

# الجمهورية

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## Tasting Syria in Fatih

A Cornucopia on Istanbul's Golden Horn

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Most visitors to Istanbul won't venture beyond the Sultanahmet district where they will snap pictures of the Hagia Sophia and Blue Mosque, grab an oversized latte at Starbucks, and perhaps pick up a simit from the street. But it is the residential areas outside of these famous tourist thoroughfares that have the most to offer in terms of eateries. One of these areas is the historical Fatih

neighborhood. About 400,000 people live in only 13 km<sup>2</sup>, making Fatih one of the most densely populated areas in the entire country, perhaps even Europe. And if you spent your entire life in the Fatih district in Istanbul, it would take a long time for you to get bored with the food scene there.

In the past two decades, Fatih has changed from a grimy, conservative, working-class area into a cosmopolitan environment where nowadays you can find shop signs in half a dozen languages and cuisines from all over the world. The transformation of the district brought in populations not only from different regions inside Turkey, but increasingly also from the wider Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, and beyond. Incidentally, this transformation is not universally celebrated in Fatih, as many residents resent the influx of immigrants from the Arab world and Africa. Any attempt to offer an exhaustive almanac of the district's culinary scene will inexorably fail, but having spent extended periods in the district and eaten out most of the time, I will attempt to at least offer a glimpse into gastronomy in Fatih.

So here goes – an appraisal in three acts.

### 1. Regional foods from Eastern Turkey

The quintessential “Istanbul experience” is to have migrated there in the 1960s and 70s – indeed, my own family moved from the eastern town of Erzincan to the Kartal district. Fatih is no exception. It is home to large communities originally from Black Sea towns (Kastamonu, Rize, Trabzon), or from the Kurdish southeast (Siirt, Van, Diyarbakır). This chain migration manifests itself in the many locals' associations and community centers (some of

which revolve around a single village), but of course also in the many regional restaurants. After all, when people migrate, cuisine migrates.

Take the unpretentious eatery Kitelimmi. Kitel is a flat dumpling, made from bulgur (cracked wheat) and stuffed with minced meat; a dish originally from Siirt. For those in the know: it is as if mantı and içli köfte (kibbeh) had a lovechild. One morning, I skipped breakfast and walked in around noon, to be greeted by a chatty woman in her 50s – the ‘immi’ in Kitelimmi (which in Arabic means “my mother’s kitel”). Kitelimmi personifies the mom-and-pop store. Apparently, the family moved to Fatih in the 1970s, and lived in the apartment upstairs until her son was able to take over the ground floor business and install his mother there as a head chef of his own favorite dish. What I liked was the freshness and simple honesty of the place: kitel is served on simple white plates, and is a chewy, spicy soul food full of umami. There is an optional (mandatory) spicy oily sauce to be absorbed by the bulgur. At 25 TL a piece it is an affordable snack (as of November 2022).

The beating heart of Fatih must be the bustling “Women’s Market” (Kadınlar Pazarı), tucked in a corner of the Aqueduct of Valens, where butchers, offal sellers, spice merchants, cheesemongers, beekeepers and nut-and-seed shops sell their wares. The presence of butchers who hang freshly slaughtered and gutted animals publicly in the streets obviously gave rise to restaurants specializing in meat, including offal specialists. For example, at Siirt Şeref you can find a splendid büryan (lamb roast) that makes you want to order another one before finishing the first. Büryan is a difficult and demanding meat dish made by roasting the meat for about two hours on a wood fire in a pit, and then

slicing slithers of fatty, roasted lamb, “as tender as Turkish delight”, onto slices of bread. The establishment claims (somewhat dubiously) that they have been in business since 1852, but that’s irrelevant. Just close your eyes, poke the menu anywhere, and enjoy. But be careful where exactly you poke! You might end up with the stuffed intestines (mumbar), roast liver, brain salad, or other offal – not for the faint hearted, literally and figuratively.

