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To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07256868.2013.807228

Published online: 15 Aug 2013.

Article views: 349

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Globalised Cuisine, Non-National Identities and the Individual: Staging Turkishness in Turkish-Speaking Restaurants in London

Defne Karaosmanoglu

This study looks at the means through which the image of Turkish cuisine in London is constructed in Turkish-speaking restaurants aiming to appeal to the greatest number of customers as possible. It intends to understand the ways that restaurateurs stage a particular type of Turkishness while trying to manage their businesses. This research entails an analysis of 25 restaurant spaces, their exterior and interior decor, menu and food, and 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with restaurateurs, managers and chefs. In this article, I argue that Turkish cuisine is defined not necessarily by turning difference into a marketable commodity, but by turning it into a familiar global product. Therefore, an emphasis on ethnicity can be a drawback to business. Turkish-speaking restaurateurs claim business success through a uniform, standard and modern world cuisine. Moreover, restaurateurs’ primary identity is mostly constructed through their relations to business as ‘global entrepreneurs’.

Keywords: Cultural Identity; National Identity; Food; Turkish Cuisine; Culinary Nationalism; Ethnic Entrepreneurship; Commodifying Ethnicity; Standardisation; Transnationalism

Restaurants are more than simply public eating or consumption places. They are also sites where ideas about identity and culture are produced, symbolised, communicated and performed in sensual and local as well as symbolic and global ways. Restaurants...
have become symbols that represent the spirit of cities, regions, nations and ethnic groups (Beriss and Sutton 2007: 1). In other words, a sense of national or ethnic identity or the idea of a nation or ethnicity has been reinforced by culinary means and restaurants can be seen as venues to express identity and culture. This study looks at the means through which the image of Turkish cuisine in London is constructed in Turkish-speaking (a term which is used to refer to Turkish Cypriots, and Turkish and Kurdish immigrants from Turkey) restaurants aiming to appeal to the greatest number of customers as possible. It intends to understand the ways that restaurateurs stage a particular type of Turkishness while trying to manage their businesses.

The selling of regions is regarded as one way of mobilising and inventing regional distinctiveness in an age of global consumerism (James 1996, Bell and Valentine 1997: 150–61, Wilk 2002; Ferguson 2004: 150). Although difference and diversity are increasingly integrated into the political consciousness of the era, they have become more and more commodified and marketable. Due to this development, culinary nationalism continues to grow in the 21st century (Bell and Valentine 1997, Wilk 2002, Ferguson 2004: 172, Karaosmanoglu 2007). Ethnic food not only becomes a practical knowledge, which provides work for immigrants, but also becomes a way to produce knowledge about a group of people or region (Gaytán 2008: 338). In this case, restaurants are used to cultivate culinary knowledge about local foreign tastes. Then what kind of ethnic knowledge does the Turkish-speaking restaurateurs construct and mobilise for profit making? According to Liora Gvion and Naomi Trostler (2008: 955), ‘ethnic dishes were detached from the ethnics and redefined in articulation with the mainstream culture’. In other words, ethnic food is incorporated into the existing system of knowledge by means of the restaurant menus (Beriss and Sutton 2007: 7–8, Gvion and Trostler 2008: 953, Ray 2011: 97–114). Therefore, the construction of ethnic food is both about differentiation from and articulation to the mainstream culture. It transforms the mainstream culture and at the same time is transformed within the mainstream.

We can identify four themes in the construction of Turkishness in restaurant spaces. The first theme is Ottomanness as it refers to a multinational cuisine. Here I discuss the ways that Turkishness is constructed with reference to its Ottoman history. The second theme is modernisation, which is defined through the notion of standardisation of cuisine. In this case, there is an attempt to modernise Turkish cuisine to make it a ‘world cuisine’. The third theme is global entrepreneurial identities, which are appropriated by restaurateurs who prefer to de-emphasise their ethnic or national identity in their businesses. Finally, the fourth theme is agency, which refers to personal choices and the power of the individual in constructing Turkishness. In the light of these themes, I explore the following questions: What do Turkish-speaking restaurateurs mobilise in order to construct Turkishness? What is the role of food and space in staging Turkishness in restaurant businesses? What does Turkishness include and what does it exclude? Assuming that commercial success is a priority in highly competitive restaurant business in London, how do Turkish-speaking restaurateurs construct and manage Turkishness as their restaurants’
identity? How do the notions of authenticity and ethnicity perform in the restaurant space? How important are national, regional or ethnic identities for restaurateurs? How and to what extent do restaurateurs define, express and perform their cultural distinctiveness as means of profit making? Finally, while immigrants are generally seen as a community, how important is the individual in creating, expressing and performing identity and culture in the business?

