Folded in Layers of Dough

TEXT Ashley P **PHOTOGRAPHY** Quentin B

Burek or börek takes on many forms across Turkey and into the Balkans, millennia of history and migration baked into its thin sheets.

“Flour, water and salt. Some things for the inside. That’s all.”

Aferdita unrolls a new layer of dough with reflexive speed onto her workspace. Light sways in and out of the room through gold and blue plaid curtains. She describes the square rooms and design of her Communist-era home in the north of Albania as a dollhouse, but the steaming pan she pulls from the oven half an hour later contains a meal fit for a giant. Baked into the thin layers of homemade dough are the “things for the inside”: white cheese, sautéed vegetables and spinach. And between the dough and the fillings is nestled something more: a history that spans more than a millennium, the history of burek.

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Food anthropologists like Alexander Lee suggest that Central Asian Turks were already eating a form of burek as early as the 7th century. Cooked over campfires, the hearty dish stuck to the ribs of the nomadic shepherds and armies of the steppe.

The Göturks brought it along with them on their conquests stretching from Siberia to the Aral Sea. With the rush of the Mongol horde, burek was absorbed into army cuisine and carried farther east and west. Mention of burek shows up frequently in writings starting in the 12th century. During the Timurid Empire the dish allegedly rivaled pilaf in popularity. Its fanbase continued to grow during the Ottoman empire. The streets of Istanbul in the 16th century saw more burek shops than bakeries.

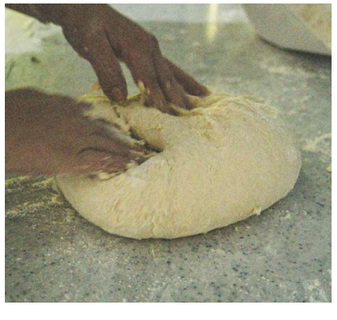
The migratory nature of burek meant that wherever dish was imported, its name was wont to change. You might be familiar with the dish without knowing it: burek, börek, beurek, boureki, banitsa, bougatsa; it’s all flour, water and salt. Etymologically speaking, the origin of the word might come from the Persian bûrak, for any dish made with yufka or phyllo dough. What you call burek might incite a bit of friction depending on where you go, but if you want to really start a debate, begin asking people what they put *in* their burek. Today, burek in Baku, Azerbaijan, looks quite different from boureki in Heraklion, Crete.

“There are at least 100 kinds of burek,” says Chef Hüseyin Bölük. “Depending on the climate, the region, the ingredients, there are many, many ways to make this dish. In my kitchen we have a daily menu, and there is almost always some kind of burek.”

There is no better place to explore the origins of burek than at AJWA Cappadocia hotel in Mustafapasa, Central Anatolia, Turkey. Standing in the doorway of one of the cave suites looking out over the gardens,

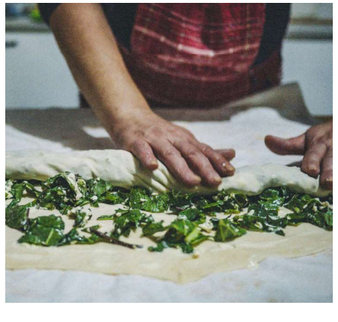











it's difficult not to find yourself swept off on a journey spanning thousands of years, surrounded by designs that include Seljuk and Ottoman architectural features.

The grounds of AJWA Cappadocia are covered with endemic plants, fruit trees and vegetable gardens, rendering it a culinary playground for chefs and guests alike. At the Zeferan Restaurant, Bölük educates and delights curious diners from around the world. He is the creator of *Yasayan Mutfak*, or the 'Living Kitchen,' concept in Turkey.

"Every dish has a story, and the diner must be part of that story."

In his 25 years of hospitality experience, Bölük has become the master of telling these stories. His dazzling burek creations can be filled with meat, spinach, potatoes, pumpkin, many kinds of cheese, onions—anything is fair game. The dough is open for interpretation too.

"At the heart of burek is wheat and flour," he says. "In our culture, this is a sign of abundance and tradition. Usually, burek is made with yufka dough, but I have made it with kadayif, angel hair dough, and when I was a child on the Black Sea, we made it with corn flour.

"I remember fighting with my brother and sister for the biggest pieces of burek when we were children. My mother was a farmer, and when she came home from the fields, she would spend a half hour to prepare a burek. Then she'd put it in the special oven in the village, and we'd wait impatiently while it cooked."

The dish is a staple in modern Anatolian cuisine.

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Over the centuries, burek has also anchored itself into Balkan, Middle Eastern and even Maghreb diets. Take Bulgaria, where the dish goes by the name of banitsa. Svetlana Raleva, who runs the Kosovo House in the mythical Rhodopi Mountains of southern Bulgaria, learned to make typical Sofia-style banitsa from her grandmother.

And while Bölük may have bickered with his siblings over burek at dinner, Raleva says that in Bulgaria, it's a staple food for breakfast.

