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DINNER AND A VIEW

There can be few better backdrops for a restaurant than the Bosphorus, that deep silver channel that separates Asia from Europe and divides Istanbul in two, reports **Adrian Mourby**.

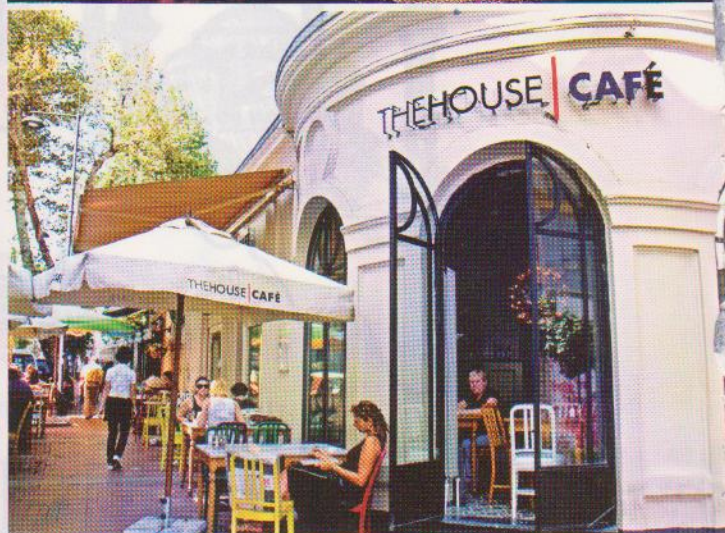
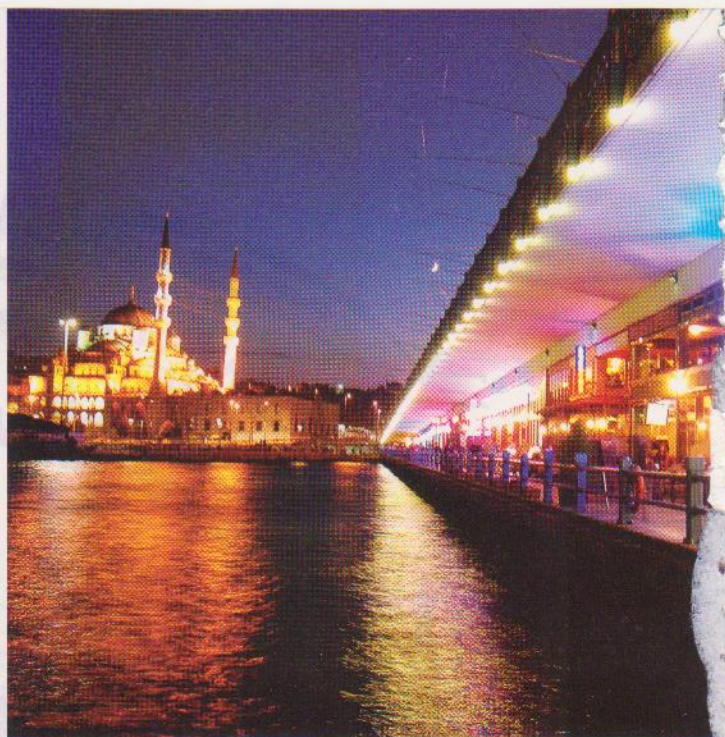
On a personal quest to discover New Turkish cuisine my wife and I took a boat from Bakırköy, just south of Ataturk airport, to our hotel. If there is one thing I've learned since coming to Istanbul it's to make the transfer by boat. Yes, it's expensive but there are no lengthy traffic jams and the views are stunning. As we chugged along between huge rusty tankers, awaiting permission to sail up to the Black Sea, the city of Istanbul unfolded off the port side. First the huge city walls, then the remains of the Byzantine palace, the six minarets of the Blue Mosque piercing the sky and finally the low squat wonder of Hagia Sophia, for 1,000 years the largest cathedral in the world.

Our hotel was Ajia, which is on the Asian side, north of the Bosphorus Bridge. On our way we passed Suada, Istanbul's floating pleasure dome where we'd be eating the following day. This section of the Bosphorus, past the Golden Horn, is the wealthiest part of the city. Villas and restaurants rose up out of the trees, reminding me of the shores of Lake Geneva.

