



# Sugar & Spice

**Eva Leonard** digs into an array of Turkish delights, conjuring up Istanbul's rich history with every forkful



**A**long with many of the storied venues in which it's served, food in Istanbul is steeped in a sweet, spicy and savory flurry of historic and cultural influences. Traditional Ottoman cuisine has melded Central Asian, Anatolian, Middle Eastern and Balkan flavors over the centuries, and today, restaurants in Istanbul continue the cross-cultural journey, serving everything from traditional Ottoman fare to sushi, creating intriguing blends from a fascinating cornucopia of spices and ingredients that have made their way to Turkey from all corners of the globe. Sweeping hilltop views of Istanbul and



Topaz, and below



the Bosphorus become even more dazzling when Topaz restaurant's paneled glass walls are swept open in warm weather. Topaz's contemporary, yet welcoming interior design reflects its name, with decorative accents including gemstone-shaped lights and mirrors. Both modern and traditional cuisines, with Mediterranean and Ottoman flavors, grace the menu, and this restaurant and bar swells with a hip vibe that is also inclusive, reflected in the range of ages and personalities thronging its tables.

Topaz's traditional Ottoman dishes include *dolma*, a starter of grape leaves stuffed with minced meat, sour cherry, and spices, including



Seasons

allspice, cumin, black pepper and cinnamon. The dish is then topped with sour cherry sauce and yogurt just before serving. Lamb, a staple of Central Asian food culture, became part of the Ottoman culinary pantheon when the Turks moved to Anatolia. Topaz celebrates this legacy delectably, with its grilled lamb loin entrée with smoked eggplant purée, minted onion relish and smoked wheat *firik* pilaf.

The modern menu offers such daring options as a beef carpaccio appetizer with coriander pomegranate sorbet, and main courses such as goose liver tortellini with goat cheese and porcini sauce with lemon. Topaz puts its own spin on *lokma*, the sweet pastry that Turkey's port town of Bodrum is known for—small balls of dough fried in oil and soaked in syrup. The restaurant flavors its lokma with mastic and serves it with homemade sorbet.

Topaz's award-winning wine list spans Europe, America and Australasia and has been carefully selected to complement the key ingredients of the restaurant's cuisine.



Reservations are necessary. (*Topaz, İnönü Caddesi, Ömer Avni Mahallesi No.50, Gümüşsuyu, Istanbul; tel. 90-212-249-1001; www.topazistanbul.com*)

Once the residence of Ottoman sultans, Çırağan Palace Kempinski is now home to Tuğra restaurant, specializing in Turkish fusion and classic Ottoman cuisine. It's no surprise that Tuğra draws the city's movers and shakers. The night we dined here, a female trio sang Turkish songs and played traditional instruments, enhancing the palatial feel of the soaring ceilings and atmospheric views of the Bosphorus.

Tuğra Chef Olivier Chaleil's menu emphasizes organic cuisine, drawing from recipes served over the last 11 centuries. With sun-dried chili flakes, butter sauce and wild thyme, Ottoman-style spinach ravioli *piruhi* was a popular appetizer during the 15th century, while Tuğra's Topkapi entrée, roasted chicken breast filled with Oriental pilaf and topped with creamy spinach, was ordered to be prepared in the late 16th century by Sultan Murad III for special celebrations. Tempting sweets clearly aren't a modern concept: Tuğra's warm *künefe*, a dessert of glazed shredded angel hair pasta in syrup, with regional Hatay cheese and clotted cream, was originally created by an 11th-century Arabic-Turkish dictionary editor.

A heady variety of desserts has long been an important part of Ottoman cuisine, with no signs of stopping anytime soon. After our culinary adventures had spanned more than a millennium, a grinning waiter appeared tableside with a stick-candy trolley to spin multi-colored, irresistible treats, much to our delight. (*Tuğra Restaurant, Çırağan Palace Kempinski, Çırağan Caddesi No. 32, Beşiktaş,*



Tuğra

## Getting There

### FROM ATLANTA

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London

### FROM CHICAGO O'HARE

**Nonstop:** Turkish Airlines

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London, KLM via Amsterdam, Alitalia via Rome, Swiss International Air Lines via Zurich, Iberia via Madrid, LOT via Warsaw, Royal Jordanian via Amman

### FROM DALLAS DFW

**One stop with plane change:** Delta via JFK, British Airways via London

### FROM HOUSTON BUSH INTERCONTINENTAL

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London, KLM via Amsterdam

### FROM LOS ANGELES

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London, KLM via Amsterdam

### FROM MIAMI

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London, Iberia via Madrid, Alitalia via Rome, Swiss International Air Lines via Zurich

### FROM NEW YORK

**Nonstop from JFK:** Turkish Airlines, Delta  
**One stop with plane change from JFK or Newark:** Swiss International Air Lines via Zurich, Alitalia via Rome, Air France via Paris, British Airways via London

**One stop with plane change from JFK:** Iberia via Madrid, KLM via Amsterdam, Austrian Airlines via Vienna

### FROM WASHINGTON DULLES

**One stop with plane change:** Air France via Paris, Delta via JFK, British Airways via London, KLM via Amsterdam, Austrian Airlines via Vienna —*Howard Weiss*

Topaz, and left



*Istanbul; tel. 90-212-259-03-94.*)

Though Four Seasons Istanbul at Sultanahmet occupies buildings that once housed a prison, (Sultanahmet Jail, built circa 1919), today nothing about the hotel or its acclaimed Seasons restaurant feels constrained. Brunch within Seasons' glass pavilion, set in a bright courtyard, is a hearty affair, with cuisine both Turkish and global, including bountiful tiers of seafood, sushi, salad, desserts and much more.

The dinner menu offers a wide selection of choices, from local dishes to international fare, ranging from ribeye to gnocchi to teriyaki eel. Seasons is just steps from the Blue Mosque, Hagia Sophia and Topkapi Palace, so there are plenty of edifying opportunities nearby to walk off any overindulgence. (*Seasons Restaurant at Four Seasons Istanbul at Sultanahmet; Tevkihane Sokak No.1, Sultanahmet- Eminönü, Istanbul; tel. 90-212-402-30-00.*)

Although convention centers typically aren't known for their culinary offerings, Boğaziçi Borsa Restaurant, Istanbul Convention and Exhibition Center, is an exception, even drawing the glitterati with its exceptional classic Turkish fare. (While we were there, a film star who was described as "the Turkish Michael Douglas" was dining at the next table.) Although Borsa seats up to 500 people, and its terrace 1,500, with soft lighting, warm colors and attentive service, it exudes intimacy and feels anything but cavernous. (*Borsa, Istanbul Convention and Exhibition Center, Lütfi Kırdar Uluslararası Kongre ve Sergi Sarayı, Harbiye, Istanbul; tel. 0212-232-42-01-02.*) ■