



Turkiye

WHERE ON EARTH

# Tasting History on Türkiye's Aegean Coast

by ELYSE GLICKMAN

THERE IS NOTHING LIKE WALKING through everything you remember from your history or social studies classes in person, and Türkiye's Aegean Coast offers a banquet of awe- and conversation-inspiring ways to see ancient history come to life.

PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM LEFT  
Restaurant alley in Izmir Bazaar; The Library of Celsus, Ephesus; Olives and cheese mezze plates.

DOĞAN ALPASLAN



**EPHESUS, A MAJOR** Mediterranean trade and cultural hub from the Bronze Age through ancient Greece, the Roman Empire and early Christianity, draws thousands of visitors. However, the UNESCO World Heritage-designated archaeological site is just one of many “courses” in this feast of history when you factor in other parks, sites and museums to the itinerary. Izmir Culture and Art Factory is a perfect starter for an itinerary that also includes the Apollon Temple, Eski Doğanbey Traditional Mansions, Bodrum Castle & Underwater Archeology Museum, and the Millet Museum & Ancient City.

Between Izmir and Bodrum in Türkiye's southwest there is a lot of walking and climbing required to take in the preserved riches of the Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, Seljuk and Ottoman empires. Thankfully, there are many ways to reenergize and replenish body and soul throughout the Aegean region, from seafood-focused restaurants to spice markets, food trucks, *döner* (“rotating meat”) kebab kiosks, specialty food shops, wineries and olive oil producers.

Eating one's way across Türkiye's Aegean Coast can be just as exciting as a stroll through beautifully preserved ruins as there are important connections to the cultural makeup of Izmir, Bodrum, Kuşadası, Urla and other towns. A clever and astute guide with an encyclopedic knowledge of the region's history, therefore, adds to the visual feast. Huseyin Demir, my guide for the week, assures me that one can eat the same dishes at

every meal every day of the week, yet never eat the same thing twice.

Huseyin posits his theory during our first meal at Ferdi Baba at Çeşme Marina, on the outskirts of Izmir. After passing through its doors and by a wall of local culinary awards, we see artfully arranged refrigerated glass cases with mezze and fresh seafood. Once seated,»





SELANİK 1945

**PHOTOS THIS SPREAD CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT**  
Kebab with tarator; Cafe entrance in Alaçatı; View to the sea in Bodrum; Bottarga mussels; Huseyin's favourite ice cream, Selanik.



“he steers the conversation toward local white cheese varieties as the mezze plates of our choice are placed on the table. The water below the dock where the restaurant stands is so clear that one can see the fish swimming even at night.

“You can tell the terroir of the cheese by the region, the climate and what the (cows, goats, and sheep) eat,” he says, as we mix and match cheeses, including two kinds *beyaz peynir* (white cheese made from cow, sheep or goat milk) with a similar texture to feta brought to the table along with mezze including seafood *burek* (layered pastry made with thin, flaky phyllo-like dough), shrimp fried in a kulfı batter, grilled mushrooms basted in butter, and grouper kabab. “Cheese is a common starter, and you will be trying white cheeses throughout the week with different tastes and textures,” says Huseyin.

Huseyin’s approach is more storyteller and less fact sheet, and he extends it to every bite and meal along the route. Whether something is from a Michelin- or Gault Millau-acclaimed restaurant, a humble market kiosk, an imaginative entrepreneur, or winery, his take underscores the idea that this side of the Aegean paradise must be experienced with all five senses.

### Izmir Initiation

One can count on inns like Antmare, next door to Çesme Marina, to serve a solid, homestyle breakfast with strong Turkish coffee and a pretty setting. However, our first breakfast of the trip at TARLA, a stylish “soil-to-table” establishment in a residential section of neighbouring Alaçatı, is elegant even if the food is modestly described as rustic. It is a self-contained mini-retreat, offering cooking and bread baking classes, soap-making and terrarium workshops, herb and vegetable gardens, and meditation sessions. A star attraction is the gorgeous all-day breakfast served on a patio beneath a canopy of trees sheltering it from the late summer heat.

