

Fennel bulb with smoked bonito and ringa fish, at Karaköy Gümrük. OPPOSITE: Nicole boasts gorgeous views to the Sea of Marmara.



# *More than Meze*



Long at a crossroads, Istanbul offers cuisine to surprise every palate, provided you know where to look. **Robyn Eckhardt** offers a glimpse of some of her favorites in a city that is evolving towards freshly foraged seasonal produce. Photographed by **David Hagerman**



Alancha's deconstructed baklava sandwiches. Like the original version, eaten in one bite.

In Turkey, spring means fava beans and *otlar* (foraged herbs and greens). Autumn brings quince, winter welcomes enormous orange pumpkins and anchovies caught off Turkey's Black Sea coast. The Turkish kitchen is one of the world's richest and most seasonal, yet you'd never know it from the culinary itineraries trod by many visitors to Istanbul.

I was one of those tourists. My earliest Istanbul food memories, dating from the late 90s, are of meats, sweets, ersatz Ottoman cuisine and unfortunate "Western" meals. Back then travelers to Turkey's cultural capital didn't have much choice. "When I started cooking in Istanbul in 2003 'international cooking'—pizza, pasta, beef and salmon—dominated," remembers Didem Şenol, chef-owner of Istanbul's Lokanta Maya restaurant.

But that's no longer the case, thanks to a growing number of Istanbul chefs tapping Turkish ingredients to devise seasonally driven menus. When I visit Istanbul these days I plan my gastronomic forays around what's on offer at the farmer's market. Here, in my favorite city in the world to eat, are some of my favorite spots to taste Turkey's bounty.



## Kantin

Semsa Denizsel is so enamored of seasonal produce that she's been known to return from road trips to Ayvalik, a small Aegean town seven hours south of Istanbul famous for its *otlar*, with a trunk spilling spindly wild asparagus, pungent chicory and other foraged greens and herbs. "What most people think of as 'Istanbul food'—grills and doners—is actually the result of migration from Anatolia and eastern Turkey. I grew up in Istanbul, and we have always eaten according to the season," says the chef-owner of the 15-year-old Kantin restaurant.

Denizsel's Alice Waters-style focus on local and seasonal foods has inspired younger chefs like Lokanta Maya's Şenol and Stavriani Zervakakou of newcomer Karaköy Gümrük. At Kantin, spring means sautéed *çağla* (green almonds) on a bed of drained yogurt drizzled with olive oil and pomegranate molasses, while summer brings cold asparagus soup, and autumn's *zeytinyağlı* (olive-oil stewed) green tomatoes gives way to *haslama*, a Turkish-style pot-au-feu, in winter.

Kantin's pastel walls and crisp white tablecloths lend it the air of a French brasserie. On a fine spring day the best seats in the house are the ones on the tree-shaded rear terrace, where you might start with *çitir*, a crispy flatbread topped with whatever's good at the market, and move on to Denizsel's refined version of street-food favorite *kokoreç*, spit-grilled lamb intestines filled with wild thyme-scented lamb meat. Don't pass on the delicious sourdough bread, the result of two years of experimentation and made with flour ground from heirloom Turkish wheat.

FROM TOP: Dining at Kantin; Semsa Denizsel's fresh take on *fattoush* at the restaurant.