We continue our tour of the same street with the stalwart Sur Ocakbaşı, a popular meat restaurant that rose to fame when Anthony Bourdain visited in 2009. The restaurant honored him with a low pixel screenshot print-out on the last page of the menu – they’re that proud. If they only knew he thought it was great hangover food... (Fatih being overall a conservative district, almost no restaurant serves alcohol.) Sur is an all-around solid restaurant, and you can’t really go wrong here. The specialties here are saç tava, chunks of meat roasted in a sheet pan, and perde pilav, fried rice with almonds and currants, packed tightly in a blanket of dough and baked in the oven. Simple, but delicious.

Speaking of hangover food, Unkapanı Pilavcısı is the undisputed champion of chicken on rice in Turkey. Served simple, with some pickles, it is Fatih’s counterpart of, or answer to, Singapore’s chicken rice. How can something I’ve been eating for four decades still surprise me, and be done almost better than how my mom does it? (Nobody go tell her, please.) In terms of texture, flavor, and optics, there is a perfect balance between the rich butter pilaf rice, and the freshly cooked chicken pulled apart like string cheese. Make sure to watch out for copycat restaurants in the Süleymaniye area shamelessly flaunting the same title –

the only real traditional Unkapanı Pilavcısı is located at İMÇ market right under the Roman aqueduct. In this same category of regional Turkish foods, I want to give an honorable mention to Meşhur Karadeniz Pidecisi İbrahim Usta on Büyük Karaman Street, which stakes a claim to the distinctive Black Sea dish of pide, a boat-shaped pizza topped with ground meat, cheese, cured meats, vegetables, etc. Again, not trying to undermine anyone's livelihood here, but watch out for emulators.

Finally, we need to talk about lahmacun, or in Arabic lahm b'ajin (literally, 'meat with dough') or sfiha, a flatbread topped with minced meat. This topic is a minefield in Turkey: which city, recipe, restaurant serves the best lahmacun? Opinions are sharply divided and the paradigm wars seem almost to warrant armed resolution, if only because the dish straddles the Turkish-Armenian divide. One fortuitous evening, I decided to conduct a comparative analysis of three major self-professed lahmacun experts in Fatih. A panel of four life-long lahmacun eaters, who will remain anonymous, started off with those of Öz Kilis, which offered a steaming hot lahmacun by serving it with onions or with garlic minced through the meat. They were crispy, smoky, and sapid, but the garlic ones were hardly meaty. We moved on to Restaurant Kavuk, which dishes out wheel-sized scrumptious lahmacun with thin dough and a well-distributed layer of mince and parsley, a pleasant surprise considering the myriad ways one can screw up lahmacun. Finally, Ziya Şark Sofrası is an institution in Fatih, a massive family restaurant that stretches across the second floor of almost an entire block. Their lahmacun is usually beyond reproach, and this time too it was a job well done: at once crispy and rollable, but due to the economic crisis, Ziya commits the ultimate sin of skimping on the mince.

Conclusion: go for Kavuk.

## 2. The tableau of Syrian cuisine

Which brings me, of course, to the world of Syrian cuisine. Fatih can rightly be called 'Little Syria' more so than any other neighborhood in all of Turkey, especially because of the richness and diversity of Syrian restaurants, eateries, and cafés in Fatih. Walk around in Yusufpaşa Aksaray on a Saturday evening and you'll see what I mean. I have spent a decade studying the Syrian conflict, of which half a decade was spent hanging out with Syrians in Fatih, and I still haven't exhausted the panorama of Syrian food there. I still walk into an inconspicuous side street and bump into a Syrian hole-in-the-wall, where the food still surprises me. And I certainly can never get through Akşemsettin Street without grabbing something to eat.