"In all of Bulgaria, banitsa is made using phyllo pastry in the Sofia style with eggs, yogurt and cheese. Only in the Rhodopi mountains, the filling includes rice, though they used to use bulgur, and of course lots of butter."

Svetlana lived in South America for a time, and when she traveled back and forth, her luggage always contained reminders of Bulgaria: local yogurt and white cheese, phyllo pastry for banitsa, sudzhuk and lukanka sausages and rakia, a clear liquor distilled from fruit.

"You can say those are the foods that represent my Bulgarian identity," Raleva says.

Travelers, invaders and immigrants who bring their cuisines along for the ride is one of the strongest filaments connecting human history. The foods may bring comfort for the travelers, but they simultaneously leave their imprint on the new culture. In her sweeping culinary history book, *Food and Empire: Cooking in World History*, Rachel Lauden reflects on the integration and adaption of new flavors across Europe during the 19th century using the example of French haute-cuisine:

"New French-style dishes were created in and disseminated from countries other than France," Lauden writes. "Recipes for a buttery macedoine of vegetables, roast beef, roux, béchamel sauce and crème patisserie jostles alongside classics of Ottoman high cuisine such as yogurt and garlic sauces and baklava in Balkan cookbooks."

French cuisine invaded cookbooks in the 19th century. In the 20th century, the humble burek crept westward. Lea Goulipian, who is Franco-Armenian and lives between Paris and Marseille, beams with pleasure as she shares her memories of burek.

"It was my paternal grandmother and my aunt who made burek in our family," she says. It takes a lot of







time, like, a lot of time. During my childhood I saw my aunt spend all her life in the kitchen, but she loves that!"

The buzz of a living room full of Goulipian's extended family drowned out the Provençal summer cicadas. Spending endless hours with her cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents are the memories the dish brings up.

"Burek reminds me of big family meals," she says. "There was always burek. It was part of the aperitif, sharing space with eggplant caviar, humus, stuffed grape leaves. You had to be careful though; it's so delicious you want to eat more, but you know even more food is coming."

At home, the dish also doubled as a weeknight meal. Goulipian's aunt developed a special "fast burek" recipe and taught it to Goulipian's French mother. Growing up, burek was as common of a dinner choice as typical French fare like dauphinoise potatoes or quiche.

Goulipian is making sure her mom's fast recipe, which uses two premade sheets of dough and comes together like a pie, lives on. Once, for a friend's open-air DJ set, she pulled out all the bells and whistles and recruited two of her friends to make the food for the party. They made a huge batch of tabouleh and an enormous burek.

"The Frenchies loved it! There was none left."

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While she has dabbled in sharing burek with yet another new community, Ariana Malushi is making it her mission. A first-generation American born to a Croatian mother and an Albanian father from Kosovo, burek is her livelihood.

"It all started when I approached my aunt Alida with a simple idea: to teach me how to make traditional Albanian recipes in honor of my late grandmother, Magbule." A weekend ritual was started, recreating grandmother's recipes.

This Sunday pastime took an enterprising turn when Ariana and Alida decided to open up the New York City-based company Balkan Bites.

"As our bond grew, so did our passion for sharing a piece of our culture through authentic, everyday Southeast European comfort foods like burek," says Malushi. "When we first started selling our burek at



Aferdita stands outside her Communist-era "dollhouse" in Albania.



outdoor pop-up markets, we defined it as a phyllo pastry. Americans would come to our stand expecting to find dessert after they had made their rounds at the savory stands, only to be disappointed that this pastry was actually stuffed with sautéed beef and onions."

A public information campaign began: "We changed the imagery that we used in the stand to showcase our bureks cut open."

With the marketing slogan changed to "savory, stuffed phyllo pies," the business took off. "One customer said to us, 'They could honestly put a dirty shoe as the filling, and it would still taste good. That's how amazing the dough is.'"

As Goulipian noted, making burek from scratch requires an incredible amount of strength, stamina and patience. What was traditionally women's work in the home has rarely been women's business on the street. According to Malushi, many of the burek shops and factories around the world are owned and operated by men.

"We visited countless burek factories in Turkey to get a better understanding of what scaling our business would involve; we were the only women in the meeting rooms."

That didn't discourage Malushi, though.

"The reason that I started Balkan Bites was to spend more time with my aunt and to share my grandmother's recipes," she says. "It is very empowering to learn a craft that so many generations before me have performed. It makes me feel connected to my culture and family overseas even though I am so far away."

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Wiping her hands on her apron, Aferdita divides the slices up between her children and her guests.

"Puna kur behet me dashuri gjithmon behet e mire." Work done with love is always done well.

As the burek disappears from the table, she smiles. No matter how many years nor miles it has traveled, burek has retained its heart. Its most important common denominator remains unchanged: the savory satisfaction of chef and diner from a dish that will satisfy and stick with you, wherever you are.