

Sharing Turkish tastes in Ghent: Aesthetic narratives of food, migration and memory

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S U M M A R Y

This article explores the relationship between the collective tastes of the Turkish food diaspora in Ghent and the role memory plays in the context of Turkish migration to and resettlement in Belgium. It addresses the interactive components of a specific set of tastes and a diasporic belonging within a particular reinterpretation of both personhood and of their parenthetical food practices. The main aim of the research conducted among the Turkish food diaspora in Ghent was not simply to trace changes in their food practices, but to examine the way in which their taste is being transformed in the framework of food memories relating to their migration to Belgium. Bringing food items from Turkey, or buying Turkish ingredients and food in Belgium emerged as something crucial to nutritional practices, but was important for other reasons beyond. The emotional, sensory and mnemonic effects of the consumption of food from the native land will be explored through an ethnography founded upon narrative portraits among 14 participants from Turkish provenance. The great importance of ritualized foodstuffs, foodways and the role of cuisine as a signifier of origin and identity are underlined in shared experiences that play out in the aesthetics of everyday life. More importantly, the article intends to show, by means of patchy pre- and post-migration narratives, how memories of food are used to inventively construct a sense of identity in the present which is reliant upon sensible efforts to reach into the past and are, at the same time, inseparably woven into the future.

A R T I C L E I N F O

Keywords

Food, consumption, foodways, memory, Turkish migration, taste, identity construction

How to refer to this article

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Introduction: migrating, eating, remembering

When travelling from Belgium to Turkey in mid-2015, I asked a friend and bona fide informant of Turkish origin, who had not returned to Turkey for three years due to visa issues, whether she desired that I bring something back for her. “*Kahve*” she said. “*Could you buy me some fresh kahve. Well actually, if you have the time and it’s convenient, could you also bring next to the kahve, some simit and hoşmerim.*” While other relatives mostly ordered clothing, the list that this particular friend had itemized consisted only of food-re-



lated items. Based on the strength of our long-lasting friendship, or perhaps just because of the overwhelming desire for the products' tastes, she continued without any hesitation to enumerate specific details of the items that she desired. The *kahve* should not just be any Turkish coffee; instead, it should be the fresh one carrying the brand 'Kuru Kahveci Mehmet Efendi'¹ and I was obliged to check the expiration date more than twice, as that would be the most integral part for the taste and smell that was desired. I was given a free pass with the *simi*t—the Turkish bagel version—as I should focus mostly on the *hoşmerim*, a dessert item made with cream, fresh cheese and walnuts. After noting down her orders, and promising that I would do my very best to find the *hoşmerim* particularly, I dared to ask why these three items held such pride of place. "You know Saliha", she continued, "whenever I'm agitated and can't fall asleep at night I close my eyes and start to imagine moments from my childhood to de-stress." Emine, a 34-year old housewife, continued to outline how her imaginary journeys unfailingly begins with a walk through her childhood home—a place located in Inegöl/Bursa in which she lived for the first 18 years of her life, before leaving to another city and, eventually, to another country to pursue higher education. Starting at the gate with the flower arch, she enters the bluish-tinted front door and wanders through the different parts of the house. As she walks through the house she tries to remember the furniture, decoration and handicrafts in each room. The

memories and lived experiences of her early life and of her family life flood back to her as she enters the heart of the house—the kitchen area—in which they used to start the day with *simi*t at the breakfast table, or where they would prepare Turkish coffee for their guests or where she would share, together with her father, mother and siblings a big jar of the *hoşmerim* sweet, traditionally on the occasion of receiving good news. I still remember the expressions on her face vividly when I was able to deliver all the food items requested a few weeks later. She also probably remembers mine as she offered to share all of the aforementioned food items with me. While sitting at her kitchen table, she continued talking about her imaginary journeys through her childhood kitchen with every bite, taste and smell of the various food items that I had brought for her from her homeland.

It is now broadly recognized within anthropology that diving into the study of food and foodways can be important to understand the ways in which people construct their identities of 'who they were' and 'who they are', given that foodways are deeply embedded in the personalities of individuals². The notion of foodways has been developed in both popular and academic writing to recapitulate everything that surrounds the act of eating, including what we consume, how we obtain it, who prepares it, where we consume it and which rituals are being performed as the food is being ingested. My research employs the term 'foodways' as a con-

¹ 'Kuru Kahveci Mehmet Efendi' is a famous Turkish coffee brand that started in 1871 as a small family business in Istanbul. (Source: www.mehmetefendi.com)

