

Travel

Edited by Blessing Waung
travel.sh@timeoutcn.com



Turkish delight

Gaziantep in southeast Turkey is one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. As **Christopher St Cavish** discovers, it might just be down to the food

Imam Çağdaş is the most famous kebab shop in Gaziantep, which is the most famous city for kebabs in all of Turkey, which may well be the most famous country in the whole world for kebabs.

In 1974, it was a little different. The shop did a bit of everything. One of those things was *beyran*, a spicy lamb broth with rice, tender lamb and a big spoonful of chopped garlic served for breakfast. Like many things in Turkey, you squeeze a lemon on top and eat it with warm flatbread. *Beyran* is a pain to make. The cooks start at 4am, finishing up the lamb that's been cooking since the previous evening. Customers come at 5am. By 8am, the rush is mostly over.

One day, a long-time customer walked into Imam Çağdaş about 7.45am. There was no menu; the third-generation owner knew what everybody wanted. But this guy was late. And he wanted bone marrow, as usual. There was no bone marrow left. He threw a fit. 'You don't know how to do this job! What is this? This *beyran* is a disgrace!' Burhan Çağdaş remembers him shouting (Burhan is

the fourth generation). His dad took off his apron that morning and gave up the *beyran* trade forever. From that day on, Imam Çağdaş would be kebabs and *baklava* only.

The best place for *beyran* in Gaziantep these days is the nearby Metanet Lokantasi. Burhan Çağdaş will tell you as much, and maybe because Metanet's owner, Mustafa Hasirci, worked for Burhan's father until the 1974 Bone Marrow Incident. Metanet opened in 1975 and hasn't changed a thing since. Not the *beyran*, and not the decor.

I'd been to Metanet once by the time I heard this story. I was with Cevdet Güllü after a morning at his *baklava* kitchen. He's a smart guy with a degree from Istanbul who came back to Gaziantep to carry on the family business. It started many years ago. At some point, the business splintered and now every Güllüoğlu shop is run by a different relative.

It's a quasi-chain. The family name is synonymous with *baklava*, and famous as far as Istanbul.

Cevdet has what some say is the best *baklava* in Gaziantep, which – yes – has the best *baklava* in Turkey, which has the...

His shop is named Elmaci Pazari Güllüoğlu.

It's a small place in the bazaar, with a dozen kinds of *baklava*. There are *baklava* that you'd recognise as *baklava*, inch-high stacks of golden filo pastry with a layer

of pistachios running through the bottom. There are *baklava* variations you might not recognise, like *sobiyet* (a stuffed triangle) or *ezmesi* (a cigar of pistachio wrapped in a single, invisible layer of filo pastry).

When I meet him, he's wearing a sweater with pistachio-green stripes. He takes me to Metanet after a morning watching his magicians conjure near-transparent filo dough and sprinkle endless pistachios.

Antep, as the locals call the city, is not exactly a tourist town. But it is the soul of Turkish cooking. It has some of Turkey's best lamb and pistachios, hence the kebabs and *baklava*. It's about 50 km from the Syrian border, in southeast Anatolia, and has close ties to Aleppo. The Silk Road used to run through here.

That ancient business gene has carried on and the city has boomed in the last ten years. The population has doubled. Squat grey residential buildings have cropped up. The city produces 80 per cent of the carpets in Turkey and, oddly, no small amount of macaroni. Istanbullites come for the weekend to eat *yuvalama*, a tiny marble of ground rice and lamb in yogurt, and go to Imam Çağdaş. The flight back to Istanbul is a parade of takeaway *baklava* boxes.

The city is centred on a very old quarter, itself centred on a castle so old no one could tell me who built it. This, in a country which seems to know the provenance of every ruin going back to the Greeks.

Antep's old quarter is slowly being cleaned up. Zeytin Han, a gorgeous

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Gobble gobble (Main) Mustafa Hasirci at Metanet Lokantasi; (Clockwise from left) Sakli Konak; the main bazaar; baklava from Elmaci Pazari Güllüoğlu; Orkide Pastanesi's 'village breakfast'; and chefs making *burma kadayif* in Cevdet Gullu's kitchen.



17th century building, went from inn to soap factory (using olive oil pressed from the trees next to the castle) to textile shop to forgotten. In the last two years, it's been revived, and now sells natural olive oil soap with almonds, bay leaves, and other local herbs and flowers. The walls are lined with regional olive oils; the entrance is a gauntlet of pickles and fresh olives.

In the former Armenian quarter, the grand and once-abandoned homes, built of limestone and teetering along narrow alleyways, are coming back to life as cafés or hotels. At Papyrus Café, an overhead grape trellis shades the courtyard and glasses of thyme tea cost 1 TL. Eventually, they'll get around to fixing the rotting wiring that makes the second floor too unsafe to sit in. But probably not soon. It's a perfectly lazy café.

