In my Istanbul neighborhood the simit-seller came by every morning and sometimes again in the early afternoon. He pushed a table-like cart filled with rows of thin, donut-shaped sesame breads, his loud voice yelling “Simitçii… Simitçii (simit-seller, simit-seller)” all the way down my very steep street.

Like the thousands of other simitçis you still see all over the city—and, really, all over Turkey—my simit-seller is an integral part of Turkish life, of a tradition that goes back to the earliest years of the Ottoman Empire.

Documents show that as long ago as the early fifteenth century, at least one mosque kitchen was serving simits. An Ottoman price register from 1525 mentions simits, too.

A hundred years later, Evliya Çelebi, the great chronicler of Ottoman life, wrote that there were seventy simit bakeries in Istanbul alone, with three hundred people working in them—something the collapse of the empire did little to change.

“No breakfast can take the place of simit with tea!” wrote one of modern Turkey’s best-known writers, Sait Faik Abasıyanık, in a 1952 short story about the bread. The word has even taken on other meanings: the name for the ring-shaped life preserver that is found on the sides of every ferry on Istanbul’s busy Bosphorus is also derived from the word simit.
Although they’re slightly sweet from being dipped in a bath of fruit syrup (pekmez) before baking, simits are a savory treat. They are traditionally eaten with a mild, feta-like cheese and tea. Nowadays, though, simits are usually served with cream cheese or a soft, foil-wrapped cheese. They can be eaten for breakfast, as a mid-morning or mid-afternoon snack, or even as a light dinner. Although simits are eaten anywhere, anytime, they are really, at heart, a street food—best bought and eaten on the street.

So essential are simits and simit-selling to life in Turkey that they sometimes enter political debate. During his 2002 election campaign, the Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan repeatedly talked about how, as a teenager, he had to help support his family by selling simits on the streets of Kasımpaşa, the rough Istanbul neighborhood where he grew up. The story simultaneously upped his street cred and pointed out how distant his opponents—one of whom could boast simit-selling experience—were from the common man. (The strategy appears to have worked: last year, Erdogan was elected to a third term.)

Much like baguettes in France, the price of simits is strictly regulated, and price increases have to be weighed against the inviolable right of Turkey’s poor to afford them. After a recent drought pushed up the price of flour, Istanbul simit-makers successfully petitioned to have the price raised from seventy kurus, about thirty cents, to one Turkish lira, about fifty-five cents. But right before the June 2011 general election, a member of the conservative Saadet Partisi (Felicity Party) accused the ruling AK party of proposing a minimum wage that would be too low for a family of five to afford their daily tea and simits.

“Simit is the meat of the poor,” Musa Dağdeviren, the owner of the legendary Istanbul restaurant Çiya and a self-taught food anthropologist told me. “A simit is like hope. Even if your pockets are empty, you can always get a simit.”

Simits Today

Even at five o’clock in the morning, the upstairs room of the Tophane Simitçisi bakery in a hilly residential neighborhood of Istanbul is uncomfortably hot, because it sits directly over the bakery’s large brick oven. Two thin windows near the floor open in narrow horizontal slits—think enormous mail slots—above the ceiling of the oven room below. The tile floor is covered with a thin layer of flour and sesame seeds. (One historian told me that the name simit comes from an old Persian word for sesame. I couldn’t verify that, but sesame seeds and simit are so connected that one simit entrepreneur I met had business cards made to look as though sesame seeds had spilled on them.)

Along the far wall of the bakery is a deep marble countertop. In the corner of the counter is a mound of dough waiting to be rolled out. The dough is a simple one: flour, yeast, water, and salt. Some recipes call for oil or butter, but the bakers I talked to agreed that such an addition was not traditional. You mix the four ingredients into a thick, sticky dough and let it rest at room temperature, for no more than two hours, then shape it.

I watched the two simit-ustası—simit makers (ustası means “wright” or “smith”)—mechanically shaping the dough. One grabbed a fistful in each hand and simultaneously rolled each mass out into a rope about the thickness of a man’s pointer finger. When both ropes were several inches long, he flipped the rope in his right hand so it was up against the one in his left. Then he rolled his right hand forward to twist the ropes around each other into a double helix, and then twisted that around the back of his hand to form a ring. He was incredibly fast, easily filling a large tray in just a few minutes.

