

# Breaking bread *in* Turkey

In north east Turkey's Kackar mountains, **Margaret Scully** discovers that faraway hills are green, clean and alive with the taste of fresh cheeses, sharp honey and Turkey's legendary corn bread

In summertime, families and their beehives, animals and household possessions all decamp to their summer homes, or *yaylas*, in the high pastures



**B**read is sacred in Turkey and, in many of its remote villages, the mill wheel still grinds this essential ingredient of local traditional life. Considered by many locals to be the cradle of civilisation, in the north east region of Turkey there is evidence of bread-making dating back to the Stone Age. Close to the Black Sea metropolis of Rize, a recently discovered cave is believed to have been formed over 8,000 years ago by the excavation of stone to make bowls for mixing dough.

The remote mountainous terrain offers more than stunning scenery and intense wildlife to visitors to the area. Throughout eight days trekking through the Kackar Mountains in mid June, the gastronomic delights were as consistently impressive as the vistas.

The mountain range separates two climates, sub-tropical to the north and Mediterranean to the south. Yusufeli on the southern side is a centre of rice production and paddy fields line the sides of the rapid Coruh river. The northern side is mainly covered in sub-tropical forest, which runs down to meet the Black Sea. In summertime, when the snows melt, families and their beehives, cows, sheep, goats and household possessions all move up

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to the high pastures where they have their summer homes, called *yaylas*. Animals graze lush organic pastures and vegetables are sown on every available piece of ground around the summer villages.

Due to their remote location and inhospitable terrain, the Kackar ranges have been massively depopulated in recent times. Many of the local people are of the Hemsin ethnic group, originally Georgian Christians who converted to Islam in the last 200 years. After eating my way across the range, it came as no surprise to hear that emigrants from the region have gained acclaim nationally and internationally as chefs. Some of the best bakeries and restaurants in Istanbul, Ankara and Moscow are Hemsin-owned. In addition to the wealth of local produce, proximity to the Silk Road and its influx of spices and recipes

from the Far East have helped to sharpen the extra culinary edge we experienced in the Hemsin's native land.

In the village of Ortan, I followed a woman with a bucket of dried corn who was following a man with a big key. The procession along the hilly village track led us to the big wooden door of a mill house, built of stone and draped in pink rambling roses. The miller set his wheel in motion for just a few kilos of corn, harvested six months ago but stored whole to preserve the flavours. Corn bread is a regional speciality of Kackar, from where our modern 'corn flakes' also apparently originated.

One of our trekking days found us on a ridge twice the height of Carrantouhill, where the dramatic interruption of an almighty thunder storm sent us running to one of the most memorable meals of the trip. With the help



Far right: A simple hand-turned device filters foreign objects from the liquid and divides it into cream and milk



## RECIPE

### Kackar corn bread

This recipe comes from a cook in Ayder where they use sweet corn which has been stone ground from dried kernels. It was served with grilled trout and assorted salads as a delicious main meal.

**500g coarse ground cornmeal, available from Asian shops**  
**Salt and pepper to taste**  
**500ml water, boiled and cooled**

- 1** Preheat the oven to 200°C/gas mark 6. Rub a 2cm-deep baking tray lightly with olive oil and warm in the oven.
- 2** Mix the ingredients into a dough that is of a workable sticky consistency, neither too wet nor too dry. Flatten the dough into the hot tray and bake for 30 minutes until the top turns a reddish-brown colour.
- 3** Remove from the oven and set aside covered with a cloth for 10 minutes. Slice into rectangular pieces and serve warm with freshly grilled fish and salads, or with dips.

of god and a passing lumber jack, we found ourselves deposited at the local sleepy tea shop of Sarigol, where our unexpected and soggy arrival sent the owner, Mr Ahmed, into rescue mode and he quickly set about making a warming meal of hot lentil Corba soup. The worn old tables were joined together and dressed with a table cloth of newspapers, on which he delicately placed bowls of freshly baked bread, local tomatoes, cheese and lettuce. Our lumberjack had picked a handful of muddy scallions from his garden en route and they were washed and added to the spread, which tasted as wholesome as supper at my granny's farm.

When we arrived in the alpine village of Ayder one Sunday morning, a woman called Ayse was busy chasing a stray cow up the hill. At the back of her house, in the cool of the shade, she had her cheese-making operation perched on the edge of a steep slope, overhanging a rapidly flowing river. Ayse heats the fresh milk to 60°C before pouring it through a simple hand-turned device which filters foreign objects from the liquid and divides it into cream and milk. The cream is then churned into butter and the milk into a hard and soft cheese. Cheeses are a staple part of the Kackar diet, and are served with many different dishes including a light-textured cottage cheese and walnut salad.

