

## Sherbet and Spice: The Complete Story of Turkish Sweets and Desserts

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**Author:**

Mary Isin

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Sami Zubiada

The Ottoman Empire, over the course of its existence, evolved a cultural synthesis of strands coming from its Arab, Persian and Byzantine antecedents, as well as the folk culture of its constituent populations. Culinary traditions were part of this legacy, and the taste for sweets an ever popular and refined element, constituting a repertoire extending into modern Turkey and the Middle East. Mary Isin delves into this fascinating history with great enthusiasm, served by ambitious research into a wide array of sources: historical records; recipes; and travel accounts, both native and European. Of the former, the travel chronicles of the 17-century aristocrat, Evliya Celebi, are an ever fertile source of tales and anecdotes. Of the Europeans, Freidrich Unger, confectioner to Otto I of Greece, spent the summer of 1835 researching confectionery in Istanbul and recorded many recipes and observations. The book is richly illustrated with images: paintings and drawings, Ottoman and European; sketches of workshops and vendors; photos; and, most interesting, satirical cartoons of the comic character Karagoz from the Turkish press in the early 20th century: the satire is on current events, and food vendors feature prominently in the themes and images.

The introduction provides an overview of the relevant history from the Arabs to the Ottomans, of Ottoman culinary traditions and orders of meals and banquets, and of European accounts and evaluations. There follows a chapter on sugar, the history of its provenance, cultivation and transportation (India, Egypt), and the other sources of sweetness, honey and grape molasses. We are reminded how this now common and

cheap food was a precious commodity, regarded as medicine in some contexts, and rated high above honey and fruit-based sweetness products.

Subsequent chapters deal in turn with sweets and pastries. We are led through an array of sweets made from combinations of sugar, starch, fruit and nuts, colouring and flavouring, tracing their genealogy and that of the vocabularies of their designation, some from sources going back to Arab, Persian and Turkic contexts, others from folklore and poetry, with accounts and illustrations of the processes of their manufacture and use. Words and things don't always correspond over time and place: *kadayif* designates different types of pastries and sweets at different times, varying from Arab beginnings, through the Ottoman period, and then in modern usage. What is now *kunafa* in some places is *kadiyif* in others – stuffed, shredded pastry stuffed with nuts or cheese and soaked in aromatic syrup. *Halva*, meaning 'sweet' in Arabic, with a wide range of qualified designations over time and space, is now most commonly applied to the familiar commercial product of sesame paste halva.

Many of these had and have symbolic and ritual functions, notably the different kinds of *halva* used in relation to rituals of mourning and commemorations of martyrdom of the saints. Home-made halva, a concoction of flour/semolina, sugar, starch and aromatics, is distributed by mourning households, eliciting from the recipients blessings and prayers for the soul of the departed. It is similarly distributed in religious rituals of mourning for the saints, notably the Muharram rituals for Imam Hussein. Like many other popular religious customs, this one is shared across confessional lines, and practiced by many Christians and Jews. Another ritual sweet is *asure*, a pudding made of wheat grains cooked with a variety of pulses and dried fruit, and always invested with symbolic significance. The symbolism and the mythical history varies for different sects. All agree that it commemorates the tenth day of Muharram, the first month in the Muslim calendar (*`ashr* is ten in Arabic), but differ on the event it commemorates. For the Shi`a, Alevis and some Sufis it commemorates the day of martyrdom of Imam Hussein in the seventh century, while Sunnis of different regions advance varying narratives, the most frequent being the landing of Noah's ark after the floods, when all the remaining provisions (ten items in some versions) were cooked together in this pudding. Similar concoctions with boiled wheat have sacred functions in Christian rituals: *koliva* is the Greek and Orthodox equivalent, made for funerals and the Day of All Souls as well as Easter. The author cites many examples from the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and even draws parallels with the old English frumenty, eaten at Christmas and Lent. The preparation of these dishes for religious occasions often involves rituals and prayers, as in the case of the Bektashi Sufi order, who prepare them to celebrate their saints and shrines.

