

## The Subconscious of Traditional Practices: Turkish Cuisine

Serife Umay Cicik

Baskent University

### Abstract

Turkey stands out among the leading countries, particularly in the consumption of meat, milk, and dairy products. In terms of climate and physical conditions, it has the capacity to produce these commodities domestically. Additionally, it is situated in a geographically advantageous position rich in seafood resources. Turkish cuisine is further enriched by dishes and desserts prepared with dough. However, food preparation and cooking methods, equipment, storage conditions, presentation styles, consumption habits, spices, and sauces bear traces of various culinary cultures. Wars, natural disasters, political events, trade routes, and religious structures are among the factors that most significantly influence these differences. The migration routes of the Turkish people also play a fundamental role in shaping culinary culture. Moreover, traumatic events such as Turkey's cultural history and the redefinition of its borders give rise to the concept of synthesis cuisine. Despite changing borders, social memory has been influential in the formation of this country's culinary culture. The events and conditions that shape Turkish cuisine practices have been transmitted verbally and in writing, reaching the present day. This study examines traditional cooking methods and equipment that were practiced in Turkish cuisine until recently but are now largely forgotten or only practiced in rural areas. Additionally, it discusses other cultures that have influenced the shaping of Turkish culinary culture, along with their historical events.

### Keywords

Memory and food; Turkish culinary history; traditional culinary practices

The culinary cultures of different countries are shaped according to their geographical locations and suitable agricultural and livestock practices (Yönet Eren and Ceyhun Sezgin 2017, 161). In a broader sense, culinary culture encompasses the materials and techniques used by communities sharing the same geography in food preparation, as well as food preservation and presentation methods (Kesici 2012, 34). Culinary culture is not only regarded as dietary habits but also as a repository of cultural heritage where emotions such as joy and sorrow are shared. Turkish cuisine, witnessing the rich texture of various cultures and traditions spanning centuries, hosts a wealth of heritage, from nourishing meals of Central Asia to the elegant

desserts of the Ottoman palace. In short, Turkish culinary culture represents the collective memory that binds together the traditions of various communities that have lived in different geographies.

All gatherings that bring people together, such as births, deaths, weddings, and holidays, have always been significant in Turkish culture. These important gatherings always involve meal rituals. On special occasions, not only meals but also pains, sorrows, joys, and successes are shared when people come together. Therefore, food not only satiates the stomachs of those gathered but also provides an opportunity for them to share the same feelings and uphold traditions. The meanings attached to food, serving as catalysts for social interactions and bonds, form the cultural memory. Especially, certain foods carry deep meanings. Among these foods, “bread,” which has a long history and carries abstract meanings beyond being a source of nutrition, stands out. For example, in Egypt, the same word is used for bread and life. It represents civilization for Greeks, and prosperity for the French (Civitello 2019). For a Christian, bread symbolizes Jesus, and for a Muslim, it represents a sacred food to be kissed and placed on the head if it falls to the ground (Ünsal 2003, 10).

Although bread may carry different meanings depending on its color, shape, type of grain, or whether it is leavened or unleavened in different cultures, it is always considered sacred for all societies. The meaning attributed to bread also represents the traumas embedded in the subconscious of that society. In Turkish, the idiom “Sharing the Same Bread” is used to denote being together in good and bad times; and “Bread in the Lion's Mouth” conveys the notion that finding gainful employment and earning money is not easy (Turkish Language Association [TLA]; Zülfikar 2024).

## **Turkish Culinary Culture**

The geographical location plays a significant role in shaping people's livelihoods and cultural traditions. Moreover, it is observed that culinary culture evolves and changes in parallel with human history (Sarışık 2021, 54). Turkey, being situated across two continents (Asia and Europe), holds a geographically advantageous position, benefiting from the diversity of products offered by the lands of Anatolia, Asia, and Europe. It also hosts a profound history dating back to the 10th century, extending from the Central Asian territories to the present geography (Girgin, Demir and Çetinkaya, 2017, 220). The formation of modern Turkish cuisine is influenced not only by the Central Asian territories that shared borders with China in the 11th century but also by the Arab culture, which they embraced Islam and were neighbors with at the time. Additionally, when Turks migrated to Anatolia, they brought traces of the culinary cultures of previous inhabitants such as Iranians, Hittites, and Greeks (Güldemir 2014).

