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# Sommelier INDIA

## THE WINE MAGAZINE

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# ISTANBUL BETWEEN MINARETS AND VINEYARDS

**A city shaped by centuries of cultural exchange**

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INDIA'S PREMIER WINE MAGAZINE | 22ND SUCCESSFUL YEAR | CONTROLLED CIRCULATION

# ISTANBUL

## Between Minarets and Vineyards



Istanbul's historic skyline rises above the Bosphorus, a reminder that this city has long stood at the crossroads of continents, cultures and commerce

From Byzantine basilicas and Ottoman palaces to hidden wine bars and ancient vineyards, Istanbul is a city shaped by centuries of cultural exchange. One of the world's great crossroads, Michèle Shah explores its layered history through food, architecture and wine

Few cities in the world possess the magnetic allure of Istanbul — a city suspended between Europe and Asia, where continents, cultures, religions and empires have intertwined for more than two millennia. Romantic, chaotic and endlessly layered, Istanbul remains one of the world's great crossroads, shaped by Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, Armenians, Jews, Levantines and generations of traders and travellers drawn to its shores. This remarkable fusion of influences gives the city its incomparable soul.

Its skyline, punctuated by domes and minarets, is among the most breathtaking anywhere in the world. The magnificent Blue Mosque, with its six slender minarets and cascading domes, remains one of Istanbul's great icons, while the majestic Hagia Sophia — once a Byzantine cathedral and later an imperial mosque — perfectly embodies the city's layered identity. Nearby, the elegant Süleymaniye Mosque, designed by the legendary architect Mimar Sinan, rises serenely above the Golden Horn, offering sweeping views across the Bosphorus and the city beyond.

Yet Istanbul is experienced not only through its monuments, but through its atmosphere, flavours and rituals of hospitality. Turkish cuisine is among the richest and most seductive in the world — a tapestry woven from Anatolian, Ottoman, Mediterranean, Balkan and Middle Eastern influences. In Istanbul, food is inseparable from conviviality and daily life. Long breakfasts unfold around tables laden with olives, local cheeses, honey, pastries, tomatoes and endless glasses of strong black tea served in tulip-shaped glasses.

The city's culinary culture stretches far beyond kebabs to vibrant meze, charcoal-grilled fish, fragrant spices, slow-cooked meats and syrup-soaked desserts that reflect centuries of imperial trade routes and cultural exchange. Along the Bosphorus, seafood restaurants serve freshly grilled fish accompanied by *raki*, the country's traditional anise-scented spirit, while hidden neighbourhood *lokantas* preserve recipes passed down through generations.

What many visitors discover only later is that Turkey also possesses one of the world's oldest wine cultures. Anatolia is widely considered among the original birthplaces of viticulture, with evidence of winemaking dating back more than 6,000 years. Today, the country still has one of the world's largest vineyard surfaces, although only a relatively small proportion is used for wine production. While

modern Turkey is predominantly Muslim and wine occupies a more discreet place in contemporary society, viticulture has never disappeared from Anatolian culture.

What makes Turkish wine particularly fascinating is its extraordinary wealth of indigenous grape varieties, many of which exist nowhere else in the world. Among the most important reds are Öküzgözü, Bogazkere, Kalecik Karası and Papazkarası, while Narince and Emir rank among the country's finest white grapes.

Over the past two decades, a new generation of ambitious producers has helped transform modern Turkish wine, investing in quality viticulture, lower yields and the rediscovery of native grapes and historic terroirs. Across neighbourhoods such as Karaköy, Galata and Beyoglu, contemporary wine bars and restaurants are quietly reviving this remarkable heritage, pairing Turkish wines with regional cuisine in ways that feel both deeply historical and distinctly modern.

Make time to visit the magnificent Topkapı Palace, former residence of the Ottoman sultans overlooking the Bosphorus. Wandering through its lavish courtyards, treasury and secluded harem offers a fascinating glimpse into the opulence and intrigue of the imperial court, while its terraces reveal some of Istanbul's most spectacular panoramas.

