



Turkish Festival a culinary and spiritual exploration

Posted Aug 5, 2010
BY JAMES RUBEC

EMC Events - Confederation Park was transformed into Little Istanbul during Ottawa's Turkish Festival July 23-25. The event, now in its third year, welcomed 25,000 people to the free, three-day event with performers, artists, retailers and cooks representing Turkey's cultural heritage.

"In 1923, the modern Turkish republic was formed after 700 years as the Ottoman Empire. Our culture is incredibly diverse, so many civilizations having come and gone. Turkey is where East meets West," said Dr. Yavus Zebek, chair of the Canadian Institute of Intercultural Dialogue and one of the festivals organizers.

One of the booths on the festival grounds was decorated as a sultan's palace, with ornate rugs and couches under a tent with tables for people to sit at while enjoying a Turkish coffee. The tent was staffed by a man wearing a sultan's costume, who was well versed in Turkish history and advised first-time Turkish coffee drinkers to remember to not drink the grinds at the bottom of the cup. The coffee, which is thick and served in small cups, is somewhat similar to espresso.

While there were many tents sharing various aspects of Turkish culture set up around the grounds of Confederation Park, the busiest by far was for Turkish pancakes, or gözleme.

Gözleme is a savoury traditional Turkish handmade and hand-rolled pastry. The fresh pastry is rolled out with a very thin rolling pin and is filled with ground beef, spinach, feta cheese, mushrooms and every combination between them. After being filled and sealed with butter and flour, the pastry is cooked on a curved griddle.

"Turkey represents people of so many origins and traditions," said Dr. Zebek who has lived in Ottawa for four years since moving from the United States by way of Turkey. "We have Christians, Jews and Muslims. We also have a large population of Kurds as we share a border with northern Iraq's province of Kurdistan." He explained that the Kurdish language is the Turkish equivalent to Spanish in the United States. "People don't necessarily need to know how to speak Kurdish to get around, but it is becoming more and more prevalent." Canada has a growing Turkish population, with over 100,000 across the country. While Toronto and Montreal have the largest populations of Turks representing the majority of Turkish immigrants and their descendants, Ottawa has a smaller but active community of 4,000 people. The festival had a variety of performances from music acts and dance groups, with several performances from Turkish pop singer Murat Toy.

"We've had Turkish country music and rap music playing through out the festival. Another one of the performances is by the Whirling Dervishes," said Dr. Zebek.

The Whirling Dervishes perform an intricate spinning dance while wearing cascading white shrouds that fold out and make the dancers look like they are floating impossibly.

"Their dance is actually a prayer. It is a prayer of the home and the hereafter," said Kerim Khan, director of the Canadian Turkish Heritage Foundation. "The dancers are devotees to Islam, who focus on foregoing ego, they own no belongings. The dervishes live on minimal necessities. They need no status or goods or land. They reserve themselves for receiving God." Mr. Khan further explained that during the dance, also known as Sema, they spin because it symbolizes how God created the universe, with the moon spinning around the earth, the earth spinning around the sun, and the solar system around the galaxy. They position their hands with one towards the sky and the other towards the ground.

"The Sema performers hold one hand high receiving blessings from God and the other gives those

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James Rubec, Ottawa East EMC
Hasan Yilmaz and Huyla Akgunlu pose with their children Akin eren Yilmaz, and Semih Erdem Yilmaz at the third annual Turkish Festival.

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James Rubec, Ottawa East EMC
The shroud that the Whirling Dervishes wear is similar to one that would be worn at by Muslims at burial.

blessings to the community through public services and sharing the word of God," said Mr. Khan.

To learn more about the festival, and Turkish culture, please visit their website at www.ottawaturkishfestival.com.

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