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Chef Gurs innovates Turkish cuisine with tradition

Mehmet Gurs travels around Turkey to revive old tastes and cooking techniques

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"I believe the time has come to rethink the Anatolian kitchen," the chef had written in his manifesto.

But, these days, Mehmet Gurs, perhaps Turkey's most renowned chef, has been neither donning his apron nor slicing and dicing onions and tomatoes.

Instead, he has been busy traveling across Anatolia in search of the perfect ingredients to revive the region's traditional food culture and culinary techniques.

The 45-year-old celebrity chef began exploring Turkey six years ago gathering information on various ingredients and cooking methods that he would later experiment in what he calls his laboratory, for the elaboration of his "New Anatolian Kitchen".

In his five-story Scandinavian-style office in Istanbul's main business district of Maslak, in which Gurs manages his "more than 15 restaurants", he explains his vision for his cuisine with enthusiasm.

"I don't care about ethnicity, I don't care about nationality, I don't care about religion," he says.

As he details in his manifesto, which can be found on his website, Gurs aims to dig in the region's past to unearth forgotten tastes, with an utter disregard for boundaries of any kind -- whether they be physical or psychological.

"The New Anatolian Kitchen has no boundaries; it is a way of perceiving food, it is a philosophy that can and should be interpreted in many ways," he writes.

A self-proclaimed "analytical engineer" when it comes to cooking, the head of one of the 100 best restaurants in the world, according to the Diners' Club 50 best restaurants Academy, has for instance devised an ice cream using ancient einkorn wheat.

"We wanted to do something radical," he says. "We marinated the wheat with dried apricots, a little bit cinnamon and spices. It is an iconic dish."

In order to come up with this innovative dish, his taste buds have experimented, if not endured, a plethora of flavors.

"We tried 950 different cheeses. Probably had 7,000 to 10,000 different cups of tea," he remembers. "We slept in a couple of hundred homes and visited almost 400 villages. We have driven about 110,000 kilometers at least on country roads."

Gurs describes his work on food -- bringing tradition into the contemporary -- as "political but non-partisan".

"If there is no villager or if there is no farmer, there will be no food. And if there is no food, there is no future," he adds.

Turkish father, Finnish mother

Gurs was born in Finland where he lived with his Turkish father, an architect, and his Finnish mother, a designer.

Most of his childhood and young adulthood would be spent in Scandinavia with the occasional summer holiday in Turkey.

The constant? "I always cooked."

First bread and cookies at home. And at only 13 years old, he began working in a restaurant in Sweden. Only two weeks but that was "enough", he says. Young Mehmet is hooked.

"It was a shitty lunch restaurant -- in Stockholm -- but for me it was very interesting," he says.

"I used to do two things the whole time I was there," he recalls laughing: "I used to help clean up the buffet and carry plates."

"But also I was doing the chocolate mousse with mint in it and a really bad tomato salad," he recalls.

Moving to Istanbul

In 1985, at the age of 15, his family moves to Istanbul. There, Gurs studies at a francophone school welcoming both Turkish and foreign students.

Gurs, who is fluent in Swedish, Turkish, French and English, has never taken a Turkish course apart from a class once a week offered by the Swedish government.

It was during these classes that he learned about Turkey's isolation from the food industry.

"They used to say that Turkey does not need to import any food because we produce everything. (It) was a one big lie that all kids were taught," he recalls.

In the 1980s, Turkey is reeling from a brutal military coup, which kept the country relatively isolated despite an economic openness towards the close of the decade.

Gurs was at first reticent to contact with Turkish culture. He lived in what he calls his own "ghettos": school, home and the sailing club he would go to for around four years.

Coming from a "super liberal society" like Scandinavia to a society that is relatively "closed" proved a difficult transition.

"I didn't like it at all," Gurs says. "I thought it was too much pressure on individuals."

After a first job in the front office of Kalyon Hotel, minutes away from Istanbul's historical neighborhood where the Blue Mosque is located, he moved to the U.S. in 1990, to study food and beverage management at Johnson and Wales University.

After graduation, Gurs worked as a chef for around two years in New York and one year in Boston where he lived with his wife-to-be Asena.

In 1996, as both of their families were living in Turkey, they decided to move back Istanbul.

With the help of his father and his uncle, Gurs opened his very first restaurant Down Town -- a heavily American and Scandinavian inspired 40-seater -- in Istanbul's upmarket district of Nisantasi.

"I felt more Swedish or Finnish than I did Turkish," he says explaining why his first restaurant had very little Turkish culture in it.

In 2001, he gets his first taste of stardom, hosting his own TV show on the private TV channel NTV. He also publishes a cooking book, *Downtown*.

But upscale Nisantasi does not suit the style of Mehmet Gurs, preferring instead Beyoglu which was and still is the heart of Turkey's intellectual universe.

In 2004, he opens up Mikla -- the Viking name for Istanbul-- on the Marmara Pera Hotel's rooftop in Beyoglu.

Although Mikla is a success from the start, Gurs feels something is "missing".

The idea of traveling around the Anatolian region to find the perfect ingredients starts to sprout.

"If you have a restaurant at this level, you need the best ingredients," he says. "I saw the potential; the ingredients and the techniques [...] were really good. But they hadn't been used in a proper way for years."

He then hires Tangor Tan, a food anthropologist who had previously worked with Carlo Petrini, the founder of slow food movement, which aims to protect local cuisine traditions.

During their travels across Anatolia, Gurs and Tan preferred to dress modestly so as not to be seen as "city person[s]".

Gurs covers his tattoos while Tan removes his earnings during such visits in the villages.

Travels and lab experiments -- a mixture of tradition and innovation -- have convinced him to completely change his menu in 2013.

No goose liver or caviar in the menu.

Instead, Gurs has opted for local anchovy, cracked wheat and dried apricots.