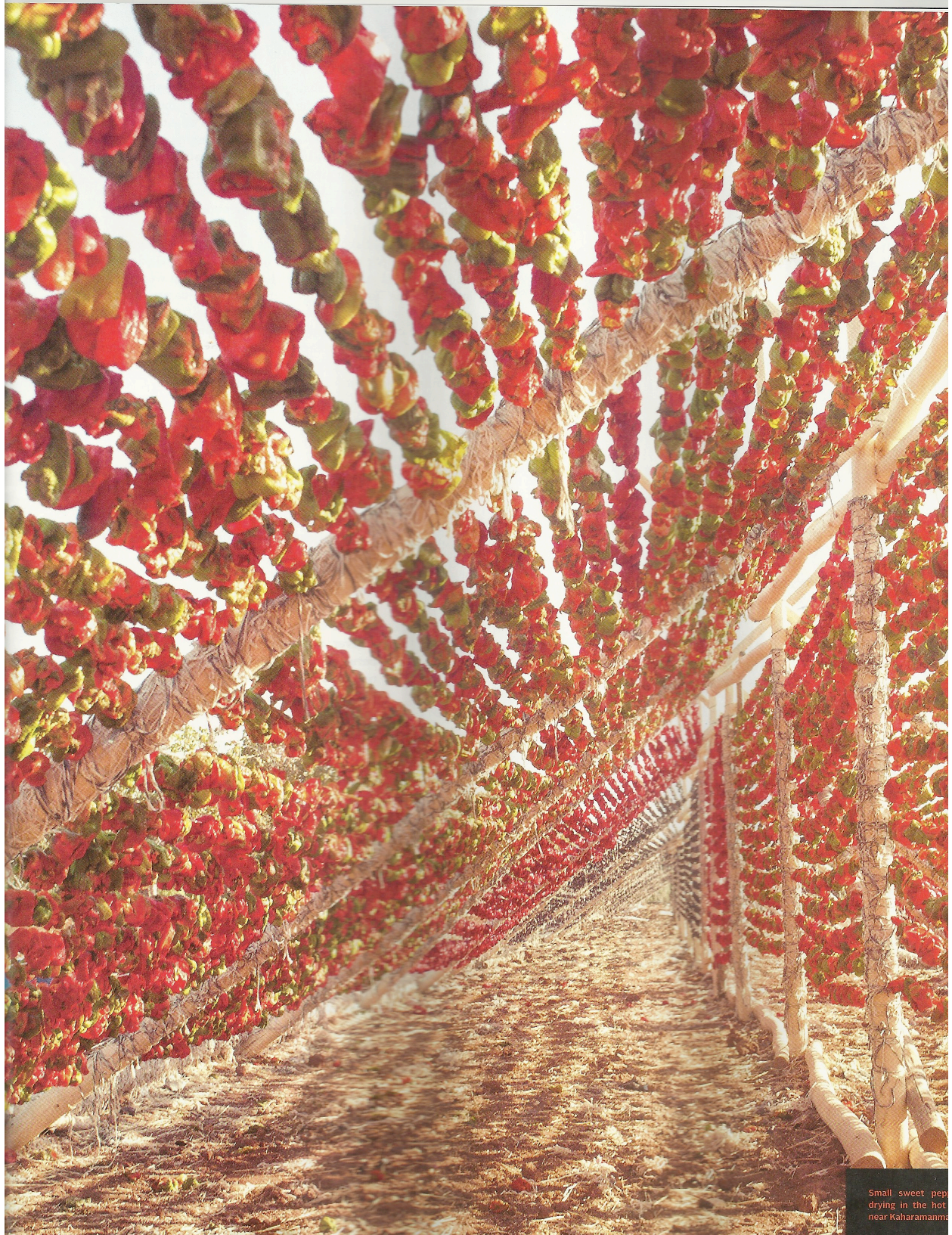


Hot
on the scent
of the indigenous
maras pepper,
PATRICIA UNTERMAN
gets an authentic taste
of the
cuisine and culture
of southeastern
Turkey.