² Authors who have written on this include Lévi-Strauss (1964), Douglas (1984, 2002), Bourdieu (1984), Caplan (1994), Mintz (1996), Goddard, (1996), Bell & Valentine (1997), Counihan & van Esterik (1997), Sutton (2001), Mintz & Du Bois (2002), Weller & Turkon (2015)

cept primarily, based upon the ideas of De La Pena & Lawrance (2011), as it offers “a window into our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves” and reflects “[o]ur attitudes, practices, and rituals around food” (Harris, Lyon, & McLaughlin, 2005). A focus on the ways and means in which the role of food interacts in the framework of migration is something that deserves much more scholarly attention than it receives; as “our understanding of the processes of migration itself can benefit from examining it through the lens of food and drink” (Janowski, 2012, p. 145). Insights regarding what is perceived as being tasty and what is not is determined according to culture and is an aspect of daily life that plays an essential role in identity construction in a migratory context. Despite being longstanding and indicative of a desire for continuity, taste and food practices more broadly are also subject to change (Opare-Obisaw, Fianu, & Awadzi, 2000, p. 145). While some migrants can hold fast to their original foodways, and the parenthetical post-migration developments, to resist change, others can also completely turn their backs on the native foodways, given that the act of migration can cause inevitable changes in food practices. We also have to keep in mind that food choices cannot be limited to the social and cultural contexts of either the home country or of the host country exclusively (Bouchet, 1995; Cook & Crang, 1996). As Moris (2008) notes, “I assume that food plays an important role in the creation and experience of identity of people on their own soil, as well as in the exploration and description of another culture” (Moris, 2008, p. 220). This holds true in my own contextual analysis of migration culture given that there exists a rupture between ‘home’ and host communities that proceeds through generations, even in terms of a narrativity that exceeds lived memory. These con-

ceptual notions, as well as that of foodways, are examined and localised in this work in the city of Ghent, Belgium.

First generation migrants are often comparatively very resistant to dietary changes in comparison with later generations. Based on Bourdieu’s theory of habitus, this resistance can be explained through the fact that individual taste is the result of a person’s primary capital, which includes factors such as one’s social status in the past, family and ancestors. Habitus is an orientation towards certain tastes, which is inherited, long lasting and sometimes even unconscious –it stems from the family context and it is not subject to change, even in the case of social and spacial mobility (Bourdieu, 1990). While this resistance has been analyzed in various ways, this article will primarily focus upon the role that memory plays in foodways, given that memory is particularly strongly connected to food (Sutton, 2001) and to identity construction (Counihan & van Esterik, 1997; Lévi-Strauss, 1964). Whether people stay in one place or wander from one place to another, food encapsulates many ways and means through which to remember the past, given that it bears a sensuous nature and has the potential to act as an influential mnemonic (Sutton, 2001). Using Fernandez’ concept of ‘returning to the whole’ (Fernandez, 1986), Sutton has stated that “the memory of taste and smell leads to the emotional effect and the sense of emotional and embodied plenitude” and in so doing has acknowledged that the past is embodied in the present through the act of consuming food (Sutton, 2001, p. 82). Food certainly has particular mnemonic qualities, given that it evokes memories of time, place and of belonging (Kravva, 2001, p. 141) and eating can be seen as being a “sensory point of entry into a web of sentiments, memories and

fantasies, which largely constitute the sense of identity” (Goddard, 1996, p. 213). In this context, the main aim of my research among the Turkish food diaspora in Ghent, Belgium was not simply to trace changes in their food practices, but instead to examine the ways in which their tastes are being transformed in the framework of food memories that are related to migration to and resettlement within Belgium. Bearing classical concepts of food as a signifier, classifier and identity builder squarely in mind (Bourdieu, 1984; Douglas, 2002; Lévi-Strauss, 1997), I was interested in the relationship between this alteration of taste, memory and the transformations that affect their individual and collective identities.

While investigating the role that homesickness plays in shaping the Turkish consumer society’s tastes and food preferences, my fieldwork experiences guided me to focus first and foremost upon memory’s influence and how it relates to my interlocutors’ migration histories. Memory can be consulted creatively by those who have left their homeland at a young age or who have close relatives who have experienced migration. These people have probably been subjected to multiple stories about the homeland as the ‘old country’ and might feel obliged to respect particular cultural and social forms, such as foodways, which they believe to have been derived from that homeland. However, when observed from up close, it can happen that they actually have no personal memory of that place to which they see themselves to be so entrenched. The children of parents who have migrated, and who were born in the host country, can feel themselves to be migrants at times. They can vacillate between one identity and another, given that they feel strongly connected to a place of which they have no personal memory or any experiential connection to at

