


Turkish Cuisine: A Planet- and Vegan-Friendly Food, Culture, and Folklore

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ABSTRACT

Turkish cuisine is one of the richest in the world with its strong historical and intercultural background. Contrary to the common perception, Turkish food culture is not all meat-centric; it has an incredibly rich diversity of vegan choices. Traditional Turkish cuisine also extends to ceremonial and traditional occasions, such as weddings, burial ceremonies, some religious events, circumcisions, migrations, journeys, hosting guests, and welcoming newborns. On these occasions, Turks prepare the best and most loved traditional foods to eat and share together. The prepared foods are mostly vegetarian-friendly, and meat is consumed in very restricted amounts. This paper explores the planet- and vegan-friendly features of the Turkish food culture and its links with folklore.

KEYWORDS

Festival, Folklore, Food Culture, Planet, Sustainability, Turkey, Turkish Cuisine, Vegan

INTRODUCTION

Republic of Turkey is located in the Northern Hemisphere and has a surface area of 780,043 km², 97% of which lies in Asia Minor (Anatolia) with the remaining 3% in Europe (Thrace). Its shoreline stretches for 8,210 km along the Mediterranean Sea in the south, the Aegean Sea in the west, and the Black Sea in the north. In the northwest, there is the inland sea of Marmara between the straits of the Dardanelles and the Bosphorus. Turkey's population was recorded as 82 million in 2019. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Turkey is among the few self-sufficient countries in the world in terms of food production, including apricots, cherries, chestnuts, chickpeas, chillies, cucumbers, figs, grapes, green beans, hazelnuts, honey, melons, leeks, lentils, peppers, pistachios, raisins, spices, strawberries, vetches, walnuts and watermelons. In addition to that, Turkey is one of the world's richest countries with regard to diversity of plant species, hosting 167 families, 1,320 genera and 9,996 species, and supports very different vegetation types, of which about 32% are endemics. The long history of agriculture and diverse ecosystems in Turkey have allowed adaptation of fruit species to specific regions. About 75 fruit species, including 16 subtropical and 59 temperate zone fruit species, and 60 vegetable species are commercially grown in the country. Around 4000 BCE, olive cultivation also originated somewhere in the Anatolia (FAO, 2018; Noroozi et al., 2019).

The Turkish culture is diverse and fascinating with 47 ethnic groups represented in the country (Mutlu, 1996). All groups in Turkey are interrelated because they have been living in this region for centuries. Their eating habits, food choices and folklore are similar. Most people would, in general and often, think of Turkish cuisine as not being vegetarian due to popular meat dishes. However,

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vegetarianism is on the rise in Turkey (Dogan News Agency, 2019), and Turkish cooking provides healthy and balanced diets for vegetarian and non-vegetarian people with a broad range of vegetables, fruits and herbs. The Turkish eating habits vary from place to place, and each region has its own food culture. For instance, the central, eastern and southeastern parts of Turkey are famous for oily and spicy dishes with grains and legumes; the Black Sea region is known for dishes made with fish, corn and endemic plants; and in the Marmara, Aegean and Mediterranean regions, vegetable-, herb and olive oil-based dishes are commonly consumed (Yüksel, 2011; Batu & Batu, 2018; Ministry of Culture and Tourism, 2019a and b).

A survey conducted in thirty-one districts of Turkey in 2017 showed that meat consumption, especially red meat, is at very low levels among Turks. The lowest income group consumes only 279 grams of meat per capita on a weekly basis, whereas this amount is 645 grams of meat per capita on a weekly basis in the highest income group. More interestingly, the survey revealed that the most-cooked and preferred courses were described as vegetable, white bean, soup, pasta, and rice dishes (Hürriyet Daily News, 2018).

