

Changes in the Breakfast Traditions of an Old-World Country: How the Breakfast Traditions in Turkey have Changed, Causing the Loss of an Important Food Culture

Banu Özden

The world is changing at a very fast pace, and when it comes to eating habits ‘What will we eat in the future?’ proposes a serious dilemma as well as ‘How will our eating habits change?’ This progression into a fast-moving world, with everchanging diets, not only threatens the way we grow our food but how we consume it as well. Gradually we are losing our time-honored values, eating habits, traditional food, and even meals such as breakfast, which has been declared as the most important meal of the day for centuries.

History of breakfast

The English word, breakfast composed of two words, ‘break’ and ‘fast’ is quite self-explanatory. Not eating anything between dinner and the morning meal does qualify as a fast since that period is the longest period between any two meals. One gets up in the morning and eats the first meal of the day, thus breaking a fast.

Breakfast, which started to be defined as one of the main meals happened towards the end of the 19th century. During this period, due to the industrialization in Europe, the working hours were extended and the conditions became more severe. Previously, two meals a day were eaten all over the world; noon and evening. Lunch was served a little earlier than today, and dinner was around sundown. In both Europe and the Ottoman Empire, there was a habit of drinking coffee before lunch and snacking (Kahvaltı Saati, 2017).

The Turkish word for breakfast, *kahvaltı*, as the first meal of the day, is derived from two words, *kahve* and *altı*, consecutively means ‘coffee’ and ‘under.’ It took on this name because it is a meal that is eaten first thing in the morning, to form a foundation in the stomach, before drinking the first coffee of the day. In the Ottoman culinary culture, small snacks were prepared in the palace kitchens and served before coffee, in addition to the two main meals. These snacks usually consisted of soup, bread, cheese, and jam, basically foods that can relax the stomach and get it ready for a strong cup of Turkish coffee.

In the early 20th century, the breakfast culture began to be established as one of the main meals of the day. ‘In the 1920s, all governments in Europe emphasized the importance of breakfast, saying that starting the day with a good breakfast improved performance’ (Popular Science Türkiye, 2016). By this time breakfast has been accepted as being an important meal by the general public all over the world. However about a century before in the United States:

The line ‘Breakfast is the most important meal of the day’ was invented in the 19th century by Seventh Day Adventists James Caleb Jackson and John Harvey Kellogg to sell their newly invented breakfast cereal. After that, the bacon food industry jumped on the bandwagon and convinced people about the importance of eating protein in the morning (Egan, 2017).

By now eating breakfast as the first meal of the day became a habit practiced all over America and Europe.

In the same years, this new culture, based on the consumption of snacks, and the dishes that were leftover from the previous evening started to turn into a breakfast meal for the Ottomans as well. Foods such as cheese, bread, jams, and eggs were consumed as *sabur* (1) meals in earlier times. But as a result of breakfast turning into a main meal, all these products started to take their place on the table in a rich variety and, consequently helped create the world-famous Turkish breakfast of today.

Typical foods of Turkish breakfast

Eating three meals a day has been the norm throughout the world thanks to the habit of drinking coffee and the processes of modernization and industrialization. Breakfast integrated into the daily lives in different ways in each country based on their traditions and geography. Turkey, a country with rich geographical structure, created unique breakfast cultures in each region that consisted of regional food products. Therefore, breakfast became a significant part of a Turk’s daily life, as a very healthy, nutritious and delicious meal.

There are certain food items fundamental to breakfast in most regions of Turkey. These would include a variety of cheeses such as cows’ or sheep’s milk cheese; meat products like *sucuk* (2), pastrami; raw vegetables like tomatoes, peppers, cucumbers; fresh herbs such as parsley, mint, dill, rocket; butter, clotted cream, black and green olives, grape molasses and tahini mixture, a variety of jams, honey, and eggs cooked in various ways. A fresh pot of tea, baked savoury goods like bread, *simit* (3), *poğaç* (4), *börek* (5) and *açma* (6) always accompany breakfast.

Turkey is divided into seven geographical regions, and in each region, the food products, as well as eating habits alter. Therefore each region although sometimes similar in nature consume different breakfast foods. For example in the Eastern Anatolian region, the cuisine is based on animal products and this is reflected in the breakfast menu in the use of a vast variety of cheeses, especially sheep’s

milk, clotted cream, butter, yoghurt with herbs, breakfast meats such as *sucuk* and *kavurma* (7). Grains are also an important part of this breakfast apart from bread. The most common example would be *kavut* which is a grain-based dish made from wheat and barley flours, milk, fat and dressed with sugar or grape molasses.