It's no exaggeration to say that nowadays Syrian food defines Fatih's cuisine, much like Turkish food characterizes Kreuzberg in Berlin, Indian food sets apart Wembley in London, or Westwood in LA breathes Persian food. Syrian cuisine has enriched Fatih's gastronomic landscape and locals' palates. While most have accepted these changes, unfortunately there is also parochialism and provincialism. The gentlemen of various famous Turkish food crawl vlogs, for example, tour around Fatih **in their videos** but bizarrely **ignore** any and all cuisines outside the Turkish Republic's borders, in a move that is almost deliberately passive-aggressive. Sometimes there's even outright hostility: when Syrians went to distribute halawet el-jibn (semolina rolls made of cheese dough, filled with cream) in the streets so Turks could taste it, **one man categorically refused** anything Syrian. His loss really, because Syrians should be given the

Nobel Prize for Food for conjuring as addictive and delectable a concoction as halawet el-jibn.

Any Syrian food guide of Fatih must start at Salloura, a formidable institution among the line-up of restaurants on Turgut Özal Millet Street, such as Layali Shamiya or Beyt al-Ezz. Note that I'm deliberately ignoring a number of restaurants which are prominently visible in the streetscape. The reason is simple: nobody said war criminals can't cook, but at the very least they shouldn't be patronized. Salloura is an ambidextrous restaurant: they manage to pull off all three courses of a meal in impeccable form and flavor. Whether you start off your meal with the usual dipping smorgasbord of hummus, muhammara and mutabbal, or whether you go straight for their signature yogurt dishes like their smooth shakriyeh, heavenly shish barak, or blissful kibbeh labaniyeh, they do a consistently good job of cooking and presenting. Downstairs in their establishment, Salloura does sweets really well, even for a restaurant. A few years ago, due to the rise of anti-Syrian racist sentiment in Turkey, the restaurant Turkified its name into the improbable 'Sallouraoğlu'. The name might have changed, but the food stayed the same: finger-licking good.





Across the street you can find Tarbush, a fast-food joint that churns out shawarma sandwiches that really make you feel alive. I ordered one to go and ate it on the sidewalk while watching half the planet walk by. Aksaray on a Saturday afternoon really might be the most crowded point in Europe. The shawarma wrap used to be Syria's signature street food, next to the falafel wrap, and before 2011 one could score a wrap in Damascus ranging between 15 and 35 Lira (with an exchange rate of 50 Syrian Lira to the dollar). Nowadays, it's unaffordable in Syria. In Istanbul too, one can find shawarma sandwiches all around town. Much better thought out in terms of flavor and texture than the Turkish döner wrap, it consists of only 3 ingredients: thinly sliced well-seasoned chicken or beef, richly schmearred with toum (Syrian garlic sauce), accompanied by pickles, and stuffed in a Syrian pita. The difference with the Turkish ones is that the Syrians dip the wrap in the grease and toast it briefly, giving it the unique crispy exterior and creamy



interior. I tried to get myself bored with it, but once ate three of these wraps back-to-back, and still wasn't sated. Ahla m'allem, more please.

I always thought falafel was an odd duck in the Middle Eastern food landscape: how can they make so much out of the lowly chickpea? Falafel done the right way is crunchy, creamy, savory, and spicy at the same time. And they do it right in Fatih, especially on Akşemsettin street. There, you can find the modest eatery Falafel Ala Keyfek ("Falafel as you like it"), which was killing it, when a competitor came up with the luminous idea to open his own falafel place right next door and named it Falafel Ala Keyf Keyfek ("Falafel as you really like it"). Snarky! Both shops do a good job, and the chickpea nuggets were fresh and tasty both times I went to test the waters. I paid 45 Turkish Lira for a dozen pieces with sauce and pickles (in November 2022), which satisfies you for a good part of the day.