When examining the dietary habits of Central Asian Turks, it is evident that the consumption of meat, milk, and dairy products holds significant importance (Sarıışık 2021, 54). Having led a nomadic lifestyle from Central Asia to Anatolia, Turks had to discover new methods to facilitate their lives while coping with the challenges of nomadic life. For instance, they learned to preserve meat for extended periods by canning at early dates. Canned meat not only contributed to their dietary habits but also became a traded commodity, with canned meat being one of the significant export products to China (Baysal 2002). Another product they discovered for preserving meat for an extended period was “pastrami,” prepared using the drying technique. Pastırma became not only a commercial product but also the most important source of food for soldiers on expeditions (Kılıç and Albayrak 2012).

According to Islamic principles, pork is among the meat products that should not be consumed. However, it is known that Turks did not raise or consume pork even before accepting Islam upon their arrival in Anatolia. Some researchers attribute this to the unsuitability of pigs for the nomadic lifestyle. Another group of researchers suggests that despite the Uyghurs transitioning to a settled lifestyle earlier than other Turkic tribes, they continued to abstain from consuming pork. Hence, it is argued that this situation is more related to different religious beliefs rather than lifestyle (Ögel 1991; Kılıç and Albayrak 2012; Demirgöl 2018).

Another product beloved and considered sacred by Turks, while carrying traces of Central Asia, is “kumis.” Kumis is a lightly alcoholic fermented milk beverage prepared from mare's milk, which has a higher lactose content compared to other livestock (Güler 2010). Throughout history, butter has been one of the staple foods for Turks engaged in animal husbandry. However, written sources indicate that unlike today, Turks in Central Asia obtained butter not from milk but from yogurt (Sarıışık 2021, 54). Additionally, nomadic Turks, in their pursuit of ways to preserve food for extended periods without spoilage, discovered “tarhana.” Reflecting traces of Central Asian nomadic culture, “tarhana” is prepared by mixing yogurt with aromatic spices, fermenting, and drying it. Known as tarhana in Turkey, this nutritious food is recognized as “talkuna” in Finland, “trahanas” in Greece, “tahonya” in Hungary, and “kishk” in Egypt (Coşkun 2014, 69).

It is clearly evident that one of the most significant dynamics in the formation of Turkish culinary culture is the geography and living conditions of Central Asia. With the acceptance of Islam by the Turks, some consumption habits underwent changes, but their culinary culture continued to evolve. Increased interaction with Arabs resulted in sweets becoming an integral part of Turkish cuisine. The term “helva,” meaning sweet in Arabic, entered the lives of Turks during the Ottoman period and became one of their traditional sweets (Yerasimos 2014). Arabs, who learned the method of obtaining sugar from sugarcane from India, contributed numerous foods to Turkish cuisine. Appetizers, mixed with European cuisine, also became part of Turkish cuisine through Arab influence. The only commonality between appetizers and mezze is their small portion sizes (Civitello 2019).

## Traces of Collective Heritage in Turkish Cuisine

It is well-known that Turks, whose homeland is Central Asia, lived in dispersed communities for a considerable period. During this time, Turks bordered civilizations such as India to the south, Iran to the west, and China to the east. Research indicates that Turkish culinary culture was influenced by these civilizations (Sarıışık 2021, 90-91). Transitioning from a nomadic lifestyle to a settled one, the Turkish society underwent a prolonged transformation, always valuing the land and animals. Records in Anatolia indicate that animals were referred to as “tavar” in old Turkish. This word, which means “wealth” in ancient Turkish, signifies the value attributed to animals (Güldemir 2022, 13-20). Especially before the adoption of Islam, horses were used not only as a means of transportation but also as a primary source of meat. Besides horse meat, the food consumed by Central Asian Turks included horse milk (kumis), wines made from honey and various fruits (Sarıışık 2021, 90-91). During the reign of Kanuni, with the inclusion of Egypt and Cyprus within the Ottoman borders, there was a diversity and increase in the use of spices. The most commonly preferred spices included saffron, cinnamon, pepper, coriander, cumin, and mustard (Sarıışık 2021, 57).