He invited me to try. But no surprise, the process was much harder than the simit-ustası made it look. He and his coworker laughed, nicely, at me, and my teacher tried to salvage my attempt before he finally gave up and mashed it back into the pile of dough.

He passed his finished simits, which were amazingly uniform in shape and size, to the simit-ustası on his right, who dropped them into a large wire colander sitting in a bowl of dut pekmez—a molasses-like mulberry syrup—diluted with water. (Some bakers use a mixture of mulberry pekmez and pekmez made from other fruits.) The pekmez bath, along with special flours (simits are made with grade II flour; grade I is the flour used for pastries like baklava and börek), yeast, and sesame seeds, are what simit purists say give the breads their distinctive taste. Then the simit-ustası dragged each simit through a tray of sesame seeds until its surface was completely covered. He lined them up on large metal trays, which he passed down through the slot windows to one of the bakers below.

After receiving the heavy tray, the bakers take each raw simit, reshape it, and reroll it in sesame seeds. They drape the finished simits over their hands like a bunch of shopping bag handles, then lay them out, about eighteen at a time, on a long, narrow peel and slide them into the oven.

The brick oven looks like what you’d find in a pizzeria—a metal door framed by a brick arch. At the top of the arch a dusty Turkish eye—the round blue “eyes” used throughout the Middle East to ward off evil—watches over the operation.
The bakery, like most traditional simit bakeries, is family owned and is mostly a wholesale operation. In the front wall is a long, thin window about six feet long and a foot high, as if somebody had built the front of the store, then realized that the room wasn’t deep enough. So a window was put in as a quick fix, because having it open is the only way the bakers can slide their wooden peels far back enough to get them out of the oven.

“I’m thirty-seven now. I was born in the bakery,” said Aydin Eryılmaz, one of the brothers who run it now. “I can’t do anything else.” Eryılmaz learned the business from his father. He loves the work, but it’s tough—the bakery runs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, even during Ramadan, when many, including Eryılmaz himself, are fasting. He hopes his daughters, who are nine and fourteen, “will get educated so they can do something else.” He says his brothers’ children, too, are hoping for a different future.

In the old days, there were strict rules about who was allowed to bake simits. Nowadays, any bakery can, though many, like this one, still specialize in simits, along with a few other, related, breads—äcma, which are like ring-shaped challah rolls, and poğaça, a flaky filled pastry reminiscent of an empanada—many of which have also been around for centuries, and which are often also sold by simit-sellers.

Like just about everyone I met who was involved in the simit business, Eryılmaz’s family comes from Tokat, a city in north-central Anatolia, about five hundred miles east of Istanbul, near the Black Sea. Migrants from Tokat have been the major force in the simit business since the 1960s. Before that, Eryılmaz told me, migrants from Kastamonu, two hundred miles to the west, controlled the business. But as far as I can figure out, this is a story of chain migration. Much like the Gujaratis who own gas stations, people from Tokat are in the simit business simply because other people from Tokat are in the business.

There remains something medieval about the relationship between bakery and simitçi. When I visited their bakery in Tophane, Eryılmaz and his brother spent much of the morning loading and unloading their gray minivan with trays of simits, which he delivered to hotels, cafés, and the bakery’s simitçis, whose carts stand at ferry terminals and on street corners not far from his bakery. The bakeries often own the carts “their” simitçis sell from, and they pay for the licenses. Like other street vendors, simitçis have to get an isgaliye, or license; these are issued by each of Istanbul’s thirty-nine belediye, or municipalities. Only simitçis who have carts can get the licenses. Each district also has specific rules about what the carts can look like: basically, they are about the size of a small kitchen table, with a glass box on top where the simits are displayed.

The simitçi buys his supply of bread from the baker, even if he is using the bakery’s cart. The wholesale price the simitçi pays, and thus the simitçi’s cut, varies from bakery to bakery, but it is roughly 30 percent of their retail value. The simit-seller keeps the difference, and then uses that money to buy the next day’s supply. This system means he’s perpetually in debt to the bakery. The arrangement also means the simitçi is responsible for getting rid of any extras he has left at the end of the day. (Though one simitçi told me that never happens. If he has too many, he simply stays on the street until he manages to sell them.)

