



Painting of an Ottoman banquet given in Izmit in April 1578 (left); *hunkar begendi* – lamb ragout served on puréed eggplant (above); lamb *külbasti* (below)



STORY ON A PLATE OTTOMAN CUISINE

A long history of fusion

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Recreating Ottoman cuisine is something akin to a food-lover's treasure hunt.

Handwritten recipes from the fallen Turkish empire are extremely elusive. Hidden away in dusty palace archives for centuries, they occasionally pitch up during renovations, or arrive mysteriously on sale at Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. Even when a recipe has been unearthed, it is hard to decipher.

Turkey had swapped Ottoman script – which used a flowery version of the Arabic alphabet – for Latin letters in 1928. Throw in thousands of specific ingredients sourced from across the Ottoman empire (which spanned from Baghdad to Belgrade and took in the north coast of Africa) and you're looking at a culinary challenge.

Nibbling through imperial yahni, a lamb, chicken and chickpea stew infused with cinnamon and currants, I realised the effort was worth it. The 15th-century recipe was created for Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, and hadn't been served for several hundred years. Now the dish has been replicated and is regularly served alongside other such dishes in Asitane Restaurant (asitanerestaurant.com) on the outskirts of Istanbul.

Asitane's owner, Batur Durmay, has sourced hundreds of Ottoman recipes from the kitchens of the Topkapi and Dolmabahçe palaces and memoirs of gastronomic blowouts penned by the city's illustrious visitors and diplomats.

"We used two main source books," says Durmay. "*Dishes from the Era of Mehmet II* and *A Feast's Notebook*. The last one describes the [circumcision] feast for Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent's two sons, Bayezid and Cihangir."

Was it difficult to transform these recipes into modern-day dishes?

"The recipes are not very hard to understand," says Durmay. "But given the period in which they were written, most of them lack quantities, heat sources, type of kitchen utensils and exact cooking times. To get the recipes right, we went through a long period of trial and error." Istanbul's position between East and West meant that for some 500 years it was a crossroads for the exchange of spices such as saffron, cinnamon and cardamom, as well as regionally specific cooking techniques.

In the highly creative environs of the Topkapi Palace (topkapisarayi.gov.tr), the empire's finest chefs produced the most elaborate meals for all-powerful sultans. They tinkered with recipes from the provinces, sourced from as far afield as the Balkans, Egypt and

the Anatolian plains – perfecting what Turks now claim was the world's first fusion cuisine.

After extensive renovations, the palace kitchens are due to open to the public in early 2013. It was here that the *chesnidjibashi* (imperial food taster) sampled new dishes (for flavour and, of course, for poison) before they were served to the sultan.

A harem kitchen lies just alongside where chefs created meals to keep the sultan's concubines looking young and healthy. On the opposite side of the palace, Konyali Lokantasi (konyalilokantasi.com) provides culinary continuity, dishing up Ottoman delights to premier international diners, including royalty, since the late 1960s.

Perhaps the most historical place to dine like a sultan lies just across the Bosphorus. At the Ciragan Palace (kempinski.com), a 19th-



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BATUR DURMAY, OWNER OF ASITANE

LEGENDS BILLI-BI

Mussel-free shellfish indulgence

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This mussel soup served without mussels is often attributed to Craig Claiborne, long-time food editor and critic for *The New York Times*, who penned *The New York Times Cook Book*, first published in 1961.

His recipe for Billi-Bi came from Pierre Franey, head chef at Le Pavillon, recognised as one of the best French restaurants in the country in the couple of decades following the second world war. Franey wrote the *60-Minute Gourmet* recipe column in the same paper.

Mussels are steamed in the shell, giving their flavour to a rich liquor of wine, butter and aromatics before being removed. The soup is finished with cream and beaten egg yolks.

Some say Franey was the creator of the soup, but neither he nor Claiborne ever claimed that. Claiborne called it "conceivably the greatest soup ever created" and suggested it came from Maxim's.

The legend says that Louis Barthe, chef at Maxim's, named the soup after one of his regulars, William Bateman Leeds, as he always started his meals there with the soup. The name of the soup came from his nickname Billy B.

There were two William Bateman Leeds – father and son. Senior founded a tin plate business that made him a fortune, to which Junior was the heir. Both could well have dined at Maxim's. However, if the soup was created by Barthe, it is likely it was named after Junior, as Barthe worked at Maxim's in the 1920s, and Senior died in 1908.



Countess Toulouse-Lautrec, in her book *Chez Maxim's: Secrets and Recipes from the World's Most Famous Restaurant*, says Barthe brought the recipe from another restaurant, *Ciro's* in Deauville, Normandy, where he made it for another "Billy", William Brand. Brand was also American, and a regular at *Ciro's*. One evening he asked Barthe to serve mussels, a local speciality, but in a way that would prevent them from making a mess, and thus the soup was born.

century palace turned five-star hotel, Tugra restaurant dishes up painstakingly researched Ottoman delights. The best way to sample head chef Ahmet Kara's creations – which include lamb *külbasti* with smoked walnuts, or crushed cucumber and pistachios – is to opt for the tasting menu. The meal may be formal, but the mood is kept light. Dishes arrive beneath covers shaped like a grand vizier's hat.

Retracing Ottoman cuisine isn't only about recreating bygone splendours. Didem Senol, chef and owner of acclaimed new venue Lokanta Maya (lokantamaya.com), says techniques used in Ottoman cuisine have also influenced modern Turkish cuisine.

"Ottoman cuisine was based on slow cooking," she explains. "The roasts and the vegetables were cooked for hours at low temperatures, causing their very intense flavours to come together. I cook lamb for seven hours, which makes it exceptionally tender."

Ottoman standards for flavour balance hold just as true today. "There weren't any tomatoes in the country at that time, so acidity was provided by seasonal fruits," says Senol. "In our restaurant, we do the same, preparing veal and quince stew, rice with almonds and apricots, stuffed bonito with pine nuts and currants."