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SPRING 2015



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*According to the experts, Turkish cuisine is the next big thing for 2015. We travel to Antalya to sample the best of the country's thriving food scene*

# A taste of the Turkish riviera

Words: Kathryn Tomasetti. Photos: Tim E White





**Taking leave**  
Melissa Maples  
visited Antalya on  
a Thomas Cook  
holiday, and never  
returned home

**R**ich, varied and drawing its inspiration from a multi-ethnic Ottoman heritage stretching back thousands of years, Turkish food brings together the best of Asian, European and Middle Eastern flavours. It's sometimes regarded as one of the greatest cuisines in the world – one of the big three alongside French and Chinese – but it hasn't had its time in the spotlight until now. Wayne Edwards, co-founder of trend forecaster *thefoodpeople* ([thefoodpeople.co.uk](http://thefoodpeople.co.uk)), explains. "Middle Eastern cuisine is having a moment," he says. "In particular, I've noticed that Turkish techniques and its complex culinary influences are finally taking pride of place on menus around the globe."

I might be in the minority, but I have to say I'm not surprised. I've spent a lot of time travelling around the country, and I've seen first-hand how obsessed Turks are with eating: weddings, parties and even simple business meetings revolve around food. Take a walk through any weekly market and you'll find stalls piled high with fresh, colourful produce, fragrant spices, nuts and dried fruits, and fish caught that very morning, their crimson gills turned inside out to demonstrate their freshness.

It's no wonder that chefs across the world are suddenly sitting up and taking notice. Yotam Ottolenghi recently made a cook's tour through Turkey, and Gordon Ramsay is a big fan. Last year Massimo Bottura, Italy's number one chef, opened up his first restaurant outside his home country – in Istanbul. But, for an authentic taste of the country, you're better off leaving the city where Europe meets Asia and jetting off to the sun-kissed shores of Antalya, on the Turkish riviera. It's the perfect destination to explore this ancient cuisine, and it doesn't take much convincing for me to pack my bags and get on the plane. ➔

**"Turkish food  
is finally taking  
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**A feast for the senses**  
Fried fish sarnies (right); freshly squeezed pomegranate juice (middle) is available on almost every street corner; Turkish cuisine meets Japanese flavours at Galenus Farm (bottom)

At the weekend, Antalyans head out of town for *koy kahvaltisi* – or village-style – breakfast spreads, consisting of dozens of tiny plates of marinated olives, herby salads, honeycomb, omelette, homemade jams and *gozleme* (savoury stuffed pancakes). It seems only right to start my foodie journey with a hearty breakfast, so I head to Ekol Gurme ([ekolgurme.com](http://ekolgurme.com)) for an urban *koy kahvaltisi* at this family-owned breakfast salon with a gourmet deli bolted on the side. Locals come here for speciality platters of Turkish cheeses, *menemen* (scrambled eggs with tomatoes and peppers), *kaymak* (water buffalo milk clotted cream) and fresh bread, toasted to perfection in the miniature fire pits adjacent to diners' tables.

It's here that I meet up with photographer, blogger and Antalya Insider ([antalyainsider.com](http://antalyainsider.com)) author Melissa Maples. A local resident since 2004, Melissa visited the region on a one-week Thomas Cook holiday (naturally!) and decided to stay on indefinitely.

A decade later, and "dining in Antalya is completely unrecognisable", she says. "When I first moved here, the two main choices were traditional Turkish cuisine and fast food – mostly soggy pizza and microwaved frozen hamburgers. But over the past few years there has been an explosion in the number, variety, and quality of restaurants in Antalya. This year we've had a few new trends, such as doughnuts, luxury ice cream, and *ekmek arasi balik*, which is a fried fish sandwich."

