

Istanbul Üniversitesi Sosyoloji Dergisi

INVITED REVIEW

Gifts of Food in Ottoman Culture

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He who comes from a garden brings roses as a gift

He who comes from a sweet shop brings sweets.

Mevlânâ Celâleddin Rûmî (1207, p. 73)

Presenting food as gifts, particularly fresh fruit and confectionery, was widespread at all levels of Ottoman society on diverse occasions. Unlike expensive gifts such as silverware, jewelled objects and kaftans made of rich fabrics presented on state occasions such as royal circumcision celebrations, gifts of food were not indicators of wealth and power. They were often, although not invariably, home-grown or home-made, so had the advantage of putting the poorest giver on an equal footing with the richest and avoiding the taint of ostentation that would detract from the giver's sincerity.

Depending on the circumstances and intent of the giver, gifts of food could express many things: congratulations, good-will, welcome, gratitude and condolences, or simply be a way of “asking after” someone (*hatır sormak*). They could be spontaneous acts of friendship or kindness; dictated by custom on special occasions such as religious holidays or rites of passage; or if the recipients were members of the ruling class, a way of expressing loyalty and currying favour without risk of the gift being interpreted as bribery.

In the private sphere friends and acquaintances frequently exchanged gifts of food. In 1660 a dervish named Seyyid Hasan recorded in his diary that his friend Ali Çelebi had given him some yellow pears and a basket filled with two varieties of grape (black *keçimemesi* and *tilkikuyruğu*) from his garden (Can, 2015, p. 25; Faroghi, 2003, p. 273–301). While fruit was the most common gift, sweetmeats and sweet pastries came a close second. An 18th century recipe for a sweet pastry called *katayif micmeri* includes the information that it can be sent to “other places and to friends”, and the anonymous author of the same recipe book recalls that when living in Bursa a local notable called Şeyh Muhammed cooked a type of helva and sent it as a Ramazan gift to a friend

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(Sefercioğlu, 1985, p. 19, 27). Baklava was a popular gift among the elite from the early 17th century (Withers, 1737, p. 727).¹ In Ramazan Muslims sent trays of this sweet pastry to friends, neighbours, school teachers and medrese students, and at Easter Orthodox Christians reciprocated by sending their neighbours hard boiled eggs that had been dyed red, Easter buns and *koliva* (boiled wheat with almonds, sugar and spices) (Abdülaziz Bey, 1995, p. 76, 273).

Exchanging gifts of food was common in Ramazan and the three-day *bayram* that followed. Stephan Gerlach, who served as chaplain to the Austrian ambassador in the 1570s recorded in his diary that during the bayram some Ottoman palace officials and “other Turks” sent the ambassador gifts of bread and pastries, and that it was customary for the Turks to exchange similar gifts of “bread, pastries, apples and pears” with one another (Gerlach, 2007, p. 166). In the late 18th century, when the English scholar and antiquarian Richard Chandler was in Athens his Turkish and Greek acquaintances in Athens sent him “pomegranates, oranges and lemons fresh gathered, pastry, and other like articles” every day during the month of Ramazan in 1764 (Chandler, 1817, p. 150).

In rural areas passing strangers were likely to be offered gifts of food. When the 17th century Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi was crossing an alpine pasture near Bursa, nomad shepherds gave them several sheep, which Evliya Çelebi and his companions roasted (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 2, p. 20–21). When Mark Sykes and his party were travelling through the eastern Anatolian province Erzincan in the early 20th century, village children brought them cucumbers and watermelons (Sykes, 1915, p. 399). Lady Agnes Dick Ramsay, who accompanied her husband the archaeologist William on expeditions exploring ancient sites in central Turkey, was on various occasions given milk, honey, apples, pears and cucumbers by local villagers and townspeople (Ramsay, 1897, p. 35, 210, 268). Travellers also carried gifts of food. When the young Vehbi Koç first travelled from Ankara to Istanbul as a teenager in 1916, his family gave him butter, honey and *pastırma* for relatives and others he would visit in the capital (Koç, 1974, p. 23).

