

When drinking tea in Turkey, certain rules apply. The tea, served in tulip-shaped glasses, should be piping hot, clear and bright. The ideal colour is described as rabbit-blood red, which makes sense when you see it.

"The clarity and colour are most important," Gonca Karakoc explains as we huddle under the brick arch of a 16th-century caravanserai. "If it's cloudy it has been too long on the stove and will have a bitter aftertaste."

Kursunlu Han is one of hundreds of caravanserais (*hans*) still found around Istanbul, if you know where to look. Thanks to Karakoc, our guide on a Culinary Backstreets tour of the food-obsessed Turkish capital, we do. Hamburg-born and Istanbul-raised — "I see the city like you do, as an outsider, but I can explain it as an insider" — she is both gastronome and cultural interpreter on a day-long binge spanning both shores of the Bosphorus.

We meet in Karakoy beneath the Romanesque Galata Tower on a chilly Saturday morning. With her fine features, gamine-cut red hair and theatrical personality, Karakoc reminds me of Shirley MacLaine.

"You will see!" she cries as we set off through the alleyways of Turkey's biggest hardware market, Persembe Pazari. "There will be no elegant restaurants. We will be eating very simple local foods. We want you to have a real, personal experience."

After our quick "commuter breakfast" at Kursunlu Han of tea and simit, the chewy Turkish bagels glazed with grape molasses and crusted in sesame seeds, we head to the next caravanserai. The 19th-century Ada Han is a hole in the wall that opens to a long corridor cafe decorated with carpets, Turkish flags and a teddy bear.

Karakoc has arranged with the cafe's owner, Mr Omer, for us to have "weekend breakfast" here. Or brunch, as some call it.

"Weekend breakfast is the queen of all meals," our guide exclaims as she and Mr Omer regale us with menemen — spiced scrambled eggs with tomato and capsicum — and pastrami-like sucuk pungent with garlic and fenugreek. There are cheeses — fetastyle tulum that's ripened in a goatskin and kashar made from goat's and cow's milk — plus Aegean olives and acuka, a Syrian paste of summer tomatoes, walnuts, fenugreek and garlic. But the star is a simple dish of clotted cream (*kaymak*) made from fatty buffalo milk and drizzled with wildflower honey from Van, near the Iranian border. It tastes exactly like fresh coconut ice.

"The weekend breakfast culture is so important," Karakoc says. "It's the only time you aren't working so it definitely goes for two ... maybe four hours, with friends, relatives, even neighbours."

We last only 45 minutes before we're off to the famous bakery-cafe Gulluoglu to buy takeaway boreks for later, and then to Baklavaci Koskeroglu for a lesson in pastry.

Class begins with baklava, the national treasure of filo and kataifi pastries layered with pistachios and sugar syrup.

"A good baklava should never swim in sugar," Karakoc declares. "You should put it in your mouth upside down. The first thing you should hear is a crunch. The 20 bottom layers are soft and thick but the 25 layers on top should be crisp and crunchy, and separated so you can almost count them."



EAT STREETS

Feast on a food tour of Istanbul

KENDALL HILL

IN THE KNOW

Culinary Backstreets' Two Markets: Two Continents tour runs daily except Sunday for groups of up to seven people (minimum two) and lasts six to seven hours. The tour price of \$US125 (\$175) a person includes all food and non-alcoholic drinks, ferry crossings and insider intel. Culinary Backstreets runs other food tours in Istanbul and elsewhere.

■ culinarybackstreets.com
■ peregrineadventures.com

The owner treats us to churros-like tulumba doughnuts, so named because the sugar syrup bursts into the mouth like a fountain (*tulumba*). But we're really here for *katmer*, a delicacy from Gaziantep in southeastern Anatolia.

"It must be baked on the spot," Karakoc says as the piping-hot sweet arrives. The pastry is thin and flaky, crisp to the bite and stained green by ground pistachio paste. It is stuffed with *kaymak*, sugar and butter for maximum *kayif*, a charming Turkish word that means anything that nurtures the soul and brings happiness.

There's a brief respite from feasting while

we board a ferry bound for Istanbul's Asian shore. The brisk winds restore my appetite somewhat as we stand on deck for a guided commentary of passing landmarks in this legendary city.

At Kadikoy, which Karakoc assures us is "an endless discovery ... and not touristy at all", a table awaits at *Gozde Sarkuteri* where owner "Elvis" is keen to ply us with *meze* from his delicatessen. We sit down to crusty bread and more than half a dozen plates, including a fiery "atom bomb" dip of chilli and charred eggplant and *ajvar* paste of capsicums, eggplant, nuts, onions, rosemary, pepper and oil. "So the whole kitchen is there," laughs Karakoc.

There are no timings or rules to Turkish eating, she reassures us as we dart across the street to *Koz*, possibly the world's most beautiful dried fruit and nut emporium. We admire its kaleidoscope of *lokum* (Turkish delight) and sample some along with double-roasted hazelnuts, white mulberries and sun-dried apricots that taste like fruit caramels.

Then it's off to Mr Fazil Bey's cafe for a

much needed pick-me-up, Turkish coffee, and more insights into local lore. The most essential thing, Karakoc stresses as our cups of coffee (and more *baklava*) appear, is to let the first sip "float on the tongue" to savour its character. And drink slowly so the grounds have time to settle. "Having coffee with friends is one of the *kayifs* of Turkish people," she says. "It is a time of deep sharing. If you don't have enough time — for me it would be about two hours — then you don't have a Turkish coffee."

After coffee we nibble candied fruits and vegetables at the 200-year-old confectioner *Cafer Erol* and window-shop along *Gunesli Bahce* street past dried



ropes of eggplant and capsicum and a flurry of fishmongers. We stop by a butchery for a lesson in *offal* and then take a stool at *Borsam Tasfirin* for *lahmacun*, flatbread pizza slathered with spicy minced meat. Later, we snack on petite *manti* dumplings stuffed with beef and sauced in garlic yoghurt, learn the rules of drinking *raki* (never on one's own, and only ever for fun) and, at some point, even manage to fit in the boreks

Karakoc bought earlier.

I'm pretty sure my fellow traveller David, a Brit living in the US, speaks for all five of us when he says: "I think this is the most authentic thing I have ever done on vacation."

Culinary Backstreets began life as a blog in 2009, launched its first tours in Istanbul a year later and now operates in a dozen cities on four continents. Karakoc says it is more of a project than a company; its aim is "to support local businesses, to give back to the culture in which it operates. It leaves positive traces."

My final morsel is a sliver of charcoal-grilled *kokorec*, a skewered mass of *offal* bound in lamb intestines. No one else braves it; I'm not sure I should have either. It has layers of intense flavours, some of them disturbing.

"Turkish people are carnivores," Karakoc reminds me. "We love to eat meat and we don't care about health issues. My grandmother used to say, 'Sweetheart, if it makes you happy it's good for you'. She had diabetes at 40; I found her under the kitchen table eating *baklava* at 82."

She sounds like a woman after my own heart.

Kendall Hill was a guest of Culinary Backstreets and Peregrine Adventures.



ABOVE AND INSET: KENDALL HILL



Romanesque Galata Tower, top; meze from *Gozde Sarkuteri*, inset; guide Gonca Karakoc with 'Elvis'; stall on *Gunesli Bahce*, above

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