

Istanbul's Portable Food Practices in the Case of Dolma

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ABSTRACT: Stuffed vine leaves with rice, onion, and spices cooked in olive oil called as *dolma* or *sarma* is one of the most distinguished flavors in Ottoman-Turkish cuisine. In fact, although the preparation of dolma/ sarma is a very complicated technique, its consumption is very practical so they are considered also as a portable food as a kind of snack preferred in open-air gatherings. This study aims to reveal the place of dolma or sarma outside of the home as a portable food in street and also social gatherings like picnics, hammam in Istanbul during the last period of the Ottoman Empire in the nineteenth century. Ottoman memoirs, novels, and some archival documents constitute the main sources used in this purpose.

Introduction

One of the most common and popular vegetable dishes in Turkish cuisine is dolma. As a form of cooking, dolma means a vegetable or fruit that is stuffed with rice or bulgur. The word dolma comes from the verb 'doldurmak' (to stuff something) in Turkish. While peppers, cabbages, eggplant, tomatoes are the most common plants to make dolma, any fresh or dry vegetable or fruit that can be stuffed can be used to cook it. Since dolma is a very old and common technique of cooking, it can be prepared with different methods, and it has several variations. One of the most common variations of the dolma is *sarma* (stuffed vine leaves). The name 'sarma' comes from the verb 'sarmak' (to wrap something) in Turkish, and it means a dish, which is made by wrapping leaves. For sarma making, although most commonly vine and cabbage leaves are used, many other types of leaves and herbs are also used in various parts of Anatolia.¹

Regarding the different cooking methods, cooking dolma with olive oil was a remarkably popular one in Ottoman Istanbul cuisine. Cooking dolma with olive oil appeared firstly in cookbooks during the nineteenth century. In Istanbul sarma, which is cooked with olive oil and without meat, was called fake (*yalancı*) dolma. The recipes, prepared with rice, onions, spices, pine nuts, currants, olive oil, and vine leaves, was first mentioned in the cookbook of Mehmet Kamil's *Aşçıların Sığınağı* (*Refuge of Cooks*), which was published in 1844.² Stuffed grape leaves in olive oil, were called as fake (*yalancı*) dolma because it was prepared without meat. Indeed, it was essentially a cooking technique developed by the Christian community living in the Ottoman lands during their fasting times and it became widespread in Istanbul's cuisine in the nineteenth century.³

When dolma is cooked with meat, it is classed in the hot food category, while those cooked with olive oil are classed in the cold food category. As a common dish for residents of Ottoman Istanbul, dolma was eaten in various social contexts like banquets, weddings, and dinners during Ramadan. However, thanks

to its portability aspect, dolma was also consumed in streets, hammams, and promenades. In such context, dolma cooked in olive oil was preferred because it had great ease of eating and transport. Once people put dolma on a plate or in a basket, they were able to carry it to wherever they go, and those small and cold pieces were perfect finger foods because people did not need to have to use a fork or knife. This aspect of the dolma made it fit for both a palace banquet and a promenade.

About the History of Dolma

Dolma represents a great cultural heritage. It is one of the most refined examples of consuming vegetables. Marianna Yerasimos says, 'dolma is the only dish to have stood the test of time and retain its status despite its many rivals'.⁴ Therefore, although Ottoman cuisine is extremely rich in terms of vegetable dishes, dolma comes to our minds in the first place. Today, we come across many countries dolma and sarma in the old Ottoman geography to Sweden. Even the origins of the name are derived from Turkish words.

As mentioned by Alan Davidson:

Dolmas are vernacular food in Turkey, the Balkans, the Southern Caucasus, Iran, C. Asia (where the word differs in form according to the local Turkish language: *dolâma* in Turkmen, *tulma* in Tatar), and in Egypt, the Fertile Crescent, and Arabia.⁵

It should be noted that in Ottoman cuisine, dolma is not only made of vegetables. Its origins as a cooking technique go back to former times. Günay Kut notes that a type of dolma called *simsımra*k (stuffed mutton intestines) was identified in *Divan-ı Lügat-ı Türk*.⁶ This shows us that the stuffing technique was known in Central Asian Turkic cuisine since the eleventh century.