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Beneath the city lies an altogether different world. The Basilica Cistern, built in the 6th century during the reign of Emperor Justinian, is a vast subterranean forest of marble columns rising from still, dimly lit waters, including the enigmatic Medusa head inverted beneath a column base. It's origin and meaning still shrouded in mystery, offers a haunting, almost cinematic counterpoint to the brilliance and grandeur of the world above.

The experience of Istanbul is equally defined by its spaces of ritual and restoration. One of my most memorable moments was visiting the Kılıç Ali Pasa Hamamı, a beautifully restored 16th-century Ottoman bathhouse tucked away in the lively Tophane district. Designed by Mimar Sinan, the hammam is an architectural masterpiece of soaring domes, warm marble and softly filtered light. Beyond its beauty and history, what lingers most is its atmosphere — calming, elegant and deeply restorative. Reclining beneath the vast dome, listening to the gentle sound of flowing water, creates an almost meditative stillness within the city's constant energy.

No visit to Istanbul would be complete without wandering through the city's historic bazaars. The Grand Bazaar remains a mesmerising labyrinth of passageways filled



Kılıç Ali Paşa Hamamı, a beautifully restored 16th-century Ottoman bathhouse in the lively Tophane district

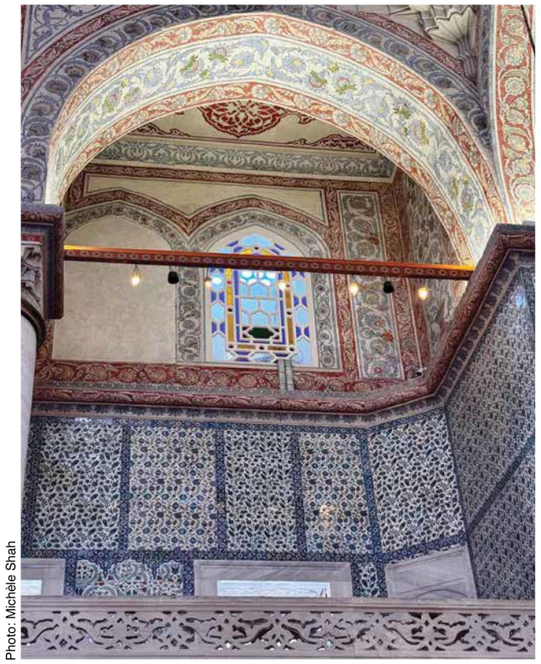


Photo: Michèle Shah

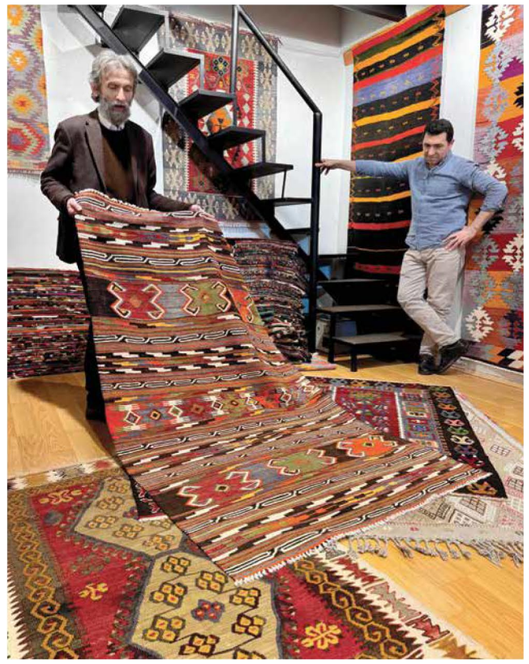


Photo: Michèle Shah

Beyond its grand monuments and ornate interiors to bustling shops and the cats that seem to rule the city, Istanbul blends grandeur and intimacy. Above: Inside the Blue Mosque; right: Recep Karaduman Kilims & Carpets at Hikmet Sirlak Grand Bazaar