The essence of Turkish cuisine reveals itself in ceremonial food and food folklore, including weddings, burial ceremonies, some religious celebration like *Ramadan* and *mevlit*, circumcisions, migrations, journeys, hosting guests and welcoming newborns, each symbolizing different meanings, and having its own rituals. On these occasions, Turks prepare the best and most loved ceremonial foods to eat together. Remarkably, the prepared foods are mostly vegetarian-friendly ones. This attitude is, in general, due to the dependence of the Turks on biodiversity and ecosystems for thousands of years. That is to say, there has always been an interaction between the Turkish society and the physical environment through collecting herbs, mushrooms, medicinal and aromatic plants from nature to treat not only their own diseases, but also those of their animals (Dark, 2016; FAO, 2018).

On the other hand, the global food production system and choices, in particular the enormous raise in meat production and consumption, are adversely influencing all aspects of human life and humanity's long-term survival prospects on this planet. If not restrained, by the middle of the 21st century, unnecessary high levels of meat production and consumption will continue to pose a threat to the biosphere's integrity. The expanded farming operations, extensive conversion of tropical forests into new pastures and mass-scale feed industry will trigger serious concerns, related to the gaseous emissions from livestock, water depletion and degradation from fertilizers, manure and other agrochemicals, land misappropriation and deprivation, biodiversity and rapid species loss (Raphaely & Marinova, 2014 and 2016; Tekiner et al., 2018). In this paper, we aim to explore the planet- and vegan-friendly features of the Turkish food culture and folklore to counteract these global trends.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TURKISH FOOD CULTURE

The Turkish food culture is a combination from the Central Asian steppes and Anatolian civilizations. Successfully survived over 1,300 years, it is one of the famous cuisines in the world. The driving factor behind these facts is Anatolia's position between the Far East and the Mediterranean Sea, leading to complete control over major trade routes, and an ideal ecology for plants and animals to flourish. In the Central Asia era, the Turks mostly used foods of animal origin for their meals. Some excavations in Central Asia however indicate that later on the Turks engaged in agricultural and irrigation activities, where they grew crops such as wheat and barley. Thin sheets of dough called yufka along with crushed grains were made to create sweet pastries. The Turks also started to consume vegetables and herbal products. Chinese and Persian influence brought rice, nuts, fruit stews noodles, manti, and cheese-stuffed dumplings in the Turkish eating habits. In return, the Turks taught them how to cook bulgur wheat.

Once the Turks were converted to Islam, some meat types were banned by the new religion, and this decrease in the meat types consumed was compensated with an increase in agricultural plant-based products. As the Turks moved further westward into Anatolia by 1200, they adopted chickpeas, figs,

olive oil and seafood. By the mid-1400s, the beginning of the Ottoman Empire's six hundred-year reign, a heavily influential Turkish cuisine was formed. The Empire spanning from the Mid-Europe to northern Africa imported a diverse range of foods and ingredients from all over the world. After the fall of the Empire during World War I, and the establishment of the Republic of Turkey, foreign dishes and Western-style food chains made their way into the modern Turkish diet (Diker et al., 2016; Batu & Batu, 2018; Food in Every Country, 2019).

COUNTLESS VEGAN OPTIONS IN THE TURKISH CUISINE

It is a fact that Turkey is also a vegetarian heaven. Turks love vegetables and have uncountable dishes that are meat-free. For centuries, they have been preserving fresh fruits and vegetables using different techniques. A large variety of vegetables and herbs are cooked in the Turkish cuisine and even meat-based dishes include a small amount of meat with a lot of vegetables. Vegetable-based dishes are more popular in Western Anatolia. Many ways of eating and cooking were popularized by the Turks, such as the use of olive oil in salads, while they gained different dishes and eating habits from other countries (Erin, 2014; Asaff, 2019).