## Lokanta Maya

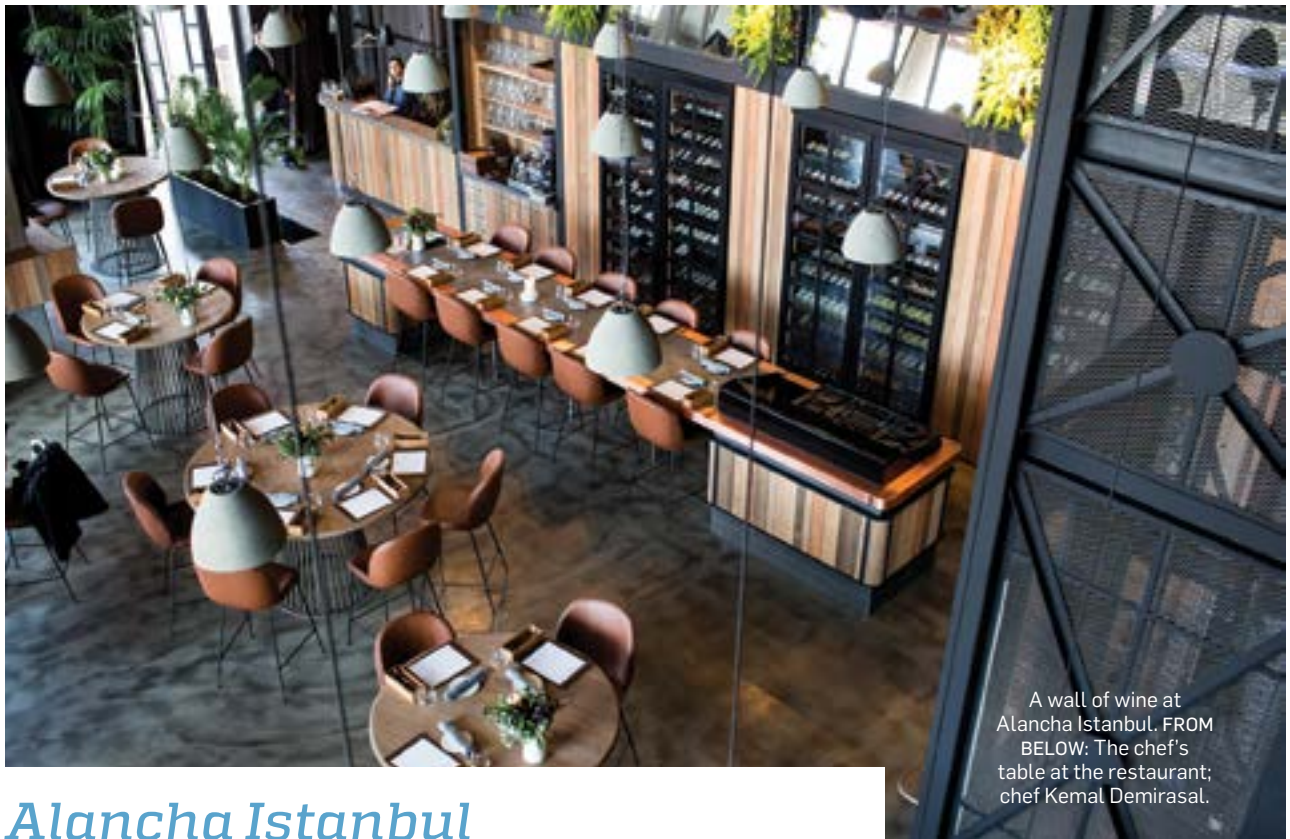
“It was boring to be cooking the same thing for six months,” recalls Lokanta Maya’s Şenol, of her time as a line cook in New York. “It’s much more fun to change the menu depending on what you find at the market.” Before opening Lokanta Maya in 2010, Şenol trained at Manhattan’s French Culinary Academy and headed a resort kitchen in Marmaris, at Turkey’s southwestern tip. Gram, a tiny Beyoğlu café with an abbreviated daily menu of mezes, salads and mains, as well as a mouthwatering selection of sweets and ice creams, is Lokanta Maya’s younger sibling; a second Gram opened this year in the business district of Macka.

Mediterranean in spirit—“I love to work with seafood and citrusy things, olive oil and herbs,” she says—Şenol’s menu draws inspiration from produce sourced at once-a-week markets in the Fatih and Ferikoy districts, as well as foodstuffs sent from small producers from Hatay province in Turkey’s southeast to Denizli in the Aegean region. Şenol seasons offal with *zahter*, fresh wild thyme from the southeast that is reminiscent of rosemary, and artichoke-flavored confit with orange juice. Not content to rest on Lokanta Maya’s laurels, Şenol and her staff continue to experiment, recently introducing house-cured spicy-salty *pastirma*.

Hung on one wall of the restaurant is a slab of glass etched with Şenol’s recipe for *mucver*, the zucchini fritters that have become her signature dish. Lunch runs to 5 p.m., making Lokanta Maya ideal for a lingering late-afternoon meal.



House-cured *pastirma* at Lokanta Maya. TOP LEFT: The restaurant’s chef Didem Şenol.



A wall of wine at Alancha Istanbul. FROM BELOW: The chef's table at the restaurant; chef Kemal Demirasal.



