

## **ISTANBUL: Emilie Harting Attends Istanbul Culinary Institute**

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*(All photos are courtesy of the Istanbul Culinary Institute.)*

A Traveler Attends the Istanbul Culinary Institute

By Emilie C. Harting

Were it not for the large letters "[Istanbul Culinary Institute](#)" above the front entrance, one would assume that the restaurant Enstitu was an elegant café in a row of buildings next to the Pera Museum southeast of Taksim Square. On a clear day locals and tourists sit under umbrellas on either side of the front door, or wander inside to eat and shop for gourmet food.



*Fehmi Samanci, Istanbul Culinary Institute teacher.*

I'd been traveling in Turkey for several weeks, and near the end of the trip I arrived at the Institute to take an individual Amateur Cooking

Class, one of an array of classes, tours, and other programs for travelers.

"As you probably know, not all Turkish cuisine is gyros and kabobs," said head chef instructor Fehmi Samanci as we entered the long, sun-filled classroom with stoves and refrigerators on either side.



*Appetizers, eggplant, salad on top.*

"Would you like to watch me as I explain the steps, or do you want to cook with me?" Fehmi began setting out a number of bowls, pots, stirrers and measurers out on the long metal table that ran down the middle of the room.

Eager to learn from such an accomplished chef, I said I'd like to participate.

When I asked him how he became a chef, Fehmi said that he'd grown up watching his mother cook, and when he was thinking about a career he saw there was a real need for educated chefs. "So I learned to teach them," he said with a slight giggle. "And to teach non chefs like yourself. I also enjoy going to cities like New York and London to demonstrate Turkish cooking at culinary institutes and TV stations."

"Let's make three basic Turkish dishes: eggplant salad (patlican salatasi), braised fish (balik pilakisi), and zucchini fritters (mücver). We'll do the slicing and chopping for each as the others are cooking."

By then I'd learned that the first course in many Turkish restaurants is the Meze, the appetizer. Soon after the guests sit down, a waiter

comes out with a huge tray of twelve to eighteen appetizers, each in a small bowl. A diner picks out three or so. Ironically, I'd avoided the eggplant salad because it looked like ochre colored paste without much texture. It also looked dull compared to dishes with tomatoes, mushrooms, onions, and olives.



*Students at work.*

"Eggplant salad is one of the most popular appetizers in the country," Fehmi told me. "We can either bake the eggplants in the oven or cook them on our grill." I looked around for a portable grill and saw that he was placing the eggplants in a standing up position over burners on the gas stove. "We'll keep them here until the skins bubble."

As the eggplants cooked, we went on to the braised fish. Fehmi chose sea bream because it was in season in the late spring. (I'd had it a few times at small fish restaurants, and it was delicious. The soft white fish absorbs the flavor of the tomatoes and herbs!) He said that orange roughy, snapper, or sea bass would be good substitutes in the United States. After slicing onions and frying them in olive oil, we chopped a few springs of parsley, concussed (rough chopped) tomatoes which we'd peeled after dipping them in boiling water, and mixed in mashed garlic, salt and pepper. We placed half of the mixture in the bottom of a baking pot and lay the filets in before putting the remaining sauce on top and covering the pot.

"It's important to have a sauce that's not too thick or it will draw down the flavor," Fehmi said as he placed the covered pot in the middle of the hot oven. "Also, it should not be cooked too fast."

While the fish baked, we started the zucchini fritters. We washed and grated the zucchini, pressed batches of it between our hands with paper towels to make sure all the liquid was out, and put it aside while we chopped scallions and dill, crumbled up feta cheese, beat eggs, and mixed all of the ingredients together. We then added the flour, little by little, along with the pepper and salt. Fehmi said there were two methods of cooking the fritters, either baking or frying. Since frying is quicker, we poured spoonfuls of the mixture into a pan of olive oil, let the fritters get golden brown on each side, and then rested them on a paper towel to draw out the excess fat.



*Farm at Saros.*

“Bon Appetit,” said Fehmi and Hande Bozdogan, the owner/director of the Institute who had come to join us at an eating table near the window.

When I told Hande how delicious and natural the food tasted, she said the aim of both their restaurant, Enstitu, and the Culinary Institute was to make the healthiest food possible. “We don’t use much butter, and avoid other dairy products, except the modest cheeses that give flavor, such as in your zucchini fritters, and yogurt in some dishes”

As we sat, Hande told me about how she has been heavily influenced by Anatolian cuisine that is typical of the interior of Turkey. She owns a farm in Saros, two hours north of Istanbul near the Greek border. Each day a wide variety of fruits, vegetables, and herbs are transported from the farm to the restaurant and training kitchens. The list was mouthwatering: tomatoes, peppers, broccoli, zucchini, eggplant, okra, artichokes, thyme, basil, and mint, as well as apples, pears, pomegranates, quince, and mulberries. “It’s important to get the food from the farm to the table as soon as it is picked. We have a

steady clientele of local business people who come because they want healthy food that's cooked without pretension. I hope we don't lose the simplicity of Turkish food with the current trend to make food look fancier than it actually is. We have such a rich culinary history with Ottoman, Greek, and Arab dishes." Hande talked about the book she wrote on street food, which she said is fascinating. You learn how basic Turkish food is cooked because the dishes are created before your eyes.

I asked Hande and Fehmi about their favorite spices. Almost speaking together, they said many fresh herbs plus red pepper flakes, cumin, sumac powder, oregano, saffron, and lots of cinnamon and cloves. "We often take students to the spice market and fish market first before we cook,"

I came away from the lesson with a better appreciation of the food I'd been loving in Western Turkey. I'd also picked up tips on how to hold knives, chop, braise, and, above all, to make simple ingredients more tasty.

Even more: Watch an interview with Hande Bozdogan on <http://tinyurl.com/27mbcnt>. Her book *Flavors of the Street: Turkey* won the Gourmand Award in 2005, and is available on Amazon. *Istanbul: Contemporary Cuisine* also received awards and will also be available soon on Amazon.

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