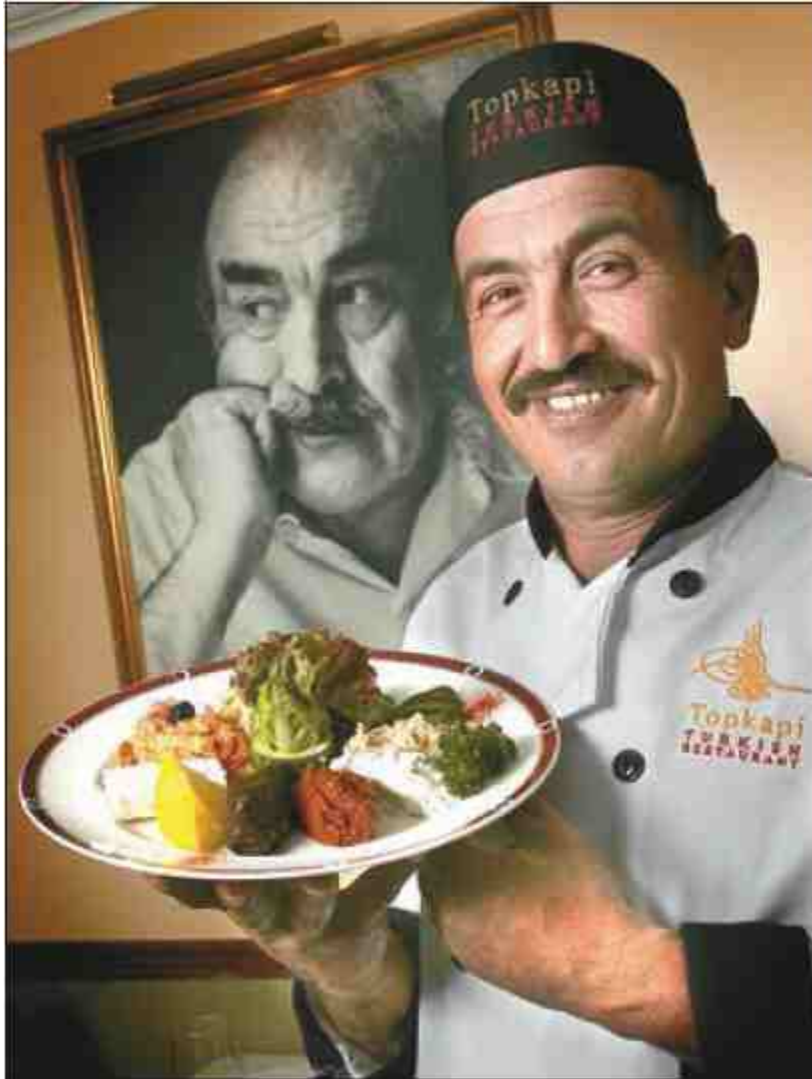


Topkapi food, prices worth the tricky trek

By Anne DesBrisay, The Ottawa Citizen October 22, 2009



A portrait of Topkapi founder Raif Erdogan hangs beside the kitchen where his son and new owner Nail Erdogan now does the cooking.

**Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen,
The Ottawa Citizen**

Topkapi

484 Preston St., 613-230-8828

Access: Steps to entrance, washrooms in basement

Price: Starters, \$4 to \$9; main dishes, \$16 to \$24

Open: Daily for dinner

Prices are low at Topkapi, portions are large, and the food is very good. (Let's see if that doesn't get people through the front door.)

Mind you, you have to walk a bit through the muck of the Preston Street construction to get to it. But if there is a restaurant deserving of your patronage during these torn-up times, this is it.

It seems to me there has been a Turkish option on the Preston Street strip for a very long time. Even before Little Italy became more culinarily diverse, when it was almost exclusively a neighbourhood of pizza-pasta-pollo, there was the Istanbul Bosphorous (in the space where you now find the Black Cat Bistro). In 2004, a restaurant called Efes opened in the space vacated by Italian restaurant Modo Mio. I liked Efes well enough, though at the dinner hour it seemed clear that patrons -- or the lack of them -- missed the liquor licence.

Last year, Efes changed hands. Its new owner, Nail Erdogan, worked with the name for a bit, then renovated and reopened as Topkapi in the spring.

Topkapi is the name of an ancient palace in the city of Istanbul. But it is also the name of a 1974 mostly take-away restaurant that stood at Kent and Gloucester streets, owned by the Erdogan family, and where the young Nail used to scrub pots.

(And if anyone is the slightest bit interested, Topkapi is the title of a 1960s film starring Melina Mercouri, Maximilian Schell and Peter Ustinov, but no one who runs the place had heard of it and only my husband seemed to care. A lot. Damn that BlackBerry.)

Where the portrait of Frank Sinatra once hung when this place was Modo Mio (My Way) you now find one of Raif Erdogan, next to the kitchen where his son now cooks some 35 years later.

So it's a good story. And it's a well-told story, both in written form in the thick, red, bound menu, and by our delightful server with the long red hair, who powerwalks around this place wearing little white gloves, bestowing good food and charming advice.

Start with the house red lentil soup. Lemon, thyme, dried mint and sumac perfume it. Then if you're game or a gang, share the mixed meze platter, which brings a range of cold appetizers -- thick, gritty humus, cinnamon-perfumed and pine nut-stuffed grape leaves, a superb aubergine salad rich with onion, roasted red pepper and garlic, a wedge of feta, a blob of thickly herbed yogurt, and a marvellous mash of tomato, peppers and chilies (the spiciest mound on the plate) -- the whole presented with a bit more panache than usual. This comes with thick house-made pide -- round loaves, an inch deep, cut into triangles, soft in the middle and crisp on the outside, and bearing no resemblance to the industrial pita product sold in supermarkets. Two things: The dish

improves as it warms to room temperature, particularly the dolma (I have a horror of fridge-cold rice), and could we please have more olives? One is never a good thing.

For the main dishes, the menu is divided into lamb, chicken, beef, fish and a children's section, but I went straight for the "chef's special." The iskender kebab is remarkably tender doner (thin shavings of vertical spit-roasted lamb and beef) on a bed of toasted pita cubes soaked in a fresh tomato sauce, served with thick, tangy yogurt. A lamb shank falls nicely off the bone, spilling onto a light eggplant mash. Also on the plate -- garlicky beans, grilled tomato and green pepper, forgettable rice, and fabulous fried potatoes threaded with caramelized onion. Pilia izgara is a supreme of chicken, flattened, rubbed with oil, lemon and thyme and grilled to juicy goodness.

There is sweet baklava (served sorrily with fake cream and chocolate syrup), which is all very well if that's your thing. For my six bucks, the better bet is the milky custard called muhallabi topped with coconut and crushed pistachio.

Round off the evening with Turkish coffee -- just a foamy shot or two of the thick, dark, syrupy brew.

The wine list is limited, mostly mainstream stuff, and with only two Turkish offerings. Unlike the food prices, the price charged for wine is more wincing.

And while I'm whining a bit, the fresh red roses on the lined tables and the white candles in their tall glass stands could have coped better with a softer light, just as the bare walls could cope with just the right art. Food this fresh, this good, and service this warm deserve ambience to match.