In court circles an early example of an unofficial gift of food expressing goodwill and friendship is “fish and other things” sent by grand vezir Mehmed Paşa to the Austrian ambassador David Ungnad in June 1576. Since Ungnad had been in Istanbul since the autumn of 1573, the gift suggests that a more personal relationship had grown up between the two men, and possibly that such informal gestures were a part of sustained diplomatic relations (Gerlach, 2007, p. 373). The custom of giving fruit was in place by the early 17th century, when Ottaviano Bon observed, “The Grand Seigneur, nor any of his women, or servants in the Seraglio, cannot want for fruit, there being

1 Withers’ work is actually a loose translation of an account by the Venetian bailo Ottaviano Bon, writing in 1604–07, and was originally published in Samuel Purchas (1625), *Purchas His Pilgrims*, London, vol. 2, pp. 1580–1611.

at this time of year so many presents, of all sorts of fruits, brought thither, besides what comes from the King's own gardens" (Withers, 1737, p. 727). This seems to have given rise to a formalised etiquette of fruit giving that evolved over the 17th century with the addition of flowers and sometimes sweetmeats to the fruit. Newly arrived foreign ambassadors began to be greeted with gifts of fruit and flowers from the grand vezir (Sak, 2006, p. 154). After the Treaty of Vasvar was concluded between the Ottomans and Austrians in 1664, the Austrian ambassador arrived in Edirne in May the following year and was greeted by "a Present, of several sorts of Fruits, to the number of thirty Baskets" sent by the grand vizier (Burbury, 1671, p. 149). In 1749, following the Austrian ambassador's audience at the palace, the ambassador was sent "several dishes of fruit, sweetmeats, and flowers" (Charlemont, 1984, p. 174). Gifts of fruit and flowers were sent as congratulations to the sultan, royal women, grand vezir and other high ranking palace and state dignitaries on special occasions like Ramazan, the eve of religious festivals, Nevruz (the ancient Persian new year, celebrated on 22 March), Muharrem /the first month of the Islamic year), births and weddings (Reindl-Kiel, 2006, p. 74; Sak, 2006, pp. 152–156). They were also sent at the accession of a new sultan; so, for example, the grand vezir sent 30 decorated trays of fruit in "Polish work" dishes and 20 trays of flowers to the mother of Mustafa III when he succeeded to the throne on 31 October 1757. Similarly various officials, including the admiral of the fleet sent fruit and flowers to the mother of Mustafa IV at his accession on 31 May 1807 (Yıldırım, 2007, p. 24, 145). Royal brides also received baskets of fruit and flowers from their new husbands (Atasoy, 2002, p. 67). A less common occasion for sending fruit was the launching of a new royal barge in 1763, when gifts of 80 baskets of fruit were sent to the sultan, 50 to the grand vezir, 30 to the şeyhülislam and 25 to the sultan's chief armourer (Atasoy, 2002, p. 66). Even the twice-annual move of the royal household between the winter and summer palaces was included among occasions that required commemoration in this manner.

Condolences for tragic events and adversities were also expressed by fruit and flowers. On the death from smallpox of Selim III's three-year old cousin Emine Sultan in 1791, 100 baskets of fruit and 32 baskets of flowers were each sent to the sultan and his mother Mihrişah Sultan (Yıldırım, 2007, p. 77). In the official sphere the government sent gifts of fruit and flowers to the Russian Embassy when a Russian ship was attacked and its flag torn in 1819²; and in the wake of a fire in the European district of Istanbul in August 1831, the government sent fruit, sweetmeats and flowers to foreign ambassadors in Galata who were affected by the disaster³.

Away from the capital a variety of foodstuffs made acceptable gifts. For example, a 17th century observer records that when an Ottoman *paşa* arrived on the island of

2 BOA HAT 1165/46094, 29/Z/1234 (19 October 1819).

3 BOA C.HR 129/6444.

Chios, local consuls customarily welcomed him with “two Baskets full of Bread, eight white Wax-Tapers of an ordinary bigness, five Sugar-Loaves, three Pots of Honey, three Pots of Orange-Water, two Baskets full of Pomegranates, two of Limons, two of Water-Melons, two of *Mezingianes* [aubergines] or Violet-Naveurs [purple turnips, i.e. those gathered early in the season with a light purple blush], one of Grapes, one of Grass [i.e. green vegetables], half a dozen of Pidgeons, a dozen of Pullets, and three Sheep” (Thevenot, 1687, p. 102). Local officials presented gifts of food to foreign travellers of standing. When Reinhold Lubenau, an official at the Austrian Embassy, and his companions visited Bursa in 1589, the city governor sent them “an excellent gift consisting of various fruits” (Lubenau, 2012, p. 494). In the 1830s the governor of Gaza presented the traveller Kinglake with “a roast lamb, and a quantity of other cumbrous viands”, most of which Kinglake rather rudely refused, accepting only half a horse load of bread (Kinglake, 1845, p. 356), and in 1848 while visiting Manastir (today Bitola) in Macedonia, the English painter and poet Edward Lear received “a large basket of pears” from the military commander (Lear, 1988, p. 39).

