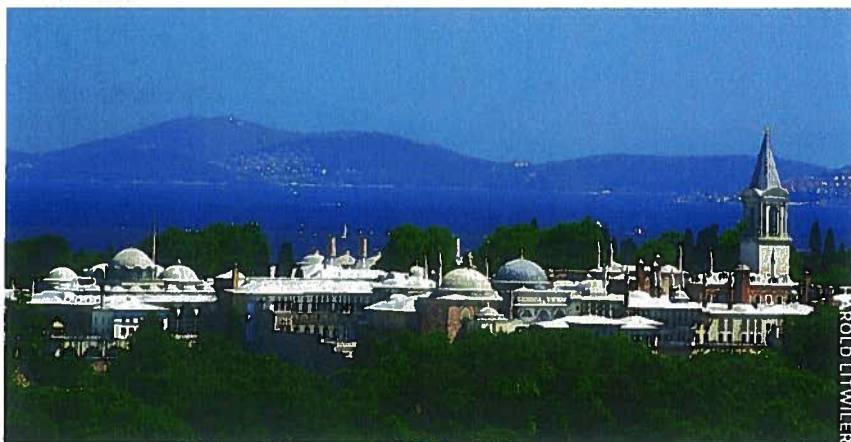


ISTANBUL'S Imperial Cuisine



by **SUSAN KORAH**

WITH ITS VELVETY TEXTURE AND SUBTLE almond flavour, enhanced by a hint of nutmeg and garnished with ruby-red pomegranate seeds, the Almond Soup served at Deraliye Restaurant was at once a comfort food and the beginning of an out-of-the-ordinary culinary journey for me. It was also a trip back in time to the exotic and esoteric world of the Ottoman Sultans of Istanbul, powerful monarchs who controlled a mighty empire from 1453 to 1922.

I WAS IN ISTANBUL ON A QUEST for Ottoman palace dishes which have become trendy on the city's dining scene. I was also eager to learn about life in the ornate palaces, such as the Topkapi and Dolmabahce, where these dishes were originally created by the most innovative chefs of the day.

At lunchtime on a spring afternoon, my Istanbuli friend Lale Utkan and I strolled into Deraliye, in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood of the city. We were cordially welcomed by Necati Yilmaz, current owner of Deraliye and former manager of the Asitane, the restaurant that pioneered

the revival of this heritage cuisine.

As I savoured the almond soup prepared by his Executive Chef Nuri Ozer, Yilmaz explained that this was recreated from a 1539 palace recipe, and, like other Ottoman dishes on his menu, is the fruit of painstaking research in palace archives and antique bookstores. He added that it was first served during the reign of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent (1520-1526), one of the most distinguished members of the dynasty.

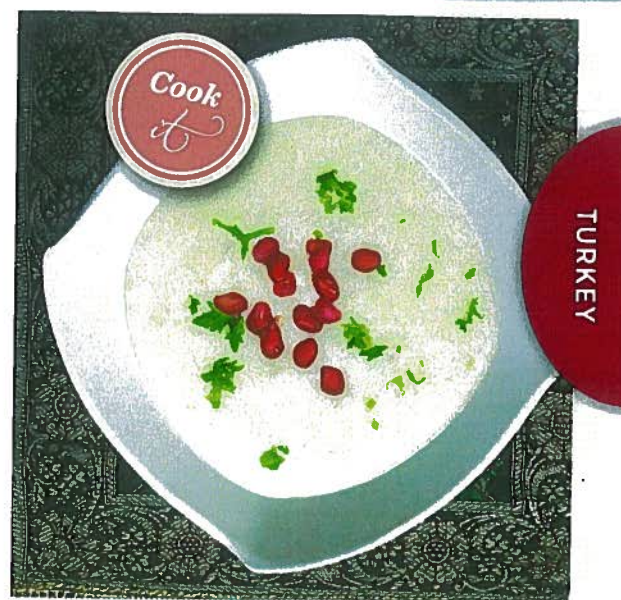
More exotic tastings were to follow, as I sampled my way through an entire meal at Deraliye and, on another »

...An Ottoman menu was more than a meal ...



Turkey

WHERE ON EARTH



SERVES 4

Almond Soup

THIS RECIPE FROM the Ottoman palace dates from 1539.

