



## DESTINATION TURKEY

# Where sugar meets spice

Intrigued by Ottoman flavours, **Caroline Baum** rolls up her sleeves and takes a cooking class in Istanbul.

I've just been handed a scimitar. At least that's what it looks like – a weapon that might have been used to lop off disloyal heads at the sultan's court in the nearby Topkapi Palace. It turns out to be the Turkish equivalent of a mezzaluna: a crescent-shaped blade, called a zirh, very large and heavy, which takes some getting used to.

The chef and teacher, Feyzi Yildirim, shows me how to rock it from side to side vigorously and then points to a mountain of fresh dill, parsley and coriander. He wants them chopped finely and I have already discovered that he's pretty exacting, even though he speaks no English. Pointing, at times, can be an eloquent method of expressing disapproval: earlier I was asked to pound and knead a bucket of salted and finely

chopped onions to extract their juices. When my hands are knuckle-deep in liquid, Yildirim insists that it is not enough. But he does have a neat trick for removing the smell of onion from my hands: a quick rub with a cut lemon.

I've joined a hands-on, half-day class at Cooking Alaturka, around the corner from the Blue Mosque in Istanbul's historic precinct of Sultana-hmet. There are seven others in our group and an even gender spread. We're preparing a five-course lunch of traditional Ottoman home cooking and, what's more, we've a schedule to stick to. The school, based on the model of the Cordon Bleu, is open to the public for lunch.

Alaturka is the brainchild of a determined expatriate Dutch woman and former hotelier, Eveline Zoutendijk. Trained at Cordon Bleu in

Paris and after a career in hotel management in New York, she fell in love with Istanbul, learnt the fiendishly difficult language and settled here 12 years ago. Briskly efficient, Zoutendijk runs the classes herself, translating Yildirim's instructions, adding her own hints, juggling pans from stove to oven. She also has a great list of recommended restaurants, which helps visitors navigate a bewildering array of options. On request, she leads tours of produce markets, avoiding the tourist traps such as the Spice Market.

Zoutendijk has studied the subtleties and diversity of Turkish food to devise the seven menus in her school's repertoire. "I love the variety of fresh bold flavours, the foraged ingredients in salads and mezze, the kebab-house culture, the sharing of dishes, the strong

emphasis on vegetables such as okra, which some of our clients are a bit unsure about; the regional variations in cheeses," she says. "Turkey is justifiably proud of being one of only seven countries that can feed itself."

All her clients "wants to do something with eggplant" and some are "a bit unsure about the yoghurt soup until they make it. When they look at the list of ingredients, their faces fall but when they taste it ... big smiles." She does not teach with seafood ("too expensive") or bread, because she doesn't have the right oven for it, and she says she doesn't have the right ventilation for grilling kebabs. Students receive recipes to keep, which means they can concentrate on technique instead of scribbling notes.

We're making a soup of red lentil, bulgur, mint



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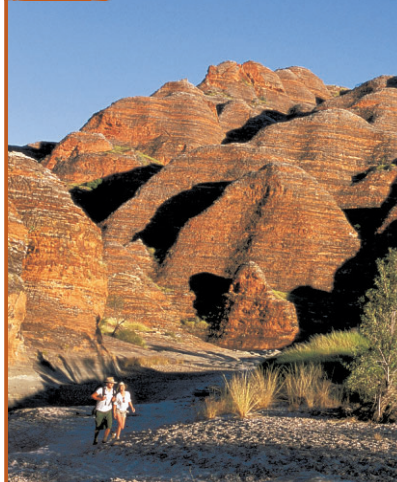
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