While the Turkish version of a fish finger sarnie might not exactly sound cutting edge, it's certainly hot right now – in the past year well over a dozen eateries specialising in this delicacy have popped up around town. Order one and find out for yourself what the fuss is about: crisp but lightly fried fish (often sardines), layers of sliced onions and tomatoes, lemon juice and a fistful of herbs (such as dill, parsley and rocket) all crammed into a crusty white bun. You'll find some of the most popular ones, including Cidir Balik (*Isiklar*, tel: +90 242 243 9333), lining the Roman wall just outside of Hadrian's Gate in the atmospheric Kaleici, or Old Town. ➔





#### Flavour of the month

7Mehmet is home to all kinds of traditional and experimental Turkish dishes; chef and owner Mehmet Akdag (middle)



Just outside the Kaleici, street-food vendors are dotted along busy Cumhuriyet Caddesi. *Simit* (sesame-studded bread rings), stuffed mussels and freshly squeezed pomegranate juice are for sale on every street corner. “Small businesses serving meatballs, bean salads and pumpkin desserts are extremely popular in Antalya,” says Fahir Telli, the Antalya-based chairman of the Federation of Turkish Chefs. With more than two decades of cooking experience and eight cookbooks under his belt, Fahir is a bit of an expert on all three. He tells me their Turkish names – *sis kofte* (meatballs), *piyaz* (bean, tomato and onion salad) and *kabak tatlisi* (a candied pumpkin dessert) – and sends me in the direction of Piyazci Ahmet ([piyazci Ahmet.com.tr](http://piyazci Ahmet.com.tr)), a no-frills establishment that’s one of the oldest eateries in Antalya. I sit elbow to elbow with workers on their lunchbreaks devouring the most delicious bean salad I’ve ever tasted, which has been given a modern touch with a light and creamy Middle Eastern-style dressing of tahini and garlic.

In the evening, I head to 7Mehmet ([7mehmet.com](http://7mehmet.com)), accessed from Antalya’s 6km Konyaalti public beach, and alongside a seafront promenade backed by cafes, waterpipe gardens and the Beydaglari mountains. This elegant spot has come a long way since head chef and owner Mehmet Akdag’s grandfather first opened his own soup restaurant here during the 1940s. Two terraces now overlook the Mediterranean and each table is dressed with finely starched linen. Seasonal meze appetisers may include artichokes, cucumber yogurt *cacik* and the house calamari, radish and garlic salad. Goat’s cheese – a perfect accompaniment to Turkey’s anise-flavoured firewater, *raki* – has been aged in the caves of nearby Korkuteli. Grouper and swordfish are sourced daily from the moonlit waters twinkling in the distance.

“There’s no way I can pinpoint our most popular dishes,” says Mehmet, when I ask him what he’d recommend. “But try *cive*, an Antalyan dish that we make with aubergine, rice, mint and basil. Alternatively, our lamb tandoori is not only exceptional, but one of our most ➔



popular menu items.” Tandoori? I’m reminded of a conversation I had with Fahir Telli earlier in the day. “Gastronomy is changing fast in Antalya,” he said. “Chefs are adding their own value and wealth into each meal, which causes a lot of diversity and richness.”

The kitchens in Antalya are experimenting with flavours from countries even further flung than India, as Japanese-born foodie Dr Kaori Goto knows well. A professor of medicine and food science, Dr Goto has been dividing her time between Japan and Antalya since 2011. She spent an initial period among the 2,000-year-old ruins of Pergamon,

where she studied the city’s age-old methods of using plants to heal. It was here that she discovered an ancient recipe for *garum*, a fermented sauce made with sardines.

Academics have long assumed that this Roman sauce was no longer used, but after careful research, Dr Goto found that Turkish chefs along the Black Sea still use a variation of *garum* in their cooking. In fact, working together with chef and Black Sea native Hava Bahadir, Dr Goto found the local interest in her project so keen that she opened up a restaurant called Galenus Farm ([galenusantalya.com](http://galenusantalya.com)) in late 2014.

“*Garum* – created from fresh Black Sea sardines – has more umami [a salty, savoury flavour] than any other food,” explains Dr Goto. She has carefully adapted ancient texts to create modern recipes, such as Galenus *kofte* (meatballs served with *garum*, pomegranate vinegar and honey) and *perge lagane* (handmade pasta topped with walnuts, hazelnuts, *garum* and sheep’s cheese).

Nibbling my way through Dr Goto’s timeless creations, I think: if Antalya’s dynamic cuisine is still wowing visitors in another 2,000 years, I wouldn’t be at all surprised. 🍷

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