

HOLIDAY

INTERNATIONAL TRAVEL AND STYLE REVIEW

ISTANBUL

N° 391

FR. € 24
UK. £ 22
KD-391 H-F: 24,00€ - AL



HOLIDAY

A SPRING/SUMMER 23 ISSUE DEVOTED TO ISTANBUL

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International Distribution NEW EXPORT PRESS *Photoengraving* MANDARINE

Social networks: INSTAGRAM [instagram.com/holidaymagazine](https://www.instagram.com/holidaymagazine) FACEBOOK [facebook.com/magazineholiday](https://www.facebook.com/magazineholiday)

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NO. 391 COVER

This issue has five different covers. *From left to right:* Mehdi wears pullover by Loro Piana, photo by Felipe Romero Beltrán. Wall by Mario Sorrenti. Angelina Kendall wears total look by Louis Vuitton, photo by Robin Galieue. Beylerbeyi Palace's garden by Jean Marie del Moral. Steinberg, photo by Mario Sorrenti. Reproduction of any part of this publication, including all logos, titles and graphic elements, is strictly prohibited without prior permission from the publishers. All rights reserved. Copyright March 2023 by Holiday Deluxe.



SPECIAL THANKS TO

Pierre Leroy, Thomas Schwab, Serdar Gulgun, Barış Çetin at Noe Production, Sophie Marcellhacq @ Magnum photos; Kutluk Toktamış @ Production Istanbul; Björn Frederic Gerling @ Production Berlin, Irem Tonga.

COLOPHON

Holiday is printed on Fedrigoni Arena extra white smooth 100gsm (inside pages) and Constellation Snow Fiandra E34 - 280gsm (cover). The paper comes from sustainably managed forests. It was printed in March 2023 at the Frazier press located in Paris 75010 (France), using LED offset printing for the cover and the inside pages. This publication is typeset using the Bodoni BE, Adobe Caslon and Berthold Akzidenz Grotesk typefaces.

HOLIDAY
is published by Holiday Deluxe
To subscribe, please contact:
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BOUCHERON

PARIS SINCE 1858

MEMORY IN A BOWL

For many people in Turkey, there's no better way to begin the day than with a bowl of soup.

This humble yet infinitely variable meal also makes a great starting point for exploring the country's culinary and cultural history.

by Jennifer Hattam

● The southeastern Turkish city of Gaziantep is famed across the country and beyond for its succulent kebabs and buttery baklava, but for many “Antepilers,” as the locals are known, this culinary capital’s real gustatory treasure is *beyran*, a rich, spicy, fire-red broth swimming with slow-cooked lamb meat, rice, chili paste and garlic. It is most commonly eaten at breakfast time, giving a real kick-start to the day for the traders and craftspeople slurping down a steaming bowl in the city’s historic bazaar, where small restaurants have been serving it up for more than a century.

“People from outside Antep call it soup, but for us it’s a main dish; it’s just beyran,” says Filiz Hösükoğlu, a native of the city who works as a freelance consultant on culinary culture. She remembers her mother making the soup at home on such special occasions as after the Muslim feast of Kurban Bayramı (Eid al-Adha), when there was plenty of meat available. She would cook lamb necks and other excess pieces for hours. On regular days, Hösükoğlu recalls, her mother would take whatever she had on hand—day-old bread, leftover rice—and use it as the basis for other soups.

“Soup is humble, fulfilling comfort food that is very adaptable to what you have in the kitchen and what’s available seasonally and regionally.

I like to say that it wears a lot of different dresses,” Hösükoğlu says. “It also feeds you quickly compared with other foods; from the first spoonful of soup, you start feeling nourished. I don’t know, maybe it’s something psychological.”