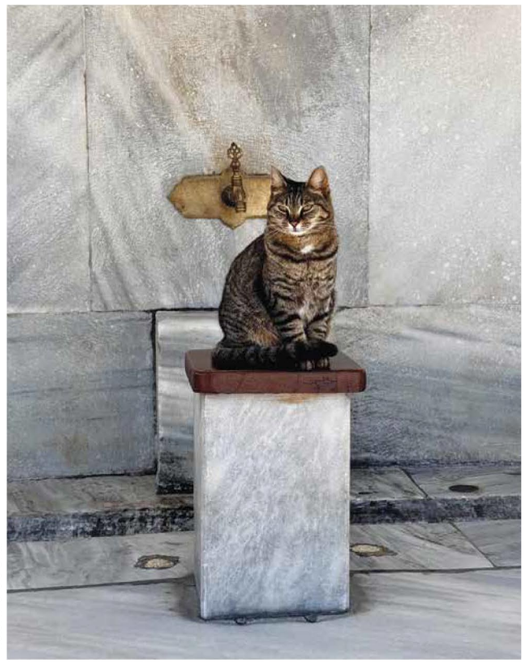
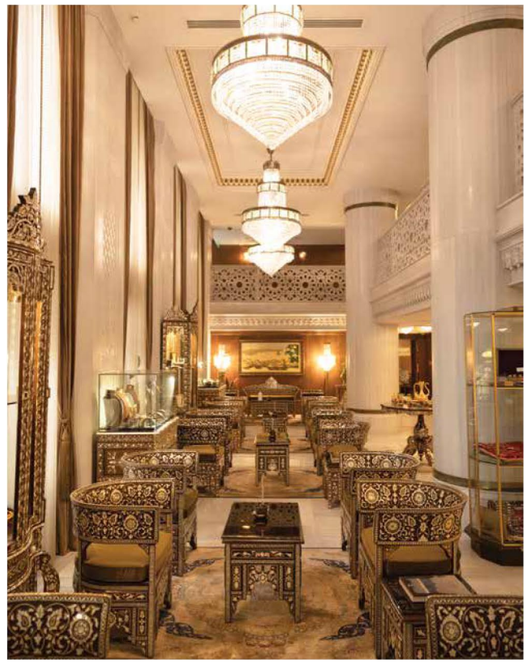


Photo: Michèle Shah



Photographs by: Michèle Shah





From the sweetness of Turkish pastries and the enigmatic Medusa head in the Basilica Cistern to the meditative whirl of the dervishes and the aroma of sesame-crusted bread rings, Istanbul reveals itself through its flavours, history and living traditions







with carpets, ceramics, lanterns, antiques and textiles, while the nearby Spice Bazaar intoxicates the senses with saffron, cinnamon, Turkish delight and freshly ground coffee.

Hidden within the Grand Bazaar, Recep Karaduman Kilims & Carpets has become one of Istanbul's most authentic destinations for antique and vintage Anatolian kilims. Since the early 1980s, Hikmet Sirlak has travelled through rural Anatolia searching for handwoven pieces created by nomadic and village families for their own homes rather than for the commercial market. Woven with hand-spun wool and natural dyes, each kilim carries the memory of a place, a family and a disappearing way of life.

What makes the experience so distinctive is Hikmet Sirlak's complete absence of salesmanship. Visitors are invited simply to browse, sit quietly over tea or Turkish coffee and absorb the atmosphere. According to Hikmet, "the kilim finds you, even if you are not looking for a carpet." Those wandering the bazaar without any intention of buying often leave having discovered something extraordinary.

