



Cooking Turkish Style - Review of a Turkish Cooking Class

Red Lentil Soup
Rice with Green Beans
Mixed stuffed Vegetables
Olive and Tomato Salad
Chilled Watermelon



We are in the hills near the Aegean coast of Turkey, overlooking the tiny village of Gokpinar. With its population of 100 people, one Mosque, a tiny tea house, four cars, a dozen or so donkeys, the rural pace of life in Gokpinar village blends into the seasons and daily activities of small scale farming.

Women in their scarves and practical baggy trousers are not seen lingering in the tiny dusty tea house over tulip shaped glasses of strong sweet tea or Turkish cigarettes. Instead they are kneeling in front of their carpet looms, bent double digging in the fields under the scorching sun, herding the cattle or preparing food.

It for this reason that today we are at the Gokpinar Music and Dance Centre overlooking the village on this early summer morning, with the smell of the dry grass, pine trees and hint of wild mint. Today is a day for our guests to learn how to prepare a Turkish style lunch using some of the traditional methods. We have all the requirements for a successful Turkish meal, fresh seasonal produce, hot dry weather, indeterminate number of guests, cushions to recline on and our host Dursune.

Dursune for many years cooked for her guests in her family run Pensiyon in nearby Bodrum, a coastal Turkish Aegean town with whitewashed houses set amongst lush bougainvillea. At that time Bodrum was a gentle destination where sponge divers could be found amongst plentiful fish in crystal clear waters. Now a preferred destination for package tourists often with little appreciation of local foods or traditions, Bodrum has struggled to retain its former character while rapidly become a booming coastal resort town more known for its nightclubs and bars.

Today Dursune begins by laying out all her ingredients on a large round beaten copper tray and through a translator, explains that the tray itself was passed to her from her own mother who also used it to prepare her own dishes for the family. As we crouch around the tray on the floor she points to fresh aubergine, green peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers, green beans, onions, parsley red lentils, rice and one of the most staple ingredients – olive oil. The olive oil that we are using comes from the Gokpinar village, harvested every year in from the hundreds of olives trees that are scattered around the hills and rocky landscapes. This olive oil is rich in colour and flavour and is the result of hardy mature trees and hot weather. Olive oil features heavily in Turkish cooking and even appears at breakfast, splashed over plump olives, on sliced tomatoes sprinkled with oregano or sopped up with torn chunks of crusty fresh bread.

Dursune puts the olive oil to one side and peels onions for the soup. Soups appear at various times of day in Turkish cuisine including late at night as an end to an evening of drinking and eating, where a visit to a soup shop for a plate of steaming tripe soup wards off the potential effects of a hangover. Today though we are making red lentil soup, cooked in a clay pot over an open fire which will give the soup with a delicious smoky flavour.

After the soup has been prepared and taken away by one of the men to be placed on the small outside fire and boiled slowly, Dursune prepares the vegetables for stuffing. The tomatoes are washed and a little lid cut from around the core. Gently squeezed to drain away excess juice and pulp they are set to one side. With the green peppers she firmly squeezes out the stalk and gathers the small white seeds in one movement. The aubergines are cut in half, stalks removed and with a sharp knife she neatly removes the bulk of the inner flesh. A bowl of salted water is prepared and the aubergines and inner cores are placed in to float for 10 minutes. We will later use the eggplant innards and tomato pulp to make a tasty garlic flavoured dip.

Meanwhile the rice has been gently sautéed in olive oil with herbs in to make a sticky partially cooked mixture that we now begin to stuff into the tomatoes, aubergines and green peppers. Like a true cook, Dursune has correctly estimated the number of vegetables for the size of the pan and now stuffed they fit neatly in the pan ready to be steamed. The remainder of the rice mixture we roll up carefully in boiled grape vine



leaves, picked earlier that morning from the vines trailing over the hot stone walls of the house as lizards flick in and out of the cracks in the bricks.

Placing these slender dolma parcels on top of the stuffed vegetables for steaming Dursune tackles the final dish of the day which is based on a speciality from the Black Sea region of Turkey, rice mixed with green beans. Simple in appearance it is however a culinary challenge achieving rice that is shiny, intact, perfectly cooked with green beans that are still firm and strong in colour. Again with this dish she sautés the rice first in olive oil before adding stock, beans and tomatoes. Left to absorb the remainder of the water we retire to sit on Turkish cushions with glasses of tea and look out over the village below. The soup has been boiling outside in its clay pot, watched by the men while absorbed in discussions on their cushions with their glasses of tea. Each lentil has blown up to absorb the stock to become fluffy and swollen. After removing it from the fire, and cooled slightly the mixture is pressed by hand through a copper sieve until only a handful of dry paste is left. This is put out for the birds to eat and the rest of the mixture, now a fine liquid is boiled further.

Time is getting on and temperatures in the tiny village style kitchen are soaring. With one tiny grated window and concrete walls, ventilation is at a minimum and the salad must be prepared before we can eat. One of the men is pressed into service and the cucumber is accordingly peeled, the tomatoes diced, olives thrown in, lemon juice squeezed liberally over with splashes of olive oil. The watermelon is cut for later and placed into the fridge, Parsley is quickly chopped, the bread is cut and the meal is ready.

More guests have arrived in the meantime including a regular visitor from Gokpinar, Tekel Baba. In his peaked cap and woolen trousers, Tekel is a successful local villager who owns a horse, mule, sheep, a goat, numerous roosters and a very lush plot of land near the local well where he grows his own produce for the local market. So to the strains of traditional Turkish oud and ney music, on our stone terrace looking out over the village below, we all finally settle on the floor on our cushions around the low tables to eat.

As is custom the soup is served first and more lemon juice is squeezed over to personal taste. Bread is dunked and wiped around the inside of the plates. The stuffed vegetables are served with the dolma and rice as well as the eggplant cores that are now pulpy and fragrant, having been fried in olive oil with garlic and tomatoes. Salad is spooned on and more bread is dunked into the remaining juices. As is the custom as people have finished their meals they get up to smoke cigarettes, stretch or lie back on cushions.

It is time again for our tea in the tiny tulip shaped glasses and down in the Gokpinar village, the women are starting to bring in the cattle and goats from where they have been grazing. The local men start to come in from the tea house and some go to the Mosque where the Imam is crying the call to prayer. As we praise the hands of Dursune, she smiles at us and says "Afiyet Olsun, Afiyet Olsun" - may you enjoy your food, may you enjoy your food.



Kimberley
oryantal bellydancing