Another falafel place is Al-Khal, a hole-in-the-wall a block away from the Fatih Mosque, where they serve the basic Syrian staples. It is a tiny place, 22m<sup>2</sup>, so how they make so much out of so little keeps amazing me. There seem to be three pots on the counter and yet eight dishes on the menu. When I trudged in one hungry morning at 10am, a very young man from Homs was mincing the falafel mix as he narrated his exile as a child. When he mentioned Bashar al-Assad, he dunked the falafel bits with suppressed rage into the oil. They still fried up really nicely brown; with a hole in the center and dipped in the tahini sauce sprinkled with sumac, they give you the perfect balance between crunch and cream. I ate at least 3 pieces on the road before I brought the falafel back home for our family breakfast. Yes, then I ate three more at the breakfast table as if I

hadn't already...

By now, the attentive reader will ask: what about kebab? I was just getting there. Bayt Ward, or as it came to be known after the wave of Turkification, "Gül Evi", offers the usual fare of chicken and meat skewers, roast chicken on rice, and whatnot. But it also serves a Deir ez-Zor regional delicacy you can't normally get in other Syrian restaurants. Mshahhamiya (مشحمية) is a patty of pastry dough, chopped onions, minced meat, and sheep's tallow, with a light dusting of turmeric. The dish is so specific to Deir ez-Zor, and almost esoteric, that my Syrian friends are always positively surprised when I tell them I know, order, eat, and love it. Often, other Syrians at the table never even heard of it, but it is a must-try due to the tallow - it warms you up and lubricates your body and soul.



Khan al-Wazeer (or Vezir Han) is where every single



Aleppine friend has taken me for some epic meals. Their kebabs are smoky, their bulgur and freekeh dishes buttery and full-bodied, being an Aleppo restaurant they pride themselves on being able to cook dozens of types of kibbeh, and they deliver a simply mouth-watering cherry kebab (kebab karaz). You also can't go wrong with the safarjaliyah (quince) and sumaqiyah (sumac) meat stews that, again, a number of Damascenes at the table had never even heard of. According to the most Aleppine person at the table that night, the use of fruit in meat dishes was the imprint of the distinct cuisine of Aleppo Armenians. The service is jolly, the prices very reasonable, and the portions huge. Khan al-Wazeer has never disappointed me.



We cannot close this section on Syrian food in Fatih without an honorable mention and shout-out to two special restaurants in Fatih. First, Booz al-Jeddi, apparently a Damascus institution with a cult following, churns out

breakfast staples like fetteh (chickpeas cooked in a broth and served over a warm yogurt and tahini sauce) and fool (fava beans served similarly). The plastified menus feature high-context Syrian jokes, e.g. about certain characters in Damascene drama series. Likewise, Al-Bayt al-Dimashqi is where you go for all your offal and other esoteric Shami food – including, of course, intestines. Customers treat this place like an East Asian tea ceremony: with aplomb, dignified, almost gravely they sip their broth and break apart the sheep skulls served on a large tray. Offal is not for everyone, obviously, but if you're into brain, tripe, feet, belly, gut, sweetbread, and stuffed intestines (bumbar), then this is your ticket. If there was ever an anti-vegetarian restaurant, this would be it: a meat lover's meat restaurant.



Finally, dessert. I'm not sure where to begin and where to end. There are dozens of sweet shops, confectioners, and patisseries in Fatih. Some swear by the very diverse and



original offer of sweets at Al-Sultan (always bustling, with bright lights), and others will touch only the baqlawa at Zeitouna (posh but affordable), and again others will live and die for the halawet el-jibn at Abbas (admittedly simply brilliant). But you know what? Scratch all that. Finish off the day at Halwayat Zain, a hole-in-the-wall at the Malta entrance of the Fatih Mosque complex, where Little Syria comes together over plates of hot knafeh served on styrofoam plates. Close your eyes and eat it on the street. Then go back and order another one.



As an aside: if you wondered why I haven't mentioned moloukhiyeh (mallow leaves) or bamiyeh (okra) anywhere, there's a perfectly good reason. I absolutely detest those slimy stews, which have a mouthfeel identical to the loosening phlegm you cough up during a cold...