Garden-sourced tomatoes are as addictive as candy and balanced with a colourful assortment of earthy local olives. Butter served in a small pool of olive oil and dusted with herbs adds a touch of luxury to rustic just-baked bread. Spiced hard-boiled eggs, fresh hummus, zesty avocado/chili dip and brewed Turkish tea fill out the spread. The cheese offerings allow Huseyin to continue his discourse on the Turkish white cheese multiverse. One is essentially a deconstructed cheesecake — airy, soft cheese topped with dried apricots. A roasted cheese is a flavourful cousin to Greek saganaki. Roasted cream surrounded by honey and lemon curd, meanwhile, gives off panna cotta vibes that make it almost too decadent for breakfast.

“Just add apricot jam, and it (completely transforms) the taste,” Huseyin explains, validating my reactions to the small plates, which quickly empty, and provide context for the generations-long food culture ties between Türkiye and Greece. “The Pergamon cheese, which we also tried last night, is also called *Bergama tulum peyniri*, comes from the Bergama district of Izmir, but has a different flavour and texture than feta. The roasted cheese is called ‘village cheese,’ which is similar to *helim* or *hollowi* in Cyprus, yet specific to the village where we are now. The spicy sauce with avocado and olive oil, garden-fresh tomatoes and olives are always required to complete a meal. The cream is a little like sour cream, but becomes something different when you add honey,” he continues.

A tight schedule encompassing the Izmir Culture and Art Factory, walks on the boutique-lined streets of Alaçatı, Urla and other ancient sites curtails our grazing session at TARLA but Huseyin promises the Izmir





Bazaar Konak we'll visit next will provide more insight into the delicacies we will be trying throughout the trip. Following sightings of residents purchasing their home provisions, we have a welcome breather inside a traditional coffee shop in the covered section of the market. To accompany our caffeine fix are tiny squares of *lokum*, (Turkish Delight) to the delight of my travel companions. Huseyin confidently assures us that the "real" *lokum* worth taking back home is coming later.

The short sojourn along Alaçatı's "Art Street" is punctuated with snacks embraced by generations of locals, from piping hot *lokma* (deep-fried fritters) to cold and stretchy *dondurma* ice cream made with mastic. While some find it an acquired taste, it pairs well with walnut or pistachio gelato.

En route to Urla, we stop at Ege Lokum, which is to Turkish Delight what Sephora is to perfumes and cosmetics. The samples, pretty boxes, teas, coffees and related products are hard to resist. In addition to traditional *lokum* dusted with powdered sugar and a dark chocolate covered version, there are elaborate, freshly made rolls in several flavours along with pistachios, walnuts and other ingredients. There's every fruit flavour imaginable, from pomegranate and cherry to citrus, mint and tropical fruits... and samples of everything for days, making the decision of what to buy with the limitations of a carry-on bag especially challenging.

While the region's national parks, archaeological sites and museums preserve key milestones in world history, several businesses strive to do the same for traditional foods and recipes shaped by local culture — many of which have since spread across the globe.

Köstem Olive Oil Museum, just outside of Urla, blurs the line between historic and agricultural tourism in a vivid but thoughtful way. Its founder, biology teacher Güler Köstem, turned a passion for science and history into a dynamic space tracing the evolution of Anatolian olive oil and its impact on the Mediterranean diet from 1000 BCE »



SERVES 4-6

## Stuffed Grape Leaves with Rice

### *Yaprak Sarması*

**COOKING TEACHER** and pastry chef Irem Turnaoğlu Öcal explains: "The dolma recipe is at the heart of Aegean home cooking and has travelled across the centuries from Ancient Anatolia to modern Turkish Kitchens. The recipe is my grandma's recipe, in an 'İstanbul' style. They are rich in anti-oxidants, aligned with the Mediterranean diet, and represent centuries of Aegean hospitality."