The chapters on manna and musk offer interesting ethno-biological information on the origins and use of these biblical substances. Manna turns out to be a product of insects and aphids deposit on particular trees, collected and processed into different sweets, the Turkish *kudret halvasi* and nougat-type products in Iran and Iraq.

*Lukum* aka Turkish Delight is the success story of Turkish/Middle Eastern sweets in the West. It is in the line of the starch/sugar family which found favour with European travellers and took off from the 19th century, becoming a boxed commercial sweet. Another popular genre is that of *Sucuk*, made of grape molasses with starch and aromatics, shaped around nuts, mainly walnuts, and threaded on a rope in a sausage shape, the word *sucuk* designating 'sausage'. Tourism and diversification of commerce, starting with the transport revolutions of steam and railways in the 19th century, favoured certain confectioners in Istanbul who took advantage of these developments. Thriving confectionery businesses at the present time continue to bear the name of one such pioneer, Hacı Bekir.

Another globalised sweet from the region is the family of pastries that bear the name *baklava*, now, like humus, to be found on many supermarket shelves. A chapter in the book is devoted to its illustrious history and lore. It is the lineage of layered pastries with nut fillings, soaked in honey and/or sugar syrup. Mention of the genre is traced back to 13-century Abbasid writers, but with a designation in Turkish, and the word *baklava* is traced to a first mention by a mystic Turkish poet in the 15th century. The etymology of the word, however, remains a mystery, with various speculative constructions, none of them convincing. This class of pastry had pride of place in the Ottoman courts with devoted cooks and kitchens. It continues to be prized on

tables and gifts especially on ritual and festive occasions, such as Ramadan breakfast and weddings.

Sweets occupied an important place in the social spaces and rituals of sociability. One chapter treats 'helva parties', *helva sohbeti*, held on long winter evenings to bring together family, neighbours and friends. These parties were, we are told, a widespread custom at all levels of society, from the courtly circles to provincial towns. This custom has largely disappeared in modern times, perhaps because of the rise of diverse forms of leisure and sociability, and the altering function of sweets in meals and diets in the modern food systems.

Ice and ice cream have another interesting history. The collection, transportation and storage of snow and ice were practiced and valued in many regions from ancient times, and were of special interest to the Ottoman court and elites. It served to cool waters, sherbets and syrups in hot summers. Ice cream, which required freezing the liquid separately from the surrounding ice with salt added, needed particular technique and equipment, which was, apparently, transmitted from Italy in 18th or 19th century. The Turks, however, innovated the thickening of the liquid with *salep*, a starch from an orchid root usually served as a hot drink in winter, but giving ice cream a stretchy texture, lending itself to playful displays of ropes and shapes. Known as *Maras dondurma*, after the city of Kahramanmaraş, it is now offered by some Turkish outlets in European cities including London.

This book is a treasury of Turkish sweets, dealing with classification, history, recipes and processes, and etymologies. It draws on a rich mix of sources, with the notes and bibliography occupying pages 243–313. Narratives of cultural contexts of folklore, ritual, festivities and beliefs add to the richness of the accounts. The book also traces aspects of diffusions, imitations and evaluations between Turkey and Europe. It remains to ask: what part did sweets occupy in diets and meals at different points in time and across social differences. While the book does not delve into these aspects systematically, there are interesting descriptions of meals and banquets. Banquets, as described by European notable guests, appear to comprise the lavish provision of many dishes and courses served in succession but in no discernable order: roast meat, fish, sweet pastries, stuffed vegetables, boiled meat, more sweets, and so on. The Europeans were puzzled by this lack of order, but, of course, this jumble was also part of medieval and early modern European banquets, only served altogether on a groaning table. The logic of it is display and spectacle.

Drinks, sherbets and syrups are included in these accounts, but there is complete silence on wine and alcoholic drinks. The parties here described, as we saw, revolved around sweets. This is understandable in the context of religious prohibition. But we do know that this prohibition was widely flouted, especially by the courts and elites. Perhaps they are politely passed over in the sources.

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