all. According to Janowski (2012), all migrants are eventually exposed to different identities and to mixtures of identities to which they can aspire and from which they can borrow to construct a future identity. The ones that have moved at a young age, or who were born in a country other than that of their parents, can implement and adjust new ways more easily. In the case of food, their tastes are less shaped by native foodways and, therefore, they are more receptive to new tastes and to appreciations of different foods. However, this is not applicable for every individual as some are more constrained than others, as alluded to in the vignette provided at the outset. In the end, people vary, from individual to individual, in both their aspirations and in their capacity to take up the occasion to use food, alongside other dynamic cultural modes, in their distinctive identity construction. While some people cannot detach from memories that have been inherited from former generations, with a view to constructing their identity into the future, others easily discard these inherited memories and allow themselves to be receptive to the creation of new memories and experiences in their new surroundings and through which to construct a new identity. They can avail themselves of foodways as one such central dynamic available to them. The longing experienced by migrants, which is also imagined by their offspring rather surprisingly, can be explained through what Appadurai describes as ‘armchair’ nostalgia (1996). The memories they construct do not have to be experienced personally, but can be instead be heard through the grapevine. Migrants may appreciate memories of foodways that recall iconic narratives that symbolize history and identity, even though they themselves have not lived through this personally experienced past. This is also illustrated among my interlocutors in instances

in which some participants still preferred to build their identities on the basis of others' memories, particularly those who did not migrate themselves but who were rather born in Belgium and, therefore, do not have their own memories of the migration journey that their parents went through.

Setting the scene

The methodology used to gather the material for this article was determined by the nature of the scope of this research itself. The purpose of the research is to interpret the changing and continuing progression of the concept of foodways and the meanings given to the consumption that are derived from the consumers in the field themselves. I conducted my fieldwork in Ghent where at present approximately 20,000 people from Turkish provenance live. This means that for every twelve people you pass by while navigating the streets of Ghent, roughly one is of Turkish origin. I walked, shopped, ate, observed, cooked, and talked with 14 Turkish interlocutors (8= ♀, 6= ♂) from different migration backgrounds and of different ages during the development of this research project. While listening to numerous narratives on the topics of migration and of Turkish lifestyles in Ghent, I attentively tried to unravel the continuities and changes that are evident in the construction of their foodways while observing how food has been an important dynamic in the preservation and modification of a sense of 'Turkishness', throughout their odyssey from Turkey to Belgium. In the end, a variety of methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviews and general conversations were used to capture my informants' everyday lives. The focus on the symbolic meanings of consumption, in relation to consumer identity, requires that research be conducted not only in

the consumers' natural settings, but also at several sites that are dear to the participants themselves. By following the repertoire of Turkish food through Ghent physically, I conducted fieldwork in a wide variety of places and spaces: homes, shops, weekly market places and leisure sites, all patronized by Turkish entrepreneurs, such as festivals, wedding venues and restaurants.

“Returning to the whole” via food

The reaction that one of my participants gave to *zeytin* (olives) provides an entry point into this section, which concerns “the power of tangible everyday experiences to evoke the memories on which identities are formed” (Sutton, 2010). While Turkish migration history to Belgium is known primarily through its historical context of the discourse of ‘guest workers’, expatriates and students are amongst the most recent group of Turkish people in Belgium. Even though there is a differentiation, in terms of taste, between the earlier Turkish migrants and the newer Turkish population in Belgium, similarities in the foodways are immediate and remarkable. When I visited one of my participants for the first time at her home, I took with me as a gesture a tinned can of fresh olives, the *zeytin*, from Edremit —a district in Balıkesir, Turkey where my parents hail from. My parents, in their turn, had brought a couple of huge cans to me when they had travelled by car to Turkey and back that summer. I could not possibly have imagined her response to this small gesture, as I still remember vividly her first reaction on the tin can of olives. “*Saliha, nasıl oldu da bu tatları bırakıp buralara geldim?*” [Why have I left these tastes behind me to come to here?]. Eda is a 22-year old language student who had moved from Izmir to Ghent, a city in which she hopes to continue

her university education after finishing her language training. The ideal situation would be in which she would move up the academic career ladder and would continue to live and to work in Belgium. Her parents moved back to Turkey in 1999, after having raised enough money in Belgium to carry out their business ambitions in their hometown. Eda was around 5 years old then; neither she nor her parents could have ever imagined that she would migrate back to Belgium to continue her education, given that she got very used to their new environment in Turkey. When I met her for the first time, she had just moved to Ghent from Antwerp after having decided that Ghent University was the place to pursue her goal of language acquisition, after experiencing some unpleasantness at the language training courses in Antwerp. Retrospectively, this kind of a trajectory suited my research well as she began to rattle off, almost automatically, how she arrived in Ghent, what she had experienced while in Antwerp and how her homesickness impacted upon her education. It was the first time that I observed someone being so intrigued by a food item. She lifted the can to eye height, examining the olives one by one—which were lined up in a mix of olive oil, corn oil and water—as though they were diamonds. She then opened the can carefully, fished one particularly olive out of the treasure chest she just discovered and tasted it immediately after first offering one to me too. “It really tastes like Turkey”, she said to me with a clear longing in her voice. At first I thought that she had not encountered the multiple Turkish supermarkets dotted throughout the city, at which you can buy different brands, sizes and colors of Turkish olives. However, as the conversation continued I understood that she actually had tried out different brands of canned olives from the Turkish supermarket but couldn’t find the