In the Mid-Anatolian region, breakfast is quite heavy on the flour-based products, not only varieties of bread, but other types such as *katmer*, a flaky layered pancake with a filling, *börek*, *poğaç* along with an assortment of cheeses, clotted cream, butter, eggs, grape molasses and, tahini. A quick and nutritious breakfast in most Anatolian regions is a bowl of soup, especially in the winter months. Soup is generally prepared at home. One example is *tarhana* (8) soup, which can be found all over Anatolia in different varieties. It is a type of homemade instant soup that has all the necessary nutrients one would need for a hard day's work. Depending on the region, the addition of butter, tomato paste, legumes, minced meat and sometimes garlic elevates the nutrition level. Another example of a breakfast soup would be *beyran*, distinctively eaten in the Southeastern Anatolian region especially in the city of Gaziantep at specialty shops that open at five o'clock in the morning. This soup 'consists of rendered lamb fat that's topped with rice and shredded lamb meat. The combination is then cooked with the addition of garlic, pepper paste, and lamb broth.' (Taste Atlas, 2020)

In the Black Sea region, where the defining ingredient is corn flour, a fare made from corn flour that is cooked with a substantial amount of butter, and local melting cheese creates a heavy breakfast dish that is suitable for the people who are working in the farms and or participating in heavy labour.

It is important to acknowledge that most of the people in Anatolian villages and rural settlements work long hours on heavy physical labour jobs such as farming or manufacturing. '[...] the purpose of breakfast was for a person to load up on a huge storage of calories to draw from throughout the busy day' (Egan 2016, p.35). Once the rural person leaves home, he does not have the luxury to eat whenever he wants, due to the lack of food establishments in rural towns. Accordingly, breakfast is still believed to be the most important meal of the day especially to improve one's performance, and this can be seen in the Anatolian breakfast traditions which are stable and breakfast is still eaten in rural homes all over Anatolia.

Changes in the breakfast habits

The modern life in cities is one place where traditions are likely to lose their existence, as the cosmopolitan population are more likely to adapt to the global lifestyle rather than keeping with tradition. Time goes fast in the city, especially for the working population. Enjoying a proper sit-down breakfast in the mornings is considered a waste of time. That precious time could be spent elsewhere like sleeping or leaving home early to avoid the morning rush hour traffic.

Therefore the habit of eating breakfast is declining rapidly in the big cities because of the fast-paced lifestyles.

Compared with rural jobs, urban occupations require almost no physical labour and are executed from a desk. Aside from differences in working conditions, urban workers have the possibility of getting food whenever they want, which makes eating breakfast at home an optional extra. Hence the changes in breakfast habits.

Generally, leaving home without eating breakfast bears two results. Eating something quick on the go or not eating anything until lunch. The working population who prefer to eat on the go or something quick at their desks are likely to choose one of the traditional breakfast items that are sold all over the city in small carts that includes *poğaç*, *börek*, *simit* or *açma*. Since these popular breakfast pastries replace a proper breakfast in today's modern world, the vendors have become clever in including some typical breakfast items such as cheese, tomatoes, green peppers, cold cuts, and even hazelnut spread inside these baked goods turning them into breakfast sandwiches.

Those who prefer to remain on the healthier side or follow a certain diet such as gluten-free, ketogenic, no carb no sugar diet stick to low-calorie breakfast items such as fruit yoghurt, fruit salad, oatmeal, a healthy smoothie loaded with protein powder, and even a *café latte*. None of which resemble anything close to the food eaten at a traditional Turkish breakfast.

In social media and TV one of the most talked of these diets is intermittent fasting, which seems to be easy to follow, as diets go, because there is no calorie-counting or prohibition of a nutrient. It just requires eating two meals a day and letting the stomach rest in between the two meals, while gaining health and losing weight. The doctors and dieticians who are advocating intermittent fasting, usually advise on skipping breakfast, as it is the easiest meal to remove from our daily three main meals. The urban population who are on this diet, follow what the doctors say and skip breakfast.

In an interview, the Turkish-American TV personality Dr Mehmet Oz revealed his plan for the new decade:

I think for 2020 one of the first things I'm gonna do is ban breakfast, I don't think we need to eat breakfast, that's an advertising ploy. Unfortunately, a lot of the dogma that we were fed for decades came out of advertisements, it wasn't really based on the truth around our health. [...] cancel breakfast and have your first meal when you're actually hungry. In fact, cancel breakfast and have brunch every day of the week. [...] You're not even hungry you're having withdrawal because you had some super-carbohydrate like a potato chip or some french fries at 10 at night. That means that your body's insulin is all whacked up. By the next morning, that withdrawal is happening and you're starving (Ritschel, 2020).