The traditional Turkish cuisine has countless vegetarian and vegan options. The most interesting of all are the olive oil-based dishes, the so-called “*zeytinyağlı*”, literally meaning “with olive oil”, which are deliciously vegan. Needless to say, a *zeytinyağlı* dish is much tastier than plain boiled vegetables drizzled with olive oil as a dressing. Other vegan masterpieces among hundreds in the Turkish cuisine are: “*çiğ köfte*” (bulgur with tomato and pepper pastes and spices), “*mercimek köftesi*” (lentil balls), “*kısr*” (a raw bulgur salad), “*humus*” (chickpeas mashed with copious amounts of tahini and lemon juice), “*fava*” (fava beans cooked with onions, seasoned with salt, sugar, and olive oil, puréed and left to gel), “*pilaki*” (fresh borlotti beans cooked with olive oil in a garlic-onion-tomato rich mixture), many eggplant dishes, “*börülce*” (black-eyed peas salad with olive oil and vinegar dressings), “*muhammara*” (roasted red peppers, ground walnuts, breadcrumbs, tomato, pepper pastes, and onions with a drizzle of pomegranate molasses), “*aculizme*” (finely chopped fresh tomatoes, green peppers and onions), and vegan desserts from baked pumpkin and quince, to the tahini-based “*helva*”, to the pudding “*aşure*” (a wholesome concoction of wheat, berries, pulses, dried fruits, and nuts), pickles and “*dolma*” (stuffed paprika or other vegetables). Although not always vegan, but vegetarian, “*baklava*” and “*tarhana*” (dried fermented soup mix containing yogurt, flour, tomato, and herbs) are similarly popular.

In summary, rice, wheat, and vegetables are the foundation for the Turkish cuisine (Albayrak & Gunes, 2010; Öney Tan, 2019; Food in Every Country, 2019). Meat-free options are traditionally popular and commonly enjoyed.

TURKISH CUISINE AND FOLKLORE

There is a mutual relationship between food culture and cultural identity represented through many historical events, legends, folklore and traditions. Hence, community shapes culture, cultural identity shapes food culture, and food culture shapes the demand for certain foods and the meaning attached to specific foods, the styles of preparation and serving, and eating practices. Feast traditions and special occasions are quite common within Turkish culture. They were carried out at weddings, burial ceremonies, when going to war, after successful work and in religious organizations. Extensions of this tradition in modern Turkey include weddings in particular, but also holidays such as Ramadan and Hıdırellez and occasions such as prayers for rain, migrations, mevlit ceremonies, long journeys, arrival of guests, holidays, circumcisions, births, and other occasions. On these events, the best and most loved foods like pilav, baklava, börek and various sweets are eaten in a celebratory atmosphere (Shipman & Durmus, 2017; Tezcan, 2019). As Teixeira & Ribeiro (2013, p. 2) explain: “Before food

reaches the table, a vast array of culturally relevant processes and practices intersect, betraying the culinary heritage of a given people, place, and culture”. This is certainly the case in Turkey.

When the Turks were living in Central Asia, they were mostly engaged in agriculture and animal husbandry. Among the meals they consumed, pastries mostly made from wheat and wheat flour came into prominence. Wheat is an indispensable part of Turkish life and has significant social, cultural, and historical value. Bread is the symbol of human existence for the Turks. In fact, there are many common Turkish proverbs which express the bread’s place in social life, such as “battle for bread” (*ekmek kavgası*), to “obtain their bread from stones” (*ekmeğini taştan çıkarmak*), “earn the bread” (*ekmeğini kazanmak*), and “the bread is in the mouth of the lion” (*ekmek aslanın ağzında*). In Turkish culture, when a child gets its first tooth, a dish is made of boiled wheat, and both the meal and the ceremony are named the same: “*diş buğdayı*” or “*diş hediği*” (tooth wheat) (FAO, 2018; Batu & Batu, 2018).

Turkish people have diverse dishes and courses for almost any occasion, celebration and mourning in life. An important aspect of this is simply the act of “sharing” – sharing the things that are happening, and the food that is associated with these occasions. Below we present some of the most common occasions which link the Turkish food culture and folklore (Yaşar, 2018).