taste she just experienced with the fresh ones I had given her. Ferda Erdinc’s statement that “taste memory travels with you in such a way that awareness of it is usually discovered in the absence of that taste in real life” (2001, p. 93) is valid for people on the move, including Eda, who did not expect to miss fresh Turkish olives quite so much. She tries to bring fresh olives with her every time upon returning from her holidays in Turkey but they often run out quickly. However, Eda is certainly not the first consumer of Turkish provenance in Belgium to long for food items from Turkey; this longing has an historical antecedent as the following section aims to demonstrate.

‘Vivre et Travailler en Belgique’

In 1964, the brochure titled ‘*Vivre et Travailler en Belgique*’ (Living and Working in Belgium) was distributed in Turkey for the first time. The brochure’s fourteen pages sought to convince the Mediterranean guest workers to opt for Belgium instead of a neighboring country, given that different European cities were struggling with severe staff shortages, the city of Ghent particularly. In May 1964, the first thirty-five Turkish workers, transferred by bus, arrived in Belgium. There is a legend that this first group of guest workers from Turkey, who fired the starter’s pistol for the rescue of the Belgian economy, were received by King Baudouin himself as well as with festive events held throughout Brussels. While they had said goodbye to their family and friends with a huge farewell dinner in their home villages in Turkey, they were welcomed by a bottle of Coca-Cola, with a straw in it, in their hands. Ahmet, a factory laborer in his mid-forties, claimed that his uncle was one of those first group’s members and he still thinks of this event every time he sees anything related to the Coca-Cola

brand. “Maybe we shouldn’t have given up warm Turkish tea for cold Coca-Cola”, Ahmet recapitulates at the end of one of our interviews concerning how his migration trajectory changed him as he moved from Turkey to Belgium, while taking a long sip of his Turkish tea.

Upon their arrival, Turkish guest workers found their way to the different factories in Ghent in which they did not earn very good money for their hard labour. Food consumption became a big issue almost immediately, given that they had to cook for themselves for the first time in their lives because of the lack of female kin in the group. They would survive on canned soup alone, for years sometimes. Some evenings after work, if the time permitted, they would walk quickly to the fast-food shop, located at Sint-Jacobs in the city center named ‘*Bij Sint-Jacobs*’ (At Sint-Jacobs). This famous shop is in the meantime taken over by Bayram (35), Sükrü (33) and Selim (19) Kirer, three citizens of Ghent with Turkish roots. People drive there all the way from the Netherlands to Ghent, for their stew particularly. Sükrü is especially proud to run the place in which his father, and their other friends, filled their tummies while longing for their family, friends and those Turkish tastes that they had left behind in their homeland. This is the main reason behind how he convinced his brothers to take over this particular Belgian place, rather than another Turkish kebab shop that they had considered initially. His father still shares memories from his first years in Belgium while at the dinner table; this is quite apposite as the first guest workers struggled with food-related issues, as I have stated above, as well as issues of housing. He remembers enthusiastically how he would look forward to some weekends, as the men would plan to gather and to cook simple Turkish recipes, to

sate their hunger and to keep their longing at bay, well in advance. One of my other informant’s elderly father lives together with her and her family under the same roof. Hülya, who is a 42-year old professional sewer, still prepares *menemen* for him almost every weekend — *menemen* is Turkish-style scrambled eggs with chopped onions, tomatoes and sliced green peppers— as her father used to prepare this every fortnight for all of the male guest workers with whom he stayed when he first arrived in Belgium; over time this foodway had become a ritualized circuit for him. And even though his daughter doesn’t have any experience of the meaning of the foodway, or has no memory of the guest workers, she is still able to participate, aid and abet in the narrative memorised experience. When her father heard us speaking about this, he immediately joined the conversation from the other corner of the room, and said carefully: “*My daughter cooks wonderfully, even better than her mother*” to honour her, “*but you know the taste of the menemen was different those days; I think it had to do with the longing for the homeland. We prepared the menemen with such a longing that you could practically taste the sadness in the menemen. Nowadays, we still long for the homeland but luckily we’re together with our family members.*”