Almonds

$\frac{3}{4}$ cup
blanched
and ground

Butter 2 Tbs

**All-Purpose
Flour** $\frac{1}{3}$ cup

Whole Milk
1 cup, warmed

Beef Broth
2 $\frac{1}{2}$ cups

Nutmeg
a pinch

**Salt and
Pepper**
to taste

Garnish

Butter 1 tsp

Beef Broth
 $\frac{1}{4}$ cup

**Pomegranate
Seeds**
a handful

- 1 MELT** the butter in a medium saucepan.
- 2 ADD** the flour and gradually pour in the milk, stirring constantly. Make sure the milk and flour blend very well.
- 3 ADD** the ground almonds, beef broth, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Cook, uncovered, over low heat for 20-15 minutes.
- 4 FOR** the garnish, in another small saucepan, melt the butter and add the beef broth. When it starts bubbling, add a sprinkling of parsley and pour over the soup in the bigger pot.
- 5 SPOON** the soup into bowls, sprinkle with pomegranate seeds and serve while still warm.

**Recipe courtesy of Mehmet Gunay,
Bella Mira Restaurant.**

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT
The Topkapi
Palace; Suleiman
the Magnificent.



SERVES 2

Mutancana

Lamb Stew with Dried Fruits

MUTANCANA WAS A popular Ottoman dish in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Lamb 350 g,
cut in cubes

Butter 2 Tbs

**All-Purpose
Flour** 1 ½ Tbs

Hot Water
2 cups

Pearl Onions
12, peeled

**Salt and
Pepper** to taste

Fresh Grapes
½ cup, washed

Honey 1 Tbs

**Blanched
Sliced
Almonds**
¼ cup

Dried Figs
½ cup, cut
in julienne

Dried Apricots
½ cup, cut
in julienne

- 1 IN** a heavy pot or Dutch oven, brown the lamb cubes in their own juices.
- 2 ADD** the butter and sprinkle the flour all over the lamb. Stir, coating the lamb with flour.
- 3 ADD** 2 cups hot water and cook on low heat until the lamb pieces are tender.
- 4 WHEN** there is about ½ cup liquid left in the pot, add the pearl onions, salt and pepper.
- 5 COOK** for about 15 minutes on medium-low heat.
- 6 ADD** the grapes, honey, almonds, figs and apricots, then stir.
- 7 AFTER** five minutes, turn the heat off.

**Recipe courtesy of Mehmet Gunay,
Bella Mira Restaurant.**

«occasion, at the Bella Mira Restaurant co-owned by Mehmet Gunay and his Executive Chef Habib Atkan.

Two of my favourite dishes, sampled at both Deraliye and Bella Mira, were a stuffed cantaloupe and *Mutancana*, a richly flavoured lamb stew.

The stuffed melon (*Kavun Dolması*) is an ambrosial blend of sweet and savoury flavours. It is one of the dishes Chef Nuri Ozer of Deraliye demonstrates in the cooking workshops he conducts every day at the restaurant.

After cutting the top off a cantaloupe, he removes the centre with an ice cream scoop, and serrates the edges with a sharp knife before stuffing the melon with a mixture of sautéed onions, minced meat, rice, almonds, currants, pistachios, herbs and spices. It is then baked in the oven.

Watching Ozer cooking this dish is almost as much of a pleasure as eating it. The expression on his face, as he performs his art, is one of pure delight. He clearly loves to cook, and he is a true virtuoso in the kitchen.

Mutancana is another symphony in sweet and savoury tastes. The lamb stew is cooked with a medley of dried fruits — figs, apricots and raisins — spiced with shallots and laced with honey. I tried it at Deraliye first, and on another day, at Bella Mira. Both were delicious.

This dish, Bella Mira owner Mehmet Gunay explained, was created for the circumcision feast of two royal princes, Beyazid and Cihangir, sons of Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent. The recipe dates back to 1539.

As my friend Lale pointed out, an Ottoman menu was more than a meal. It was a symbolic expression of power, wealth, prestige and indulgence.

Holding sway over a vast territory that for almost 600 years (1453–1922) stretched from the banks of the Danube River and the Balkans to the Arabian

Peninsula and the northern shores of Africa, and included most of the Mediterranean basin, the Ottoman Sultans and their entourages ate and drank as if at some celestial banquet, complete with music and dancing girls to entertain them.

With access to the finest ingredients grown or produced in their vast, fertile lands, and exotic spices brought by ship and caravan via the spice routes from Egypt and India, Ottoman chefs could give full play to their creative talents.

Typical of the palaces where such lavish meals were enjoyed was the Topkapi in Istanbul, one of the major residences of the Sultans for almost 400 years (1465–1856) of their 624-year reign.