Wedding Feasts

The “*keşkek*” is a traditional and ceremonial dish in wedding feasts. Recognized as an Intangible Cultural Heritage by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), it also plays a big part in circumcisions and other religious celebrations (UN News, 2011). It is a made of pounded wheat and meat. The next course in wedding ceremonies is the wedding soup, which is a hearty dish typical of Anatolia, and its preparation is time-consuming if cooked for a large number of guests. Stuffed grape leaves (“*yaprak dolması*”), rice, okra soup, tarhana (a soup of curds and flour), chickpeas, baklava and fruit compote are most common dishes prepared at weddings or engagement ceremonies. They are all vegetarian.

Mourning Ceremonies

“*Halva*”, a very sweet and dense confectionery of Assyrian origin, is made with flour or semolina, while “*lokma*”, fried sweet dough soaked in syrup, is cooked by the deceased’s family, then distributed among relatives, neighbors and the poor. These vegan sweets are very common in mourning ceremonies before and after the burial (Krystyna, 2020).

Welcoming Newborns

In Anatolia, Turks serve a traditional sherbet called “*lohusa şerbeti*” (puerpera sherbet), to celebrate the newborn baby. It is consumed by the new mother who has just given birth but also to increase lactation as well as by those visiting the family members. This syrup is made from slabs of sugar flavored with spices and dyed red. It is believed that the sherbet protects the mother from illnesses and bad spirits. “*Lokma*” is also served for the celebration of the newborn. Another interesting ceremonial food is “*hedik*” (boiled wheat). Guests are served *hedik* when the baby’s first tooth appears, symbolizing health and strength.

Let’s Eat Sweet, Speak Candy...

“*Tatlı yiyelim, tatlı konuşalım*” (Let’s eat sweet, speak candy) is a well-known phrase that relays how crucial “*tatlı*” (cakes, sweets) are in the Turkish food culture and folklore. For the Turks, dessert or sweet foods are social rituals, and need to be shared. Desserts have distinct meanings from celebrations to funerals. Some of the most common ceremonial sweet foods in the Turkish cuisine are “*lokum*” (Turkish delight), “*güllaç*” (meaning “meals with roses,” as a conventional Ramadan dessert), “*irmik helvası*”, “*baklava*”, and “*aşure*” (Noah’s pudding). They are all vegan and celebrate love, kindness and union.

UNESCO RECOGNIZED TURKISH FOODS

The strong link between food and culture is recognized by UNESCO through its world lists of cultural sites and intangible heritage. As explained by Oliveira et al. (2018), a national cuisine combines natural and cultural components which represent authenticity, distinctiveness, and ultimately cultural identity. Vegan dishes play a major role in the Turkish cuisine and are recognized as part of the world's cultural heritage. According to Ron and Timothy (2013), food as a heritage is multi-sensory, involving the use of all five senses, and is both, tangible and intangible. The uniqueness of Turkish foods and cultural places is recognised by UNESCO but also experienced by residents and tourists alike.

Dishes

Food culture in Turkey is dependent on tradition, recipes and preparation methods that are passed onto each next generation. This transfer of food culture to the next generation makes Turkey's cities and authentic cuisine a profound experience for visitors. Although most food in Turkey is delicious, enjoyable and highly appreciated, certain Turkish foods are included in the UNESCO's List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. For example, UNESCO recognized the Turkish coffee as a symbol of hospitality and friendship. Flat bread is another UNESCO-recognized food, and its making involves at least three people, and therefore it is a key to Turkish community culture (Oliveira et al., 2018; Slow Travel Guide, n.d.). As already noticed, *keşkek* is similarly part of UNESCO's list. It is interesting to note that no meat or meat-derived course or dish is included in the list by UNESCO.

Cities

Furthermore, there are some places in Turkey that are recognized as Creative Cities of Gastronomy by UNESCO. Two such fascinating food places are Hatay and Gaziantep. They combine traditional food with unique architecture and cultural experiences dating back for millennia.