One example of gifts from those of high rank are “two mule loads of sweet confections and other foodstuffs” sent by Abdal Han, the rebellious khan of Bitlis, to Evliyâ Çelebi, who was then serving under Melek Ahmed Paşa, as reassurance of his good intentions (Seyahatnâme, v.5, 1996-2007, p. 25). Another is a gift of large boxes of pistachio nuts, dried peaches and apples from Malatya and honey produced in the mountains of Harput sent by the Ottoman general Hafız Paşa to Helmuth von Moltke in 1838, when he was serving as a captain in the Ottoman army (von Moltke, 1969, p. 154).

In the 19th century when foreign rulers first made state visits to the Ottoman Empire, the etiquette of official gift giving at court had to be adjusted so that the sultan himself sent gifts of fruit rather than the grand vezir on his behalf. Abdülhamid II sent Kaiser Wilhelm II several chests of *akça* pears during his visit in 1898 (Osmanoğlu, 1984, p. 54), and in September 1903 the same sultan sent a chest of melons to Germany for the kaiser’s wife, Empress Augusta Victoria⁴.

Sweet confectionery of various kinds, which symbolised good fortune and prosperity, figured particularly as gifts at rites of passage such as births, marriages and circumcisions. At the birth of the future Selim III on 24 December 1761, his mother Mihrişah Sultan received 360 bowls of sweetmeats as well as the usual fruit and flowers from the grand vezir and other state dignitaries, and 30 bowls of mastic from the superintendent of customs (Sertoğlu, 1992, p.230-234). As notification of the birth she sent bottles of the special spiced sherbet (*lohusa şerbeti*), traditionally drunk by new mothers and their visitors after a baby was born. Six days after a royal birth the “cradle ceremony” (*beşik merasimi*) was held, at which guests were presented with fresh fruit, bouquets

4 BOA Y.PRK.EŞA. 43/76.

of flowers and sweetmeats (Seydi, n.d., p.55; Atasoy, 2002, p.67). Customs surrounding birth were similar in upper and middle class Turkish families in Istanbul. They too sent bottles of *lohusa şerbeti* to friends and acquaintances (Rıza, n.d., p. 106), who visited the new mother three days after the birth, bringing “baskets of sweets prettily got up with flowers and gilt paper and enveloped in gauze tied up with ribbons” (Blunt, 1878, p. 4–6). Those of moderate means sent or gave the new mothers sweet pastries such as *kurabiye* (Rıza, n.d., p. 106), *mâfiş* (Nedim, 2016, p. 125), *zülbiye*, or a sweet musk-flavoured paste called *devâ-i misk* (Celâl, 1946, p. 23).

Marriage customs also included gifts of sweetmeats, ranging from the “30 mules laden with sugar-plums and sweet-meats” sent to Hatice Sultan, the daughter of Mehmed IV, when she married Musahip Mustafa Paşa in 1675 (Coke, 1676, p. 366), to sugared coffee beans given by families of limited means (Saz, 1974, p. 256). Circumcision gifts to Ottoman princes included sugar loaves, sugar candy, model gardens built of sugar, musk lozenges, sugared almonds and boiled sweets, as well as spices, saffron and fresh and dried fruit (Arslan, 2009, p. 18; Hazerfen Hüseyin Efendi, 1998, p. 212, 218, 221, 243; Hafız Mehmet Efendi, 2008, p. 19, 121). In 1577, a Hungarian nobleman Zrinyi György purchased 100 florins’ worth of sugar as a gift for the Ottoman governor of Szigetvar when his son was circumcised (Takats, 1958, p. 47).

Another special occasion at which sweet foods were customarily presented was the *ulufe* ceremony at which the janissaries received not only their three-monthly salaries but trays of baklava. They reciprocated by presenting fruit drops known as *akide*, symbolising loyalty to sultan and state, to the grand vezir, state dignitaries and their own commanders (Işın, 2013, p. 62). In the private sphere, baklava was given as an expression of congratulation on a variety of occasions. The novelist Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar (1864–1944) was sent baklava by neighbours when he first fasted for a day as a child of nine (Gürpınar, 1973, p. 19–20), and another Turkish writer Aziz Nesin (1915-1995) recalls that his mother was expected to bake a tray of baklava for the teacher when he first memorised a surah from the Koran at the age of five, but being too poor to afford sugar baked *börek* instead (Nesin, 1998, p. 32).