We can estimate more than 200 Turkish-speaking restaurants in London excluding fast-food and take-out buffets. They can be classified into various categories according to the food they serve, their décor, location and customers. For example, one of the categories can be named as ‘modern Turkish restaurants’ and these would include bistro and fine-dining places, which are located in Central London and wealth neighbourhoods such as Islington and Hampstead. These restaurants appeal to a diversity of middle and upper-class customers. Another category can be named as ‘conventional Turkish restaurants’ including grill restaurants (Ocakbaşı or mangal) and esnaf lokantas (tradesmen’s diners) (see Öğüt 2008 for another kind of classification based on the décor). Esnaf lokantas are also called ‘sulu yemek’ (proper food) or ‘soup places’. They are canteen-style eating-places with prepared meals placed in a counter for the customers to choose from. They are casual and not pricey compared to bistro and fine-dining restaurants. Esnaf lokantas are concentrated in Haringey (around Green Lanes) known as a Greek, Cypriot and Turkish-speaking neighbourhood, whereas grill restaurants are mainly located in Dalston, Hackney (another Turkish-speaking neighbourhood). The customers of conventional restaurants are mainly Turkish-speaking people and ethnically diverse immigrants who reside or work in these neighbourhoods.

The survival strategies of restaurants in London depend on many factors from the location and business aims to the gaze of targeted clients. So how would these factors effect what they present and perform as identity, culture and tradition? In this study, my focus is on modern Turkish restaurants since their targeted clients are not limited to Turkish-speakers. I also consider highly popular conventional restaurants, which appeal not only to Turkish-speakers and neighbourhood residents, but also to tourists and Londoners in general. I look at how Turkish cuisine is constructed to survive and compete in the market. Therefore, I ask how it is staged for the others.

Within the period September 2010–June 2011, I walked on the street of Hackney and Haringey where conventional Turkish restaurants are concentrated and I visited the modern restaurants around Central London, Islington and Hampstead. I usually dined in these restaurants while I examined their exterior and interior décor, menu and food. My research entails an analysis of 25 restaurant spaces and 16 semi-structured in-depth interviews with restaurateurs, managers and chefs. Eighteen of the restaurants analysed are modern, whereas seven of them can be regarded as conventional. Interviews took about 45–60 minutes. Twelve of my interviewees own and/or manage a restaurant business, while four of them work as chefs. They are all male in their 40s and 50s. I asked specific questions to the restaurateurs, but we most often flew with the conversation. My questions included the ways that Turkish cuisine
has emerged and developed in London; restaurateurs’ thoughts about their role in this development; their thoughts about the expectations of their clients and the ways that they cope with these expectations; their own concerns of taste, memory and nostalgia; the ways that they define their food, restaurant and authenticity; since Turkish cuisine is often categorised as Middle Eastern and Mediterranean whether this categorisation make their business easier or harder for them and whether they accept or reject being involved in these categories; whether they have an urge to construct, express and perform their differences from other cuisines and among each other and finally their thoughts and ideas about other Turkish-speaking restaurants in London and also in Turkey.

**Commodification and Standardisation of Food in Transnational Contexts**

Studies that deal with ethnic entrepreneurship and restaurant businesses are generally concerned with ethnic minority networks, the integration of ethnic minority enterprise within the urban economy, their survival strategies and business motives (Kesteloot and Mistiaen 1997, Basu and Altinay 2002, Masurel et al., 2004, Wahlbeck 2007, Katila and Wahlbeck 2012). In these studies, the economic importance of food-related employment for immigrant groups has been acknowledged and discussed. Two questions seem to be important in the works that deal with the relationship between migrants and restaurant businesses: how different migrant groups are situated and function in the restaurant industry and how national or ethnic identities are produced through these restaurants (Morris 2010). This study focuses mainly on the second question by making a specific emphasis on the profit making motivations of immigrant restaurateurs.