Hatay

Hatay (capital city Antakya, formerly Antioch) is a province on the Mediterranean coast in the southern part of Turkey. Located on the Spice and Silk Road, it has been a place where Arabians, Armenians, Circassians, Christians, Jewish, Nosairians and Turkmens have been living together for hundreds of years. All these different ethnic communities and religions created the richness of Hatay's food culture and folklore of today. Hatay caught UNESCO's eye, resulting in a well-deserved award as a City of Gastronomy. There are over 600 recipes originating from this area. Among them, the most famous ones are "*Künefe*" – a hot dessert made of stretchy cheese and shredded filo dough, and "*Haytali*" – a cooling dessert, made of a layer of pudding, topped with vanilla ice cream with *salep* (a flour made of local orchid tubers) and bright rosewater syrup (Slow Travel Guide, n.d.).

Gaziantep

Gaziantep is a city also located on the Silk Road. Its food culture and folklore roots date back to the Iron Age and the city is a melting pot of different cultures. Gaziantep continues to be a buzzing marketplace for pistachios and other nuts, dried fruit, many spices, and cereals. In addition to baklava made with pistachio nuts, over 400 other local dishes, including many vegetarian, are intrinsic to this area, representing a truly diverse culinary and cultural experience. Around 60% of its 1.9 million population is employed in gastronomy and close to 50% of the city's enterprises are dedicated to food (UNESCO, n.d.).

DİDİM – THE FIRST VEGAN CITY IN TURKEY

Plant-based (or vegan) food is highly characteristic for the Turkish cuisine with a variety of options as soups, main courses, pastry and deserts. Researching interest in vegan options because of

environmental concerns and animal welfare considerations, is attracting a special status to places which can offer such choices. Barcelona is the world's first Vegan City. Didim, a tourist town in Aydın Province on the Aegean Sea coast of Turkey, has become the second vegan city of the world (after Barcelona). Turkey's first Vegan and Vegetarian Festival (Vegfest) was held in Didim on April 29-30, 2017 at the historic Apollon Temple. This event organized by the Turkish Vegan Vegetarians Association, Tourism Research Association and Didim Tourism Infrastructure Association proved popular and continues the rich folklore tradition of the country (Altaş, 2017).

PLANET- AND VEGAN FRIENDLY FOOD FLOKLORE

As explained earlier, cultural values have been intertwined with some specific crops and plant-based dishes. A number of Turkish provinces are known for specific plant products and they are celebrated with festivals held around them; for example, the festivals of the orange blossom, tomato, watermelon, artichoke, wild herbs, fig, grape, einkorn, emmer or wine vintage. Specific examples include the Golden Orange Film Festival and competition organized in Antalya Province and the Golden Boll Film Festival in Adana Province where cotton is locally important. The list of festivals includes events in Adana, Hatay, Mersin, Nevşehir and Gaziantep cities, Gökçeada eco-tours, Bozcaada, Şarköy, Ürgüp, Kalecik and Urla vintage carnivals, herb festivals of the Aegean Region, workshops for making traditional dishes and desserts for tourists in İstanbul. Local festivals of region-specific agricultural products incorporate activities that blend food culture and folklore in Turkey. There are also specific museums in particular cities that preserve, educate and maintain the folklore traditions, such as the olive oil museums in Çanakkale, Balıkesir, and İzmir, the wine museum in Tekirdağ and traditional culinary museums in Hatay, Şanlıurfa, and Gaziantep (İrigüler & Güler, 2017; FAO, 2018).

Below are some examples of popular festivals which celebrate the vegan roots of Turkish cuisine. They maintain the strong links with folklore but also strengthen Turkey's contemporary cultural where sharing of food continues to be a defining feature. Some of these festivals are relatively new (e.g. established in the last five to ten years), others have been running for hundreds of years. They all signify the importance of plant-based foods for local people and economies.

Alaçatı Herb Festival

The Alaçatı Herb Festival is organized by the İzmir's Çeşme Municipality and celebrates the intricate use of numerous local herbs for which the Aegean cuisine is renowned. Each year, this annual event is dedicated to a particular herb. It includes workshops with celebrity-chefs, street parades, sessions on health and the use of food ingredients as well as competitions to make the best herb dish or collect the most herbs (Daily Sabah Life, 2019).

