



FOOD CULTURE AND AUTHENTICITY

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I am a Turkish Chef living actually in Istanbul. Born in 1960 in Anatolia, as son of a baker's family from mother side, my interest in gastronomy began as a child. My enthusiasm turned into an exciting curiosity that asked me to travel as soon as possible around different regions to meet people's cultures.

To name just a few of my early experiences, when I was of preschool age, I used to visit our neighbours to taste and decide who makes the best pickles or best stuffed meatballs. Later, during school years I used to visit every night one my friends' home, to taste food and see how his mother prepares it. This curiosity became a habit for me, and brought me to know deeply the gastronomic culture of different regions of my country, from fruit yard meals of my home town (Nizip) to nomadic people's way to prepare and preserve food.

That's when I started to collect documents and objects concerning food and the way to prepare it. I remember the first years of the introduction of industrial ovens in bakeries, which I was opposing hard. I told desperately to everybody, that traditional ovens and bread were disappearing. Later I had the urge of making something concrete and travelled from Trace (western part of Turkey) to Eastern Anatolia in order to write the Food Atlas of Turkey. Of course I recognized it was not an easy task, but it allowed me to gather a lot of information from cheese and dough yeasting techniques from camel milk or tree roots, to shepherds' food, to rich houses cuisine and ways of cooking of different religions. I also had the chance to visit neighbouring countries, included in the Silk Road, and saw the caravansaries and local people's traditions. I had the opportunity to examine dumplings, noodles, ghoshtebek, yoghurt and boiled borek.

Now I would like to talk about my first Ciya Restaurant. It was a five table venue in the beginning and we were four friends, who started together. The others were too impatient to make money and left after few months. Besides my personal efforts I cannot deny my luck meeting my wife in early days of the restaurant, which made me keep up the struggle. We, my wife and me, never had a day off for the first five years. This way we could pay the debt of opening. In this period I had to face the embarrassment of people when I was offering them their own traditional food, and this was making me both nervous and sad. The general attitude was: "Hamburgers are OK, but Kebab is not cool". This idea was dominant, mainly because of movies, theatres and literature, and because this kind of venues were present all over the country. But our restaurant had distinct stance. We introduced the wording "Regional Dishes" and always played classical instrumental music, offered kebab and lahmacun, and presented only two different regional meals.

We were also trying to prepare a publication on the results of my studies, and saving the money for it. A friend of mine, who was unemployed, asked me about what I could suggest

him to do. There was a pizza restaurant for sale across Ciya Restaurant. I suggested him to rent that venue. He said he had no money. I decided to borrow him the money, asking him to pay back whenever he could, or even never if the restaurant did not have success. We rented the restaurant the next day but suddenly my friend disappeared, and did not show up for ten days. I went to his home and he said that he could not trust himself to run the restaurant. I was very angry he did not tell me about that before I paid for the business. I waited for him a couple of weeks to come back. Then my wife suggested postponing the book project and thinking about starting a second restaurant.

We decided to start a restaurant presenting North East and Eastern Mediterranean Turkish Traditional food. We re-decorated the place and gathered ingredients from these regions. My wife's mother and mine helped us to prepare the food for the opening day. There was an incredible crowd in opening day. We had invited 600 people, hoping that half of them would come. But there were 2500 people! Dish washing crew got afraid and ran away! We had to close the restaurants for two days in order to make the cleaning. Customers were asking why we did not open and they were angry at us for not opening the next day. Ciya's history is well known from this day onward and it was the day dining market in Turkey started to change. We have a lot of beautiful memoirs that can make books. An old lady told me that "I want to kiss your cheeks, I could not teach these dishes to my children and I can't thank you enough for cooking and preserving them" while crying. Other customers also had tears in their eyes, and my staff and I got goose bumps. Another lady, a lawyer, was thanking "I used to eat Italian and think we do not have a food culture. After I ate here, I started to miss my grandmother and her food and visited her. I noticed that your restaurant recalls old memories". An 80 year old man seemed so very happy and I asked why. He said "Do you have any idea what you made me taste? Last time I ate this food, it was my mom cooking it for me". So I recognized the importance of my job, and motivated me to continue. Another customer called me and said "Well done, you are using the batter that my grandmother was using, I never forget that taste". We exchanged recipes for the preparation of that batter. I was very impressed because I was sharing the moment with people who knew how to prepare that batter. My meals were named according to their regional names. Many of my waiters did not know those names and could not pronounce them: this produced many funny stories.