Another business, the butcher shop named ‘*Zwaenepoel*’ —still located at the ‘*Donkersteeg*’ in the city center of Ghent—, was a popular location for the Turkish diaspora for years, as halal butchers did not exist in Belgium at the time when the guest workers arrived. It was nicknamed “the Jew”, because the shop only sold lamb as their specialty. After all, and according to members of the Turkish diaspora, a butcher who was not fond of the pig could not be Belgian. When the first male guest workers

arrived in Belgium in 1964, they were very suspicious towards food, given that they did not know what and where to eat, what to buy or even how to prepare it; their wives had always cooked for them. There was a suspicion towards pork meat especially, as their friends, family and relatives who had stayed behind had mocked them while bidding them farewell with rhetorical phrases such as: “*Are you going to Europe to eat pork meat there?*” This is also the basic reason why the first Turkish migrants would empty out the big pots of soup their Belgian neighbors would prepare for them, once out of sight, given that they could not trust the soup’s ingredients. Nuran *teyze*³ and Hasan *amca*⁴, a retired couple with whom I conducted fieldwork, still love to walk through the city center, by the few Belgian shops in which they used to shop for similar Turkish ingredients before the first Turkish shops opened throughout the city. ‘Tastes the same as at home’; this one-liner is part of an advertisement that decorates the window of a Turkish restaurant they walked by. It describes the multifaceted relationship between food, (be-)longing and Turkish people on the move vividly. It tries to attract the passer-by, particularly people of Turkish provenance, and promises the possibility of being at home in the host society through the consumption of familiar tastes, brands and sensorial landscapes. This attraction is similar in so many ways, and throughout so many periods, of the promise of the possibility of collapsing the space time distinction by way of an identical, irreducible taste experience. Entrepreneurial minds were well aware of the economic potential the complex cultures and emotions of this diasporic population pos-

³ Teyze: a familiar designation to an older woman

⁴ Amca: a familiar designation to an older man

essed and when the myth of return weakened, they found themselves in the midst of what was coined as the ‘homesickness economy’ or the ‘nostalgia economy’ (Brightwell, 2012). The economies are niche sectors in which Turkish entrepreneurs provide particular services and goods for Turkish consumers by way of an appeal to their feelings of homesickness.

Narrated glimpses of the shared Turkish taste

Luckily for the Turkish guest workers, Belgium had a different Turkish migration history than that of other European countries, given that it was the only country that allowed guest workers to reunite with their families, following the signing of the bilateral agreements between Turkey and Belgium in 1964. The myth of return meant that some men procrastinated over whether they would apply for family reunification or not. However, after the first applications were made it took about three to six months before the procedure was completed and families were united, and before wives could be back in charge and take the helm of all matters relating to food. The men warned their wives about the lack of products prior to their arrival to Belgium. The women who were going to reunite with their husbands in Belgium were mindful of this deficiency and prepared for weeks before they would travel, by the same transport vehicles that their husbands had taken for the first time. As there were no weight restrictions per kilogram of luggage, the women and the children carried multiple bags with clothes but, above all food. A few of my

interlocutors, who remember having taken the first bus or train to Belgium, told me the stories of the multiple smells of sausages and spices that surrounded them in the train once on the move. Of course, not everyone's wife could come as quickly as they were desired, due to circumstances ranging from incomplete travel papers to a sick family member that they first had to take care of. This meant that the first women who arrived to Ghent, for example, had to cook for the whole neighborhood practically, given that the men would live in little compounds near the factory at which they worked. Ayse teyze, who is in her late fifties, still does not like receiving big groups of guests for dinner, given how much she started to hate cooking dating back to that time and during which she would stand cooking for approximately 7-8 hours a day in the kitchen. When the men left for work in the morning, the Turkish women in the neighborhood would arrive and start cooking for everyone together.

Even though they had brought a great deal of food items, around half of it became spoiled on their way and the other half that made it ran out quickly or was destroyed. For this reason, they had to find new food ingredients. The newly arrived settlers were very lucky in that the host society members were also very curious about them and sought to help them in any way that they could. Many narratives of solidarity were told by first generation men and women of Turkish provenance. Semra teyze told me about how her neighbor, Ann, took her, for the very first time, to the weekly market in order to buy fresh fruit and vegetables. Ayse told me about how she, her other siblings and their mother were very greatly surprised when they discovered, during their first couple of weeks, a pot of soup on their front door every evening waiting for them when they first

arrived in Ghent. Every member of the first generation of Turkish migrants in Ghent also remembers the friendship between the hairdresser Gilbert —nicknamed Zülbiye by the Turkish friends— and Veli — nicknamed Willie in his turn by his Belgian friends— who would share their meals at the same table almost every night (De Gendt, 2015).