## Alancha Istanbul

Since opening his celebrated restaurant Alancha in Alaçati, an historic resort town on Turkey's Cesme Peninsula, in 2012 young chef Kemal Demirasal has morphed from a Noma-style champion of local, seasonal and often-foraged ingredients to a proponent for food as a transmitter of culture. At his Istanbul outpost, home to a new test kitchen, seasonal ingredients and modern techniques are employed in the larger effort to convey Turkey's diverse cultures and cuisines in one menu.

"I no longer believe that a chef must be in his kitchen 24/7. Half our time here is spent reading history books. We like creating something and our tool is food," Demirasal said as we sat down to a four-course lunch in front of double-story windows overlooking a terrace in the restaurant's casual ground-floor dining room, called Beets. (Dinner, which can run to 18 courses, is served upstairs.)

In recent years, much has been made of Istanbul's "New Anatolian" cooking, which claims to modernize traditional Turkish dishes. Yet too often the concept fails to deliver on execution. Thanks perhaps to his test kitchen where, says Demirasal, "we make the foods we've created delicious," Alancha Istanbul succeeds where others have failed.

Take, for example, Alancha Istanbul's version of *ayran asi*, a cold yogurt soup with grains, legumes and herbs that's often served with ice in Turkey's southeast. Here, it's served in a bowl made of ice so as not to dilute the soup and features extra-sour yogurt, smoked barley and chickpeas, crunchy hopped wheat and mint-cilantro-arugula oil in place of chopped herbs. It's refreshing and intense, a burst of deep flavors and texture. A raw dish composed of thin planks of Cretan zucchini rolled and stood on end with tiny shrimps in spring-onion cream dabbed with arugula oil tells the story of Cretans who migrated to Turkey's Aegean region in the early 20th century. It's also delicious. At Alancha Istanbul fruits fermented in the style of *şalgam*, an Anatolian beverage reminiscent of pickle juice, make for bracing juices served straight or mixed into 'cocktails', and the classic Turkish pairing of watermelon and feta cheese is transformed into a savory ice cream.



## Nicole

In late 2012, chefs Kaan Sakarya and Aylin Yazicioğlu, veterans of Michelin-starred kitchens in Europe, and of their own well-received Istanbul pop-up, returned to redesign the menu at the penthouse restaurant atop luxe boutique hotel Tomtom Suites. The renamed Nicole is now one of Istanbul's most exciting and, inexplicably, under-the-radar places to eat.

"We can call it a Mediterranean influence—some French, sometimes Spanish or Turkish. A mixture of what I've learned cooking in other places, influences from my journeys," says Sakarya, explaining the inspiration behind dishes like artichoke with baby herbs (nettles, chickweed) and umami-rich fish roe mayonnaise drizzled with a vinaigrette that he makes from preserved Turkish grape leaves.

Over the last two years Sakarya and Yazicioğlu have worked to build a network of Turkish suppliers; they continue also to develop their own skills. As we spoke in April, Sakarya was preparing for a trip to the Mediterranean province of Alanya to meet with a maker of aged goat cheese while Yazicioğlu, who handles Nicole's breads and desserts, was heading off for a stint at Spain's Asador Etxebarri.

A wall of windows overlooking treetops, mosques and the Bosphorus, plus a retractable roof that opens in fine weather, give Nicole a certain wow factor. Yet Sakarya's refreshingly down-to-earth creed—"Nothing too fancy, nothing pretentious"—is evident in dishes like baby potatoes poached in morel stock with asparagus and aged *tulum* cheese, and shockingly tender kid (modeled after Turkey's traditional tandoor-cooked meats) with purslane, snow peas and crocus flower. Even Yazicioğlu's beautiful desserts—in April, blood orange ice cream alongside tangerine cream *gianduja* with praline crunch—invite devouring as much as they do admiring.



Chefs Kaan Sakarya and Aylin Yazicioğlu of Nicole. FROM TOP: Tangerine cream *gianduja*; a warm salad with mint, parsley, purslane and snow peas.

## Karaköy Gümrük

Most mornings find Gümrük chef Stavriani Zervakakou at the fish market in Karakoy district, which sits beside the Galata Bridge four blocks from her restaurant. “I’m obsessed with seafood,” says the Athens native, who says her fondest childhood memories are of fishing with her aunts off the Mani Peninsula in Peloponnese.