Apart from the minivan, the selling of simit today largely resembles what Çelebi, the Ottoman writer, witnessed in the seventeenth century: “[simit-bakers] put their loads of simits on carts to bring them to carriers who then display and distribute them to the people.”

History

The precise origins of the simit remain obscure. While there is clear documentation of their presence in early Ottoman times, some people told me they were introduced to Turkey from Central Asia; Eryılmaz told me he thought they were invented by Armenians. There are references to simits that predate the 1453 Ottoman conquest of Constantinople. In 1432 a Karamid leader, Ibrahim Bey, set up a vakf, or endowment, for a mosque complex in Karaman, in south-central Turkey. In it he called for the creation of an imaret, or soup kitchen, to serve people who worked in the complex, poor people, and travelers. In the deed, he wrote that the imaret “must offer guests simits.”

Over the centuries, simits spread throughout the Ottoman Empire, and versions of the bread can still be found in places like Greece and Macedonia, as well as the farthest corners of Turkey itself. Some historians have argued that the simit spread as far as Eastern Europe, where it became the progenitor of the bagel.

It’s unclear when the simit evolved into the version we know today. In 1553, for example, a German traveler, Hans Dernschwam, wrote that “[the Turks] also bake round, full-flavored bagels, strewn with sweet, white poppy seeds.” (I occasionally saw simits with poppy, rather than sesame seeds—usually in bakeries, rather than on the street. Until I read this five-and-a-half-century-old account, I assumed they were a novelty item.) And variations remain: in the area around Izmir, on Turkey’s Aegean Coast, they are known as gevrek (and have a slightly different taste than the simits...
Regardless of its origins, simit culture seems to have survived the end of the Ottoman court just fine. Today it is as street food that the bread holds its legendary status. Musa Dağdeviren, the chef and food anthropologist, argues that simits must have come from the people because the rich—having access to whatever they want—have no impetus to come up with something new. “It’s the poor who don’t have any choice,” he said, “who have to be creative.”
Street Food Rules

As Turkey rapidly modernizes, the changing culture of street food is posing a new threat to the simit. Turkey has always been a street-food culture. Besides simits, Turkish coffee and mulberry juice are still sold by men carrying containers on their backs; there are mackerel sandwiches made on the wharves; stuffed mussels hawked on street corners; syrupy semolina cakes bought from carts. You could easily eat three full meals a day, plus snacks, without ever going to a restaurant, and what you find on the street is often better than the equivalent restaurant food.

But the rules have been changing, driven partly by Turkey’s efforts to join the European Union. These days, the only way to sell food on the street is if it is behind glass. Samim Saner, head of the Turkish Food Safety Association, told me that the regulations also require vendors to wear gloves and use tongs when handling the food. (Although many simitçis use glass, and some use tongs, I never saw one who used gloves.) This means that simitçis like the one in my neighborhood, who covers his simits with thick plastic sheeting, and Mesut Tanus—a simitçi who, like the man in nineteenth-century paintings, still carries simits on a tray on his shoulders—are breaking the law.

Saner acknowledges that a glass case lacks the charm of a simitçi carrying a tray on his head. “On the one hand, of course [selling simits from an open tray] is part of our culture,” he said. “But we’re food scientists, not anthropologists.”

But Tanus says the laws don’t just go against tradition. There are practical concerns, too. “If they’re in a closed box,” he said, “they get damp, which makes them less crunchy.” And he says it would be nearly impossible to push a cart through the crowded neighborhood where he sells his simits.

Meanwhile, the stricter licensing of vendors has given the government a way to keep track of the simit-sellers and enforce the new rules. Recep Yıldız, the official responsible for licensing for Fatih, a large district on the European side of Istanbul, guesses that there are around two thousand licensed simit-sellers in the city. (Oddly, for all the bureaucracy around food vending, the authority is still very diffuse; until recently there were multiple agencies at the national level that were responsible for the regulations.) But regulations have done little to stop the unlicensed vendors. “The police vans get completely filled up with confiscated simits,” Yıldız told me. Plenty of other simitçis escape punishment, either because the police have too much else to do, or because they look the other way. (Or maybe they just like simits too much.) Mesut Tanus told me he had had his simits confiscated only three times. And I saw unlicensed simit-sellers all over the country, selling from tables, from open carts, and from their heads.