While some enjoyed the companionship of their Belgian neighbors very much, others did not intend to socialize with their new neighbors. The biggest reason for this can be found in the homesickness and sadness felt at being away from home. These 'isolationists' did not want to have any contact with Belgians and segregated themselves within the boundary of their own Turkish circle. As a group, they would perceive Belgium to be a country in which they would save money to return to Turkey and did not plan to live there very long. In fact, most of them did eventually decide to stay in Belgium, bought houses and their children have integrated into Belgian society. Mecit, a 56-year old translator, came to Belgium in 1977, and for all of those intervening years he did not like even one Belgian meal that he tried. His wife, who is Belgian, was very surprised when she prepared '*mercimek çorbasi*' (lentil soup) for him and which they ate for a few days, but when they went out on restaurant he would once again order '*mercimek çorbasi*' as starter. He himself is not able to answer the question as to why this monotony is not boring for him. This is an example of the cultural, habitual and archetypal nature of taste as something not constructed or figured out, but as something deeply coded in the very essence of self. According to Mecit, his mother would prepare this soup regularly and when he does have the choice he always chooses for this specific soup as the smell and taste coincide

with a lot of memories that he would not experience regularly otherwise.

The few international Turkish students that I have included in my ethnographic fieldwork still share the idea of the ‘superior Turkish taste’, but they are more ‘open’ towards the host society and have experienced more or less significant taste transformations since their settling in Belgium. Although they consider local fruits and vegetables to be tasteless, they are less expensive or freely accessible to them than in Turkey. For instance, they tried exotic fruits such as passionfruit, pineapple and lychees for the first time in Belgium, and which were too expensive for them to buy in Turkey. The cultural shock of the initial enculturation was combined with the fact that some of these young people were supposed to cook for themselves for the very first time in their lives. The stages they went through can be compared to the experiences of the first guest workers when they came to Belgium. In Turkey, cooking was their mother’s task. So, in the beginning (for a period of several months and up to one year) they used to live on Belgian fries, spaghetti and more simple Turkish meals, constantly asking their mothers how to prepare a certain Turkish meal that they longed for over the phone.

Elif, a doctoral student in Belgium, lives near the Dampoort area in Ghent in which many Turkish grocery shops, bakeries, restaurants and butchers are situated. Although she wants to rent a flat near her office in a quiet neighborhood in the long term, she is happy to have rented her first flat near the Turkish street. In the morning she can buy a piece of fresh *börek*

(a general name for filled pastries in various shapes) in the Turkish bakery around the corner. In the evening she can shop at her Turkish supermarket before entering her flat located on the same street. She was surprised when a friend, visiting from Turkey, commented while passing by a branch of *Simit Sarayı*⁵ in the city of Antwerp; “*Oh no! Did they also come to here?*” with a mocking voice. “*Well, when you’re far away from home you actually appreciate these kinds of places that remember tastes and landscapes from home*”, was her reaction to the derisive comment. After a few days of eating at different places, such as Pizza Hut (American pizza chain) and Panos (Belgian bakery chain), her friend asked at a particular moment whether she knew a good Turkish place as she craved *kıymalı pide* (*pide* is Turkish pizza with minced meat). They did not have to go far as she knew a good place that had satiated a similar craving she herself had had many times, just across the street from where she lived.

Turkish restaurants are crucial for the marketization of the national cuisine. Eating out is the main characteristic of urban culture; restaurants are not only economic phenomena, they are important social places, institutions —some authors even consider them to be a type of mass media (Girardelli, 2004, p. 311). The mediating function of ‘foreign’ restaurants has intensified; they often act as mediators between ‘our’ and ‘their’ cultures. By selling ‘authenticity’, Turkish restaurants confirm the image of Turkish food as both ‘ethnic’ and ‘exotic’. There is a considerable number of Turkish restaurants in Ghent and, as a rule, they are cheaper

⁵ Simit Sarayı is a Turkish brand, which opened its first store in Istanbul in 2002. In the meantime it employs over 6,500 people worldwide and has outlets in countries including Belgium, the U.K., Germany and the Netherlands. (Source: www.simitsarayi.com)

than Belgian restaurants. While some of my participants travel to Brussels for better classic *pideciler* especially (restaurants specialized in *pide*), or Antwerp for posh Turkish restaurants such as Seven Hills or Fincan, most of them are quite satisfied with the ones in Ghent;