Pharmacists and physicians who treated members of the elite traditionally prepared an expensive paste made of ambergris, musk, rose water, spices, sugar and cochineal to distribute to their patients on the eve of Nevruz, the ancient Persian new year celebrated on 22 May (Işın, 2013, p. 88–90; Sak, 2006, p. 152–156).

Gifts of food to the sultan, statesmen and local dignitaries as a way of earning their goodwill. Hope of receiving a reward known as *in’âm*, consisting mainly of substantial sums of money, was a principal incentive in the case of gifts to the sultan, since there was an established system of rewarding those who sent gifts or performed valued services. An *in’âm* register for the year H 909 (26 June 1503–13 June 1504) lists

several examples of rewards for gifts of food that include strawberries, fresh fish, quails, rose water, fruit and pintail ducks (Barkan, 1979, p. 296, 302, 325, 346, 351). The 17th century judge and poet Nev'izâde Atâî gave the sultan and his principal officials celadon bowls filled with *pelte*, a starch pudding flavoured with rose water, made by his own unique method that involved stirring the mixture unceasingly for three hours. He had “meticulously and painstakingly brought this dish to such a glorious state and renown that words hardly suffice to describe it” (Sefercioğlu, 1985, p. 32–33; Ünver, 1948, p. 20; Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi, 1988–2013, p. 40–42). Nev'izâde may have been motivated by pride in his culinary prowess, rather than more materialistic expectations of preferment in his career or monetary reward, but we can only guess. Others sent dishes made by their own cooks to the sultan (Rıza, n.d., p. 131; Hafız Hızır, 1987, p. 164, 166). In 1640, when a beluga sturgeon caught in Büyükçekmece Lagoon west of Istanbul was sent as a gift to Grand Vezir Kara Mustafa Paşa, he in turn sent it to the newly enthroned Sultan İbrahim, whose first meal as sultan consequently included this fish (Seyahatnâme, 1996–2007, v. 6, p. 72).

There are instances of gifts of food to the sultan being rewarded with exemption from certain taxes. Evliyâ Çelebi relates that when Süleyman I conquered the town of Dobroçin in Hungary from the Austrians, the inhabitants wished his campaign well and gave him four gigantic loaves of white bread, each carried on sledges pulled by a hundred pairs of water buffalo; in return the sultan gave them a *muafname* or document of exemption (Seyahatnâme, 1996–2007, v. 7, p. 250). At Gyöngyös in northern Hungary large loaves of bread flavoured with fennel seeds, nigella seeds and sesame seeds were given to Süleyman's great grandson Mehmed III, and again the citizens were rewarded by exemptions from taxation (Seyahatnâme, 1996–2007, v. 7, p. 71). An English traveller who visited the Greek Orthodox Mauromolos monastery on the Bosphorus in the first half of the 18th century was told that the monks had on one occasion presented cherries to an unspecified sultan and thereafter been exempted from the poll tax (Chishull, 1747, p. 42).

Numerous thankyou letters in the correspondence of Pertevniyal Sultan, mother of Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876), concern gifts of food. Some of the givers were tradesmen who supplied the harem with items such as fabrics, ribbons, household linen, porcelain and padlocks;⁵ others were artisans such as jewellery repairers and dressmakers;⁶ and some personal acquaintances.⁷ As well the usual fruits, she was sent yogurt, swordfish, pickles, sweetmeats, butter, bread rings made with milk (*sütlü simit*)

5 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_03144, PER_VAL_SUL_03150; PER_VAL_SUL_02814.

6 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_04679 PER_VAL_SUL_03201.

7 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_03017.pdf.

In this letter Pertevniyal invites the sender, his wife and children to the palace at the *bayram*, suggesting personal acquaintance with the family.

and cheese.⁸ Occasionally Pertevniyal sent these foods to the sultan's table, usually fruit, but also cheese and yogurt.⁹ To senders of several hundred watermelons she explains that she has distributed them to the *eski kalfas* (senior female servants) in the harem.¹⁰ In one case we learn that the gift accompanied a request for a favour, as when she thanks the giver for fruit from his own garden and explains that she has passed on his request for a pension and help with the water supply at his farm.¹¹