**Hidden within the Grand Bazaar, Recep Karaduman Kilims & Carpets has become one of Istanbul's most authentic destinations for antique and vintage Anatolian kilims**

Choosing the right place to stay in Istanbul is equally important, particularly in a city so rich in atmosphere and history. For travellers wanting to immerse themselves in the heart of old Istanbul, Ajwa Hotel Sultanahmet offers one of the city's most refined and peaceful stays. Blending Ottoman elegance with warm Turkish hospitality, the hotel combines exceptional service, serene comfort and an ideal location within walking distance of the city's major historic landmarks. Its rooftop restaurant, overlooking the city's domes, minarets and waterways, is also one of the most memorable places to begin the day with an exceptionally rich and delicious breakfast.

Ajwa Hotel also houses a small boutique of the remarkable Verni Art Salon, though it is worth visiting the gallery's impressive three-storey building nearby in Sultanahmet. Housed in a beautifully restored Ottoman-era depot, the space feels closer to a private museum than a commercial gallery, with antique carpets, handwoven textiles, mother-of-pearl furniture and rare decorative objects reflecting the artistic heritage of Turkey and Azerbaijan.

For a deeper immersion into Istanbul's spiritual traditions, an evening at the Hodjapasha Cultural Center to witness the Whirling Dervishes ceremony is an unforgettable experience. Performed within a restored Ottoman hammam, the ceremony becomes far more than spectacle — evolving into a hypnotic ritual of movement, music and devotion.

Istanbul also rewards those willing to explore its contrasting neighbourhoods. On the elegant Beyoglu side of the city, a visit to the Pera Palace Hotel for afternoon tea or evening cocktails offers a step back into the golden age of travel. Built in 1892 for passengers arriving aboard the Orient Express, the hotel still exudes old-world glamour.

Nearby, the lively Karaköy and Galata districts reveal a more contemporary face of Istanbul, where restored historic buildings stand beside stylish cafés, galleries, wine bars and creative spaces. One of the area's culinary highlights is Karaköy Lokantası, celebrated for its refined interpretation of traditional Turkish cuisine in a vibrant yet relaxed setting.

Yet perhaps the greatest luxury when visiting a city as layered and overwhelming as Istanbul is having a guide who understands not only its monuments, but also its rhythm, hidden corners and untold stories.

No one embodied this better than our guide, Kahraman, whose extraordinary passion and deep knowledge opened the door to countless hidden details and places we would otherwise never have discovered. Thanks to him, the journey became something of a treasure hunt through the soul of the city itself — unfolding



Photo: Michèle Shah

Looking out to Bosphorus across the domes of the Suleymaniye Mosque

**No experiencwe of Istanbul is complete without time on the Bosphorus, the shimmering strait that divides Europe from Asia while binding the city together**

slowly through stories, encounters and unexpected layers of history.

No experience of Istanbul is complete without time on the Bosphorus, the shimmering strait that divides Europe from Asia while binding the city together. A leisurely cruise reveals Ottoman palaces, elegant wooden yali mansions, grand mosques and waterfront neighbourhoods unfolding on both shores, offering Istanbul at its most poetic and unifying.

From the water, the city no longer feels divided at all — but instead like a single living landscape, shaped by currents, memory and light.❖

## IF YOU GO

**Guide:**
Mr Kahraman: kahramankevs1990@gmail.com

**Hotel:**
https://www.ajwa.com.tr/
https://www.perapalace.com/en

**Restaurants:**
https://www.karakoylokantasi.com/
https://www.surbalik.com/en/sarayburnu

**Food**
**Pastries:**
https://www.karakoygulluoglu.com/en/

**Simit:** a sesame-crusted bread ring, eaten on the go, often with tea

**Balık ekmek:** a grilled fish sandwich, typically sold along the waterfront (especially Eminönü)

**Hamam**
https://www.kilicalipasahamami.com/

**Grand Bazaar Kilims**
http://www.recepkaraduman.com

**Whirling Dervishes Cultural Centre**
https://www.hodjapasha.com/en/