Since the beginning of the fifteenth century, stuffed vegetables and fruits with meat appeared in Ottoman sources. For example, in the cooking manuscript edited by Şirvani various dolma names were mentioned. Dolma, one of the sought-after tastes of banquet and entertainment tables, appears immediately on the menus. Stuffed gourd and stuffed eggplant were among the dishes served in the 1539 festival organized for the circumcision of the sons of Suleiman the Magnificent.⁷

Some seventeenth-century sources emphasize some types of dolma, such as stuffed onions, stuffed carrots, stuffed turnips, stuffed cabbage, stuffed borage leaves, and stuffed watermelon. For Yerasimos during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, old habits of cooking vegetable and meat dishes began to be abandoned.⁸ In addition, Dolma was sold in cookshops since the earliest times. Evliya Çelebi, the famous traveler of the seventeenth century mentions that stuffed gourd, stuffed sheep sausages, onion, eggplant, and stuffed cabbage were the dolma varieties sold in cookshops in Ottoman-İstanbul.⁹ Mustafa Altıntaş also notes that in Istanbul's cookshops, dolma was sold by the piece.¹⁰

Nowadays, although not all the dolma and sarma recipes from the old centuries are applied, some are still alive, and they will be passed down from generation to generation.

Female Vendors Selling Stuffed Vine and Cabbage Leaves: Arab Nannies

Street food sellers constituted a significant branch of Istanbul's culinary culture, and the richness of the cuisine was also reflected in the public areas during the Ottoman Era from the fifteenth to the twentieth century as witnessed by travelers' accounts and archival materials. Many people and shops were selling food, and street vendors were also essential participants in this business network. Thanks to their mobility, the sellers provided their portable food during the day to many different city dwellers, like shopkeepers, immigrant workers, and students.

Dolma was sold also as a portable food in the Istanbul's streets during the nineteenth century. Arab nannies (called *Arab bacı*) have been trying to make a living by selling dolma (stuffed vine or cabbage leaves with olive oil), in the city. Their existence hints at the complex and diverse form of the late Ottoman Istanbul's street food vendor profile.

The famous folklore researcher Pertev Naili Boratav noted that these women were brought to the Ottoman lands by piracy or being bought from slave traders from various parts of Africa. As domestic servants, they were responsible for childcare, the kitchen, and other daily chores. After leaving the mansions where they worked, they used to work as vendors to support themselves. These women who took place in the social memory as sesame and dolma makers were trying to make a living by traveling to various parts of Istanbul, selling sesame halva, cookies, and various dolma (stuffed vine or cabbage leaves with olive oil), and roasted chickpeas (called *leblebi*).¹¹ Arab nannies used to go around the city, from the baths to weddings, to the bazaars and mosques, and sell the food they made. When we look at the Ottoman Archives, we can reveal that the women who sell dolma often asked for help from the state. For example, according to an archival document dated from 1860, it is seen that an Arab woman named *Zülgaffar* asked for help from the state. The interesting part here is that it was stated in the document that this woman sells dolma.¹²

The memoir of an Ottoman gentleman called Abdülaziz bey provides a detailed description of 'women who sell dolma' in his book that gives detailed information about the Ottoman customs and ceremonies traditions in Istanbul during the 19th century: 'These women would leave the house with a chador on their back, a sash tied around their waist, a headscarf around their necks, a camisole called *kaşbastı*, a sesame basket in their hands, and a stuffed pot on their heads. Arab nannies used to sell the dolma they made at the market exits and around the mosque so that they could be closer to the shopkeepers and bachelors. Frequently, they would stand at the gate of the bazaar on the *Kaşıkcılar* side of the Bayezid Mosque, put the stuffed pot on a small chair that they brought with it, place the lid under the pot, sit next to them and wait for customers. They had sold stuffed vine leaves with olive oil or stuffed cabbage.'¹³

In her novel, *Sinekli Bakkal*, Halide Edip Adıvar, a well-known public intellectual, and writer, mentions also that an Arab Nannie named Zarafet, who sells stuffed vegetables in the Aksaray district of Istanbul.¹⁴

Dolma as a Portable Food in Promenade

Eating out has a long and deep history. People ate outside their homes in the early modern period for various reasons, such as military expeditions, feasts, and pilgrimages to holy places. In the current literature of eating out show that in the second half of the eighteenth century, dining open-air became as a pleasure and leisure activity in Europe. With the urbanization process in the nineteenth century, escaping the crowd and noise of the city and meeting with nature began to gain importance for urban people.¹⁵ Eating more ruleless in the countryside, acting outside of specific table rules, and spending time in nature turned into important activities. Although picnic firstly emerged during hunting parties in early modern Europe, it reached its current meaning over time.¹⁶ Picnics, which were social organizations where everyone shared their meals, have turned into an activity of eating easy-to-make meals and having a pleasant time in the open air around beautiful views.¹⁷