“The restaurants in Ghent are the places where I have always eaten with family and friends. I have the most memories here in Ghent. We ate at restaurant Gök 2 to celebrate the birth of my first daughter. We came together for bayram (religious festivity) in restaurant Gülhan with the whole family. We celebrate our wedding anniversary with my wife in restaurant Ankara every year, as she likes that place the most. We once went to Seven Hill to celebrate it and although the food was great, it was too posh, we didn’t feel comfortable and we had to pay a high bill, so that was the first and last time. And besides authentic food, if it is expensive, it cannot be authentic in my eyes. But, perhaps most importantly, I don’t only go to the restaurants in Ghent for the food and accustomedness. I have a higher chance to see someone I know and talk to them than when I go to Brussels. Social life and spending time outside the house is quite limited in Ghent in comparison to Turkey where people are constantly eating out and seeing relatives to talk to.”

Yavuz, 38-years old, Ghent

In the beginning, when phones were not available, one of my interlocutors—who is now a renowned doctor in Ghent— would write a letter to his mother in which he would ask for a certain recipe and when his mother would eventually write back to him, a month or so later, he would try the recipe many times until he was able to prepare the dish in exactly the

same way as she had done. He is in charge, not his wife, when Belgian friends come over for dinner as he can cook perfectly Turkish in the meantime;

“In some way I revive my Turkish past every day with the tastes I experience in my kitchen. You can’t eat out every day and besides where can you find true authentic Turkish food these days? The pides are called Turkish pizzas on the menus to sound familiar to Belgian customers, which I find very disturbing. It’s a joy for me to use my cooking skills to promote the real Turkish culture via original Turkish food. I don’t exclude the Belgian tastes from my kitchen, I rather prefer to mix some Belgian ingredients in my Turkish dishes. I had my best conversations with visiting guests when unexpected tastes lead to discussions about history, different cultures and migration.

Ercan, 46-years old, Ghent

These days any recipe is available on the internet with a simple click. Beyhan Ağırdağ once stood behind the kitchen counter of her husband's kebab shop, but today the famous Belgian-Turkish cook has more followers than the popular Belgian cook Jeroen Meus on the social networking site Instagram⁶. Beyhan shares her Turkish recipes in Turkish as well as in Dutch, given that her fan base is not only limited to Turkish, but also Belgian fans—of whom there are 164,000 to be precise. Ağırdağ considers the native Belgians more open towards different tastes, compared to the members of the Turkish diaspora. She heard accounts of Belgian spouses showing their wives her latest posts on Instagram and asking whether she could prepare that for dinner. “We unfortu-

⁶ Instagram-account: MUTFAKTAYIM_B (Source: https://www.instagram.com/mutfaktayim_b/)

nately only introduced döner kebab to Belgium, while we have so much more to promote in the Turkish food culture”, she commented in a recent newspaper article⁷. She obviously saw the kitchen, in which a lot of Turkish women still spend quite some time, as being an important cultural communication space.

Some cases of the gradual acceptance of Belgian food products, initially considered not to be tasty, were also registered during my fieldwork. For example, when Hatice’s father was given salmon fish with ‘*stoemp*’ (mashed potatoes), steamed asparagus and broccoli for the very first time, a regional Belgian dish, at the restaurant of the factory at which he worked, he couldn’t forget the dish’s disgusting taste in the days that followed. Since then though, he has gotten so used to it that every Friday evening his wife prepares this dish with the fresh fish that he buys that same morning at the weekly fish market.

On the whole, after a certain period of time (which differs among individuals), immigrants start eating Belgian food in the light of the new circumstances in which they find themselves. For an example of this one needs only to think of the Belgian fries that have become very well integrated into the Turkish food habits; even kebab shops add a portion of fries to their döner, as now it is simply something that customers cannot do without. However, a lot of my respondents tell every now and then about being nutritionally homesick. They miss certain food items and associate the image of their home country with the smell and the taste of fresh bread, traditional pastry and their other favorite products and dishes. Sutton calls this the “burning desire that is satiated through a

sensory experience, evoking local knowledge” (Sutton, 2001, p. 81).

In the mid-sixties, when there were not any Turkish grocery shops or supermarkets at all, women went looking for the ‘original taste’ specifically and bought various food items in different shops –white cheese from the Greeks, spices from the Balkan shops, vegetables and fruits from the Italian shops. There was a time that there were no eggplants to be found anywhere in Ghent. A list of food orders would be given to Ahmet’s father, and he would ride with a friend in a minivan to Brussels to pick up the orders at different locations. It often happened that when someone discovered an original Turkish product or found a rare vegetable somewhere in Ghent, there was an informal understanding that he or she would share this information far and wide. This is the case up to this day. Friends share information about where to go in order to find the most suitable products, such as when the first watermelons are displayed at the grocery shop of Osman in the Rabot area during the summer period or when the first ‘*dolmalık biber*’ (green pepper) is displayed to make ‘*dolma*’ (stuffed vegetables) during the spring period.