A number of anthropological/sociological food studies stress commodification of ethnic foods and the power of agency in immigrant groups in terms of the ways that immigrants re-invent an ethnic cuisine and sell it as a commodity. In this respect, ethnicity is seen as a marketing tool in the overall entrepreneurial market (Lu and Fine 1995, Narayan 1995, Çağlar 1999, Ferrero 2002, Girardelli 2004, Wu 2004, Cwiertka 2005, Oum 2005, Srinivas 2007, Gvion 2009, Liu and Lin 2009). Davide Girardelli (2004) examines the concept of commodification of ethnic identities through an Italian restaurant chain, *Fazoli*. By way of semiotic analysis, he looks at the ways that these restaurants constitute the myth of Italian food in the USA. On the other hand, in his analysis of Hezha restaurants in a highly multi-ethnic region in China, Enshi, Xu Wu (2004: 226, 227) looks at the creation of ethnic foods and ethnic identities for the commodity market. The local elite described Hezha foods as ‘ethnic’ foods in Enshi. However, as the author claims, instead of ethnicity, regionalism and lineage are known to be determinants of identity and community in that region. Moreover, Lynn Harbottle (1997) studies Iranian entrepreneurs in food trade in Britain and their resistance to the commodification of Iranian food due to Iran’s bad image in Britain. Therefore, rather than selling Iranian food, Iranian entrepreneurs sell other national foods. Sylvia Ferrero (2002) stresses the economic, social and
political power of cultural brokers in the production, circulation and representation of cuisine and its cultural image. Ferrero (2002: 214) looks at Mexican cuisine not only as an expression of social and cultural identity but also as a space where social change is made possible. She argues that the Mexican restaurant business in Los Angeles opens paths for immigrant labour, empowers the ethnic ‘I’, enhances economic and social power and establishes solidarity and social alliances among immigrants. As a result, Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles use Mexican cuisine to accomplish social and economic improvement. Moreover, in order to meet the expectations of customers (cultural outsiders), restaurateurs use authenticity to create an imagined ethnicity. In that way, they could keep the cultural outsiders at a distance since the outsiders lack the knowledge of authentic food (Ferrero 2002: 203). Similarly, national or ethnic food becomes a practical collection of knowledge, which would provide work for Turkish-speaking immigrants in London.

According to Nina Glick Schiller and Ayşe Çağlar (2009: 184), studies on city and migration generally move in two directions: one studying an ethnic group in a particular city, the other studying an ethnic pathway either ‘ethnic entrepreneurship’ or ‘ethnic enclave’. The common approach that we find in both is a specific perspective, which is called the ‘ethnic lens’. According to this perspective, even before considering their actual practices in the city, immigrants are defined primarily by their ethnicity. This means that immigrants are not considered individuals, but as part of a generalised transnational community defined by ethnicity. Schiller and Çağlar (2009: 186) claim that this is a problematic perspective since it ignores the role of immigrants as participants of urban transformation. Therefore, a shift in perspective is necessary, especially since literature that sees immigrants as active agents in urban transformation, is not widely present (Gunew 2000, Schiller and Çağlar 2009, Ray 2011).

As we have seen, studies analyse the power of immigrants in using the restaurant business as a viable source of revenue where people are being mobilised in new ways and produce new meanings as they undertake their food-related practices (Phillips 2006: 45). Migrants are active social actors in building their own businesses, expressing identity and changing taste in the city. Identifications that migrants take on are fluid and multiple, which proves an internal diversity within supposedly homogenous groups. Therefore, trying not to look through the ‘ethnic lens’, I ask, how important is the individual, individual desire, and personal memory and belonging in restaurant businesses.

**Ottomaness: A Multi-National Cuisine**

There is no such thing as Turkish cuisine in London but only Turkish entrepreneurs (Chef Turan)

London houses more than 70 kinds of regional/national restaurants. Within this highly competitive environment, how do Turkish-speaking restaurants survive in the city? According to the restaurateurs and chefs that I interviewed, one key figure seems
to play a significant role in the development and standardisation of Turkish cuisine. Hüseyin, who is a well-known Turkish entrepreneur and chef, has contributed to the development of Turkish cuisine to a great extent. As chef Turan says, ‘Hüseyin has brought a commercial light to the [Turkish-speaking] restaurateurs [in London].’ Hüseyin was born in a village in Tokat (Turkey) in the 1950s. After spending his youth in poverty in Ankara and Istanbul as a street kid with no primary school education, he went to London and worked and lived in a kebab place in Mayfair. He and his partner turned the kebab place into a modern Middle Eastern/Mediterranean restaurant in the 1980s. Today, Hüseyin is a multi-millionaire, one of the world’s richest people according to the Discovery Channel (2008) and regarded as one of the most successful entrepreneurs in London.

Hüseyin attempted to familiarise Turkish cuisine for Londoners by replicating dishes from successful Lebanese and Greek restaurants. He admits that at first he had not wanted his restaurant, Sofra (one of the most well-known Turkish restaurants with four branches in Central London), to cry out ‘Turkish’ since, he says, Turkish had a bad reputation. Instead, he called the restaurant Mediterranean and Middle Eastern. Referring to the Ottoman Empire, Hüseyin does not seem to distinguish his food from Lebanese or Greek: ‘Our mezes are like Lebanese or even better [. . .] they are all our food.’ Hüseyin personalises the dishes with respect to their foreignness or domesticity:

I make roast beef. It is on the menu. If someone comes home, you say welcome Mrs. Rose. Nobu’s Japanese codfish enters and you again say welcome. They bring excitement. All the rest is the neighbour, aunt, grandmother, and someone from the other village.