Compare to Europe, open air-eating practices during the promenade (which was called *mesire*) were an old tradition in Ottoman culture. In the Ottoman context, although the tradition of having fun by eating in the open air has existed since early modern times, it has been institutionalized since the eighteenth century and has more profound meanings.¹⁸ The *mesire* world comes from the Arabic root *syrr*, which means ‘*place to visit*.’¹⁹ For the early modern period, Fatma Yaşar points out that:

Picnic as a term refers to both a space and an action. On the other hand, *mesire* was defined as a space (ism-i mekan of *seyr*), or *mesiregah*, where people ride for amusement and excursion (*tenezzüh* and *teferriü*), are defined as acts related to *mesire*.²⁰

Visiting promenade had been a significant part of Ottoman social life at certain times of year since the early modern period. There were gardens and promenade areas used by primarily members of the dynastic family, ordinary people, and the upper class. While there were also gardens that were only open to the usage of the dynasty in the eighteenth century, the public began to use gardens and promenades more widely.²¹

There were many reasons for people to go to the promenade in Istanbul. To have a good time in a place with a nice panorama and clear air, if there is a portion of delicious food in that neighborhood, go and eat from it or visit a religiously holy place. When the Ottomans were going to a promenade, they would go for something famous in that region. For example, they used to go to Beykoz (the *district of Istanbul*) to eat lamb's feet or to the Göksu for its famous corn and eggplants.²²

As shown by Samiha Ayverdi's memoirs:

In July and August, especially on Fridays, it was customary to go to Joshua's Hill together. People used to make preparations for visiting the promenade and the grave of Joshua, and they would come with them, preparing their halvah and dolma.²³

People used to go to the promenades to spend time outdoors in spring and summer. Istanbul also had many advantages in this regard. There were many promenade areas from the city's center to its peripheries. People from all segments of society went to the promenade and had a good time. In the last periods of the Ottoman Empire, the Göksu area (the district of Istanbul on the Anatolian side) was a frequent destination for upper-class people. In contrast, Kağıthane, one of the most famous promenades of the period, appealed to broader segments of society.

When people went to the recreation areas, they would take food that they could easily carry. Dolma (stuffed vine leaves with olive oil) was also an indispensable part of this menu. We come across this menu quickly in many novels, memoirs, and travel records belonging to the Ottoman Empire to the until Republican era. As an example, Balıkhane Nazırı Ali Rıza Bey expresses that the classical Kağıthane promenade menu consists of cold dishes, dolma (stuffed vine leaves with olive oil), söğüş (lamb cold cuts), and sütlü irmik helvası (semolina halva with milk).²⁴

Ottoman writer, Sermet Muhtar Alus explain also in one of the newspaper articles that he used to go to the Langa orchards in Istanbul with many foods such as dolma (stuffed vine leaves with olive oil), semolina halva, söğüş (cold cuts), cacık (yogurt with cucumber), cucumber and oil.²⁵

Ahmet Mithat Efendi was one of the famous authors and intellectuals of the late Ottoman period. His Romans include many detailed excursion scenes from Istanbul. For instance, in *Felâhî Bey and Rakım Efendi*, published in 1875 there is a Kağıthane scene. The menu consisted of dolma (stuffed vine leaves with olive oil), söğüş (cold cuts), and halva.²⁶

Promenade entertainments are diverse in the Ottoman Empire. There are many promenade entertainments called by different names. For example, at the end of the year, the children who went to primary school were taken to the promenade for entertainment and rest, accompanied by their teachers. The children's mothers prepared dolma (stuffed grape leaves with olive oil). The wealthy part of the neighborhood also provided the necessary tools and equipment for the children's entertainment, and three or four lambs were bought with the money collected.²⁷

Samiha Ayverdi says that Arabian called *halayiks* were having fun while they were gathering wild herbs in pastures in spring at the beginning of May. These Arab women, who went to the Veli Efendi and Çırpıcı meadows of Istanbul and the Bülbül meadow in Üsküdar, used to sit in a different place from the people and organize various entertainments for themselves during the day. They used to bring classic promenade dishes such as halva and dolma.²⁸

Abdüzaziz Bey focuses on the promenade experiences of both upper and middle-class women while describing the Ottoman ladies' preparations for the promenade with detailed descriptions. Dolma a delicious and easily transportable food, was one of the common items in the menus. A busy work begins in the mansions while the ladies' bridesmaids prepare dolma (stuffed vegetables with olive oil), semolina halva, savoury pastry with cheese (*börek*), and *söğüş* (cold cuts) as promenade meals. On the *selamlık* (the part of a house reserved for men) side of the mansions, stuffed lamb, broad beans, and artichokes cooked in olive oil were prepared also. A similar menu could be seen at the promenade table of the middle-class ladies who did not live in the mansion. Excited preparations begin in those kitchens as well. Dolma (stuffed grape leaves with olive oil), semolina halva, and *söğüş* (cold cuts) were cooked one night before. In addition, people did not forget fruits and salads these foods such as boiled eggs, spring onions, cheese, sardines, and dried mackerel have been prepared according to the season.²⁹