**Onions** 2 large, finely chopped

**Olive Oil**  $\frac{2}{3}$  cup

**Cooked Rice** 2 cups

**Tomato**

1 large, diced

**Dried Currants**

2 Tbs

**Grape Leaves**

500 g, fresh or preserved<sup>1</sup>

**Dried Mint** 1 Tbs

**Black Pepper**  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp

**Cinnamon**  $\frac{1}{4}$  tsp

**Salt** 1  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp

**Sugar**  $\frac{1}{2}$  tsp

**Water** 3 cups

**Lemons** 2, sliced

<sup>1</sup> *Blanch* fresh vine leaves to soften them, making them pliable for rolling.

**1 MAKE** the filling: Slowly sauté the onions in the olive oil until translucent.

**2 ADD** the rice, herbs, spices, diced tomato and currants.

**3 COOK** the mixture long enough to absorb the rich flavours of the olive oil.

**4 ROLL** the dolmas: Spread the grape leaves flat, with the glossy side down. Remove stems.

**5 ADD** a tablespoon of filling near where the stem would be, and roll it into a slender cylinder and fold in the ends (like a burrito).

**6 EACH** piece should be tight enough to stay in place, but loose enough to expand during cooking.

**7 COOK** the dolmas: Arrange the rolls neatly in a large pan, pour the water over and layer the lemon slices on top.

**8 ADD** a generous drizzle of olive oil to the top and cover the dish.

**9 SIMMER** slowly until the olive oil and moisture are absorbed, about 30 minutes.

**10 SERVE** warm or at room temperature on a platter with lemon wedges.



to the present. The 17-year restoration of the world's oldest known olive oil processing site was a labour of love, she explains. It was supported by her doctor husband and his patients, who donated various species of olive trees for the museum's adjoining garden. Her tour through the authentic olive presses, careful reconstructions, and related artifacts adds extra sheen to the liquid gold that transformed the region through the ages.

A second lunch at Beğendik Abi, inside an exquisite Art Nouveau building just off Urla's main shopping street, is another stellar example of women entrepreneurs translating their dedication to Aegean culinary traditions into successful businesses. Just next to the front door, small signs highlight its Michelin (including its Green Mark, denoting sustainable cuisine) and Gault & Milieu accolades. Just beyond it, a long glass case draws in hungry people with almost the entire menu on display.

Founder Handan Kaygusuzlар presents us with brimming plates of her best-selling mezze, including artichoke dishes (the official vegetable of Urla), and the transcendent *Hünkar Beğendi*, or "sultan's kabab" (roasted lamb cubes on a bed of puréed eggplant). With palpable pride, she explains the origin of each mezze and how she has brought her family's century-old recipes back to life using local herbs and ingredients from local farms and purveyors. Even with international attention, including a profile in *The New York Times*, she takes her celebrity in stride. She would rather allow the long glass case and a packed house and patio on a weekday afternoon to do the talking.

At Ulrice Wines, where we stopped for a pre-dinner tasting, founder and Izmir native Bilge Bengisu Öğünlü shared her story of returning home after 16 years as an architect in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Around 2002, she and her husband Reha began laying the groundwork for their own winery, which officially opened in 2006. Once their wines began winning awards and the business was firmly established, their deep passion for Turkish viticulture evolved into a broader mission — developing and promoting the Urla Wine Route in collaboration with other local wineries. Öğünlü was instrumental in establishing Slow Food Urla and Doğal Sofra Urla Gönüllü (Natural Sofra Urla Volunteers), dedicated to agricultural sustainability, development, and the preservation of native foods and flavours of the region. She is also a driving force behind a multitude of food events including the Urla Artichoke Festival, the Local Seed Exchange Festival, and others.

