

## CHEF MEHMET GURS: THE BRIDGING OF CUISINES

by James Brennan

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IN A SYMBOLIC CITY LIKE ISTANBUL, THE BRIDGE BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST, THE RESTAURANT MIKLA PROPOSES A NEW KIND OF ANATOLIAN CUISINE. ALL THANKS TO CHEF MEHMET GURS, WHOSE TURKISH-SCANDINAVIAN ROOTS ARE TRANSFORMING LOCAL FLAVOURS...

It's the view that grabs you first at *Mikla*. There are few restaurants in the world that can match its majestic panoramas. From its perch on the 18th floor of the *Marmara Pera hotel*, the city of Istanbul tumbles on for miles. A riot of concrete boxes, skyscrapers, twisting lanes and elegant minarets. Through the clutter of the city, famous landmarks peek out like eyes in a forest; the *Blue Mosque*, *Hagia Sophia*, *Topkapi Palace*...

You can watch giant cruise liners glide through the city's waterways, the *Golden Horn* and the mighty *Bosphorus*, which divides the great continents of Europe and Asia. At night across its bridges, a fluid glow of traffic flows in both directions, snakes of red and white. And the whole city begins to sparkle like all the Sultans' jewels scattered in the dark.

They call the open-air terrace here the 'flying carpet', and as far as rooftop restaurants go it's hard to beat. But where most rely on the view alone to deliver kicks, *Mikla* has quite a few more tricks up its sleeve. Take the ambience - almost horizontally relaxed and effortlessly cool. Muted lighting hides in coves. Sweeping wooden decking and crisp, clean tables make up the minimalist look, which is broken up by a textured wall sculpture of a silhouetted figure blowing bubbles, while languid beats waft from the speakers.

It's seductive, but there's substance to go with all that style. *Mikla* is one of the most important restaurants in Turkey, thanks to the ancient and otherwise forgotten ingredients it sources from all over the country. The man with the vision to bring it all together is **Mehmet Gurs**.

Born in Finland to a Finnish-Swedish mother and Turkish father, Gurs grew up in Sweden. He then studied and worked in the US before finally settling in Istanbul. «When we first opened up, my Scandinavian background had a huge influence on what I did here,» says Gurs. «But as I travelled more to the farthest corners of Anatolia, it transformed into some kind of new Anatolian cooking.»

With a new manifesto to use only local ingredients, Gurs hired an anthropologist to drive around the country, sourcing obscure and ancient foods from the remotest villages. The idea is to support and work alongside farmers, so that their unique products can be resurrected in a modern context in Istanbul, and a culinary tradition can be kept alive.

«Dying out is a very strong phrase,» says Gurs. «But many of these things will die out, if not all of them. There is one ingredient, for example, I know we are among the last users of it. There are three guys in Turkey making it. It's a sesame paste - think of *tahini* - but they toast the seeds over an open fire on a steel pan. Once they think it's right - there's no measurement, weighing or timing - they crush it with a stone. That will go if no-one will take over.»

Alongside this soon-to-be-extinct sesame paste, Gurs offers a lifeline to a raft of unique ingredients. The *Halhali* olives are green, slightly crunchy and with a gently sour flavour. Unlike most olives offered in restaurants, they are served on ice and not in oil. They are grown in a Christian-Arab village near the Syrian border, and are unlike any other olive currently on the market. Then there's the honey from a village near the Georgian border; or the *halwa* that's been produced by eight generations of the same family. «The young generation are taking it over, which is great,» says Gurs. «The father is a very religious man - it's Allah and *halwa*, those are the two things he worships.»

«We've got a bunch of different products like that, all from this area,» he adds. «We discover all kinds of products and techniques - what the ladies and old men have been doing there for centuries. We film them, then we come back and try to re-do it in a restaurant setting, in a commercial kitchen. It can be frustrating because you taste a great product in a town in eastern Turkey, but you come back with the same ingredient but you cannot always make the same thing.»

Nevertheless, Gurs manages to combine traditional ingredients and modern cooking techniques to great effect on *Mikla's* menu. The locally sourced lamb shoulder is slow-cooked using the sous vide method until indecently juicy and tender. It's complemented by *frika pilaf*, cherry tomatoes and pomegranate molasses. It tastes as good as it sounds, but Gurs' food isn't just about flavour. It's about supporting independent farmers against a growing tide of mass production and large-scale commercial farming.

«There's the awareness all over the world that people want to eat more proper food. Non-industrial food, properly produced food,» says Gurs. «Turkey has not been industrialised completely yet, but it's going there really quickly. We are seeing some of the mistakes that have been made in other places such as the UK, France and the US. But there are groups trying to protect things. I work a lot with these producers to try to promote them and share information. We feel good about what we do when we go to bed at night.»



**MEHMET GÜRS | LAMB SHOULDER WITH TARHANA**  
Photos courtesy of Mikla Restaurant



**ROOFTOP OF THE MIKLA RESTAURANT IN ISTANBUL**  
Photo courtesy of Mikla Restaurant



**CANDIED PUMPKINS | ROOFTOP OF THE MIKLA RESTAURANT**  
Photos courtesy of Mikla Restaurant



**RECIPE - Makes 20 pieces**

*Ingredients*

300g flour AP  
15g fresh yeast  
30ml extra virgin olive oil  
8g sea salt  
160ml warm water  
20 double Hamsi fillets, cleaned, skin on (substitute with anchovy)  
25g clarified butter  
Black pepper

*Preparation*

*To make olive oil bread*

Preheat the oven to 200° C.  
Add yeast to warm water and mix well.  
Add salt and 10ml of olive oil.  
Sift flour in and mix until it forms a smooth textured dough  
Take the dough on the work table and knead until surface becomes sleek texture.  
Place the dough on an ¼ 150mm stainless steel gastro pan  
Press the dough with your fingers to fit into the gastro pan  
Brush 20g of olive oil on top of the dough  
Cover and allow to rest at room temperature for 20 minutes.  
Cook the dough for 40 mins at 200C with the fan off.  
Rest the bread overnight and the next day slight bread 4mm thick.  
Cut the bread slices into rectangular shapes (9 x 4.5 x 0.8 cm)

*To assemble Hamsi crisps*

Place the sliced olive oil bread on baking paper  
Season Hamsi fillets with sea salt, black pepper  
Flatten Hamsi fillet on top of the bread. Skin must be side down, wrap in cling film and keep in fridge for 4 hours (Hamsi fillet must stick on the bread)  
Melt butter in a nonstick pan on stove over medium heat.  
Add bread and with fish fillet on top  
Sear until the bread takes a crispy texture and brown color.