With the opening of multiple Turkish shops and supermarkets, it is conceivable that the importation of foods from Turkey has slowed or ground to a halt. Nothing could be further than the truth in fact. This is due to the fact most families still travel to Turkey by car and do not have weight limitations on their luggage, as was the case initially on busses or later on airplanes. For many respondents, the desire for native products has not diminished over time. This could be because, in Sutton’s words,

⁷ Source: <http://www.haberler.com/beyhan-agirdag-belcika-ya-sadece-kebab-tanitmisiz-7864635-haberi/>

“eating food from home becomes a particularly marked cultural site for the re-imagining of ‘worlds’ displaced in space and/or in time” (Sutton, 2001, p. 84). In the first years after their arrival to Belgium, and because of the process of adaptation, they felt the lack of their home cuisine more profoundly, but the ingredients were not available to them: “In time, sooner or later, you give up and adapt to cooking with local products.” Nuran teyze and her husband came to Oostrozebeek, near Kortrijk, where her husband started working at the textile factory before they moved to Ghent. This retired couple feel themselves to be among the luckiest of the first generation as one of the cooks who worked at the factory’s kitchen himself was of Turkish provenance and knew the taste palate of the majority of the factory workers. As there were no shops nearby, the director of the factory also arranged for his employees, who lived on site, for a greengrocer to pass by to deliver fresh vegetables to their house every week. Nuran teyze remembers the weekly grocery delivery right to their door as being one of the sole events that she looked forward to as it reminded her of Yavuz amca. Yavuz, she told me, used to own the grocery shop under their house in Kesan/Edirne when she was a young girl. She would not even have to leave the house when they needed any groceries. Instead, she would shout out of the window, lower out a basket made of reed tied with a string, and he would fill the basket with the groceries down there. The weekly home delivery put her in mind of Yavuz amca, her house, her street, her friends, the kitchen, everything that she had left behind. I collected parts of her ‘patchy’ pre- and post-migration story during different fieldwork sessions at her house, during restaurant visits or when we gathered with other friends and interlocutors, but mostly when we walked around and did

some shopping at the artery of the Turkish neighborhoods in Ghent. I eventually came to understand that after 38 years she actually had gotten very used to Belgium and all its aspects. Her husband, her children and grandchildren were all located in Ghent and the surrounding area. Every once in a while she would ask her Belgian daughter-in-law to drive her to the weekly Sunday market, located in the North of Ghent at the ‘Van Beverenplein’, to shop for fresh fruits and vegetables, just as she had done in Turkey and would see some friends to talk to, as the majority of the visitors of the market are of Turkish provenance.

Conclusion

Like all anthropological research, this study does not aim to give a solid picture, nor does it pretend to represent all the experiences of every member of the Turkish food diaspora throughout Belgium at all times and in every space. It is not based on a large quantitative sample, but instead has the aim of presenting declarative first person statements stemming from individual migration histories. To that end, it is based on qualitative research and dives deep into the lives of several dozen individuals, and their parenthetical private and public spaces, and with whom I have spent a great deal of time over the scope of my doctoral research. Many storytellers have shared their past, present and future stories with me, fulfilling the role of the anthropologist and that of a story-seeking listener. While listening to these memories, feelings, aspirations and observing in as focused a manner as possible, I tried to add meanings to their actions in the pursuit of upgrading from ‘thin to thick description, from twitching to winking’ in Geertz’s words (1972).

The general goal of this paper has been to offer narrated portraits of the interconnection of migration, food and memory. Because of the emotional, sensory and mnemonic effects of the consumption of native food, carrying food items from Turkey or obtaining them in Belgium has always been crucial for immigrants' nutritional practices. Their constant search for the 'original taste' evokes 'returning to the whole' experiences of different strength and depth. The relationship they have with the distinctive Turkish taste in food and Turkish foodways can be interpreted as a form of belonging to Ghent with roots in Turkey. This is achieved through a shared taste revived with – imagined or otherwise – specific memories of migration of both people and food. Eating is a crucial part of both cultural contexts the migrants are living in. Their constant transition between here and there, living here and dreaming of there, not knowing for sure where home is, is encoded in their food preferences and practices. Even when trying to suppress them for the sake of blending in, they are still there. Recalling native taste preferences in relation to food memories from the (imagined) past served as a practical strategy for belonging and longing for the homeland. At the same time it supported migrants and their offspring in their present and future identity construction.

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