The idea that the most acceptable gifts of food were home-grown, home-made, or in the case of fish presumably caught either by or for the sender is reflected in many of Pertevniyal's letters. When we consider official gifts of fruit and flowers in this light, the same principle quite possibly marked the early evolution of the custom in a society where fruit and flower growing were popular pursuits. But as official etiquette demanded that these gifts be sent in ever increasing quantities, sticking to home-grown became impractical and already by the early 17th century baskets of fruit elegantly arranged by royal gardeners could be purchased from palace estates (Withers, 1737, p. 727): "The buyers of it do commonly send it to some great personages; for it is extraordinary good, and so artificially piled up in baskets by the Bustangees, that, for the beauty of it, it oftentimes proves more acceptable than a gift of greater price." By the 1630s eighty shops specialising not just in baskets of fruit but arrangements of fruit and flowers had sprung up in Istanbul to meet the demand (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 1, p. 264). Particularly excellent fruit was also purchased for high prices from private individuals, as in the case of large sour pomegranates growing in the garden of a woman in Istanbul that were sought after as gifts for the sultan and sold for two gold pieces each (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 1, p. 301).

Local delicacies were also regarded as desirable gifts for friends, state officials and the sultan. Evliyâ Çelebi gives many examples of these in his accounts of famous dishes and foodstuffs in Ottoman towns and cities that he visited during more than four decades of travel (1630-1676): pears from Beypazarı near Ankara, which were wrapped in cotton wool and packed in boxes (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 2, p. 242-243); apples from Malatya inscribed with couplets (by means of attaching cut-paper inscriptions to the apples while still green) (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 4, p. 16); fragrant apples from Sudak (Soldaia) in Crimea (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 7, p. 160); dried *gök lop* figs from Köşk in western Anatolia, which were sent to "the seven climes" in wicker baskets (Seyahatnâme,

8 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_04033, PER_VAL_SUL_04039, PER_VAL_SUL_04190, PER_VAL_SUL_04930, PER_VAL_SUL_03109, PER_VAL_SUL_03122, PER_VAL_SUL_02901, PER_VAL_SUL_01486, PER_VAL_SUL_01521).

9 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_04203, PER_VAL_SUL_04566, PER_VAL_SUL_03197 (fruit); PER_VAL_SUL_02914 (mandarin oranges), PER_VAL_SUL_02793, PER_VAL_SUL_03129 (cheese), PER_VAL_SUL_04199 (yogurt).

10 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_03112; PER_VAL_SUL_03121.

11 İ.B.B. Atatürk Kitaplığı, Pertevniyal Valide Sultan Evrakı: PER_VAL_SUL_03116), PER_VAL_SUL_03129.

1996-2007, v. 9, p. 96); prunes from Tirnovi (Veliko Tarnovo) (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 8, p. 89); quince marmalade from Amasya (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 2, p. 98); large olives from Koron preserved in earthenware jars with lemon juice and olive oil (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 8, p. 149); pine honey¹² “as white as muslin” from Seferihisar (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 9, p. 70; Işın, 2013, p. 38–39); Akdağ honey from Ladik (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 2, p. 204); cheese from Çorlu (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 3, p. 172); *pastırma* and garlic sausage from Kayseri (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 3, p. 110); and botargo from Anatolkoz (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 8, p. 277). *Kehk* (twice-baked biscuit) made in Damascus was so prized that according to Evliyâ it was taken as gifts to Arabia, Iran, India and China! This hyperbole may reflect some truth, however, since biscuit was a staple food for travellers and seamen (Seyahatnâme, 1996-2007, v. 9, p. 279). Palace archive documents also record local specialities presented as gifts, such as, watermelons from Tekirdağ in 1863¹³ and *şekerpare* pears from Konya in 1899¹⁴. One early 19th century English traveller tells of dates stuffed with almonds sent as gifts to Istanbul by the monks of Sinai (Burckhardt, 1822, p. 602).

Conclusion

Ottoman culture could be said to revolve around the sharing of food; in daily life, official ceremonies and celebrations of all kinds. Gifts of food served an important function by conveying unspoken messages of goodwill and sympathy from givers to recipients. This symbolic character and the fact that they were appropriate on almost any occasion distinguished them from food offered as charity or hospitality. They had the advantage of avoiding undertones of corruption and allowing people at all levels of society to engage in gift-giving. The sultan himself did not disdain gifts of food, however humble the gift itself or the status of the giver. Even though such gifts were not necessarily disinterested, a basket of pears or a bowl of home-made yogurt from a well-wisher carried a sincerity that no expensive and ostentatious gift could match.

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¹² Pine honey was made by bees feeding off a type of manna deposited by the aphid species *Marchalina hel-lenica* on the branches of the Turkish pine (*Pinus brutia*).

¹³ BOA Yıldız EE 142/14.

¹⁴ BOA Yıldız PRK.UM 47/52.

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