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good living

Native food race gains pace

A Turkish chef leads the search for rare produce before it's lost forever, writes **Leisa Tyler**.

Backlash is brewing on the Bosphorus. After years of watching Turkey's plump pantry of indigenous foodstuffs slowly disappear to industrialisation, a coterie of chefs is fighting to bring them back.

In the vanguard is Mehmet Gurs, vivacious owner/chef of the fine-dining Istanbul restaurant, Mikla.

"There have been so many cultures on this land, both on the Asian Anatolia side and European Thrace side, and they all left an incredibly rich array of foods," says Gurs from Mikla's marble balcony which, on the top floor of the 18-storey Marmara Pera Hotel, offers sensational views across the royal-blue Golden Horn and spires rising above the historic Sultanahmet district.

"Now it is so commercial and mass-produced that you have to be a villager or seasoned intellectual to even appreciate a decent tomato."

It's an issue Gurs feels is only getting worse. Hoping to become a member of the European Union, Turkey has been modifying its food laws to meet EU standards, which includes pasteurising all milk products and preparing foods in industrial kitchens. Further, a list of genetically modified crops – including corn, soya bean and potato – has recently been given the green light, adding further challenges to the preservation of vanishing native species.

Eager to reverse the trend, two years ago Gurs employed the



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services of a food anthropologist and started scouring Turkey's countryside for obscure and forgotten ingredients. Some of them can now be found in Istanbul's fashionable restaurants and delis.

"Farmers can't sell their goods and that forces them to move to the cities where their skills are worth even less. If we can shorten this gap, give farmers marketing and internet skills then encourage city people to buy these goods, it will be win-win all around; city people get to eat healthier and the farmers get to stay on the land," Gurs says.

His recent travels took him to Camili, a remote village in the lushly fertile Macahel Valley near Turkey's border with Georgia. Home to both Caucasus bees and more than 1200 flowering plant species, Camili produces a range of unique organic honey. Separated from the nearest towns by several mountain ranges, communications are limited and the road is blocked by snow for six months of the year.

In Hatay, the southern province bordering Syria and the Mediterranean, Gurs found an ethnic Arab Christian village growing a rare strain of olive; crunchy and slightly sour halhal zeytin olives are the size of a small finger nail and unlike any other.

In the Southern Aegean, Gurs tracked down a village rich in indigenous pears. So far, 40 varieties have been found.

Some of these ingredients have made their way onto the menu at Mikla. Hamsi, a tiny fish from the Black Sea, is sandwiched between wafer-thin slices of bread, deep-



Fighting back... chef Mehmet Gurs of Mikla, Istanbul, is coming to Sydney. Photo: Leisa Tyler

fried and served with a lemon and egg-white sauce. The halhal zeytin olives are served over ice with zesty Turkish wines as a canape.

There is an unusual seventh-generation halva recipe that Gurs blends into pistachio ice-cream, and local kaymark pears he uses in a gorgeous silky-smooth terrine.

Mikla's menu is what Gurs describes as Modern Istanbul cuisine – a blend of Turkish ingredients with some Scandinavian cooking styles and European flair, "as complex as my ethnic background".

Born in Finland to a Finnish mother and Turkish father, Gurs grew up in Stockholm in Sweden, did his high school in a French school in Istanbul and then hospitality training in the US.

His respect for authentic and natural foods came at an early age; each winter his grandparents took

him hunting and fishing in Finland's remote north, where they would smoke moose and cure herring in the traditional Scandinavian ways.

Summers were spent wandering the aromatic markets of Turkey, getting lost in the chaotic streets of Sultanahmet and snacking on stuffed mussels and grilled mackerel sandwiches by the shores of the Bosphorus.

Gurs opened his first restaurant in the fashionable Istanbul neighbourhood of Nisantasi in 1996. Modelled on a New York-style brasserie, contemporary Downtown was a roaring success, but not satisfying.

"We imported almost everything. It was a time when Turkey was opening up to the West and Western things were very trendy," he says. "We were FedEx cooks and our food was fake."

A string of restaurants followed, including Lokanta, a "no tablecloths, gastro-pub serving locally sourced food in the then rowdy district of Beyoglu"; a chain of sleek city cafes called Numnum; and then the elegant but unpretentious Mikla in 2005.

Recently, Gurs started a not-for-profit laboratory documenting and cataloguing the rare ingredients his team unearths. Eventually he hopes to create an encyclopaedia of them and invite young Turkish chefs to learn about them.

"It's the irony of the world", says Gurs. "People don't realise what they have got until they have lost it."

* Mehmet Gurs appears in the Middle East/Mediterranean program of the World Chef Showcase, part of the Crave Sydney International Food Festival. See cravesydneyfoodfestival.com.au.