Traditional Turkish culinary culture is classified into periods such as the Central Asian period, Seljuk period, Ottoman period, and Republic period, considering the transformations and changes it underwent. The Silk Road trade, religious beliefs, and intermarriages between states have also influenced the change in culinary culture over time. For example, the shift from using lamb meat to beef and veal in dishes is cited as an example of these changes. Previously used in meat dishes, cinnamon later found its place in bakery and pastry products. Stews prepared with fruits are now only found in old cookbooks. Until the 19th century, traditional meat recipes did not include potatoes and tomatoes (Güldemir 2022, 13-25).

Another significant change in Turkish culinary culture is evident in the type of fat used in cooking. While clarified butter was predominantly preferred in meal preparation, the arrival of the Seljuk Turks in Anatolia saw the widespread use of olive oil. It is known that the variety of fish provided by the Aegean coast, along with olive oil, combined with the sweets of Arab cuisine and the characteristics of Roman cuisine, contributed to the richness of Turkish cuisine today (Sarıışık 2021, 63). With increased cultural and political interaction between Turks and Europe, dishes such as dolma, sarma, ayran (yogurt drink), baklava, and döner are now also seen in European cuisines. Additionally, the discovery of the Americas led to significant changes in Turkish culinary culture with the spread of foods such as tomatoes, eggplants, potatoes, turkeys, and corn worldwide. Furthermore, the influences of European cuisine are felt in the variety of pastries from France and pasta from Italy that have entered Turkish cuisine (Güldemir 2022, 14).

When examining Turkish culinary culture, it is observed that some products stand out more prominently, with yogurt being one of them. It holds a special place

among the most unique foods of Turkish cuisine. Ayran, which is the diluted form of yogurt, is considered the national beverage of Turks. Another prominent product in Turkish cuisine is raki, which is prepared by distilling grapes with aniseed. Raki is regarded as the national alcoholic beverage of Turks (Sarıışık 2021, 63).

Another beverage that ranks high in Turkish culinary culture is tea. Tea holds different meanings for Turks beyond being just a beverage, both in terms of presentation styles and consumption purposes. For example, there are sayings such as “drinking tea cools you down in hot weather, warms you up in cold weather, soothes you when tired, and heals you when sick.” Tea is prepared in teapots made of various materials such as glass, copper, or porcelain, consisting of two separate parts. Samovars, which are less commonly used nowadays according to recent observations, are also among the methods of brewing tea. The term originates from the Russian word “Samovar,” meaning “self-boiling” (Selim and Adabalı 2023, 160).

### **Episodic Memory of the Kitchen: Traditional Practices**

Memory encompasses various subtopics under one roof. Within these headings, two important memory phenomena exist: Semantic Memory and Episodic Memory. Semantic memory enables us to recognize objects and phenomena and describe them in our daily language. Episodic memory allows us to recall many events that make up our life story. We can evoke episodic connections in our memory through smell. For example, when we perceive a scent, we can recall a memory buried deep in our subconscious associated with that scent. This phenomenon is known as the Proust Phenomenon. Ozan, briefly defines the Proust Phenomenon as “the smell of the combination of madeleine cake, known as shuttle in Turkey, and a cup of linden tea activates the limbic system where memory and olfaction are processed together” (Ozan 2014, 245-249). The Covid-19 pandemic, which the whole world recently experienced and caused a mass trauma, led to the loss of our sense of smell and taste (Yasan and Sivrice 2021). In fact, there is no direct effect on our sense of taste; rather, the retro-nasal pathways that allow us to perceive the aroma of food are damaged. This means that if we cannot perceive the aroma of food, we cannot taste it either. Based on the sense of smell, it is known that there is a very strong connection between food and memory (Ozan 2019). According to Assmann, memory is a concept created by or applicable to warm societies that have a disconnect between the past and the future. Assmann suggests that the concepts of cultural memory and tradition can actually be used interchangeably (Demir 2012). From this perspective, traditional culinary cultures emerge as a reflection of a society's memory, covering its dietary habits with a flexible and holistic approach (Çınar 2019).