While Hüseyin sees English roast beef and Japanese codfish as guests paying a visit to their house and bringing excitement, he refers to ‘all the rest’ meaning Middle Eastern, Mediterranean and Turkish as the neighbours, relatives or people from the neighbouring village. Situating Turkish cuisine as part of these regional cuisines with reference to Ottoman history becomes a survival strategy for the other restaurateurs as well. For example, Haz, whose manager Ahmet worked with Hüseyin, follows a similar kind of business strategy based on building commonalities (rather than differences) with Middle Eastern/Mediterranean cuisines. Haz is a popular modern restaurant, which has four branches in London, and one of which is close to Square Mile business district. It appeals mostly to businesspeople working around the neighbourhood. Haz had a Lebanese chef once, and Ahmet claims common dishes between Turkey and Lebanon grounding his immediate argument on the Ottoman Empire. For example, they make a dish similar to babaganush with eggplant paste and tahini, which is mostly identified with Middle Eastern cuisine:

They are all Ottoman indeed. So we can serve food under the names Lebanese, Greek or Middle Eastern. Musakka for example is common to all, someone took it
Talking about cultural interactions, encounters and exchanges, Ahmet does not seem to limit himself with a national identity, but he defines his food and restaurant by way of a larger regional or imperial identity.

In his long-term restaurant career, Huseyin (Sofra) has worked with many managers and chefs, most of whom opened their own restaurants in the city. Their attempts to standardise Turkish cuisine in London have been successful. For example, Turkish cuisine includes hellim, a special Cypriot cheese, falafel, hummus and tabouleh which are mostly known as Middle Eastern specialties. Whereas these dishes are not specifically known or claimed as ‘Turkish’ in Turkey, they are the most essential components of almost every Turkish restaurant menu in London. Mehmet (the owner of Antalya in Central London) explains this through the business concerns of restaurateurs: ‘Turkish people were the last to come here [London] and to open restaurants – after Lebanese, Greek, etc. Falafel, hellim, and hummus were already known, so it was easy to follow them’. As a consequence, Turkish cuisine is constructed as a multinational regional cuisine, which is grounded on the Ottoman Empire (see Karaosmanoglu 2009 for the commodification of Ottoman cuisine in the city of Istanbul).

Modernisation of Cuisine

Most of the Turkish-speaking restaurateurs call their food ‘English Turkish cuisine’ referring to the construction of a particular cuisine different from the cuisine in Turkey. Engin, the manager of Ishtar (a modern restaurant on Baker Street which appeals mostly to the businesspeople and the middle and upper-class residents of the neighbourhood) puts it this way:

> There is a Turkish cuisine in London. It has to be a standard cuisine. Here it has no difference from Greek cuisine. There is a specific taste here [London] and we need to address that taste. The menu has developed automatically.

To introduce a diverse and ‘authentic’ (as the restaurateurs call it) Turkish cuisine (as opposed to the ‘English Turkish cuisine’), an adequate number of personnel is needed with good and qualified chefs/cooks and qualified assistants. Engin, who had a gastronomy education in London, says that he would have been willing to serve a more sophisticated cuisine if he had found a way:

> Yes, customers know a limited Turkish cuisine. If we want to go forward for a conscious Turkish cuisine, we need good cooks. Plate design, idea, cost, everything should fit. If the cook says that he wanted to cook a dish with that cost and it fits our cost balance, I will happily put the dish on the menu.
Restaurateurs usually claim that they are entrepreneurs and therefore their primary concern is profit and cost balance. When present dishes have been making profit already, it would be a burden to take the risk of trying new things: ‘Why do I fight? They accept us here in this neighbourhood because of our quality, if the quality of your food is good, they protect you’ [A Turkish grill chef in Stoke Newington, Hackney – 19 Numara Boş Çırık II].

On the other hand, Hüseyin (Sofra) believes that he has actually revolutionised the Turkish cuisine in London and his vision of modern Turkish cuisine has saved it from its bad reputation. In the development of modern ‘English Turkish cuisine’, concepts of progress and improvement are realised by way of simple design, minimal décor, healthy cooking techniques, timely serving and nutritionally balanced food. To be recognised as a ‘world cuisine’, restaurateurs need to modernise the performance and the space as well as the food.