SPICE TRAIL

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ERIC WOLFINGER

Most travelers know Turkey through the urbane lens of its largest city, Istanbul, maybe followed by a sybaritic sail along its spectacular turquoise coastline. But southeastern Turkey, bordering Syria, is another country entirely—more Arabic than Turkish, intensely agricultural, and a hot spot for some of the best rustic cooking in the world. I discovered this on the trail of maras pepper,



Small sweet pepper
drying in the hot
near Kaharaman



ABOVE: Once the stems are removed (shown opposite), the peppers are placed on perforated trays and set out to dry for a day in the late summer heat outside Gaziantep. BELOW, FROM LEFT: A classic hummus served with pickled vegetables, flatbread *pide* (pita), and pounded fava bean puree. // Some kebab connoisseurs say the best come from the southeast of Turkey. Squared skewers prevent the kebabs from rolling around the grill and allow the meat to cook evenly.



one of those ingredients that hits you over the head with its inevitability the first time you taste it.

Maras pepper comes from a ruby red, medium hot, aromatic chile that is harvested in September, when the wind blowing off the central Turkish plateau is so hot that it dries brilliant red seas of them, split and laid out on mats, in just one day. Once they're finished drying, the chiles are stone-ground into flakes.

Paula Wolfert—a revered local cookbook writer and culinary anthropologist, of sorts, who interprets recipes from the eastern and western Mediterranean—gave me a jar of the chiles 12 years ago. I haven't stopped using them since. Maras pepper goes into everything I cook (greens, eggs, braises, soups, pasta, meat rubs, and oils) until my supply runs out.

Every year I get a new batch from Musa Dagdeviren, the visionary chef and owner of Ciya Sofrasi, a tripartite eatery composed of

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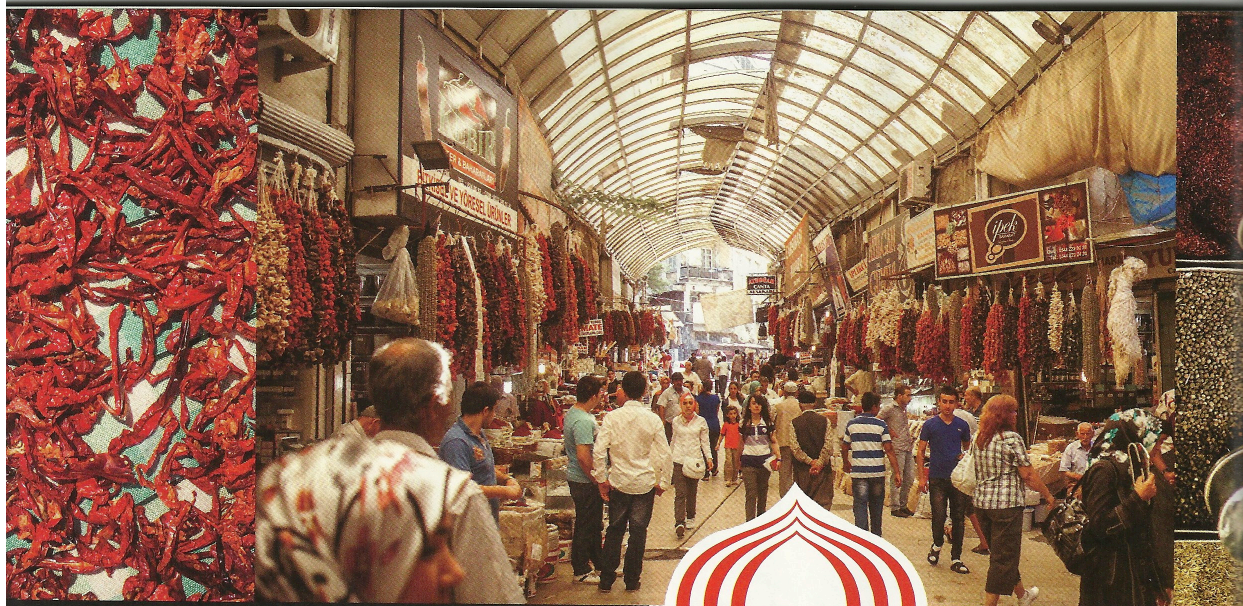
a restaurant and two kebab houses, nestled together on a narrow market street on the Asian side of Istanbul. Dagdeviren searches out village recipes, heirloom vegetables, and artisanal products for his restaurants, bringing traditional labor-intensive cooking to his adoring Ciya patrons. A kind of evangelical for local ingredients in his hometown of Gaziantep, he brings packets of maras pepper when he comes to teach at the CIA Worlds of Flavor conference in the Napa valley every November.

For years I have been begging Dagdeviren to take me to the maras pepper harvest in Kahramanmaraş near Gaziantep. And in September, he finally did, just when Syrians were pouring across the Turkish border and into refugee camps, fleeing the civil war. As I read newspaper accounts of car bombs, retaliatory air strikes, and door-to-door gun battles, Musa's family and friends in villages just 20 miles from the border wondered what Americans were so worried about. Things were fine. The harvest was on. Come see.