The Simit King

The largest threat to traditional simits, however, may come from stricter laws but from a combination of changing tastes and the simits’ own success. With Turkey’s business-friendly economy opening up to foreign companies, both simits and simitçis are losing ground. Traditional bakers say that, faced with endless choices for snacks, Turks are increasingly choosing pizza or Big Macs over simits.

At the same time, simits are frequently available at fast-food outlets in Turkey—from Starbucks to the IKEA café. Leading this trend has been a new chain, started in Turkey itself, called Simit Sarayı (Simit Palace). Founded in 2002 by a Turkish businessman named Haluk Okutur, it has quickly turned into a Turkish Dunkin’ Donuts. The comfortably generic stores, which are everywhere, sell simits and a few other baked goods, Turkish tea, and Turkish coffee. (Simit Sarayı has also spawned imitations large and small, including a little one-off bakery I encountered in a tiny fishing village on Turkey’s Aegean Coast, which went so far as to use the company’s distinctive rounded letters to write its name—also Simit Sarayı—on its T-shirts and plastic shopping bags.)

“Simits needed a kind of revival. So we actually have accomplished this mission, we have revived a traditional food which was disappearing,” Okutur told me when I visited him at Simit Sarayı headquarters in the far eastern reaches of Istanbul. “Our main aim when we started this venture was to give back the reputation of the simit, which was deteriorating…Simit sales were going down, more hygienic production was needed.”

Okutur is pale, quiet, and gentle, with thinning dark hair. The Simit Sarayı headquarters—where all of the company’s product is made—are in offices that, like the company’s stores, are plain. Some of the walls are papered with enormous blow-ups of simits and other breads. Sitting at the conference table in Okutur’s office, I was served plates of cut-up simits and carrot cake; there were napkin dispensers like you’d find in a fast-food restaurant.

There is no way to know how many simits are made or eaten in Turkey, or even in Istanbul. But as Turks turn away from simit-sellers for their simit fixes, Simit Sarayı is leading the way. There are currently two hundred Simit Sarayı outlets in Turkey, with two to three new ones opening every week. Okutur’s vision is ambitious, to say the least.
“Our target is to have the chain with the most outlets in the world,” he said, in a cocky refrain that is often repeated in the press. “If McDonald’s has thirty-four thousand outlets, then today’s target is thirty-four thousand plus one. If some other chain grows bigger than McDonald’s, it’s that number plus one.”

On the wall of his office is a map of the world. He laughed when I asked if it was there to plan Simit Sarayı’s future conquests. There are already Simit Sarayı stores in Holland, Germany, Greece, and Saudi Arabia, among other places, and the first American branch is scheduled to open in New York City soon. (Okutur’s vision for that store is equally bold; he says he is looking at real estate in, among other places, Times Square and on Madison Avenue.)

But if Okutur’s model has other Turkish entrepreneurs salivating, it is giving people like Mehmet Özdemir indigestion. The son of a simit baker from Tokat, Özdemir has devoted his life to the art of the simit. His bakery, in an out-of-the-way industrial neighborhood near the water, still uses a wood-burning oven. Last spring he applied for a European patent for the simit—“The Greeks took baklava,” he said—and he is trying to get certification for a 100-percent-organic simit. “I’m not trying to make a lot of money. I’m trying to preserve a very Turkish part of the culture.”

He almost cried when I asked him how Simit Sarayı has changed the simit business. “They try to make it a business sector. But it’s not, simit is culture,” he said. “These businessmen who entered the simit business said, ‘Oh, I can make simit a brand.’ [But] it’s not business, it’s culture.”

Özdemir’s bakery turns out only a few hundred simits a day. He doesn’t want to make more than that because he might compromise the quality. He sells to a few simiti, but most of his customers are artists and others in the area who seek out his artisanal simits. (Simit Sarayı, by contrast, sells 80 million breads a year; they are all made at company headquarters and shipped out, frozen, to outlets around the world.)

It is hard not to see the two simit-making models—Özdemir’s and Okutur’s—locked in a hopeless David and Goliath struggle. But maybe it’s not as dire as that. Over the last few years, Turkey has been trying to reclaim its Ottoman role as a global political and economic leader. Maybe the simit will be the ambassador it needs.