Soup looms large in personal and cultural memory and in the contemporary diet in Turkey, where it has a history dating back centuries, if not millennia. The Turkish word for soup, *çorba*, comes from the Persian *orba* and has spread into Balkan languages like Bulgarian and Romanian as *chorba* or *ciorbă*. In Turkey, *çorba* is eaten—or “drunk,” as you would say in Turkish—for breakfast, lunch and dinner in cities and villages, by the rich and the poor, and associated with both religious occasions like the fast-breaking meal during Ramadan and boozy nights out on the town. Though they can be made from a wide variety of ingredients—legumes, grains, vegetables, meat—soups in Turkey are almost always thick and hearty.

Says culinary historian Mary Işın, the author of *Bountiful Empire: A History of Ottoman Cuisine* (Reaktion Books, 2018): “In Western Europe, ‘soup,’ *suppe*,’ or *zuppa*’ came from the old German word for meat broth with bread in it. So there was no term in these languages for the Turkish *çorba* that foreign travelers to the Ottoman Empire encountered.

They just used the word ‘*çorba*’ in their 16th-century accounts.” Still-used idioms in Turkish relating to soup attest to its importance. “*Çorbada tuzu olmak*” means to help or contribute in a small way—literally, to be the salt in the soup. “*Çorba parası*,” or “soup money,” is usually used to refer to an entreaty for charity, or an expectation of a bribe. Another expression, “*kazan kaldırmak*,” to lift the cauldron, means to mutiny or rebel, after a storied practice in the Ottoman era.

From the mid-14th to early 19th centuries, soldiers known as the Janissaries formed the elite corps of the Ottoman Army. Organized around a metaphorical kitchen system, the highest-ranking members were known as *çorbacı*, or soup chefs. The Janissaries took their meals provided by the sultan from a shared cauldron (*kazan*), which they carried with them in ceremonial parades and on their military campaigns; their uniform hats had a special slot in front for holding their soup spoons. As they grew more powerful, the Janissaries engaged in much-feared revolts and would signal the beginning of a new rebellion by overturning their soup cauldron as a sign of their dissatisfaction with the sultan who fed them.

“Soup was the staple food for soldiers and the lower classes, mainly made of whole-wheat grains, rice, lentils, beans or yogurt, maybe with some meat,” says Işın, citing records kept on the schools that trained young Janissaries and the *imarthane* (public soup kitchens) that were attached to large mosques. “But soups for the wealthier classes were amazingly varied,” she adds.

Though few written recipes from the period exist, notes and lists of ingredients from palace accounts establish that at least 30 different kinds of soups were consumed by Sultan Mehmet II, the 15th-century ruler who conquered Istanbul (then Constantinople) for the Ottomans. “I came to the conclusion that he was definitely a gourmet who was encouraging his chefs to be experimental,” Işın says. “Some of the things Mehmet ate never appeared again in written records.”

Soups served at Mehmet’s table included apricot soup with parsley, cabbage soup with cheese, and yogurt soup with chard, as well as soups made with a nearly endless list of different kinds of vegetables. Most were flavored with some kind of sour ingredient, be it plums, pomegranate juice, unripe grape juice or lemon juice, according to Işın’s research.

Later Ottoman-era records mention a chicken soup made with chickpeas, cinnamon and dill; other chicken soups contained lemon juice, eggs and almonds; or onions, pepper, chickpeas, lemon juice, parsley, cinnamon and ginger. A fish soup served at a diplomatic banquet in 1649 featured grey mullet, onions, black pepper, parsley, saffron, vinegar, olive oil, clarified butter, honey, sugar and almonds.

Though some flavor combinations have gone out of fashion, Turkish soups remain remarkably diverse, thanks to a rich regional food culture. An academic research paper from 2015 catalogs 124 different kinds of soups, ranging from a sweet soup made with rosehip, raisins, groats, dried beans, figs and plums in the mountainous northern city of Bayburt to a tahini-and-chickpea soup from the southern coastal city of Mersin.

