

A chance encounter

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Turkish delight ... the kitchen at Ciya Sofrasi. *Photo: New York Times*

A transit error places Jon Faine on the wrong continent but in the right neighbourhood for a regional Turkish feast.

It all happened because I caught the wrong ferry. Not deliberately - just a happy fluke. Hurrying to negotiate the simple dispensing machines for plastic tokens used on the short trip on the Bosphorus and racing through the turnstiles before the gates shut, I found myself aboard one of Istanbul's efficient ferries heading across the water to Kadikoy instead of Karakoy. A mistake - but one that turned out well.

Kadikoy or Karakoy - try saying the two quickly, all the while pretending to make what you hope are vague Turkish-type inflections.

Add the ambient noise of Istanbul's frenetic waterfront and you will know how asking for directions can easily confuse.

Unique to Istanbul, this small ambiguity results in continental differences - Kadikoy is in Asia but Karakoy is in Europe.

Once aboard, boys toss scraps of doughnuts to tease the hungry seagulls that shadow the ferry as it churns through the fleet of anchovy-fishing boats plying what must be one of the most crowded waterways in the world.

A teenage chai-seller juggles his tripod-clasped brass tray of aromatic apple tea through the crowded deck offering narrow-waisted glasses for the equivalent of 50¢. Imagine being able to buy a glass of steaming apple tea on your way to work; the ferry ride becomes its own adventure.

I arrive 15 minutes later in Asia. Kadikoy Quay is awash with food vendors, shoeshine stalls and booths selling everything from cigarettes and the ubiquitous mobile phones to battery-powered fluffy barking dogs.

A suicide-mission to cross the road rewards me with a quieter streetscape and alleyways lined with olive and baklava sellers, bookshops, the obligatory kebab booths and bored old men with glass-cased carts selling the delicious Turkish equivalent of a pretzel - called "simit" - crisp on the outside but soft and doughy within, coated with sesame seeds; a perfect snack.

I stumble through the fish market to an alley lined on both sides with restaurants, outside tables begging for patrons.

Many are empty but oddly one establishment is full. A table clears just as I walk past and it makes sense to find out why this place among dozens is so busy. I soon discover I have struck culinary gold.

Ciya Sofrasi is renowned for its founder's efforts to recover endangered local recipes and regional specialties at risk of being forgotten within mainstream Turkish cooking. The walls bear framed reviews in the *New Yorker* and gourmet-magazine colour spreads in several languages. What to me is a coincidence is for others a point of pilgrimage.

Bubbling on the stove behind spotless glass screens are 20 mouth-watering choices, including lamb in plum stew; yoghurt, chickpea and fennel bean casserole with whole garlic cloves as sweet as apple; lamb and mushroom infused with saffron; a ramekin filled with crisp rice and stuffed in the middle with aromatic minced lamb, roasted nuts, sultanas, thyme and garlic; 16 choices of fresh salads and then to finish a platter of sweet glazed pumpkin; sugared olives and lemon; pickled whole walnuts; and pistachio cakes.

This is all washed down with bottomless cups of apple tea. Now I understand why it is popular.

After my third visit in five days, I learn Ciya Sofrasi is starting cooking classes soon to share the founder's success and passion with residents and tourists.

Next time I'll return not just to eat but to acquire new skills. While learning to cook, I could also enrol in classes in the district of Sultanahmet to learn marquetry, silversmithing, jewellery making, beading, woodturning, glass-blowing or enamelling. Marbling is the ancient art of affixing paint to paper so it resembles the patterns in natural marble but these days flowers and figures are marbled in exquisite colours and curves.

In the tranquil green courtyard of the Kucuk Ayasofya, also known as the Little Hagia Sophia, are studious artisans plying their trade. The courtyard is their studio and they seem eager to show their skills, not in any way expecting a sale - just delighted that I'm interested in their culture and its revival.

Eventually I venture to Karakoy and find a noisy mob marching through the crowded mall, trumpeting with megaphones and waving banners. They turn out not to be threatening revolution but inviting the public to the opening night of Istanbul's first International Comedy Festival. Karakoy has bustling street life, quirky shopping and a lively cafe culture. This is the heart of Turkey's European ambition, embracing counterculture and galleries that display Istanbul's thriving creative community.

Dodging the tourist tram, I walk the length of Taksim's pedestrianised Istiklal Avenue, its several kilometres of packed promenade hosting all the familiar big-label shops and franchises. I could just as well be on Rue de Rivoli or Oxford Street.

Yet in the famous bazaar just a half an hour away you can buy fake designer gear for a fraction of Taksim's prices. Around the back alleys there are even shops selling rolls of fake labels to put on the fake garments to hoodwink unsuspecting fashionistas. While the labels here are fake, it's the experiences that are authentic in Istanbul.