First, restaurateurs claim improvement and progress through simple and minimal décor rather than through pompous orientalist décor. Simplicity brings comfort and convenience, and this is what customers want, according to Hüseyin 2, the owner of Mangal 1, a grill place in Dalston which has gained enormous popularity and rated as the 23rd among London’s best restaurants in 2011 (Time Out London 2011):

How can I tell you, people like convenience. For example, if they [the customers] drop their fork on the floor, they can get a clean one themselves, they can get their glass from the service table. This is simplicity, they are tired of luxury [...] It is more comfortable here... If they looked for a luxury place, they would not come here [...]. There has to be something special about this place and it is simplicity.

In this case, rather than luxury, minimal décor and comfort seem to be appealing for customers and restaurateurs. Similarly, Hüseyin (Sofra) criticises the restaurants that have orientalist decorations, such as decorations with typical kilims or Kütahya porcelains. His following quote draws a line not only between the traditional and the modern but also between ‘the primitive’ and ‘the civilised’:

Are the Turks Third World people? Carpets on the floor, on the walls, there should not be carpets on the walls anyways. Is Turkey that underdeveloped? Do I have to show only the underdeveloped part of Turkey here abroad? It is very ugly. There is nothing that is not European in Turkey. Turkey is European.

Here being European and being developed are used interchangeably. A minimal décor would show Turkey as a developed European country, whereas a ‘traditionalist’ décor (carpets hanged on the walls) would show her as pre-modern.

Second, cooking techniques and serving styles are significant elements of progress and change. For example, Hüseyin (Sofra) refers to his Turkish food as ‘elegant, modern, open-soul, healthy and balanced’. Criticising the way food is served in restaurants in Turkey, he implies that their cooking techniques and serving styles are primitive:
They bring the fish like a stabbed man as if his head/eyes are bleeding. You wouldn’t know what to do with it. They throw it into the grill, it is not clean at all […] No cook! They don’t do anything with it, it is wild! Commandos cook like that in the mountains. You eat commando food in the restaurant. Very strange.

Food served in Turkey is seen as pre-modern and primitive. To modernise the dish, they need to revise and transform it. Then how much of its authenticity and tradition would be left is a concern. While managers of Maedah Grill (a modern helal restaurant in White Chapel appealing mostly to Muslims) and Efes II (the oldest fine-dining Turkish restaurant in Central London) criticise the attempts to modernise cuisine, Ahmet (Haz) is not uncomfortable in admitting that they do not serve ‘authentic Turkish food’:

We try to modernize our cuisine. We do not serve the original because today health is important. Healthy food is important. We value health. Döner for example is fatty and heavy. We try to make light dishes, dishes that would not cause any discomfort in the body.

However, this does not mean that ‘the traditional’ and ‘the authentic’ have totally been de-emphasised in the marketplace. Some restaurateurs claim authenticity through the use of ingredients particular to Turkey (Mehmet, Antalya), while some believe that Turkey has always been modern so ‘change to modernise’ is not an ‘unnatural’ process that would harm or diminish authenticity (Hüseyin, Sofra).

Finally, as Ahmet (Haz) mentioned above, nutrition and health are inevitable elements of improvement and modernisation of cuisine. According to the restaurateurs, nutrition is an essential part of the restaurant business. A number of modern restaurant managers whom I interviewed claim that they actually did not like the food served in Turkey and did not like to eat in Turkey in general, because as they argue the food is heavy and causes discomfort in the stomach (Ahmet, Haz; Engin, Ishtar; Hüseyin, Sofra). They also indicate that they are no longer familiar with that kind of Turkish food because they are trained abroad, mostly in Britain, and they are used to eating ‘quality’ food, that is, nutritionally balanced, healthy and tasty food. When I asked Engin (Ishtar) whether he would like to open a restaurant in Istanbul and if so what would be different there in terms of food, he says:

I cannot open a restaurant in Turkey. I am not familiar with the Turkish cuisine in Turkey. I ate in good places there [Istanbul] but I did not like the food and the plate design. Plate design, quality, and taste are very important here […]. Cuisine has completely changed here. I have learned wine and food culture here in England, so this changes the cuisine I serve.

In other words, according to Engin, Turkish cuisine has ‘improved’ in London. To emphasise the importance of health and nutrition, modern restaurants change their menu seasonally, serving lighter dishes in summer (dishes with olive oil and fish) and heavier ones in the winter. Moreover, most of the modern Turkish restaurants serve
light international dishes such as, *mozarella and tomato, smoked salmon, pasta dishes, dishes with asparagus and artichokes, prawn cocktail, stuffed mushrooms, goat cheese salad*, and *octopus salad* together with Middle Eastern specialties. Modernisation also includes customising dish names for non-Turkish-speaking customers and giving them a European sound. For example, *Sofra* replaces the dish name *lahmacun* with *lahvaza* to make it sound like Italian.

