

Sweet talk

For a century or more, Gaziantep has been home to Turkey's crispiest, tastiest, *stickiest* baklava. **Laura Goodman** gets a sugar rush



I like pistachios. I like eating way too many pistachios before gathering up an embarrassment of shards and shells, which I can barely keep from sliding down the sides of the sofa. But best of all I like the pistachio as an ingredient in a piece of baklava, the rich, sweet treat characteristic of Turkish and Greek cuisine, with the nuts ground up to be housed within layers of golden filo pastry and lashings of syrup. I've been known to devour dozens of these dense, diamond-shaped morsels in a single sitting, and regularly scour Hackney corner shops for them (they're usually next to the scratchcards). I've even eaten them in Istanbul. But this was all BG – Before Gaziantep.

Gaziantep is an appetising little city in southeast Turkey, surrounded by pistachio trees, close (but not too close) to the Syrian border. Everyone here is very proud of their pistachios, because they are utterly delicious. (Visitors consume around four scoopfuls per day without trying, just because the stallholders selling them are so keen to offer a taste.) From these unctuous nuts sprang the world's best baklava, and an unfaltering commitment to keeping it that way. This began a few centuries BC, long before croissants or éclairs. These days, the president of Turkey has his monthly pastry delivery flown in from Gaziantep and, increasingly, everybody else flies over to see what the fuss is about. As Paula Wolfert, the Mediterranean cookbook writer, puts it: 'Gaziantep continues the tradition of great baklava. To Turkish gastronomes, it is a kind of mecca.'

To make my pilgrimage, I have to switch planes in Istanbul for the 90-minute onward flight. There are eight per day so it's not difficult, but because most summer arrivals in Turkey head for a beach resort, I still feel like an adventurer. I'm not, of course – I'm just a greedy lady. Gaziantep is off-the-beaten-track: an industrial city (many of the passengers on my flight seem to be commuting), and a relatively conservative one (the commuters are all men). It has a beautiful ancient quarter, rather like an 'Istanbul-lite' – all the fun of the bazaar, none of the chaos. But unlike Istanbul, there are no 'east meets west' clichés to be had. This is the *real* east, unalloyed in all its exotic glory.

A copper market spans several streets, with its rhythmic clonks, clangs and dangling pans. In a lovely covered bazaar, tomato pastes are piled into troughs, smoothed over with spatulas



Nuts about baklava: from top, a fruit and nut stall in Gaziantep bazaar; a variety of pistachios for sale on the streets of Gaziantep. Opposite, a selection of perfection

and protected with plastic domes. There are walnuts covered in dried grape juice, sun-dried aubergines on strings, and thousands of little logs of pistachio marzipan.

Soon, I am plotting my stay over tea and pistachio macarons with a local foodie, Filiz Hösükoğlu (my friendly hotel manager got us together). Filiz helped Paula Wolfert write books, gave Rick Stein recipes and fed pistachio-flavoured goodies to Sam and Sam Clark (of London's evergreen-ethnic Moro restaurant). We're at a cafe called Orkide. Its cabinet is stocked with pretty treats in various shapes, but Filiz only has eyes for *katmer*, baklava's less-indulgent sibling: picture crushed pistachios in a large, flat, crisp filo square, which is cut into smaller squares when cool. The cafe packs about 50 *katmer* into pizza-style boxes on a weekday – but 200 at the weekend, when locals seek lavish family brunches. Does it put my Saturday drop scones to shame? Yes. Will it distract me on my quest for baklava? Not a chance. It isn't nearly sweet enough.

Filiz takes me to Imam Çağdaş – a name I had already scrawled on a notepad and smothered with asterisks. To describe it as a kebab house with a baklava counter would be misleading; it's an emporium, a vast and buzzing food hall in which the tender >

kebab is a grand precursor to the pastry. The boss – Burhan Çağdaş, grandson of Imam – sends over three pieces of baklava, flashing a smile so brilliant it makes his face crinkle and his eyes disappear. He is clearly confident I'm about to enjoy myself. I go straight for the familiar diamond-shaped piece. Little bits of ground green pistachio tumble from between the filo layers. My teeth cut through the crackly top, and continue onward through the sticky, nutty filling, until I reach the syrup-sodden bottom – my favourite bit (if I wasn't in polite company, I'd dissect it and save the best for last). The syrup leaks into my cheeks.

Gosh. If there's one thing I can't afford, on top of my addictions to Welsh sea salt and Campbell's Perfect Tea, it's a monthly baklava shipment from Imam Çağdaş. But there's no looking back now I've eaten it. There are other things on my plate. One very green item consists of a thin piece of pastry and lots of puréed pistachio filling. The ratios aren't as pleasing. You definitely don't get the impression people have been honing the recipe for centuries; it has the distinct vibe of a pistachio-loving pastry-maker having a play.

The next day, not long after the dawn call to prayer, I duck into Mahmut Güllü, a little baklava cafe in the market. The Güllü chain is enormous (there's even a branch in Coney Island) because, since the early 1900s, sons of sons have opened their own shops, altering their methods depending on their area. (Mahmut Güllü is run by Mahmut's son, Cevdet.) They love showing visitors what they do, so see if your hotel can fix a tour. When I arrive, a young pastry apprentice greets me and escorts me to the kitchen, across empty market floors, past tradesmen and their tea.