Arriving at Ajia we were welcomed on to its quayside by the manager. In the nineteenth century this white-painted boutique hotel had been the summer home of the bey (mayor) of Istanbul. From his quay he would be rowed to work every day. The manager told us that a boat party had booked the restaurant that night so we'd be eating on the

MAP ILLUSTRATION: TARAQ PARTIKI

CUISINE



Clockwise from above: A moment of calm before the diners arrive at A'jia; A night view of Galata bridge and its numerous restaurants, with Yeni mosque in the background; The House Cafe in the trendy Gumussuyu district.

quay itself. She hoped that was acceptable? I said I could think of nothing nicer.

It was a hot, heavy evening. We ordered the mezze platter, which came with hummus, pastirma, borek (small fried dumplings filled with cheese and herbs), babaganoush (a smoky aubergine puree), courgette strips wrapped around rice, bean salad and chunks of a firm oily fish. This is the Turkish equivalent of tapas. Normally it comes in bowls placed centrally for all to share, but at A'jia each diner has a tray with little individual dishes. I missed the largesse normally associated with mezze but had to admit it looked stylish.

As we ate on our secluded section of the quay, packed and noisy dining boats passed up and down the Bosphorus. We also watched as container ships headed south from the Black Sea (the Bosphorus operates a one-way system depending on the flow of the channel). The rest of A'jia's menu was not really

Turkish, let alone New Turkish. Italian-style dishes like carpaccio and pasta plus Asian specialities like Beijing Duck were listed alongside a handful of Turkish-style grills. Asian seasonings – ginger, sesame and lemon grass – were everywhere. A'jia scores top marks for location but it resembles a number of affluent restaurants in Istanbul these days – a lot of young Turkish chefs offering essentially international fare rather than New Turkish cuisine. We'd have to look further afield.

There was a huge thunderstorm that night with winds that blew a dozen chairs into the Bosphorus never to be seen again. The following evening the water was calm enough for us to take the hotel's launch to the European shore and then get a taxi to Suada. A small boat was transferring diners at five-minute intervals from the roadside. The atmosphere as we disembarked was one of excitement, very different from the calm seclusion of A'jia.



Suada is home to a number of restaurants. Our choice, 360 Suada, has an unobstructed view of the Bosphorus Bridge decorated with lights that change colour continually during the night. Mike Norman, the chef, is one of those credited with pioneering New Turkish cuisine. A cheerful young hostess with bright orange hair told us Mike was busy at the moment and presented us with menus.

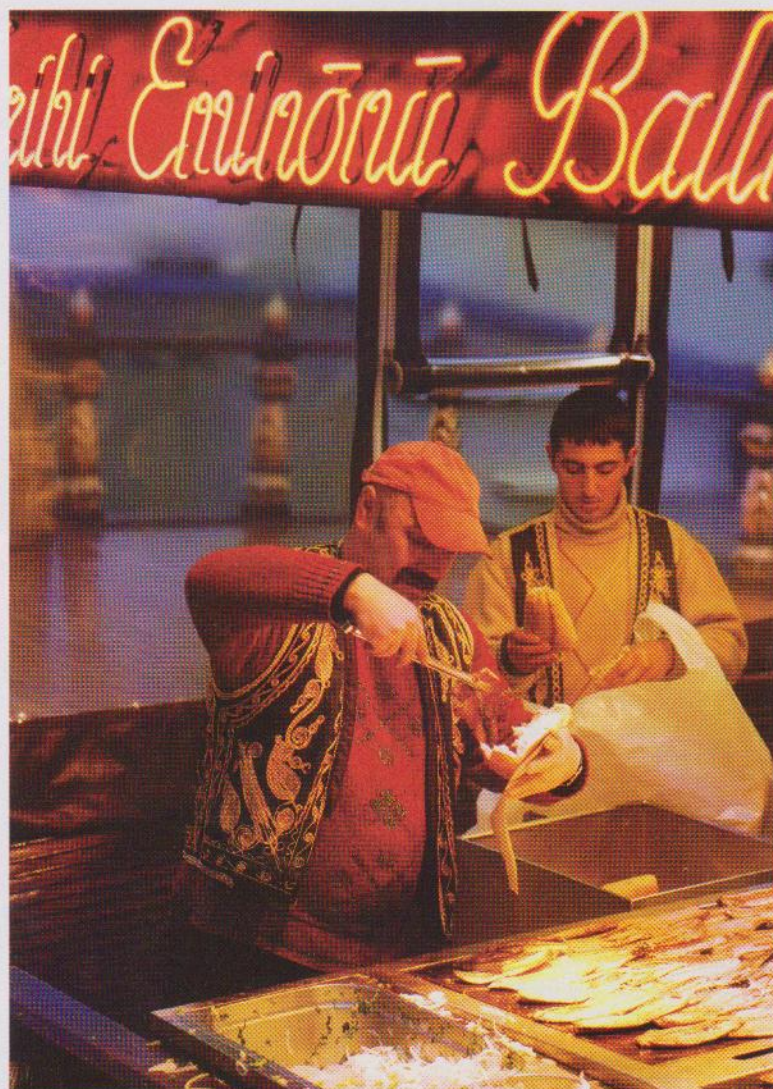
360's a la carte selection is wide but we chose the set menu, which offered a mixed mezze of aubergine and shrimp tian, octopus carpaccio, grilled seafood calamari, feta cheese and crisp whitebait. To follow my wife had the Society Shish Kebab 'summer remix' – two kebabs, beef fillet shish and spiced minced shish, garnished with an aubergine puree and wild thyme salad. I ordered fillet of dorade in vine leaves with a shrimp tomato rice. To finish I had the wasabi ice-cream, which sounded intriguing. I couldn't believe it would actually be wasabi flavoured but indeed it was, a curious experience that I'd try again – but not too often.