Serving healthy and light meals is a concern for grill restaurants as well. Owners of grill places in Dalston believe that grill food makes them popular because it is healthy, especially compared to fried food (*Mangal 1* and *19 Numara Boş Çırık II*). *Hala* (can be classified as a conventional place in Haringey) publicises the restaurant as serving ‘home-made food’ to give the ‘true’ impression that food is healthy, as the owner Savaş claims. The aim is also to separate ‘home-made food’ from ‘greasy’ Turkish fast-food. Savaş (*Hala*) states that they serve yogurt with most of the dishes, not only because it is traditional but also because it is healthy. Restaurateurs, chefs and managers often mention that they cook, serve and sell what they themselves eat. Eating light, healthy, less fatty and fresh dishes has become their personal concerns as well as those of the customers. Freshness and quality of the ingredients are also important for the standardisation and modernisation of cuisine: ‘It is the quality of ingredients that makes us special’, says the owner of *Diyarbakar* (a casual soup place in Haringey). On the other hand, for grill restaurants in Dalston (e.g. *Mangal 1* and *19 Numara Boş Çırık II*), the quality of meat seems to be the most important criterion.

**Global Entrepreneurs: Fading Nationalism?**

While serving standardised and modern cuisine following the business values of timely service, minimal décor and nutritious food, restaurateurs tend to stress themselves as world citizens. They manage to survive and commercially succeed in London, handle the system competently and live side by side with people with diverse nationalities. For example, Hüseyin 2 (*Mangal 1*) insists that restaurants have no nationality:

> The restaurant is a universal place. It appeals to every nation. From Russians to Arabs, from Nigerians to Germans and French, and from Spanish to Brazilians, it is a universal place, it is not your place, not my place, it is the customers’ place.

Furthermore, some of the restaurateurs attempt to ‘upgrade’ kebab, bring it to world standards and to make it a world cuisine saving it from any nationality: ‘I try to prove that kebab is a type of cuisine, and I try to prove its place as a cuisine in England [...]’ (Hüseyin 2). Here saving kebab from Turkishness or Kurdishness goes parallel with entrepreneurial objectives. As Antoine Pécout (2004: 9) claims, in the German case rather than national identity, cultural openness is necessary for commercial growth. The common business strategy that Turkish-speaking immigrants take on in Germany is to avoid the ‘typical Turkish business’. Therefore, emphasising nationality
or ethnicity is seen as a drawback to business. However, national representation is not totally eradicated. Commercial growth through standard and global qualities of place, service and taste brings good national representation. It is the condition to ‘improve’ the image of Turkey and to promote Turkey to potential tourists. Ahmet (Haz) claims:

English people come to know Turkey from us, from what we have done here. 50–60 per cent of our customers went to Turkey after they had come here and gotten to know us. What we do here is important for representation. If we provide good food, good service, and clean place, they would know us as such.

Similarly, Hüseyin (Sofra) says that his mission is to save Turkish cuisine from all prejudice and to present Turkey as a ‘developed’ European country through minimal and modern décor, elegant plate design, sophisticated cooking techniques and nutritionally healthy food. Therefore without totally abandoning nationalism, restaurateurs emphasise international business values. Ahmet (Haz) explains restaurateurs’ motivations for modernisation and standardisation with a simple sentence: ‘Modernized food, quality of food, fast and good service, and pricing are what make us successful in this business.’ Therefore, rather than claiming local identities and differences, restaurateurs seem to hold a global identity as being successful entrepreneurs. In this case, they go beyond the constraints of an ethnic or national identity (without totally giving it up) towards developing new identities in relation to their business and commercial imperatives.

Agency: Going Against the Stream

Seizing business imperatives through modernisation is the most important concern for entrepreneurs and emphasising or commodifying specific ethnic identities seems to be a minor matter and even an obstacle on the way to success. For example, restaurateurs avoid any implication of Turkishness when it has a bad reputation; they are unwilling to introduce local dishes that do not exist on the standard menu; they replace the dish name lahmacun withlahvaza to make it sound like Italian; they favour the categorisation of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean; they attempt on modernisation and familiarising rather than claiming difference and they use the already popular labels or names. Cemal, the owner of Gem (a modern restaurant in Islington), is highly critical of this situation and uses identity as a reaction to the overall economic system in the restaurant business. However, his criticism of modernised tastes is not very much reflected on the menu, food or décor of his restaurant, with one visible exception – gözleme is called a Kurdish name, qatme, which is again called ‘Kurdish bread’ on the menu. After all, he serves a similar menu like all the other modern restaurants.