In the workshop there are white walls, white floors, white marble surfaces and hazy plumes of flour. Then there are

Filo the love: opposite, clockwise from top, Gaziantep mosque; hot-out-the-oven baklava; chefs making baklava at Imam Çağdaş restaurant in Gaziantep

We're communicating via the medium of finger-dipping. I go bravely into hot clarified butter

18 men in white coats – mixing, working dough, and using the weight of their entire bodies to roll pastry, balancing on their toes to do it. One very hot man has complete control over the 270°C oven, while another oversees the bubbling sugar syrup.

Meanwhile, a short man in a grey polo shirt barks out instructions. I don't understand a word he says but I'm pretty confident his monologue runs: 'Put that there. No, not there – there. Lift it up. Put it down. Put it back where it was.' We're soon communicating via the medium of finger-dipping. I go bravely into hot clarified butter and sugar syrup. I eat unflavoured semolina, raw pastry and lumpy, savoury clotted cream. I munch *boz* pistachios – the early-harvest variety used for its deeper flavour. Each ingredient is pure and lovely.

Cevdet meets me back at the shop, just in time to give me my final lesson: how to eat his family's beloved baklava properly. He picks up a piece, turns it upside down and bites. I am seconds behind him. My palate presses down on the syrupy section, sending the sweet liquid drizzling directly down my throat. It makes such a difference I wonder if this is how I should always have been eating my fried-egg sandwiches, or my pizza.

I buy 24 pieces of classic baklava, emerald on gold, boxed up to take home. Within 12 hours I am in my kitchen, regaling my boyfriend with unnecessary details about pistachios, which is making him late for work. As I waffle, he opens the box and takes one misguided bite. Before he takes his second, I flip his piece over. Then I watch as his eyes pop and his lips spread into a syrupy smile. ■



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CRUNCH TIME: Pick your pastries

The classic one: The diamond-shaped delight you know and love is *yaş* baklava. Between its *yufka* (filo) sheets, you'll find *kaymak* (clotted cream), pistachios and clarified butter, all stickied-up with sugar syrup. *Havuç dilimi* is the same product, cut, pizza-style, into slivers. If you're buying to take home, look out for *kuru*, or 'dry' baklava – like *yaş* but without cream, so it keeps for longer.

The sausagey one: You'll find lots of savoury *dolma* on menus – bulgur wheat, meat and vegetables in various combinations, stuffed into sun-dried peppers or aubergines. *Dolama* is the lurid-green sweet version: a pistachio purée, wrapped in a slim layer of filo. If you're mad for pistachio, you'll love it.

The shredded-wheat one: Filo pastry shredded into elasticky strands is referred to as angel's hair. It's the main component of

burma kadayıf. The other ingredients are the same as in classic baklava, with the occasional addition of semolina, arranged in a twisted spiral in a round tray. In Gaziantep, *burma kadayıf* is considered a completely different dessert from baklava, which means you find it in *katmerci*, rather than in *baklavacı*.

The improper one: Imam Çağdaş has *cevizli* baklava in the cabinet, but not on its menu, and few members of staff will encourage you to order it. That's because it's walnut-based. In Gaziantep! Very naughty, but very delicious.

The buried one: All you'll see of *bülbül yuvası* is a great, green deluge of ground pistachios arranged in mounds across the tray. Beneath is a layer of 'nightingale's nests', little rounds of puffy, twisted pastry. Without the topping, they're nowhere near nutty enough.

Get me there

GO INDEPENDENT
Pegasus (0845 084 8980, www.flypgs.com) flies from Stansted to Gaziantep via Istanbul from £269.
Turkish Airlines (00 90 212 444 0849, www.turkishairlines.com) flies via Istanbul from Heathrow, Stansted, Birmingham or Manchester from £279.

WHERE TO STAY
Anadolu Evleri (00 90 342 220 9525, www.anadoluevleri.com) is a beautifully converted collection of Anatolian houses arranged around a pretty courtyard, where alfresco breakfasts of fresh cheese, olives, bread, eggs and tea are served. Find it down the alleyway between Imam Çağdaş and a pistachio seller. Doubles from £86, B&B. Or try **Belkishan**, another converted house, with a Turkish wine cellar, reading room and courtyard (00 90 342 231 1084, www.belkishan.com). Doubles from £62, B&B.

GO PACKAGED
Anatolian Sky (08445 719111, www.anatoliansky.co.uk) has a seven-night tour of southeastern

Anatolia, with one night in Gaziantep, from £1,375pp, with half-board accommodation, some packed lunches, travel by air-conditioned minibus and flights from Heathrow, Stansted, Birmingham or Manchester.
Wild Frontiers (020 7736 3968, www.wildfrontiers.co.uk) has an 11-night tour of ancient Anatolia, starting in Cappadocia and ending in Gaziantep, from £1,995pp, with all meals and transport; flights extra.

WHERE TO EAT BAKLAVA
Imam Çağdaş (Kale Civarı Uzun Carsı 49; 00 90 342 220 4545) is the source of the president's *özel kare* baklava, which has extra pistachios inside; around 50p per piece (according to weight); tea 20p. At **Mahmut Güllü** (inside the Apple Bazaar; 00 90 342 231 2105), order classic baklava or try *kadayıf*; baklava 40p; tea 20p. At **Koçak** (Gazi Muhtarpaşa Bulvarı 29; 00 90 342 215 0012), order Americanos and triangular baklava from a slick marble bar; baklava 40p; coffee £1.