Down the road, Ali Atalar, a local author, has opened his century-old courtyard house to the public under the guise of a copper art museum named Sakli Konak. The upstairs is originally shabby, unrestored and charming. Downstairs, modernity

has caught up with him. In a plush room facing an old pomegranate tree, I walk in on him lamenting his hacked Facebook account.

Like, it seems, a lot of chefs in Turkey, Uğur Acioglu is an amateur historian. The personal history of his restaurant Acioglu, which specialises in the city's stewed and lesser-known dishes, goes back 50 years. A six-foot tall picture of his handsome father hangs on the wall graced with a kebab skewer in one hand, meat in the other, cigarette dangling from his lips.

In his father's time, he explains, Antep's restaurants weren't so specialised. The butcher was also the baker and grocer, and did a *baklava* to boot. With the baker and grocer, the three functioned as a complete unit, and were a sort of second kitchen outside the home. There was a dialogue between seller and home cook, and that was the foundation for

the city's high standards. Here, they know how to eat because they know how to cook.

Uğur certainly does. He's a gregarious guy with a rough voice and a spiritual conviction about his food. He tells me 'this job is holy' and then presents the evidence: creamy white beans cooked with pomegranate molasses; a lamb shank stewed with the region's sun-dried pepper and tomato paste; a smoky *pilaf* made from burnt wheat.

He converts vegetables – squash, eggplant, tomatoes – into jewel-like desserts more interesting than any fruit. (Fruit in Antep, incidentally, often winds up in savoury stews or even threaded onto kebabs.)

There are other things to do in Gaziantep besides *beyran* and lunch. There is a world-class museum of ancient mosaics, rescued just before the flooding from a new dam on the Euphrates. There is a culinary

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The flight back to Istanbul is a parade of takeaway baklava boxes

museum, a work of love by Filiz Hösükoğlu, one of Antep's resident food authorities. There is Tahmis Kahvesi, a 375-year-old café with a smoky medieval atmosphere and a Foursquare account.

There is also dinner – the nine types of kebabs at Imam Çağdaş are a good start – and Orkide Pastanesi's *katmer*, a dessert that looks like a green and white polo shirt wrapped in a layer of tissue paper. The paper is filo; the green, naturally, pistachio; the white is *kaymak*, Turkey's clotted cream. It's the size of a plate, cut into twenty *baklava*-sized squares, and, so owner Mustafa Ozguler apparently believes, can be eaten by one person – two if they've just had his 'village breakfast', the other very good reason to come to his restaurant. The name is meant to evoke a rural bounty. The reality is that it would take a village to finish the spread, which starts with four types of local sheep's and cow's cheese, includes olives and chickpeas and tomatoes and onions, and would be just as good if all you got was the smoky *kaymak* and local honey to spread on bread.

In a *baklava* town like Gaziantep, Orkide stands out as a welcome quirk – a French pastry shop (with an Italian lunch menu and a very talented *katmer* chef, no less). I ask Mustafa about it. Not surprisingly, he tells me it started three generations before as a *baklava* shop. So, what happened? What type of cosmic, once-in-a-million-year event could possibly happen to turn a native son away from its filo and pistachios, its sugar syrup and its sheep butter, its pride and joy?

'I'm not sure', he says. 'Maybe my dad got in a fight with my grandfather.'

Essential info

Flights

Turkish Airlines (www.turkishairlines.com) fly from Shanghai to Gaziantep via Istanbul from 8,200RMB return (including taxes and surcharges).

Getting around

Gaziantep is not aimed at Western tourists and English can be scarce. Ertan Ozaslan works as a school teacher in the nearby countryside and freelances as a tour guide. +90 (554) 827 9056 or ertanozaslan1@gmail.com

Where to stay

Zeynep Hanım Konagi (17 Atatürk Bul, Eski Sinema Sok; +90 (342) 232 02 07) is a handful of rooms set in a century-old limestone mansion, in the heart of the former Armenian Bey neighbourhood. Private doubles start from 320 RMB/night.

Where to eat

Imam Çağdaş 49 Uzun Çarşı; +90 (342) 231 2678
Metanet Lokantasi 11 Koziluca Caddesi; +90 (342) 231 46 66,
Elmaci Pazari Güllüoğlu 4/A Elmaci Pazari; +90 (342) 231 21 05
Acioğlu 24 Ali Şir Nevai Sk; +90 (342) 338 51 11
Orkide Pastanesi 17 Gazi Muhtar Paşa; +90 (342) 215 1500

Money

1 Turkish Lira (TL) = 3.5 RMB. Garanti Bank ATMs accept Chinese Unionpay cards.

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