Below are some of the traditional foods and equipment that are considered to best reflect the memory of the Turkish society:

**Simit:** Classified within the categories of street food and fast food, simit is regarded as a traditional food specific to Turkish cuisine. According to experts, simit is considered the most harmless food among other fast food products. Essentially prepared with flour, water, salt, and yeast, it is produced as crispy or hard, with wide or narrow holed ring shapes. Similar products resembling simit are seen in many parts of the world under the name “bagel.” Although there are minor differences in cooking methods and ingredients, they essentially evoke the same product. The influence of migrations is thought to be a factor in simit becoming such a universal food. Particularly during the Ottoman period, simit, which became widespread in street vending, became a frequently consumed food by people away from home during lunchtime due to its filling and inexpensive nature. Wheat consumption in Turkey was restricted due to the wheat crisis during World War II, and simit was among the bakery products whose production was halted in 1942. Simit is a unifying food consumed with pleasure by people of all ages, regardless of economic class, and regardless of mealtime in Turkey (Onaran 2016; Özbay 2020). Considering working conditions and economic factors, the tradition of eating simit at lunchtime continues today. Simit is humorously referred to as the “civil servant kebab” among the public.

**Kebab:** Contrary to common belief, kebab is not actually a type of food but rather defined as a cooking technique. Moreover, it is known to be applied not only to meat products but also to vegetables such as eggplant, tomato, and pepper. Anything cooked without water over charcoal fire is referred to as kebab. Considering the cooking technique, it is reported that the homeland of kebab, which has existed since the discovery of fire, is Upper Mesopotamia. (Kuşçu Erbay 2006, 91). Various types of kebabs such as *tas kebabı*, *çöktürme kebabı*, *kuyu kebabı*, *testi kebabı*, and *döner kebabı* are claimed to be best made with male lamb meat (Çelik and Aksoy 2017, 136-144). Unlike other Central Asian cuisines, Turkish kebabs use tail fat (Ünalın 2016, 63).

**Döner kebab:** Since the industrial revolution, the changing concept of time is considered one of humanity's most significant competitors. Especially with the participation of women in the workforce, a race against time has begun. This race, accompanied by an increase in education and income levels, has particularly directed young and working people towards faster eating, i.e., fast food consumption (Çılgınoğlu and Çılgınoğlu 2023, 79). Dating back many years, döner kebab, as part of the fast food industry, ranks high on global food lists. It is reported that döner kebab was first made approximately 150 years ago by İskender Bey, who lived in Bursa/Turkey (Adamış 2019, 122). Before the rapid rise in popularity of fast food and eating out, while approximately 20-30 kilograms of döner meat was roasted over oak charcoal fires, today it is prepared in quantities of 100-200 kilograms and cooked on propane gas stoves (Kuşçu Erbay 2006, 4-5).

**Tandoor oven:** The origin of the word “tandoor” comes from the Persian “tennur” (TDK; Zülfikar 2024). Tandoor is defined as a type of stove or oven. Made

of clay with a wall thickness of 5-6 cm, buried in the ground and in an inverted cone shape, the tandoor oven is used with an open top. It is used not only for baking bread and cooking meat but also for heating in some regions of Turkey. The origin of the tandoor oven, dating back to the Hittite and Urartu periods (Dündar Arıkan and Özkeşkek 2019, 55), extends to the Neolithic age in Anatolia (Köşklü 2005, 156). Today, it is mainly used in rural areas and on special occasions.

**Griddle pan:** Griddle pans, which have a concave structure, can be used on both sides. With a diameter of approximately 40-50 cm and not very deep, red meat and fish are mostly cooked on the inner side of the griddle pan, while bread is cooked on the outer side (Kızılaslan 2023, 1447). The griddle pan, made only of iron and without paint or coating to withstand open flames, is a widely used equipment in Turkish cuisine. Nowadays, electric and gas models are also available.

