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TURKISH BANQUETS FIT FOR A SULTAN IN İSTANBUL

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İstanbul is a city in love with its food. Wherever you go you are surrounded by street sellers hawking snacks. The UK has its ice cream vans and the US has its hot dog vendors, but İstanbul outdoes them all with its mobile food. Corn on the cob down by the ferry docks, rice and beans outside the bank, a bag of sunflower seeds in the neighborhood park, fresh walnuts still in their shells outside a top tourist attraction, roasted chestnuts on the street corner and fish sandwiches bobbing up and down in a boat on the Bosphorus.

Even stuck in a traffic queue on the motorway you are not far from a snack. Intrepid sellers of sesame bread rings or honey-filled wafers work their way in between the lanes of traffic to satisfy the needs of hungry motorists and their passengers.

Feeding a city of over 12 million people is no easy feat -- it must take an army of cooks! Many of these are housewives or busy working moms, but eating out is a popular and reasonably cheap pastime.

If you need more than a quick snack to tide you over until you get home, again you have plenty of choice. Some of the mobile carts have cooking facilities in them, meaning that they are mini mobile kitchens. A gas-fired grill can heat köfte meatballs out on the street-corner, plus a few tomatoes and pepper to make your sandwich just perfect.

Of course, İstanbul has its five-star hotels with luxury restaurants, too. Roof-top restaurants with amazing views over the Bosphorus present the best of cuisine, at prices that reflect the fact they are in vogue this season. Their clientele are businessmen, the rich and tourists, and often their menus feature items that can be found anywhere in the world -- only the presence of rakı and Turkish coffee giving any clue that you are in Turkey.

Most İstanbul eating guides just cover this segment of the restaurant offerings of İstanbul. International magazines devote pages to

these fashionable restaurants, proving that their food and drink editor did not stray too far from the comfort of his or her hotel.

But there is a whole world out there of Turkish culinary excellence just waiting to be discovered by the foreign traveler. I learned very early on when I came to Turkey to ask my local friends where they would go to eat if they wanted, say, a great soup, or a good piece of lamb, or a delicious Turkish dessert.

For in the main streets, the side streets and back streets of İstanbul lie hundreds and hundreds of restaurants. Many of these are traditional family businesses that have been serving up excellent fare to their customers for decades. They are well known to the locals who flock to them for a good meal, often cooked just "like their mother used to." They are frequented not because they have flash décor, or a stunning view, or because a top model or football star may be at the next table, but because the food is simply excellent.

Some may look like a hole-in-the-wall, but they have no airs and graces. Just great food at great prices. But in order to sort the gems from the hole-in-the-wall dives, you needed a local to guide you.

That is, until Ansel Mullins and Yigal Schleifer decided to share a few years' worth of their experience in the restaurant guide that celebrates these best-kept secrets. The two have been interviewed a few times for Today's Zaman, so I won't repeat too much of their background. Suffice it to say that their blog on the subject became so popular it convinced them that many people were searching for just the information they had.

They say: "This book got its start naturally over lunch, when we asked ourselves a simple question: Why are small, traditional eateries -- where some of the best meals in İstanbul await -- so often overlooked? Why in a city with such excellent culinary backstreets, are

those areas and their bounty of good food so rarely explored and celebrated?"

To be honest, the answer to that question can only be that, in many ways, rather than celebrating their differences, Turks feel the need to show foreign guests that Turkey has the same facilities as you find in any European capital. The visiting businessman will be taken to a restaurant serving international cuisine, to impress.

But one insurance company executive I know is different. His favorite fish restaurant is not one that juts out into the Bosphorus, or plays foreign pop music, or has funky pictures of sea

creatures etched into glass panels, or an expensive wine list. Nor is it possible to park an expensive limousine right outside. So his international guests get to walk a few blocks around the backstreets of Karaköy towards the Golden Horn. They walk past stalls selling fish so fresh it was swimming only a couple of hours ago. They turn in a little alleyway and climb a few steps to reach a restaurant that, on two floors, has no more than 15 tables, not one empty, as this restaurant does the best fried fish in the neighborhood. The secret is the food not the ambience. Ansel and Yigal would approve.

In "İstanbul Eats" they divide the city up into six areas (I am delighted to note they don't ignore the Asian side) and present six to a dozen choices for each. Most of the restaurants selected are popular for just one type of food: meatballs, or soup, or liver or fish, and they concentrate on this specialty. In many of them, don't expect to get a long menu. The clientele come for one delight, and one delight only. For example, Köfteci Hüseyin at Upper Beyoğlu: "Enter this humble shoe-box of an eatery and before you can grab a seat you will be asked, 'One portion or one-and-a-half?' Shortly thereafter, 'Side of beans?'"

The authors know their food, and describe with relish the eating experience in each res-

taurant good enough to make it into their guide. Some of their comments can be a bit flip-pant and American-centric -- "what Denny's restaurant must have looked like in Ottoman times," "a mom and pop shop" -- but this is very much a personal selection, and reads like two friends are taking you out to their favorite place: on the way there they are trying to set the scene so you know what to expect.

This is an unpretentious guide: the only qualification for entry is excellent food. Whilst other guides think the only spots of Bagdat Caddesi on the Asian side are those franchises with raised decking outside so that customers can see and be seen, Ansel and Yigal take us to a small Adana Kebapçısı with a plain shop front near the railway line at Bostancı. "With its walls lined with photographs and the tiny vine-laden terrace upstairs, the place feels like a local clubhouse... What's their secret? As the grill man explained: 'For 35 years we've been making Adana Kebab from good fresh meat, with sumac and onions on the side and fresh lavas. That's the way it's done in Adana, so that's how we do it.'"

That seems to be the secret to superb food that qualifies as popular for the locals -- no fancy gimmicks, just do it like it is supposed to be done!

Some of the maps are a bit local, so you have to know the general area to be able to find the establishment from the map in the book. But, hey, these places are so popular with Turks that ask anyone in a nearby street and they should be able to direct you. I also would have liked some kind of a price guide.

But whether it is meat, fish, offal or dessert that you are after, the authors love their food so much that they deserve to have their recommendations taken seriously. You are unlikely to be disappointed, unless of course you value slick decorations over pure wonderful food.

"İstanbul Eats: Exploring the Culinary Backstreets," by Ansel Mullins and Yigal Schleifer, Published by Boyut Yayıncılık (2010), TL 11.90 in paperback ISBN: 978-975230720-9