“Your cuisine is based on what’s available to you and your living conditions; when we are talking about the origins of food, we are talking about geography, not nationality,” says Gonca Karakoç, a tour guide with Culinary Backstreets in Istanbul. She believes that the Turkish fondness for soup comes from a deep, unconscious connection with history.

“These hearty soups [we eat today] originate from our nomadic past, when our ancestors ate things like yogurt and meat [from their herds], and grains and different types of legumes that were storable for a long time and were full of different sources of protein,” she says. “You eat these soups with bread; it’s filling, and that’s all you need to stay strong and alive. Then, in time you get sophisticated and start making things like little meatballs or *mantı* [small dumplings] with the meat.”

Historical lines can be drawn even further back, says Işın. “In the Neolithic period, people in Anatolia were making porridge out of barley or wheat, and we’re still eating variations on this [as soups] today,” she says. Cultivation of wheat, one of the first crops to be domesticated, originated 10,000 years ago in the part of the world that includes southeastern Turkey and is sometimes known as the “Fertile Crescent.”

Some early Islamic scholars interpreted the story of mankind’s expulsion from paradise as an allegory for the advent of farming and decline of hunter-gathering, with the “forbidden fruit” not an apple, but wheat, which changed life in the region, explains Işın. “Wheat soup was believed to be the first cooked meal eaten by Adam and Eve after they got kicked out of the Garden of Eden,” she says. “That’s why wheat soup in Turkish is called *baba çorbası* or ‘father soup,’ after Adam, the father of mankind.”

Today, Turkish soups fall broadly into three main categories: those based on grains and pulses, yogurt soups, and offal soups. In terms of ubiquity, the clear winner is *mercimek çorbası*, a soothing soup typically made from red or yellow lentils that is found on restaurant menus, canteen counters and kitchen tables all across the country. According to data published last year by the popular food-delivery website Yemeksepeti, *mercimek çorbası* was the most-ordered soup in all 70 Turkish cities where the company operates.

“Mercimek is one of the archetypal Turkish soups, made at home and in restaurants; you’ll find it in any village you go to,” says food writer Aylin Öney Tan. The classic Istanbul version is smooth and creamy, something Tan says dates back to the “fondness in palace-style cooking for *süzme* [strained] soups.” (Today, most cooks use a blender to achieve the desired effect.) The finishing touch in the kitchen is a swirl of drizzled paprika oil or butter; a squeeze of lemon or a dash of red pepper flakes (*pul biber*) is often added at the table. Especially in winter time, it’s common to see people eating lentil soup for breakfast on their way to work.

Another popular lentil-based soup is *ezogelin*, which incorporates bulgur and hot pepper. “Ezogelin is basically the Antep-style version of *mercimek*,” says Tan. “The name didn’t exist before people from Gaziantep came to Istanbul, opened restaurants there, and wanted a way to differentiate their soup from the Istanbul version.”

Even within the same region, the seemingly simple lentil soup contains multitudes. “Whenever I eat *mercimek*—at a restaurant, at a friend’s home—it never repeats its taste, it’s always unique to the cook,” says Hösükoğlu. “My mother and my mother-in-law, two of the great cooks in my life, were both from the same town [in Gaziantep] and the same socioeconomic background, but had totally different approaches to their cooking. My mother never used flour to give a creamy texture to her soups, for example, while my mother-in-law preferred to add some.”

Yogurt soups are another distinctive category of Turkish soups that have been popular for centuries. A 17th-century yogurt soup served at the Ottoman palace was cooked with clarified butter, meat, onions and chickpeas, according to Işın's research. A refined version of yogurt soup called *düğün çorbası* (wedding soup), which includes lamb meat and egg yolk, is still often served at banquets and other celebratory occasions.

Originating in nomadic traditions, yogurt soups are sometimes called *yayla çorbası* after the high pastures (*yayla*), where herders still graze their animals in the summer months. "People in these areas made soups to use up the yogurt left over after churning it into butter; it's a zero-waste approach," says Hösükoğlu. Yogurt soups must be cooked on low heat to keep them from getting too sour, lest that tartness dominate all other flavors in the dish. In the summer, some yogurt soups—often studded with chickpeas and wheat, and seasoned with dill—are served over ice and eaten cold.