### 3. The Best of the Rest

According to myth, there used to be an amazing Malaysian restaurant in Karagümrük. I never visited – it closed before I became interested in Fatih as a culinary destination – but I

heard it was so good that even Turks frequented it. But Fatih is full of surprises, never ceases to amaze, and has lots to offer from around the world, if only because of migrant communities.

For example, did you know there is a great Korean restaurant named Sopung Kore in Fatih? It is tucked away in the shadow of Fatih's city walls, where not long ago no one reputable would ever step foot. As one acquaintance said problematically, "Gypsies used to hang out here". Not to foster low expectations for a Korean restaurant in Fatih, but having eaten for months in Koreatown in LA, Sopung Kore really is on point with their fried chicken, thick jajamyang, sizzling bibimbap, and tightly rolled mincemeat kimbap. The outdoor seating on the quiet terrace is lovely on a summer evening and I recommend the restaurant wholeheartedly. And we all knew about the age-old boza (a fermented corn and wheat drink) served classically at Vefa Bozacısı, but did you know you can grab Ethiopian coffee in Fındıkzade that will really wake you up? Fatih - a cornucopia indeed.

Kuveloğlu Han in Tahtakale is an old Ottoman inn that historically serves only three types of artisanal pide, richly topped, and baked to perfection in their stone oven. You almost don't notice this courtyard restaurant amid the run-down buildings in Tahtakale, a neighborhood waiting to be gentrified as soon as the right palms are greased. It takes a while before you get it, but it's fully worth the wait: I had the tam karışık (half mince, half mixed) which is oval, not boat-shaped, almost like a richly topped Flammkuchen. Eat it by hand or use utensils, you'll hesitate whether you should order another one.



Restaurant Shenashil in Yusufpaşa brings all the Iraqi goodies to the table, and if you call half a day ahead, actual, real masgouf – the signature Iraqi seasoned, grilled carp. My Iraqi father-in-law became visibly emotional when he had masgouf for the first time after 30 years. There are a number of Uyghur restaurants in Fatih, mostly due to their flight from the cultural genocide China is carrying out. Admittedly, I haven't tried them all, but Tarhan in Yusufpaşa was a really excellent place that went easy on the senses: it had great indirect lighting, no music, which was a relief, and offered incredibly fresh laghman (hand-pulled noodles topped with roast vegetables and chicken or meat), manta (steamed dumplings filled with minced meat), and pilav with fried carrots and roast meat. Order a variety of dishes and tuck in.

One of the first 'Arab' restaurants to spring up in Fatih was Filistin Lokantası on Kızıtaşı Street, a simple eatery with plastic all around, offering popular 'shaabi' food, including their specialty: Jerusalem falafel, a slightly larger falafel ball stuffed with herbs and sprinkled with sesame seeds. It's creamier, but also a bit doughier than the usual falafel. My rule of thumb in this place was always: hummus is good, but hummus bel-lahmeh (with spiced minced meat inside) is next level; fetteh is good, but fetteh bel-lahmeh (idem ditto) is simply orgasmic. So one morning, I skipped breakfast and paced my way to Filistin, impatient and full of anticipation. When I ordered the two above dishes bel-lahmeh, the waiter sheepishly replied that since the economic crisis in Turkey, they had stopped offering any meat dishes because they simply didn't make a profit from them. How embarrassing – for proprietor, customer, and government. "If I bring my own meat, can you then cook the two dishes?" I asked him. Flustered, he shrugged and

nodded, so I walked to the first butcher in sight, bought 400 grams of minced meat for 150 TL, and brought it back. The hummus and fetteh bal-lahmeh were absolutely luscious, and the total bill for a table full of mezzes was less than what I paid for the minced meat.



All in all, Fatih's food scene is booming and extraordinary. If you search, you find great food. Even when you don't search, you find good food: one night, after having dinner at home, I walked out to run some errands, when I inadvertently bumped into a small Uzbek place in Malta: they served a remarkably tasty plov and great chicken pastries. That I returned home late with the errands I blamed on "traffic": there were too many good restaurants on the way.