Diyarbakır Watermelon Festival

The Diyarbakır city located on the banks of the Tigris River in Anatolia is renowned for its local cuisine, beautiful location surrounded by mountains and delicious watermelons. Since 2010, the Diyarbakır Watermelon Festival includes a multitude of colourful events, watermelon presentations and artworks as well as competitions for the biggest watermelon grown (Motley Turkey, n.d.). A similar festival has also been celebrated in Bafra county of Samsun Province on the Black Sea in the last week of August since 1987 (Samsun Guide, n.d.).

Gaziantep International Pistachio Culture and Art Festival

The Gaziantep Pistachio Culture and Art Festival is organized annually in the centre of this iconic creative city of gastronomy (UNESCO Creative Cities Network, n.d.) as an international event with the participation of its twin towns and sister cities. During this festival, the performances combine gastronomic celebrations, folk art, music and literature.

Manisa Mesir Paste Festival

This UNESCO-registered Festival has been running for more than 500 years and celebrates the medicinal properties of a paste consisting of 41 different spices. During the days of the Festival, usually in April, the paste wrapped in small papers is distributed to the public from the Sultan Mosque in the centre of Manisa, a historic city in the Aegean region (Motley Turkey, n.d.).

Orhangazi Olive Festival

Celebrated for more than 40 years, the “Zeytinyağlı” Festival in Orhangazi – a rural district in Bursa Province, offers olive oil dishes and desserts (Turkey Culinary Trip, 2019). The region is famous for its olive trees and production of olive oil which is widely used in the Turkish cuisine. Many local people and visitors are enjoying the festivities.

Urla Artichoke Festival

The Artichoke Festival in Urla – a picturesque town and a holiday resort on the Aegean Sea, was first organised in 2015 (Turkey Homes, 2019). During the Festival, Urla’s centre is transformed by events celebrating the artichoke commercially produced in the region since 1945. Various workshops on how to cook artichokes, performances and prominently food tasting, are part of the three-days celebration by locals and visitors (Business Turkey, 2020).

Yeşilüzümlü Morel Mushroom Festival

The morel mushroom which is only collected in the wild is a gourmet treat which tastes exquisitely and is also full of nutrients. In April, the mountain village of Yeşilüzümlü near the city of Fethiye in Muğla Province in the Aegean Region of Turkey, hosts the Morel Mushroom Festival (Turkey Homes, 2019). The festival opens up with a big tub of morel soup to be shared by the participants. This is followed by a range of community-based activities, including craft and food stalls selling local produce, such as Turkish pancakes, homemade cakes and pastries, children’s performances, traditional music and most importantly, team collecting of morel mushrooms in the forests surrounding the village (Turkey Homes, 2019).

The list of food-related Turkish festivals is quite long and can be extended with the Beypazarı Carrot Festival, Bozcaada Wine-Harvest Festival, Kaman Walnut Festival and Tekirdağ Cherry Festival (Motley Turkey, n.d.). What is characteristic of all these celebrations is the planet- and vegan-friendly unity between community, food and culture which have sustained local people throughout the ages.

CONCLUSION

This paper explored the planet- and vegan-friendly features of the Turkish food culture and folklore. Besides the Turkish cuisine being one of the richest in the world with hundreds of plant-based dishes, it also possesses strong characteristics that allow for the health of the planet and its people to be sustained. With its strong historical background, it has an incredibly rich diversity of vegan choices.

We also showed that the Turkish food culture’s extensions through celebrations and festivals are quite ceremonial, and food folklore plays a very important role in the daily life on traditional occasions. Sharing of food together with a strong community spirit is part of festival activities and individual occasions. The traditional Turkish cuisine blends food culture and folklore, yielding a strong interaction between society and environment with diverse and fascinating plant-based food options. Internationally recognized by UNESCO, many vegan-friendly places and features of Turkish food allow for a more sustainable life.

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