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## Istanbul: Dining at the Crossroads

August 9, 2010 by Alexis Quinlan

Filed under: Culture, Editor's Desk, Food/Drink



The Spice Market

Istanbul, the city perched on the leafy, hilly brinks of two continents, practically invented fusion cuisine. Locals credit the cultural cross-pollination of three world empires—Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman—each of which left its mark in religion, architecture and of course, food. For centuries its beating heart has been the maze-like, 4,000-shop covered market known as the Grand Bazaar. Today, [Istanbul](#) is Europe's fastest growing economy teeming with glam restaurants and cultured venues.

Asitane Restaurant provides an unforgettable homage to the far-flung Ottoman Empire with its setting adjacent to a Byzantine church. Chef/owner Batur Durmay spent years seeking intricate and largely unwritten recipes from the old palaces and near-obsolete ingredients in Istanbul's aromatic Spice Bazaar. He now offers menus with titles like "Main Courses from Topkapi Palace" with dishes first concocted in 1539 for the sons of Suleiman the Magnificent. Order almond soup, veal in apples and cinnamon liver patties; then sit back and dine like a sultan.

For more modern fusion, tuck in at Gaja on the 14th floor of Swissotel The Bosphorus Istanbul. Chef James Wilkins, a veteran of kitchens from London to Japan, travels with a team of chefs who have a real passion for the local markets.

"The produce and fish here are among the best I've seen in the world," he says, "particularly the summer fruits, morel mushrooms in autumn and wild fish from the Black Sea." Upstairs the Gaja Sky Bar offers wines, cocktails and mezzes with a panorama of the Bosphorus, Marmara Sea and Golden Horn.

Chef Hiroki Takemura, formerly of London's Nobu oversees Sunset Bar & Grill with "a dream to make a revolution in Turkish cuisine," he proclaims. His sushi bar has enjoyed a 16-year success by strolling the Spice Bazaar for new twists on Japanese standards melded with Turkish favorites.

As for venues, meet Libby Perkowski, destination executive with the DMC [VIP Tourism](#). Libby, know

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any good places for groups to experience the heart and soul of Istanbul?

"Where else can you host dinner and a fashion show in a 4th century Byzantine cistern?" she replies. "Or a private party on an island between two continents, or a dinner in a converted Ottoman mansion along the Bosphorus?"

So there you have it. A surprising number of historical sites and palaces, some dating from Greek and Roman times, are available for private events. If you're seeking palaces, Perkowski favors the Salim Hatt Pasa Mansion, an Empire-Baroque masterpiece on the Bosphorus with a dining hall, a hunting hall and an (empty) harem, as well as excellent catering. For an ancient Roman setting, visit Binbirdirek Cistern, built around 330 to slake the thirst of Istanbul. The underground reservoir, replete with 224 marble columns and a capacity of 10 million gallons of water, is now filled with private parties, catering extravaganzas and any number of concerts.

For more modern stylin', ride the ferry to Suada, a floating beach club with linen-covered beds by the Olympic pool in the middle of the Bosphorus. For eats, G Balik is a local fave, and count on feeling welcome. A Turkish proverb proclaims that all guests are a gift from God, which you'll experience viscerally in Istanbul's magnanimous hospitality and cultured cuisine.

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