After gaining a degree in international relations, she went to Istanbul and worked a number of odd jobs before following her heart to Istanbul Culinary Institute. A connection with Kantin’s chef Sema Denizsel led to Gümrük (Turkish for “customs house”), which opened last summer in a sensitively refurbished Greek architect-designed building dating to the late 19th-century. “If you keep a dish stable you miss the chance to experience another,” she says, explaining Gümrük’s daily menu of five starters and five mains.

Working with seafood usually eschewed by Turkish chefs (stingray, *ringa*, clams) and farmed and foraged produce that she orders directly from village women near the interior Aegean town of Tire, Zervakakou crafts beautiful but unaffected dishes like earthy pink beetroot-marinated John Dory with fresh parsley, garlic and green-olive-oil dressing and open-faced *balik ekmek*, a play on Istanbul’s iconic fish sandwich that layers *pastirma* and a charred fillet of what’s best that day atop a slice of caramelized onion-lacquered sourdough. Offerings like saffron-stewed chicken and tabbouleh and homemade pasta with broad beans and goat cheese keep fish-phobes happy.

Open all day,  
Karaköy Gümrük  
lures late-  
afternoon diners  
with small plates.







Meze at Cunda  
Balik includes fava  
beans, wild parsley  
and raw artichokes,  
with olive oil.

## Cunda Balik

*Meyhane*, the restaurants in which *Istanbulullar* gather to while away an evening over rounds of meze and glasses of raki, Turkey's anise-scented liquor, are integral to the city's dining culture. When I want a *meyhane* fix I skip the tourist traps that line the warren of streets around Beyoğlu's fish market and hop a ferry over to Bostanci, on Istanbul's Asian side, where the welcome is warm and the meze are made with care.

"My wife and I would go to Cunda to eat meze. We love it," says owner Özgür Bayrak, explaining his decision to ditch a career in electrical engineering in 2003 to run a restaurant. Just as on its island namesake, Cunda's meze—some five or six dozen nightly—are displayed in a refrigerated case from which diners order before they sit down. Point to more meze than you could possibly eat and your waiter will gently advise "*yeter*" (enough).

Look for foraged vegetables like nettles, *cilbiz* (small cabbage similar to baby gai lan), wild chicory and radish, watercress, samphire and sea beans dressed with Ayvalik olive oil and lemon or garlic sauce. There's light, airy wild herb and white cheese fritters served with yogurt, fava-bean and black-bean salads and squash blossoms filled with seasoned rice too. Bites from the sea include anchovies smoked and preserved in olive oil, cheese-stuffed calamari, grilled octopus so tender it cuts like butter and, in August, sardines wrapped in grape leaves and grilled. Decked out in bright white with splashes of sea blue, Cunda is crowded, noisy and convivial. On a Friday night the restaurant feels like one big party at a seaside restaurant in an Aegean resort town—just the way a *meyhane* should. ☺



#### THE DETAILS

##### RESTAURANTS

**Alancha Istanbul** Maçka Residences, Husrev Gerede Caddesi, Sehit Mehmet Sokak No. 9, Maçka; [alancha.com](http://alancha.com); lunch from TL110 for three courses, dinner from TL 160 for four courses.

**Cunda Balık** Köy Yolu Sokak No. 6/1, Bostancı; [cundabalik.com.tr](http://cundabalik.com.tr); TL160.

**Kantin** Akkavak Sokak No. 30, Nişantaşı; [kantin.biz](http://kantin.biz); TL150 for two.

**Karaköy Gümrük** Gümrük Sokak No. 4, Karaköy; [karakoygumruk.com.tr](http://karakoygumruk.com.tr); TL190 for two.

**Lokanta Maya** Kemankes Caddesi No. 35A, Karaköy; [lokantamaya.com](http://lokantamaya.com); TL220 for two.

**Nicole** Tomtom Suites, Boğazkesen Caddesi, TomTom Kaptan Sokak No. 18, Tophane; [nicole.com.tr](http://nicole.com.tr); dinner TL150 for five courses or TL175 for seven courses.



At Lokanta Maya, the menu on a mirror. FROM TOP LEFT: At Karakoy Fish Market; mornings find chef Stavriani Zervavakou of Karakoy Gumruk at the market.