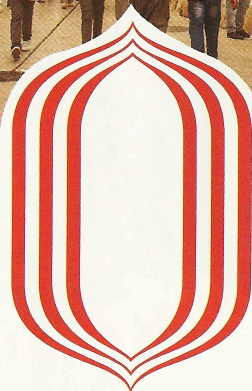
I landed in Hatay, otherwise known as Antakya (the ancient Antioch) at a new airport in what seemed like a desert. As we walked on broiling tarmac from the plane to a small terminal, the air felt like a convection oven. But 30 minutes away, the old center of Antakya was tree-shaded; a river ran through it; and canvas strung between high rooftops protected the serpentine alleys of the bazaar from the sun. A stroll through this lively marketplace produced the progressive meal of my dreams.

At the tiny hummus shop **Cayirci Bakla ve Humus Salonu**, two hummus makers stood behind a small counter pounding warm chickpeas and favas to order in metal bowls with thick wooden pestles. The legumes cook overnight in clay pots in the waning heat of the neighborhood *hammam* (Turkish bath) to become so wondrously creamy that even their skins disappear. Customers sit outside the shop at a few long tables in the shaded lane. A boy shuttles out bowls of hummus, plates of pickles, fresh herbs, whole hot green chiles, and steaming flatbread from the wood-fired bakery next door. Many more stop by to get their hummus, poured directly into plastic bags to-go. I followed my communal tablemates, scooping up the hummus with flatbread and piling on the condiments, making each bite my own. But I fell so hard for the fava hummus with its slightly bitter edge, I just polished it off with a spoon.

My next course—*tepsi*, or tray kebabs—started at **Aydin Kasap**, a tiny butcher shop at Uzun Carsi (Long Market). The butchers rocked a heavy, curved scimitar-like knife back and forth over small hunks of lamb and veal carefully selected from a row of hanging carcasses. Then they pressed the chopped meat flat onto metal trays, some containing veal with pepper paste and parsley, some with pure chopped veal. Still, other trays held pieces of lamb and lamb tail fat. Tomatoes, onions, and whole green chiles topped all of them. The trays were whisked away to a nearby wood-burning bread oven to emerge 20 minutes later, charred and juicy, draped with long elastic



FROM LEFT: Some families grow their own maras peppers, setting them out on sunny doorsteps to dry. // The covered market in Gaziantep is a feast for the senses with garlands of dried bell peppers and eggplant hanging in front of each shop.



n the two-hour drive from Antakya to Gaziantep, we stumbled upon our first pepper mill in a nondescript warehouse on a dusty highway.

Maybe Dagdeviren caught a whiff of the pungent fragrance of crushed pepper in the air. We peeked around the back of the building to see a breathtaking red landscape of drying peppers behind a low stone wall. On a shaded concrete platform adjacent to the warehouse, women in floral print pants, long-sleeved blouses, and scarves, scrawny men, and smiling children sat on blankets in front of piles of chiles, pulling off the green stems and throwing them into sacks. Everyone chattered as their hands flew. They were Syrians, bussed over from nearby refugee camps to help out with the harvest and earn some money.

In contrast to the small, sleepy city of Antakya—which was actually coming awake with an influx of NGOs tending the refugee camps and displaced Syrians moving into apartments—Gaziantep is a large modern city surrounded by fertile farmland. I can attest that the best pistachios in Turkey—arguably the world—are grown here, based on the kilos I bought, still warm at a nut shop on the edge of the bazaar. We ate plenty of them fresh and plump, a seasonal treat.

Homeboy Musa considers Gaziantep kebabs to be the best in a kebab-crazy country. After an orgy of them at a long, low table under a huge mulberry tree at **Kabapci Necdet**, barely upwind of the billowing smoke from the narrow box of smoldering charcoal across which they cooked, I agreed.