Honey is another Kackar favourite and bee-keeping is an inherent part of rural life in the region. The hives are often perched high in trees or on platforms, to keep them out of reach of the local bear population, of which there are 150 species. One bee-keeper had rigged up a micro-hydro electricity plant on a

stream near the hives and used this to power night-lights in order to discourage the furry creatures of the night.

The rare and unpolluted flora from which the bees are gathering pollen makes this one of Turkey's most prized nectars and Ayder honey commands prices in excess of €50 per kilo. Production is subject to strict regulations from the government and only approved members of the cooperatives can sell their honey. Compared to our Irish wild flower honey from the Burren, the Ayder honey lacked sweetness and had a slightly medicinal taste, reflecting the forest flora and its reputed healing values.

Walking through the village of Yaylalar of an evening was like visiting a dream eco-housing development. Cows and cow dung are central to life and every girl in the village seemed to be tending her own cow. These lucky cows are grazing the cleanest greenest mountain grass, so it is no wonder that their milk is producing such fine butter, yoghurt, cream and cheeses. Cow dung cakes and slabs can be seen drying beside houses, to be used through winter as fuel. Piles of covered dung are spread onto the vegetable patches and it is also used as plaster between the beams of timber buildings.

Along the old Silk Road I met Mr Mahmut Yasar Pasali, who shared a few wild food treats with me, one being a type of camellia. He invited me to visit his *yayla*, the summer home where up to 100 edible wild plants feature in his family's cooking. Noting the lack of medical centres in the region I asked the 57-year-old Mr Mahmut about the health care system in the mountains. He cheerfully informed me that he has never seen a doctor in his life.

“The **hives** are perched **high in trees** to keep them out of reach of the local **bear** population”



## RECIPE

### Mercimek Corbasi (Red lentil soup)

This soup was served in Ahmed's tea shop in Sarigol

Serves 4

1 medium onion  
1 medium potato  
1 medium carrot  
1 small tomato (or ½ tablespoon tomato purée)  
2 tablespoons olive oil  
125g red lentils  
875ml water  
Salt and pepper

to serve

1 teaspoon dried mint, or finely chopped fresh mint  
A few red chilli pepper flakes  
4 lemon wedges

**1** Chop the onion, potato, carrot and tomato into small chunks. Heat the olive oil in a saucepan and add the onion. Stir over a moderate heat for 10–15 minutes until soft.

**2** Add the remaining ingredients and season lightly. Bring to a simmer. Reduce the heat, cover partly and cook for 15–20 minutes until the lentils are tender, stirring from time to time. Leave to cool a little.

**3** Blend to a creamy texture before reheating gently and adjusting the seasoning to taste. Serve hot with a garnish of mint, a pinch of red chilli pepper flakes and a squeeze of lemon.

While we in the west are busy re-educating ourselves on the learned ways of our forefathers with their sustainable building methods and eco-living principles, these people are still living that life. Progress has not yet reached the mountainous outposts such as Yaylalar, although many of the native people are keen to shake off their traditional labour intensive ways. Television and mobile phones have brought images and messages of far away hills which, while they may not be greener, appear to offer a better standard of living and education.

This 'cradle of civilisation' has been well and truly rocked in recent years as the area's suitability for electricity generating dam projects adds to the instability of the region. Protection agencies are moving in to assist the remaining population in sustaining a livelihood in the unique natural habitat they share with some of the world's rarest flora and fauna. Numerous scientists, botanists and bio-diversity experts are based in Yusufeli as part of the TEMA protection project (Turkish Foundation for Preventing Soil Erosion, Reforesting and Protecting Natural Habitats), whose objective is to preserve the nature of

the area and to develop a form of tourism that doesn't cost the environment.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Development Programme is assisting villagers to maintain their organic food production while educating them on how to host international guests. Development of ethical responsible tourism is a vital economic key towards the future protection of the Kackar region and the survival of their slow food skills. ☞

### Ethical travel

Kate Clow & Karem Karaerkek of Middle Earth Travel offer ethical trekking tours.  
[www.middleearthtravel.com](http://www.middleearthtravel.com)

### Getting there

Turkish Airlines fly direct from Dublin to Istanbul five times per week, with onward connections to Erzurum and Trabazon.  
[www.thy.com](http://www.thy.com)