Heading toward Bodrum, we stop at Eminems Olive Oil/Oro Di Milas for lunch and a tour. Emine Colin found success as an endodontist in Northern California after serving in the military. When she and her husband returned to her home country, they searched different regions and eventually found a century-old olive oil plantation that needed a complete overhaul. The production facility was rebuilt and the orchards replanted with trees producing the rare Memecik olive varietal. Her restaurant and shop blends a Napa/Sonoma wine country look with the local aesthetic and geography. The establishment, opened in 2006, is now an expansive showcase for its award-winning Oro Di Milas olive oil, featured in a menu of mezze and main courses that reveal this olive oil's versatility, and bottles available for sale.

In Bodrum Irem Turnaoğlu Öcal — a cancer survivor who left her risk analyst career to pursue a career as a pastry chef — offers Mediterranean olive oil cooking classes. At the Maride Cafe & Patisserie in residential Muğla, where one can purchase her acclaimed desserts, participants learn how to recreate her family's renderings of classic dishes like dolma and capia pepper rolls.

The route from the Delice Peninsula to Bodrum is spangled with Michelin accolades, be they stars, guide callouts, or Bib Gourmand winners, as well as awards from equally prestigious Gault-Millau. The best of them

ELYSE GLICKMAN



PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM TOP LEFT Museum founder Güler Köstem; Köstem Olive Oil Museum; Downtown Bodrum; Milass sunflower fields; Turkish cheeses in the market; Izmir clocktower at sunset.



SERVES 4 AS PART OF A MEZZE

## Capia Pepper Rolls

**CAPIA PEPPERS** are Turkish variety of red bell pepper that Irem Turnaoğlu Öcal serves as a delicious mezze stuffed with creamy cheese. Roasted red peppers from a jar work well as a substitute and also make the mezze a snap to whip up.

**Roasted Red Bell Peppers** 1lb

**Cream Cheese**  
1 x 8 oz package

**Feta Cheese** 8 oz

**Fresh Dill** to taste

**Extra Virgin Olive Oil**  
for serving

**1 BLEND** the cream cheese, feta and chopped dill until smooth.

**2 CUT** each roasted pepper in half vertically. Fill each half with the cheese mixture and roll tightly.

**3 DRIZZLE** with olive oil before serving.

show that ideas as old as time can also shape the future of regional cuisine at every price point.

Isabey Bağevi, a 'Michelin Selected' restaurant in its 2024 regional guide, is an offshoot of the award-winning Isabey Vineyard. It has all of the earmarks of upscale wine country dining, from casual-chic interiors to tasting/shop areas, to manicured outdoor dining spaces including some tables set under a 350-year-old plane tree. Woodfired steakhouse fare with Mediterranean and other European influences are paired with wines produced in its vineyards and sold in its shop. Fresh, crisp salads and mezze provide a nice counterpoint to lamb, fish and other local proteins.

Hus Şarapçılık, another Gault Millau- and Michelin-recommended wine-country restaurant near Izmir, gives traditional recipes an even more modern twist through presentation, unexpected combinations, and constantly changing tasting menus. In beach town Kusadasi on the Delice (Dilek) Peninsula, Bottarga is a restaurant that's easy to miss from the main street but hard to forget once you have dined there. Chef Cengiz Taner and his team focus on the restaurant's namesake ingredient, as well as fish and seafood sourced directly from the Mediterranean waters. It is a humble restaurant in appearance and presentation. Dishes»

## The 'Döner' Class

WHEN IN TÜRKİYE, don't call it "gyro" or "shawarma." Throughout the country, it's known as döner, which simply means "rotating meat." The meat can be beef, lamb, chicken, fish or a blend of beef and lamb, depending on which region the recipe originates from and who sells it to you. It can be thin sliced, thick sliced, roasted chunks, or even in a meatball format. It is sold everywhere from informal kiosks and spice market stalls to cafes and restaurants and in many forms, is seasoned and prepared in a myriad of ways.

