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An unusual book about Turkish cuisine has just hit the shelves of Istanbul bookstores. It has been recently reviewed in Turkish newspapers and is a hot topic on a number of expatriate forums. While discussions of "Istanbul Eats, Exploring the Culinary Backstreets" feature the contents of the book itself, we learned a little about its two expatriate authors. I first hastily met them last week at a rather hectic book launch in Galata, but later had the pleasure of sitting down with them in a quiet restaurant in Sultanahmet to learn more about them both between sips of Texas sweet iced tea.

What piqued my curiosity was why on earth two American men would be impelled to author a book about eating in

the backstreets of Istanbul. The history of the book begins with a blog started last year. No, that's not quite right. The inception of the book actually began eight years ago when Yigal Schliefer and Ansel Mullins met casually at expatriate functions during their first weeks in the city. From those meetings grew a friendship based on some common past experiences and current interests.

When they moved to Istanbul within weeks of each other, Yigal was fresh from New York City and Ansel hailed from his native Chicago. Experienced big-city dwellers, they easily fell into what they both describe as the complex but laidback pace and rhythm of Istanbul life. Ansel

now resides in Tarlabasi, "a village ghetto-land" reminiscent of his former South Side neighborhood. Here he "really enjoys idle chatter. I have at least six or seven brief chats with total strangers every day." Yigal, now settled in Galata with his wife and two Turkish-born children, states that "actually, there are a lot of similarities between New York and Istanbul -- both vibrant, cosmopolitan cultural and commercial hubs and crossroads." Galata reminds him of his residence in New York City's East Village -- a former historically significant Jewish neighborhood, hit by hard times, now coming back to prosperity. He enjoys "the pedestrian traffic, the fact that everybody knows everybody... and of course there is the View!"

Both men came with an interest in Turkey's rich cultural and conflict-filled political history and with a desire to immerse themselves in its current events. Their timing was perfect. Yigal, already a freelance journalist, recalls that he landed the day before the 2002 elections, "I hit the ground running." Ansel and his wife had come in search of adventure; they found that quest satisfied immediately.

Making a living has proven no problem for either. Ansel acts as both a real estate consultant and as a consultant for the restoration of traditional Turkish homes. He also co-hosts a weekly radio show on Akis Radyo called "Soul Sendikası" (94.9 on your radio dial). While the commentary is in Turkish, the musical content is primarily the golden oldies of Motown and American Rhythm and Blues. Yigal pursues his journalistic career by publishing in the prestigious Christian Science Monitor, UPA and the Internet blog Istanbul Calling, the latter with a concentration on Turkish politics and foreign policy.

JUST WHO WROTE THE NEW BOOK ABOUT FOOD?

Ansel and Yigal grew frustrated with responding to all the e-mails from home asking about Turkish food and even more frustrated with constant references to the same old, same-old eating establishments listed in the guide books and online advisories so they rolled up their sleeves

Journalist Yigal Schliefer (right) and real estate consultant Ansel Mullins have been sharing their best culinary finds through their Website Istanbul Eats for over a year, a project that has culminated in their book.

Neither expatriate experienced much culture shock, both being intellectually prepared. Yigal gives some credit for his ease of adjustment to the fact that he had lived as a child for some years in Israel. However, both miss a few things from their former lives. For Yigal, it is "the lack of good, affordable wine!" Ansel deplors "the lack of Mexican food!"

That brings us back to the inception of the blog and the topic of their recent book -- where to eat great Turkish food!

What a wonderful revelation to discover that a friend who shares your academic curiosity also shares an avocation -- that of being a passionate eater! What if you grew up exploring your hometown, your city, through its restaurants? What if you learned about other cultures through sampling taste treats rather than strolling through museums? What if you found yourself in a foreign land which offered what you consider some of the best native cuisine in the world? Of course, the two of you would go out and eat together.

When any of us go out for a fine dining experience anywhere, we don't want to keep it to ourselves. We want to tell all our friends about it. Ansel and Yigal grew frustrated with responding to all the e-mails from home asking about Turkish food and even more frustrated with constant references to the same-old, same-old, ever-too-well-known, eating establishments listed in the guide books and online advisories. They decided to try the off-the-beaten-track eateries, the places that Turks eat.

The following tale is an exclusive for Today's Zaman. The idea of telling the story of Istanbul through its food was born over lunch. Sitting in Pera Sisore (see page 100 of the book!), a small restaurant dedicated to serving the traditional dishes of its Black Sea owners, the pair of intrepid eaters had a mutual epiphany. "Let's do this," they exclaimed over savory sauces. "We gotta tell people; we have to tell the world about this food!" Although arguing about the purpose of their incipient blog, the duo had a bit of a wrangle about what to name it. Yigal proposed "EatIstanbul," but Ansel won out with "Istanbul Eats," a name that suggests that all Istanbulites can and do enjoy the places recommended.

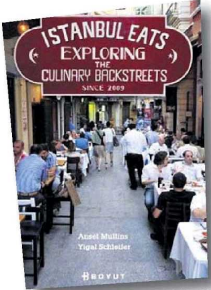
Nothing like the resultant website had existed before. Most travel advisories about Turkey give advice about hotels, tourism and such -- many based on travelers' experiences, with individual commentaries on places in which they ate. All good and well and welcomed by people who plan ahead. Yet tourists and expats are often looking for something a little bit different, something to write home about.

According to Yigal, "We launched the website www.istanbuleats.com in April of last year, after finding that the kinds of places we liked to eat were not making it into the guidebooks.

We thought there's a world of rich food culture in Istanbul that deserves to be promoted and that visitors to the city (and local residents, too) would love to discover. We find the places we discuss in the website and the book through a combination of years of eating around the city, doing detective work, getting tips from friends and being on a constant lookout for new and interesting spots."

Ansel points out that the book was a basic goal as websites are transient. He sees himself as "the Don King of Turkish culture. I promote it, heavily. I see our website and especially the book as devices for this promotion."

Join Ansel and Yigal as they eat their way through Istanbul. "Istanbul Eats, Exploring the Culinary Backstreets" is now available for only TL 12 at the airports, at Robinson Crusoe, DNR, other English-language bookstores on Istiklal Caddesi in Taksim, at the newsstand at the uphill entrance to the Tünel funicular and at Java Café in Sultanahmet. Compact and complete with descriptions of food specialties, maps and tempting photo shots of tasty treats, this little book is one I will henceforth carry with me.



"Istanbul Eats: Exploring the Culinary Backstreets" shares the best food finds on the backstreets of Istanbul.