Instead, Cemal expresses his criticism of the ‘English Turkish cuisine’ in the interview that I conducted with him. Cemal, who is in his 40s, is from Göksun, Maraş. He moved to London in the 1980s and opened Gem in 1999. He claims that
Turkish cuisine has no identity in London because of the commercial concerns of restaurateurs:

Turkish cuisine is not taken seriously here and so it has no identity. Lebanese cuisine is even more authentic [. . .]. I lost customers because I was an idealist. If we had looked at the issue from an idealist point of view, not too much an economic way, Turkish cuisine would have been in a much better position today.

Therefore, since commercial concerns and identity concerns work in total opposition for Cemal, business interests have weakened nationalism (or idealism as he calls it). As a Kurdish himself, Cemal tried to put more Kurdish names on the menu, but it did not work out as he had expected: ‘It means that I had to go against the stream. You cannot go too far like that’. Even though Cemal considers Kurdish dishes not separate from the Turkish cuisine, his Turkish customers were irritated by Kurdish names on the menu as he explains.

Moreover, Cemal’s many attempts to cook and serve regional dishes of his hometown Göksun ended in failure: ‘It is very difficult to run a mission on your own. Others look at this work as business only. Then I gave up’. He continues:

I opened this restaurant eleven years ago. I was going to make it as I wanted. If you are stubborn, you can change some things. But chefs said no, I had to play the game according to its rules, because they said there was an order, a harmony in this business that I had to follow [. . .] I wanted to open an authentic place, something which reflects Turkey. But somehow chefs managed to put me into their system. When you are not in the kitchen, you have less power. They think that this is Turkish cuisine, there is no Turkish here. There is no identity of Turkish cuisine.

From Cemal’s perspective, chefs find the most convenient way to make business by serving ‘safe’ and ‘familiar’ food for Londoners. Cemal points out that despite business risks that he had to face, he tried to introduce dishes that he liked, that were specific to Göksun, where Chechen, Circassian, Kurdish and Turkish live together, and to his home where his grandmother used to cook. Here, for the first time in my interviews, personal memory becomes a crucial element in creating the menu, and authenticity and tradition are explicitly reclaimed. Cemal’s aim was to make a difference among Turkish restaurants. However, his attempt to serve regional dishes such as ‘Göksun style mantı’ was not successful. Perhaps it was not because of the obstacle that were put by the chefs, but because people simply did not like the dish. A similar reaction was seen in the case of döner, when he attempted to serve it in an ‘authentic’ way with melted butter on top. After a while, he had to make butter optional on the menu because people found it heavy and unhealthy, and they were unwilling to order it. Here unlike most of the other restaurateurs whom we have discussed, Cemal implies that authentic food is more valuable than healthy food, and identity is more important than business. Cemal however fails in his attempts to introduce his own ‘Turkish cuisine’ to Londoners. But still he does not think that he has no power at all to change things as a restaurateur, especially when he is not all
alone in his attempts to make a change. He could at least insist on keeping Kurdish
named dishes on the menu.

A Kurdish-owned modern restaurant, Zara, is another interesting case that does
not necessarily stand as a reaction to business and economic concerns, but it
somehow stresses the importance of regional identity. Similar to Cemal’s case, the
owner Hasan talks about identity more than business, but we see its reflection only
on the restaurant’s name and categorisation (as for the food, he admits that he
followed the menus of other restaurants). The restaurant’s name Zara is a Kurdish
name and Hasan calls it ‘Anatolian cuisine’ (on the restaurant’s sign) rather than
Turkish, Middle Eastern or Mediterranean cuisine:

I call it Anatolian cuisine for political reasons. When we say Anatolian, we include
Kurdish, Armenian, Greek and Turkish people. Anatolia is a Greek name. It means
‘East’ in Greek... Turkish cuisine as we know it includes Kurdish, Greek and
Armenian food.

Hasan moved to London in 1986 as a political refugee. After working as a lawyer
for some years in London, he decided to open a restaurant. He has been running his
own restaurant for 10 years. When I asked Hasan if he had ever thought of calling the
restaurant Kurdish cuisine, he says:

I do not feel like defining myself as Turkish, Kurdish or English. This is a matter of
feeling. I am leftist and I want to have a leftist identity, that is all about it. I do not
feel otherwise and other identities. I only feel my leftist identity.