Huseyin estimates that there are 110 different types of kebabs available in Türkiye, and credits this to the fact that the Ottoman Empire was friendly to Jews, Christians, Muslims and people from other backgrounds, each putting their stamp on the national dish. He adds that the first kebabs in Türkiye originated from the Erzurum province in the east as *cağ kebab*, with meat stacked and cooked on a spit horizontally, rather than vertically.

"They are first mentioned in Ottoman travel books dating back to the eighteenth century," he explains. "The 'father' of the modern döner kebab, Iskender Efendi, wrote that he and his grandfather had the idea of roasting the lamb vertically and invented a vertical rotisserie." The classic Istanbul-style döner kebab made with meat shaved from a vertical spit most people are familiar with has since travelled all over the world.

When in Türkiye, be prepared to expand your horizons on what defines the döner. Here are some varieties we encountered on our visit:

**ADANA KEBAB:** Adana kebab is a spicy (hot!) kebab made from ground mince formed over a wide skewer and grilled over charcoal. A milder version originates from a nearby town and is known as Urfa kebab. Both kebabs are served with grilled vegetables and bulgur pilaf.

**BODRUM DÖNER:** Various vegetables are interspersed with meat layers on a vertical spit and roasted together, integrating the meat and vegetable flavours.

**DÜRÜM DÖNER:** Döner meat is served with vegetables as a wrap in lavosh or a similar paper-thin bread.

**ISKENDER KEBAB:** Layers of döner meat, tomato sauce, yogurt and melted butter are piled atop a pita or similar bread. It is said to have originated in Bursa.

**PATLICANLI KEBAB:** Marinated kebab meat is skewered with aubergines, and grilled or baked. A variation served in better restaurants features meatballs or large pieces of lamb oven-baked with onions, tomatoes and eggplant.

**SOSLU DÜRÜM:** A specialty of Ankara, this Dürüm wrap includes a special döner sauce, onions and local cheese.

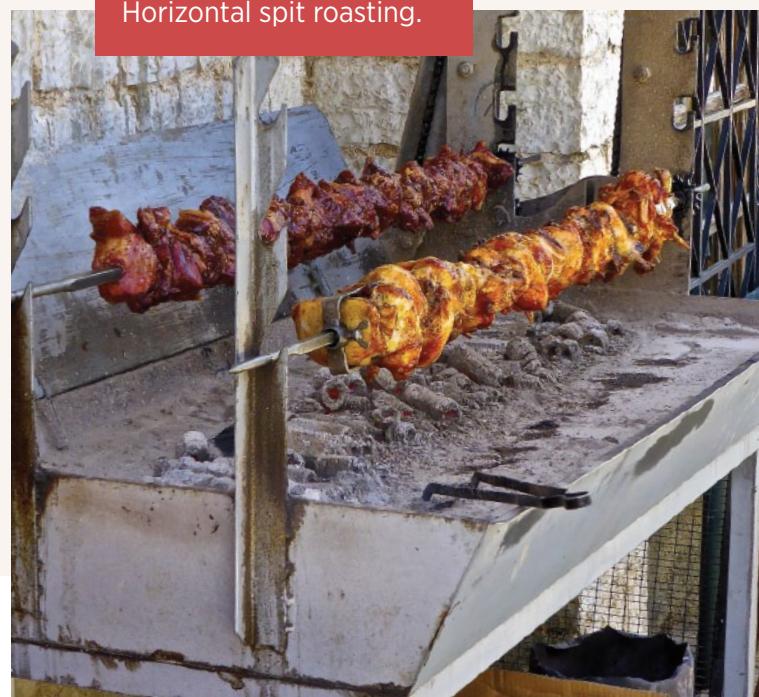


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PHOTOS THIS SPREAD FROM TOP LEFT  
Döner on a vertical spit;  
Döner kebab takeaway;  
Horizontal spit roasting.





...When in Türkiye, be prepared to expand your horizons on what defines the döner...



