

Eating Your Way Through Istanbul's Grand Bazaar

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When visiting the ancient and fascinating city of Istanbul, the Grand Bazaar is often tops on most visitors' must-see list. One of the oldest and largest covered markets in the world, the labyrinthine market houses thousands of shops and kiosks selling everything from gold to clothing, household items, spices and trinkets. Visiting the Bazaar is a feast for the senses — not the least of which is the sense of taste.



Over the last 100 years or so, dining has become a more important part of the Grand Bazaar experience. Traditionally, the Grand Bazaar was a shopping destination only — the Turks' nomadic lifestyle and the fact that women were generally barred from appearing in public meant there was nowhere in the Bazaar to get food. Merchants would often bring meals from home; it wasn't until the early 1800s that simple foods became available from kiosks in the middle of the street. Merchants and shoppers would line up for traditional kebabs and Turkish coffee they could enjoy on the go.

Today, while kiosks still dot the Bazaar, the food offerings have become more plentiful and diverse. From simple tea shops to full service restaurants, it's easy to find something to eat while you peruse the wares.

Restaurants and Cafes

Many of the Grand Bazaar's best eating spots are hidden out of the way, tucked into back alleys or courtyards and cater to the locals who work in the Bazaar. These spots are where you'll find the most authentic and affordable fare — and lines of hungry shoppers and merchants.

For example, Kara Mehmet Kebap Salonu is located in the Cebeci Han, an out of the way courtyard populated primarily by carpet repair shops. This tiny spot specializes in expertly grilled kebabs; in addition to traditional beef and lamb, be adventurous and try a liver or kidney kebab. Locals also flock to Aynen Durum, near the Bazaar's currency exchange center. Here you can order a durum (wrap) made with fresh Lavas bread and grilled meat; you can add your own peppers, pickles and parsley from containers lined up at the always crowded counter.

If you'd rather have a more relaxing meal than fight the jostling crowds at the small cafes and counters, get a table at Havuzlu, near the legendary coffee spot Sark Kahvesi in the Grand Bazaar. This restaurant serves simple, traditional cuisine in an opulent dining room decorated with painted tiles and antique rugs. Just around the corner from the Nuruosmaniye Gate, Fes Café is a modern and chic space serving more modern interpretations of Turkish cuisine, including sandwiches and salads. A smaller outpost of the Fes Café can be found at the Bazaar at Halicilar Caddesi. Aslan Restaurant is another popular spot near the Nuruosmaniye Gate; the menu changes daily, but generally offers lighter versions of traditional Turkish comfort foods such as lentil soups, stuffed peppers and eggplant-based dishes.

A Word About "Free" Tea

As you wander through the stalls and shops of the Grand Bazaar, don't be surprised if the merchants are generous with cups of tea. Many shopkeepers offer passersby a cup of apple tea to entice them into the shop and keep them there, hoping to make a sale. In general, if you accept the tea, it's understood you intend to make a purchase, so if you're just looking, politely decline the beverage. There are any number of tea houses that will provide you with a beverage without any strings attached. Try the Kizlaragasi Han, a humble courtyard where you'll find gold and silver recyclers, for a small teahouse where you can play backgammon with the locals.

Shopping at the Grand Bazaar requires a great deal of stamina — not that you could ever expect to visit all 3,000 shops in one day. Even if you only explore a portion of this landmark, you'll need to refuel before heading back to your Istanbul inn. So pack comfortable shoes, your camera (the Bazaar is among the most photographed sites in all of Turkey) and your appetite. Enjoy exploring this feast for the senses.