

# Asmalı Canım Ciğirim, İlhan Usta: Liver and Gossip

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**T**hese days, along with döner kebabs, Turkey's biggest export is the soap opera. From Athens to Abu Dhabi, people are hungry for these sultry and often scandalous one-hour dramas. We too enjoy some good intrigue, and following the back-story of the Istanbul restaurant scene, which often plays out like a season finale of "The Foreign Groom."

On a recent stroll down İstiklal Caddesi, we spotted the newly opened Asmalı Canım Ciğirim, featuring İlhan Usta at the grill, and smelled a story. For years, we have been receiving our liver fix at a restaurant of the same exact name just around the corner in the Asmalimescit area. So we decided to stop in for some grilled liver and gossip.

We immediately recognized a few of the old crew standing awkwardly at a long grill with a funhouse mirror over the hood, which distorts one's body, making us all look like plump sausages. Refugees from the leafy garden of the Asmalimescit location, we stood uncomfortably in the bluish light of the new shop's energy efficient lighting trying to act as if nothing had changed.

What happened?

It took some prodding, but eventually, the manager explained, İlhan Usta, the grill master whose name and presumably wisdom were behind the ever-tasty liver at the original spot, had a falling out with his old boss. The two decided to go their separate ways, İlhan Usta taking his name and the owner of the old shop keeping the liver business alive under the name Asmalı Canım Ciğirim.

As the story unraveled, we wrapped five skewers of freshly grilled liver with the contents of about a dozen small plates of bitter greens, onion with sumac and ezme. Our hands worked automatically, sliding tender juicy liver bits off of the skewer with a handful of thin lavas, and then loading it with crisp arugula. But while the crew here seems to have transplanted the flavor of the old Canım Ciğirim, the vibe was distinctly different. Perhaps it was the absence of the "asma" (the "Asmalı" part of the name

The story of Asmalı Canım Ciğirim is a peculiar one. [IstanbulEats](#) unravels the story and discover restaurant's history. They enjoy some good intrigue, and following the back-story of the Istanbul restaurant scene, which often plays out like a season finale of 'The Foreign Groom.'



**VENUE:** Asmalı Canım Ciğirim, featuring İlhan Usta at the grill, and smelled a story and grilled liver.



For weeks, we were still troubled by the split and where we stood on the subject. If the liver is roughly the same in quality, where did our loyalty rest: with the usta or with the place filled with warm memories?

We discussed the situation with a local vendor of pirated DVDs, who also happened to be a former kebapçı. He said, "Look, Canım Ciğirim kept the same green grocer, same butcher, same waiters. So what's the difference? İlhan Usta is just a brand. He's not sitting at the grill you know."

We found peace in this former grillman's insight. Once a successful kitchen is set up, it doesn't require the grandmaster of liver to keep it going. On the contrary, it would take the determination of a new boss to ruin that kitchen. So, in the end, we didn't have to take sides in the battle for Canım Ciğirim. We remain loyal only to good liver, wherever it may be found.

promises vine-laden pergola), making us think of a "biergarten" with no "garten."

Days later, we went back to the old Canım Ciğirim, the one with the garden and outdoor seating, and found the liver much as it had been before İlhan Usta's departure. Many of the old staff seemed to have survived the split. On a Wednesday afternoon it was bumping, business as usual.

As we polished off our liver, our thoughts strayed back to the exodus of İlhan Usta after 10 years of manning the grill at the old spot. It must have been quite a row, which actually ripped the name of the place in two, one owner maintaining the pergola and the other keeping the title of İlhan Usta.

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