The Go Türkiye [www.goturkiye.com](http://www.goturkiye.com) website dedicates a full section to the Aegean and other regions of the country. The information is available in ten different languages.

### Çeşme, Izmir

**Antmare**

[www.antmare.com/en](http://www.antmare.com/en)

**Ferdi Baba at Çeşme Marina**

[www.ferdibaba.com.tr](http://www.ferdibaba.com.tr)

### TARLA

[www.facebook.com/TarlaAlacatim](http://www.facebook.com/TarlaAlacatim)

**Izmir Bazaar Konak**

[www.goizmir.com/about-1-3](http://www.goizmir.com/about-1-3)

### Urla, Izmir and Beyond

**Bağendik Abi**

[@begendikabi](http://@begendikabi)

**Ege Lokum**

[www.egelokum.com](http://www.egelokum.com)

### Hus

[www.huswines.com/en/mutfak](http://www.huswines.com/en/mutfak)

**İsabey Vineyard**

[www.isabey.com.tr](http://www.isabey.com.tr)

**Köstem Olive Oil Museum**

[www.kzmurla.com](http://www.kzmurla.com)

**Ulrice Wines**

[www.ulrice.com](http://www.ulrice.com)

### Kuşadası, Aydin

**Charisma Hotel**

[www.charismahotel.com](http://www.charismahotel.com)

**Bottarga**

[@bottarga\\_restaurant](http://@bottarga_restaurant)

### Didim, Aydin

**Barut Anda**

[www.barutanda.com/en](http://www.barutanda.com/en)

**Eminems Olive Oil/Oro Di Milas**

[www.orodimilas.com](http://www.orodimilas.com)

### Bodrum, Muğla

**Cape Bodrum**

[www.capecodrum.com/tr](http://www.capecodrum.com/tr)

**Cooking Classes with Irem Turnaoğlu Öcal**

[@ireminpastafabrikasi](http://@ireminpastafabrikasi)

**Mado Ice Cream**

[www.mado.com.tr/en/anasayfa-2](http://www.mado.com.tr/en/anasayfa-2)

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SERVES 4 AS PART OF A MEZZE

### Carrot Tarator

**TARATOR TAKES** various forms around the Middle East. The Turkish version is a thick sauce often served as part of a mezze spread or as a condiment with fried mussels or fish. This recipe is from Irem Turnaoğlu Öcal.

**Extra Virgin Olive Oil** 3-4 Tbs

**Carrots**  
4 medium, grated

**Garlic** 3-4 cloves, chopped

**Salt** to taste

**Honey** 1 tsp

**Greek Yogurt** 3 Tbs

**Water** 1/3 cup

**Salt** to taste

**1 SAUTÉ** the grated carrots and garlic in the olive oil.

**2 REMOVE** them from the heat and stir in the honey and salt.

**3 ALLOW** the mixture to cool.

**4 WHISK** the yogurt with the water until smooth. Salt to taste.

**5 COMBINE** the yogurt sauce and carrot mixture.

**6 SERVE** on a platter or large plate.

«are served family-style on large plates for sharing and what comes from the kitchen on a given day is front and centre, with Taner's good will with local purveyors apparent.

The Cape Bodrum's dramatic modern building, 30 minutes outside of central Bodrum, is packed with quaint cafes, outdoor döner vendors, and an excellent branch of national ice cream chain Mado. Its Michelin Guide-listed Anda Restaurant sits at one end of the luxury hotel's expansive beach. The dinner menu is relatively small, featuring elevated Mediterranean mezze and mains, perfectly executed. Breakfast is a showcase for fresh produce and other components of the Mediterranean diet. In addition to its cozy outdoor seating area, seasonal Bodrum-only selections such as the wonderful local "Bodrum mandarins" make it a standout compared to other locations.

The Aegean stands as proof that, like ideas from past civilizations, old and new can not only co-exist but endure in memory.