Mike joined us later and took me through the dishes. "The tian is based on a classic Turkish dish known as Imam Bayaldi – the Imam Fainted – but we added shrimp. With the calamari we stuffed it with smoked Circassian cheese, which is rarely cooked in Turkey. It's usually eaten as an appetizer. As for whitebait, because of its simplicity, it's found more in low-end fish restaurants, but we've accompanied it by a fish roe sauce which is a variation on tarama, that's a Turkish mezze dish with a mix of eggs, bread and garlic."

It was clear that Mike was nudging Ottoman cuisine towards the eastern Mediterranean, varying the ingredients rather than rewriting the rules. He's

Above (l-r): Assorted mezze on a platter; The scene is set ready for arrivals at 360 Suada.

Below: Fresh fish sandwiches being made on the waterfront of Eminonu.



CUISINE



also varying traditional techniques. “Fish is generally never stuffed here but the leaf flavour penetrates the dorade, turning it into a successful fusion. Interestingly though, the Turks never eat the leaves, just the fish – but foreigners clean it all up!”

The next day we went for lunch at Topaz in the Istanbul suburb of Gümüşsuyu. The view was a stunning panorama overlooking the baroque Dolmabahçe mosque and palace (home of the last Ottoman sultan) and of course the silver water of the Bosphorus beyond. Our host was Yücel Özalp, who also owns a restaurant down on the European shore.

Topaz’s chef, Tevfik Alparslan, has created two Ottoman degustación menus for the restaurant, one wholly traditional and the other a modern take on Ottoman dishes. “Smoked eggplant is part of the starter culture in Turkey,” said Yücel. “I wouldn’t change that. We have a rich cheese culture too and certainly no one would want to disturb the culture of the doner kebab! But we use modern techniques, making traditional dishes lighter.”

The food certainly was innovative. The cherry soup had a raki foam – another first for me – and the grilled Black Sea mullet was presented with a European salad of fresh onions and dill. Best of all was a goose liver crème brûlée, one of the most intensely flavoured dishes I’ve ever eaten. It was a good job Yücel warned me it was coming up as it looked just like an ordinary dessert in its ramikin.

As we watched the local ferries nip between the great Black Sea tankers, plying their trade between two continents, Yücel told us how one of these monster container ships had crashed into his other restaurant, taking out the windows and wrecking the first few rows of tables.

“Fortunately we weren’t open. The captain reversed and made for the Sea of Marmara but my manager had caught the whole thing on CCTV so he was tracked down!”

It seems there are plenty of surprises awaiting diners along the Bosphorus, even when the shipping keeps to its lanes. ❖

Top: A typically thriving night at Topaz.

Bottom left: Ekmek Kadayifi with Afyon’s famous clotted cream.

Bottom right: Topaz’s master sommelier Alain Würsching in action.