As well as being a royal residence, the palace was a setting for state occasions and royal entertainments. It is now a museum and a major tourist attraction. On this, my third visit, I focused mostly on the kitchens, which give a fascinating inside view of the elaborate production process that resulted in day-to-day meals and special occasion feasts.

Remodelled by the famous court architect Mimar Sinan after the original structures were burned down in 1574, the Saray Mufaklari (palace kitchens) consist of ten domed buildings, and include separate sections for such items as soups, desserts, jams and sherbets, beverages and confectionary; also a pantry which today houses the archives.

Meals had to be produced on a daily basis for all the 4,000 or so inhabitants of the palace, who included the Sultan, his harem, his administrators and servants.

Then there were banquets for visiting dignitaries and foreign monarchs, special occasions such as royal weddings, circumcision ceremonies and celebratory Iftar meals (eaten at sundown after a day of fasting during the Holy Month of Ramadan) that called for the chefs'

best culinary and logistical skills, to orchestrate the most elaborate feasts

As I admired the immense collection of Chinese blue and white, celadon and Japanese Imari porcelain that was transported over the Silk Road or by sea, I wondered in amazement how they ever reached their destination intact, with not a chip or crack in sight!

The day concluded with a visit to the Dolmabahce Palace, across the Bosphorus, a blue-green stretch of water that turned into shimmering gold in the late afternoon sun. By the 19th century, the reigning Sultan Abdülmecid had become enamoured of all things European and had moved his household to this

European-style residence. The feasting continued here, but from now on, European-style tables and manners became *au courant*.

Watching the sunset over the Bosphorus, I imagined the sun setting over the Ottoman Empire, when Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who spent his last days and at his last, presumably more modest, meals at this palace — established the Turkish republic in 1922. In one remarkable day I had wandered through the homes of some of history's most privileged people, dined on the food of emperors and queens, and trodden in the footsteps of the founder of modern Turkey. 

Dining, Ottoman-Style in Istanbul

Deraliye, Ottoman Palace Cuisine Restaurant
www.deraliyeresaurant.com

This restaurant, owned by Necati Yilmaz, offers cooking workshops in Ottoman cuisine every day. Please call ahead to reserve a place.

Bella Mira Café and Restaurant
www.bellamirarestaurant.com

Matbah Restaurant
www.matbahrestaurant.com

These three restaurants are in the Sultanahmet neighbourhood, home to some of the most popular tourist sights, such as the Topkapi Palace, the Blue Mosque and the Aya Sophia.

Asitane Restaurant
www.asitanerestaurant.com

Located next to the Chora Museum, Asitane offers a delightful setting for lunch or dinner after you have spent a few hours admiring some of the most beautiful Byzantine mosaics and frescoes in the world.

SUSAN KORAH is an Ottawa-based writer, journalist and communications specialist.



TURKEY

SERVES 2

Stuffed Melon

THIS SHOWSTOPPING DISH is surprisingly simple to make.

Butter or Ghee
100 g, divided

Onion 1,
chopped finely

**Whole
Blanched
Almonds** 50 g

Pine Nuts 30 g

**Ground Lamb
or Beef** 300 g

Black Pepper
1 tsp

**Ground
Allspice** 1 tsp

**Ground
Cinnamon**
½ tsp

Salt to taste

Blackcurrants
dried or fresh,
30 g

Rice uncooked,
2 Tbs

Cantaloupes 2,
grapefruit-size

Salt a pinch

Fresh Parsley
for garnish

- 1 BOIL** the rice in salted water. Drain. Set aside.
- 2 MELT** half the butter in a non-stick pan. Brown the onions. Add the almonds and pine nuts.
- 3 WHEN** the almonds and pine nuts are toasted, add the meat.
- 4 WHEN** the meat is cooked and releases its fat, add the spices and salt.
- 5 FINALLY** add the blackcurrants and boiled rice and remove from the heat.
- 6 CUT** off the tops of the melons. Scoop out the seeds and some of the flesh, and discard.
- 7 SPRINKLE** a pinch of salt on the insides of melons. Stuff them with the meat filling and top with the remaining butter. Replace the melon caps and place the melons on a baking tray. You might want to brush the melons with melted butter on the outside for a more polished look, but this is optional.
- 8 BAKE** the melons at 350°F for 35–40 minutes. Serve with fresh parsley leaves, toasted, buttered almonds and blackcurrants on top.

Recipe courtesy of Mehmet Gunay, Bella Mira Restaurant.