If somebody is interested in hearing more of this kind of stories and experiences, we have the whole evening and tomorrow for it.

In 2002 I was invited to USA for a culinary activity by the Culinary Institute of America and everybody who tasted my 35 meals was really amazed. This was the beginning of my international activity, which brought me to many countries like Spain, Italy, Portugal, Belgium, Netherlands, Australia, UAE and South Africa. Where ever I go and cook for the occasion I always receive the comment: "Are you hiding these food from us? I have been in Turkey and never tasted anything like that". They called me anthropologist, a wizard and many more names, but I always tell them "No, these are recipes from the geographical area I come from".

Another important reason of my international reputation is being the first Turkish restaurant and chef mentioned in international newspapers and magazines. In international conferences I participated, they recognized me thanks to the articles appeared in these magazines and especially the one in New Yorker. I became aware about the existence of food writers around the world following my activities. A South African chef, for instance, told me that he was inspired by my ideas, to write a book on his own local food. Ciya Restaurants are included in almost any travel guides and books, from any country, like Lonely Planet, Frommer's, Fodor's etc and in travel related web sides.

Our restaurants are receiving a lot of international attention and welcoming a great number of travellers. These often also ask for training in Turkish Cuisine and we realize short sessions for them in our Restaurants. Ciya Restaurants have created an impact on Gourmet Tourism in Turkey. A short research before and after the existence of Ciya Restaurants would easily show that local restaurants, and local producer started to address foreign customers after Ciya.

It was hard to market your food by calling it Ottoman meals but saying we offer Local or Regional Food, makes it more attractive. Many food writers (for newspapers and magazines) also profit from this new way of marketing. I remember, for instance, some of these writers, who were on Italian and French Cuisine, and used to despise Turkish food, also started to have their share from that market. Furthermore, archaeologists, authors, TV series, movies and theatres are asking me for consultancy. I am not sure if these people are looking for reviving our culinary heritage or just running after profit, but I can see that Tourism in Turkey has improved thanks to increase in presentation of local food, started with my initiation. I feel quite shy telling about myself and I wish somebody else could do it.

I want to highlight the importance of the experience of Ciya Restaurants for Tourism. I consider that each and every society must stand up to save its own food culture from possible international monopolies, and have a centre to train specialists on traditional food, so that they can pass their experience to next generations. Otherwise culinary culture will be in danger of vanishing and almost identical food will be served everywhere. Then travelling to a certain region would lose its interest, as great part of its culture would have disappeared. I believe tourism is mainly curiosity about other cultures. I would like to tell another story. I went to my hometown, Nizip, twenty-six years ago and asked women of my neighbourhood if they could sundry tomato, purslane and peppers for me. An old lady said: "Musa, you were already crazy when you were a little boy, who would buy dried tomatoes, as we have fresh tomatoes even in winter now. You must be crazy". I replied "Why should I ask, if I were not?". Thanks to Ciya, even that lady is cooking with dried tomatoes nowadays.

Let me resume the history of Ciya Restaurants in a few lines. Ciya was started in 1987 as kebab restaurant, and then turned into Ciya Sofrası, presenting regional food in 1998. Second Ciya Restaurant opened its doors 2000, in 2001 the third. We are sustaining three Ciya Restaurants one nearby the other. We also created a quarterly journal, Food and Culture in 2004. Ciya Publications started in 2010. We have published 4 books of food culture up to now. In 2012 we started Ciya Foundation. It will be responsible for the creation of a Turkish Traditional and Modern Cuisine Training, Research and Information Centre to allow to find and receive comprehensive training on traditional and modern Turkish cuisine, have library and documentation centre specialized in this very broad knowledge and attract a growing number of nationals and foreigners interested in it. It is planned to work on local development by reviving and sustaining local food items producers from all around Turkey.

We wish this Turkish Traditional and Modern Cuisine Training, Research and Information Centre may become an example for all the Silk Road area, to enhance our rich cultures, and traditional food and contribute actively in increasing interest from all over the world to travel to Silk Road countries, and/or realise the trip along this ancient Silk Road.