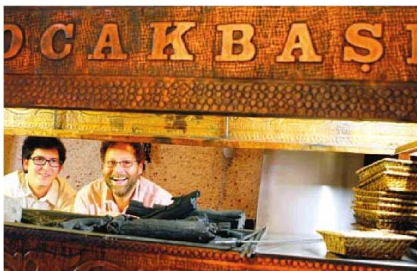




Two Americans make their way through İstanbul, one bite at a time



Yigal Schleifer (L), a free-lance journalist, and Ansel Mullins, who works in real estate and historic restoration, conduct serious fieldwork when searching for İstanbul's culinary hot spots.

GÜLİZAR BAKİ İSTANBUL

Yigal Schleifer and Ansel Mullins say they pound the pavement instead of searching for a good place to eat on Google, finding culinary gems that they then share with the world on www.istanbuleats.com.

At the end of June, they are planning to publish a book in which they will share the flavor of İstanbul.

Schleifer and Mullins are two Americans who have been living in İstanbul for the past eight years. With pen, notepad and camera at the ready, they pound the pavement of İstanbul's searching out hidden corners of deliciousness. You know those esnaf (tradesmen's) restaurants which nobody knows of in off-the-beaten-track, obscure corners of İstanbul -- the sort of places that tourists never stop by? They have taken it upon themselves to find those places and pass that information along so nobody is deprived of good food in this wonderful city. They make a habit of eating and chatting with the owner and waiters wherever they are. After exploring the story behind the food and the restaurant they share it online on their website, which is available in both Turkish and English.

They have such a fun approach to their reviews and do such a good job of describing the ambiance and flavors of places that you can't help but feel that you absolutely must give them a taste test of your own. Impressed by their review of an esnaf restaurant they discovered at the Karaköy Persembé Bazaar, tourists from Japan sought out the restaurant. The owner of the restaurant was so shocked that he told the two: "Two Japanese tourists arrived last week. I was really surprised!" And how could he not be? This quaint little place, which is generally only frequented by nearby merchants and junk dealers in the area, now plays host to tourists from across the globe. Truthfully, it is becoming increasingly common for people to travel across the world to satisfy their taste buds.

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Cultured food buffs on the scene

Mullins, who works in real estate and historic restoration in addition to hosting a weekly radio show, "Soul Sendikası," says that gourmet tourism is on the rise. Tourists of this sort are referred to as "foodies." Such people have no qualms

about packing up to visit another corner of the world just for the food.

Schleifer, a freelance journalist, says that food is a window which explains a culture to the world and adds that "foodies travel in order to see a particular culture through this window of taste." The rise in foodies reflects the fact that people visit countries not just to see historical artifacts, natural wonders and museums but also to witness how people are living and what it is that they fuel themselves with. This is why there has been a surge in the number of blogs that review small restaurants. Nowadays fewer people pay attention to advertisements in newspapers and magazines, which are glossy and far from authentic.

İstanbul's taste detectives, Mullins and Schleifer, make sure to catch every last detail of the spots they feature and in trying to track down unique places they make sure to talk to a wide array of sources, including cab drivers, the ustas (repairmen) that visit their houses, shopkeepers and their Turkish friends. Just hearing, "There's this great Kastamonu pideci in Tahtakale," is enough for them to set out on a journey. Their reason for creating www.istanbuleats.com was to let everyone know that Turkish food is not just about kebabs and döner. They say: "Turkish cuisine is vast and specific to this region. For us, it's a wonderful thing waiting to be discovered." Both food enthusiasts arrived in İstanbul in 2002; Schleifer's children were born here. He reports on Turkey and the region and his work is published in The New York Times and The Washington Post. As for Mullins, whose Turkish is quite impressive, he came here with his wife and even though each year they would say it was their last year here, they continue to reside in İstanbul. Mullins is involved in the restoration of historical buildings in the Beyoğlu area.

And the classic question, "Which foods are your favorite?" just had to be asked. It was tough for them to answer. After a long pause, during which all of the Turkish kitchen's best items flashed before their eyes, such as mantı, içli köfte, tantuni, büryan kababı and perde pilavı, Mullins went with çig kebabı. Schleifer opted for tantuni. They skipped over the classic kebab, döner and baklava, because these foods are readily available in North America.