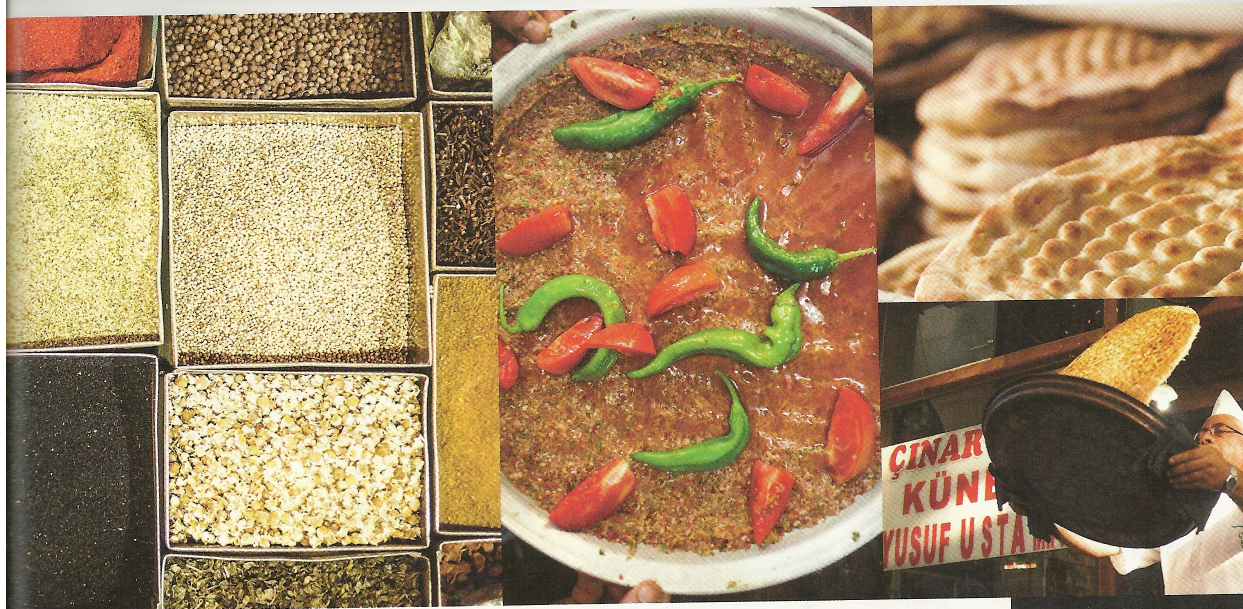
All these kebabs strung on flat metal skewers had that ethereal, almost falling apart, velvety texture only achieved by hand chopping. Some skewers held lamb chopped with onions and peppers; others mixed with poppy seeds and red pepper. Skewers of long Mediterranean eggplant, hollowed and stuffed with chopped spiced meat, and kebabs of charred hunks of lamb and fat, rubbed with spice, took up the flavor of the fire. We dusted cumin and salt on hunks of lamb liver, each with a little cube of lamb fat attached, a sensual thrill.

slabs of hot bread. The hand chopping, combined with an intuitive mix of lean and fat, made the meat incredibly succulent.

We ate the kebabs at a communal table in a trellised courtyard behind the Long Market, sipping *ayran*, a magically refreshing central Asian beverage made of thick yogurt beaten with iced water and salt. *Ayran* must be an antidote to the crusty, melting cubes of delicious lamb tail fat that are part of so many kebabs. Coming from a big flap that hangs over the haunches of fat-tailed sheep, these bits are like the pork belly of central Asia.

Dessert in Antakya means *kunefe* (grilled shredded filo sandwiches) at **Cinar Altı Kunefe**, a minuscule shop on a tree-shaded square next to the mosque in the bazaar. To make it, the owner, Yusuf, covers the bottom of a huge, round, thickly buttered pan with shredded filo, which is formed on an ingenious spinning griddle in the bazaar. He covers the filo with fresh white cheese, then another layer of shredded filo, and cooks the *kunefe* directly over coals. When the bottom becomes crisp and golden, he deftly flips the whole thing, at least a yard in diameter, so the bottom becomes the top. Right before serving, he pours on sugar syrup and cuts the *kunefe* into wedges oozing with creamy cheese sandwiched between buttery, crunchy crust. *Kunefe* is a dessert that must be eaten hot.

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These all came with soft, spongy flatbread. Plates of pickled red cabbage salad, charred hot and sweet peppers, a chopped salad of lettuce and tomatoes, *kacik*—similar to a chunky, mint-infused gazpacho—and chopped onion and parsley salad dressed with sumac, olive oil, and lemon helped balance the meaty meal. We slurped our ayran, the salted yogurt drink, from individual pewter bowls with sipping ladles.

Drunk on kebabs, we staggered up from the tables, and wandered through Gaziantep's covered bazaar, arriving at **Katmerci Murat** for dessert. *Katmer* are tissue-thin, crepe-like pancakes, rolled out and slapped onto a marble counter until they are so thin, you can read a newspaper through them. They are dabbled with clotted buffalo milk cream (*kaymak*), sprinkled with sugar and pistachios, folded, and browned in butter.