While claiming a non-national identity, i.e. ‘leftist identity’, Hasan admits that
identity could sometimes be an emotional form of expression:

I am from Turkey and Anatolia where Turkish, Kurdish, Armenian and Greek
people live. But if I feel angry for some reason [to Turkish people], I might say all
these dishes are Kurdish. This is [identity] a very emotional thing.

In restaurant businesses, identity is about representation, it is about representing
oneself, one’s own nation or country, or one’s own home. Cemal (Gem) aims to
represent his home and his hometown, where he had grown up, in his restaurant
space. Even though his attempt to serve his grandmother’s dishes failed, he
nevertheless managed to build his identity through his personal memory. Similarly,
rejecting any kind of national borders, Hasan (Zara) represents a region, Anatolia,
which, he thinks, represents many cultures, rather than just one. Therefore, in these
businesses, we see traces of identity expressions, but these are not necessarily reflected
on taste or food. Identity could be traced somewhere else, such as in restaurateurs’
self-expressions, their willingness to take risks, restaurant names and categorisations
and sometimes in dish names.

The role of immigrant entrepreneurs cannot be neglected in the changing ideas
about food and identity in the city. Food is a venue where tradition and modernity
have been negotiate and expressed, and identities have taken new forms. Three moments can be identified with regard to the role of identities in the business: first, cultural openness is appreciated, while ethnic and national identities are seen as obstacles for business. Therefore, restaurateurs most often choose to express and perform their global entrepreneurial identities. Second, either for commercial or political reasons, restaurateurs choose to claim cosmopolitan identities, such as imperial (Ottoman) or regional (Anatolian, Middle Eastern, Mediterranean), which are not based on one nationality or ethnicity. Third, rather than community defined by migrations and ethnicity, individual feelings and concerns seem to be significant on self-identifications. These moments may differ in relation to individual aims, motivations, moods and expectations.

Concluding Remarks

This study challenges two basic assumptions found in the literature that characterise the global commercial system today. First one is the assumption that ‘ethnicity’ or ‘difference’ has become exceptionally marketable today. London’s restaurant scene is highly diversified with more than 70 national/regional cuisines. This proves that ‘ethnicity’ and ‘difference’ are important symbols in the restaurant business, but perhaps to a certain extent. When we look closer to the Turkish-speaking restaurant businesses, we see that cuisine is defined not necessarily by turning difference into a marketable commodity, but by turning it into a familiar global product. An emphasis on ethnicity can even be a drawback to business. Therefore, Turkish-speaking restaurateurs/entrepreneurs define their identities not on account of expressing or performing their national or ethnic differences from other cuisines or among themselves, but instead they claim business success through a uniform, standard and modern world cuisine generated by light, fresh and healthy food, good and fast service, simple décor, and elegant plate design. Therefore, commercial success for most of them is to be achieved through the process of familiarisation rather than through differentiation.

The second assumption is that restaurant spaces and food strengthen a sense of national identity or the idea of a nation. Rather than expressing national or ethnic identities (either Turkish or Kurdish), Turkish-speaking restaurateurs identify their food with regional identities, such as Middle Eastern and Mediterranean, specifically to reflect multicultural encounters with reference to the Ottoman Empire. Nationalism, nation-state and national/ethnic borders do not seem to work as strong markers in the Turkish-speaking restaurant businesses. Restaurateurs’ primary identity is mostly constructed through their relations to business as ‘global entrepreneurs’. However, they are not necessarily and completely devoid of national or ethnic identity. On the one hand, as successful global entrepreneurs, they tend to see themselves as representatives of their country. On the other hand, individual entrepreneurs can feel belongingness to a nation or a region in particular moments. Identity is rather an emotional form of expression that is shaped by the mood of the
individual as well as by changing political circumstances as Hasan (Zara) says. Expressing identity can also be an idealist mission as Cemal (Gem) believes.

Finally, in the Turkish-speaking restaurant businesses in London, difference has put into a standard shape and familiarised in the name of progress and improvement. Restaurateurs, whose main interests are to survive and succeed in the existing economic system, stress a familiarised difference to be a world cuisine. However, there are differences in the perceptions, motives and expectations of Turkish-speaking restaurateurs in terms of identity, representation and agency, not necessarily depending on the type of restaurants, but more importantly depending on the political stance, mood and feelings of each individual restaurateur. Consequently, future studies should reconsider the concepts of difference, identity and belonging with respect to individual sensitivities as well as commercial interests in immigrant businesses.

Acknowledgements

This article is produced as part of my postdoctoral research project, which was funded by TUBITAK and was conducted at SOAS, University of London, during the 2010–2011 academic year. I would like to thank Harry West, Burçel Çelik and the journal’s two anonymous referees for their constructive comments.

Works Cited