Dr Oz is targeting the cereal and bacon companies that declared the importance of breakfast a couple of centuries

ago and accusing them of ‘pulling a scheme’. Surely he has a valid point in banning breakfast in America, because American breakfast consists of sweet and fatty foods with possibility of additives. Boxed cereals, oatmeals, commercially produced donuts, danishes, breakfast muffins, pancakes and French toasts; processed breakfast meats such as bacon and sausages can be given as examples of American breakfast. These foods compared with natural foods such as cheese, meat, vegetables, and eggs of Turkish breakfast should not be considered to be in the same category when it comes to banning breakfast.

Regardless of the differences in the breakfast items on finds in America and Turkey, all the popular diets that stem from America seems to find their way into Turkey, such as Dr Oz’s breakfast ban, which has already appeared in the Turkish media has become the diet of choice for the people whose new year’s resolution was to lose weight.

There is another theory that was supported by a Japanese doctor Yoshinori Nagumo. In his book, he advocated that eating one meal a day will not only make the person appear twenty years younger but will relieve the body from all the illnesses, as well as help them reach their ideal weight. As his chosen meal of the day is dinner, breakfast falls from popular esteem once again: ‘If we are to eat one meal a day, when should that meal be? My advice, it should be the last meal of the day which is dinner’ (Yoshinori 2012, p.35). His book has been translated into Turkish and now on its fifth edition being sold in brand name bookstores, clearly shows its popularity among urban Turks who are eager to forget about breakfast for the sake of looking younger and losing weight.

Overcompensated breakfast

Anyone who is dieting tends to give themselves a little break from food, which usually takes place over the weekend. Breakfast has now become a celebratory meal of the weekends for those who still enjoy the idea of a traditional Turkish breakfast, but avoid it during the weekdays based on time constraints or other reasons. Those who enjoy a wide array of traditional breakfast fare regularly visit the specialty breakfast restaurants and order an excessive amount of food all washed down with countless glasses of Turkish tea, overcompensating for the breakfasts missed during the weekdays. In these types of breakfast spreads, one can find pretty much all types of breakfast food eaten in different parts of Anatolia gathered on the same table. These breakfasts also result in two major problems. First is the indigestion caused by overeating, compensating for the weekday breakfast. Second is the food that is left, on the plates gets thrown away which results in food waste, which is a globally acknowledged issue, but the subject of another paper perhaps. Consuming a proper Turkish breakfast everyday of the week would have prevented the indigestion and the food waste problem.

On the other hand, a certain part of the population, ones who tend to disregard anything traditional, prefer to

eat their weekend breakfasts at a cafe that serves American or European style breakfasts. Their choice of breakfast food includes pancakes drizzled with maple syrup, French toast with berries and honey, scrambled eggs with bacon, eggs Benedict, croissants, granola and yoghurt all accompanied by a nice cup of *americano* or a *café latte*. These people are setting a bad example for the generations to come, who will grow to think that the food listed above is part of traditional Turkish breakfast fare and will never know the difference between the traditional and foreign-inspired.

Conclusion

Whether it is the part of the population that dismisses tradition and assimilate themselves with the foreign breakfast customs, skip breakfast for the sake of dieting, or simply do not want to spend their precious time eating a proper breakfast, Turks are forgetting the true meaning and benefits of breakfast. This results in the loss of an important food tradition.

Turkish breakfast is the richest breakfast in the world’s, and at the same time it is unique. As stated above, going back to the Ottoman period, when it was first formed the Turkish breakfast is the kind of meal that relaxes the stomach, and is considered the perfect light meal to have before enjoying the first coffee of the day. It is balanced and full of nutrients, and can be adjusted to fit any diet, including intermittent fasting.

Breakfast is under attack by doctors and dieticians as well as everyday people. The doctors are telling us to skip breakfast or eat it at a later time, but they are not telling us not to eat breakfast foods. So why ban breakfast altogether? Why should it not be one of two meals eaten during intermittent fasting? Consuming a proper Turkish breakfast can surely keep a person satisfyingly full until an early dinner. Whether one should make time to eat breakfast at home or bring in a proper boxed breakfast to work, it is an important meal and should not be passed up, merely postponed to a later time in the day if desired. As it is versatile, it is the kind of meal that can be enjoyed at any time of the day. After all Turkish coffee is most meaningful when it’s after breakfast.

Notes

1. A meal eaten before the fasting period starts.
 2. Spicy beef sausage, usually eaten for breakfast.
 3. Sesame crusted bread ring.
 4. Baked savoury pastries with fillings such as cheese, potatoes or minced meat.
 5. Baked phyllo dough layers with savoury fillings such as cheese, potatoes, spinach or minced meat.
 6. Buttery yeast bread.
 7. Sauteed lamb or beef with it’s fat, that is pressed into clay pots and kept for winter.
 8. A homemade instant soup made from wheatberries or flour, yoghurt and, spices.
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