Sweet soups are another distinctive element of the Turkish culinary canon. Hösükoğlu remembers a Gaziantep specialty that her mother used to prepare when she served *ıçlı köfte*, meatballs in a bulgur shell, a dish similar to the Middle Eastern *kibbeh*.

"İçli köfte is a heavy dish, but if you eat it with soup, it helps with digestion and you can serve more people—that's simple home economics," she explains. "My mother would make her *şirinli çorba*—in some parts of Turkey, the word 'şirin' means sweet—by boiling rice until it reached a creamy texture, then adding a little sugar and molasses, and some ground walnuts. We would eat the two together: one bite of içli köfte for every spoonful of soup."

Though soups can be served at every meal and in every setting in Turkey, there are some that are more closely associated with the home while others are more commonly found in restaurants. One of the former is *tarhana*, which Hösükoğlu calls "the mother of readymade soups." With a history dating back centuries, tarhana is prepared in village households across Anatolia as a way of preserving some summer produce for year-round use. The exact recipe varies by region, and even by family, but the basic method calls for combining fresh peppers, tomatoes and spices with flour and yogurt, letting the mixture ferment over the course of a few days, then drying it (traditionally in the sun). The tangy soup is prepared by rehydrating the dried mixture—stored as cakes, rings, or coarse crumbs—and cooking it in broth, typically with some tomato paste, oil or butter, garlic, and dried mint.

It's sometimes served with raw radishes, green onions, or a chunk of onion alongside to nibble on.

"Tarhana was made in huge amounts for the palace stores [larders], and always cooked with garlic; for the sultan, they would add eggs and cheese," says historian Işın. She adds that the soup was so beloved in Ottoman times that the 15th-century poet Mihri Hatun, a member of the same literary circles as Sultan Bayezid II's son, wrote a verse expressing her wish to be "the garlic in tarhana."

Garlicky offal soups such as *işkembe* (tripe) and *kelle paça* (made from sheep or cow heads and trotters), both typically seasoned with strong vinegar, have also endured from the Ottoman kitchen to present-day Turkey. Both are often served today in dedicated "salons," simple restaurants devoted to the soups; *işkembe* in particular is often consumed late at night on the way home from the bars. Tan calls it "the Turkish last rescue before hangover."

In Karakoç's childhood memories, her father's fondness for *işkembe*—a passion not shared by her mother—looms large. "My mother has been cooking this soup for my father for 55 years, and she hates it so much, she doesn't even know what it tastes like," she laughs. "She's holding her nose while she makes it, and used to call me in to try it. So *işkembe* was always a very special space to share something with my father."

Over the past two or three decades, Karakoç says many Turkish families have stopped making offal soups like *işkembe* and *kelle paça* at home. "The meat has to be boiled for a long time, and it really makes the house stinky," she says. "Especially in urban areas, women are not at home cooking all day anymore and because of the smell, there became a class divide associated with these dishes; they were seen by city people as peasant soups."

But in more recent years, she adds, these very old soups are becoming popular anew. "Interestingly, many women I know are starting to make *kelle paça* at home again because of all the collagen in it and its anti-aging properties," Karakoç says.

It's just another example of how tastes may change, but traditions endure.

"If you go to Topkapı Palace, to the harem quarters, you'll notice there's no furniture—an imperial family with an empire on three continents still ate together on the floor because of the nomadic roots they came from," Karakoç says. "I think those same kinds of connections are still there unconsciously for us today; soup is the most soothing dish because we have it in our DNA." **THE END**

A refined version of yogurt soup called düğün çorbası (wedding soup), which includes lamb meat and egg yolk, is still often served at banquets and other celebratory occasions.

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