**Copper utensils:** It is claimed that copper was the first metal tool discovered by humans in nature and used in daily life. Therefore, copper craftsmanship is understood to be the oldest known handicraft in the world. Due to its easy workability and resistance to external influences, copper is used in a wide range of areas. In Turkish cuisine, which has a rich food and drink culture, copper utensils were widely used for a long time. Today, copper utensils not used in daily life are found in Mesopotamian and Çatalhöyük excavations, only used on special occasions or for serving special meals (Yavuz, Akbulut and Şık 2019, 157-158). Commonly used copper utensils in Turkish cuisine include frying pans and pots, tea kettles and samovars, coffee pots and cup holders, trays and platters, and ewers.

**Rolling pin - "senit":** Commonly referred to as "hamur tahtası" (dough board) in colloquial language, "senit" is described as a round and flat wooden piece mainly used to roll out yufka dough, a type of bread specific to Anatolia (TDK 2024) (Alyakut and Küçükkömürler 2018, 385). The rolling pin, on the other hand, is made of various materials such as metal, glass, or porcelain, but usually made of hard wood in different thicknesses and lengths. A long cylindrical tool with a smooth, slippery, and non-flexible structure, the rolling pin is used to roll out baklava or yufka dough (Wikipedia 2024).

## Method

History is defined as the discipline that examines past events and records. Historical research is suitable for examining the combinations of social factors that lead to specific outcomes. Additionally, it is suitable for identifying similarities and differences between cultures and comparing different cultural systems (Orak 2020). Given the subject of the study, the use of historical research methods has been deemed appropriate. Furthermore, document analysis, which serves as a complementary method to other research methods, has also been utilized. Document analysis can be used both as a standalone research method and as a

supplementary source of data for other research methods. Also known as documentary review, document analysis involves examining records and documents to obtain data (Sak, Şahin Sak, Öneren Şendil and Nas 2021). National and international documents and scientific research related to the subject have been reviewed, cultures that have influenced the formation of Turkish cuisine have been addressed, and the lasting traces left by cultures that were once in interaction in culinary practices have been thoroughly examined. The historical journey of the underlying traumatic events and consequences behind the traditional practices of Turkish cuisine has been revealed.

## Conclusion

Since the existence of humanity, nutrition has been the most basic need. Changes from a hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a settled society have influenced people's eating habits. The discovery of fire introduced the concept of cooking and fundamentally changed human eating habits. However, it is still not possible to speak of a complete culinary culture. For any meal to be considered within the scope of traditional culinary practices, every step must be consciously performed. From the preparation of products to the selection of equipment, from cooking methods to presentation and storage techniques, all stages should be preferred actions with an awareness of why they are being done (Civitello 2019).

Throughout history, food has represented meanings beyond satisfying individual and societal hunger. Sometimes, it has been an important part of accumulating beautiful memories for the future. At other times, it has served as a bridge to preserve the traces of past memories. Food has been recognized as one of the rare concepts that combine objective and subjective meanings.

As in the Proust phenomenon, the event actually transitions from the madeleine cake and linden tea to a personal story, and Marcel Proust mentally journeys back to his childhood spent with his aunt, whom he had to leave due to asthma (Ozan 2014). Another example of the relationship between food and memory can be seen in religious holidays. During the Jewish religious meal of Pesach, eating unleavened bread called “matsa” for seven days, symbolizing their departure from Egypt without having time to take yeast with them while fleeing from Pharaoh's wrath, is a trace left in the social memory of food. Taken together, it can be concluded that the traditional culinary practices of a culture are rooted in traumatic events embedded in memory.

The lifestyles, wars, commercial relationships, and beliefs of the Turks, which have been present on the historical stage since the 10th century, have shaped their culinary cultures. In response to the varying conditions, they have endeavoured to adapt and have been influenced by different culinary cultures while also influencing



others. Therefore, the traditional practices and foods in Turkish culinary culture actually embody the characteristics of a “synthetic cuisine” due to these factors.

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