I wanted to start every morning eating katmer in the cheerful pistachio-green-and-white-decorated dessert cafe, but Gaziantep breakfast soup at **Metanet**, a dining hall with long tables and an even longer grill, intervened. The cooks made each metal bowl of *beyran corbasi* (lamb soup) to order, boiling deep-flavored lamb broth over charcoal, adding rice and spicy pepper paste with seeds, and melting lamb and white slices of lamb fat that have cooked so long and slow—for 12 hours—they become another substance entirely. The soup comes with *tirnak*, fingernail bread, a flatbread pressed out with the tips of the fingers. Soup service stops at 11 a.m., and then Metanet moves on to making exceptional Gaziantep kebabs.



The city of Kahramanmaraş (or Maraş) an hour north of Gaziantep, sits on a 2,000-foot plateau on the slopes of the 6,000-foot mountain Ahir Dagı, surrounded by fecund orchards and fields of figs, grapes, pomegranates, peppers of all kinds, tomatoes, eggplants, and summer squashes. Musa's chosen pepper supplier, Marbi, not only grows and processes the namesake pepper just outside the city. It also has a modern shop downtown in front of the Tepebasi Apartmanı on Azerbaijan Bulvarı, where pepper lovers can buy them packaged in boxes, along with a line of natural health and grooming products at their eponymous shop. The

smell of these small, pointy red peppers is pungent and fruity, not hot and spicy. Ripe, they have sweet, juicy flesh with an undertone of tartness that gives maras pepper its personality. Sun drying intensifies all its best qualities while teasing out medium heat, making it the sweetest hot pepper in the world, according to its producers. Marbi's high-quality maras pepper, grown and produced in Maraş, would be a prime candidate for documented regional labeling, if such a thing existed in Turkey. Musa is on a mission to make it happen.

Maraş is the source of another culinary treasure, the hand-churned goat milk ice cream (*dondurma*) at **Yasar Pastanesi**, now found at Mado ice cream shops all over Turkey. Its provocative texture comes from *salep*, a flour made from a dried wild orchid root that grows around Maraş. The original ice cream, in frozen logs dusted with pistachio crunch, is still served at an elegant, old-fashioned ice cream parlor and tea salon. It takes vigorous fork and knife work to eat it. At first hard and chewy, it melts in your mouth like a semi-freddo, leaving an essence of floral vanilla and pure dairy that feels lighter than cream.

In travel, one door leads to another. The maras pepper pilgrimage became a revelation about how deep-rootedness in soil, climate, and ethnicity gives food depth and emotion. Yes, emotion. I've eaten my way through Aleppo and Damascus, Amman, Beirut, and the Arab quarters of Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, but this Turkish-Arabic Anatolian cooking is something else—so lush and dimensional, so varied, the product of one of the most fertile and longest continually civilized places in the world. As it happened, the great maras pepper was just the ticket to get there. ✕

FROM LEFT: Regional spices at the bazaar. // For tray kebab, chopped lamb and seasonings are roasted in a wood-burning oven alongside accompanying fresh bread (top right). // At Cinaralti Kunepe, owner Yusuf flips every kunefe (a traditional Turkish dessert) himself.



TASTE OF TURKEY

CİYA SOFRASI

Savor authentic regional fare from chef Musa Dagdeviren. // Guneslibahce Sokak 43, Kadıköy (İstanbul), ciya.com.tr

CAYIRCI BAKLA VE HUMUS SALONU

Get freshly blended hummus. // Pazar Sokak, Hacımullaoglu 6 (Antakya), 0 326 214 25 65

CINAR ALTI KUNEFE

Taste the traditional Turkish dessert, kunefe. // Ayakkabıcılar Çarşısı, Pazar Sokak, Ahmedîye Camii No. 2 (Antakya), 0 326 212 68 88

KABAPCI NECDET

Perhaps the country's best kebabs. // Yaprak Mahallesi, Alınacar sokak, Alınacar camii girişi (Gaziantep), 0 342 230 2929

YASAR PASTANESİ

The source of Turkey's favorite goat milk ice cream. // İsmet Paşa Mah. Trabzon Bulvarı (Maraş), yasardondurma.com



LOCAL FLAVOR: Get the scoop on San Francisco's own Turkish delights at 7x7.com/tasteofturkey.



Before maras can be dried in the sun, the freshly harvested peppers are prepared by day laborers, whom Syrian women, who remove the stems of the peppers.