and the cooks dish them up. What sets Ciya apart is the refinement of the cooking and the originality of the recipes developed by chef/owner Musa Dagdeviren, who happens to be coming, with translator, to teach and cook at the Worlds of Flavor Conference at the CIA at Greystone in the Napa Valley November 6-8.

Ciya is not a place a visitor would find on her own. Paula Wolfert, the renowned cookbook author and expert on the foods of the Eastern Mediterranean tipped me off. It happens to be located on the Asian side of Istanbul. We took the Kadikoy ferry across the Bosphorus (forgoing another fish sandwich), a short and delightful ride, and then walked uphill to a narrow pedestrian street. Even our Turkish-speaking guide had to ask directions. As it turns out, there are two Ciyas, a kofteci, which specializes in grilled meatballs and vegetables, and across the street, a Ciya Sofrasi with hot and cold, ready-to-eat food. Both were cheerful, modern and packed.

We tried almost everything and one dish was more delicious than the next, layered with flavor and aroma, always surprising and exotic, yet masterfully balanced.

I still think about Ciya's muhammara: breadcrumbs, pomegranate, ground local, sweet peanuts (the secret ingredient) and Maras pepper, one of the best dishes in the world; and thick, delicately garlicky yogurt with soft white wheatberries, a textural poem. On the hot side, I fell in love with a casserole of small, savory meatballs, sour cherries and soaked, chewy cubes of flat bread in a subtle sweet and sour sauce, a dish of Syrian lineage. We ate meat-stuffed, dried eggplants, which looked like mushrooms; and luscious chicken kebabs, exceptionally juicy, arranged on a bed of smoky pureed eggplant, kiwi (another secret ingredient) and yogurt. The combination was sublime. When patlican kebab arrived from across the street, the chef showed us how to scrape the creamy flesh from charred cylinders of eggplant and from the fiery green peppers. He wrapped them in soft, hot, chewy lavash, made in-house, with grilled meatballs, salt and pepper and pieces of raw onion. What a combo!

We drank oregano tea as a digestif; nibbled on a plate of syrup preserved fruits--green walnuts, pumpkin, tomato and citron-- topped with thick cream. We threw down tiny glasses of fresh, tart, grape juice, and ended with an espresso of roasted pistachios called menegis, soothing, toasty, grainy, slightly sweet, and actually reminiscent of thick Turkish coffee. The feast came to \$11 a person.

On the walk back to the ferry, we passed a honey store with bees flying free, two baklava shops, a spice shop and lots of produce stalls. I guess it's no surprise that the great Ciya is located on a food street. As far as I'm concerned, Istanbul is a city made up of food streets, my kind of town.