In short, recreational days were places where moments Ottomans spent their time with their family members, relatives, and friends and they have been socialized. Meals eaten at the promenade constituted a vital part of the entertainment, and almost everyone had a similar menu, serious preparations were made before going to the promenade, cold and easily transported food was prepared and dolma was the ubiquitous one.

Hamam Entertainment

Hamam culture has an essential place in Ottoman social life. The hamam not only functions as a place to visit once a week and clean the body but also functions as a center where men and women gather and socialize separately. Especially for women, going to the hamam have a remarkable place in their social lives. In addition, to weekly bath days, women also have special days such as the bridal and the postpartum hamam, where they have fun among themselves. Likewise, in the preparations for the promenade, there is a preparation process for going to the hamam, and suitable, easily transportable food is prepared for the bath.

Hamam entertainments are widely featured in many works.

In one of his writings, well-known author Musahipzade Celal narrates that:

The postpartum woman was taken to the hamam on the fortieth day after birth. Midwives, relatives, and neighbors are invited to the bath. Some postpartum hammams were crowded like a wedding.

Dancers were played in the bath. For the guests, stuffed peppers (biber dolması), pickles(*turşu*), sherbets, and coffees were served.³⁰

This description of Musahipzade Celal implies that consuming dolma was so much embedded in many different daily practices of Istanbul's people. Besides being a popular and commonly consumed dish, also on such special occasions like hamam meetings, people preferred dolma. In another example, dolma consumption was mentioned by Hagop Mintzuri, an Armenian author who lived in Istanbul.

Hagop Mintzırı describes women's hamam entertainment:

According to him, the menu for the bath day was vibrant. He states that women bring with them anything that should be eaten cold. For example, beans, dolma, halva, sausage, pastrami, olives, and onion. Halvah and dolma were not just one type, but more than one. Dolma can be prepared with tomatoes, peppers or vine, and stuffed leaves. Halvas made with tahini were various such as pistachio halva and cocoa halva.³¹

Conclusion: Stuffed Mussels as a Portable Legacy in Today's Istanbul

Unfortunately, in today's Istanbul, stuffed vine leaves and cabbage are not seen on vendors' tables. Along with the Arab nannies, this culture disappeared from Istanbul's streets. However, there are still vendors who sell dolma. These vendors sell *midye dolma* (stuffed mussels). Midye dolma is prepared by stuffing black or blue mussels with rice, and the rice is flavored with spices.

Stuffed seafood such as mussels has been made in this city since the Ottoman Empire and has regained its popularity with newly opened places in recent years. Furthermore, now you can see vendors who sell *midye dolma* on Istanbul's streets every time. This traditional flavor that we still consume is originally a lent-period food among the Orthodox-Christian community in Istanbul. The Orthodox Church's fasting rules impose certain restrictions on eating and drinking at certain times of the year. During the fasting period, members of the orthodox community cannot consume meat and foods made with animal fat.

Most of the vendors who sell midye dolma in today's Istanbul are from Mardin, a southeastern Turkish city. They came to Istanbul as a result of internal migration movements that started in nineteen-fifties, and many of them had not seen the sea until they arrived in Istanbul.³² An increasing number of midye dolma sellers and new shops that serve traditional midye dolma with new serving options lead us to ask how this traditional and local food is adapted to today's needs and trends as a portable food.

Being the subject of television programs, documentaries, and sometimes interviews, Dolma sellers from Midyat also brought a new breath to the classical taste of Istanbul.³³ Some shops have started to sell stuffed mussels in plastic buckets for ease of portability. In the traditional form, the street food sellers sell the mussels on a bench. Stuffed mussels made with rice flavored with spices in the original recipe also started to be made with bulgur as an Anatolian touch and even they served with new sauces such as curry. At the end of the day, dolma is not only a banquet dish but also a finger dish. The portability aspect of dolma has caused it to find a place in every social event.

Dolma was a form of practical finger food that can be carried to everywhere even to the jails during a visit. As it is seen in the Sabah newspaper on June 8, 1891, a child brought a box of dolma to a prisoner named Corci, who was convicted of theft in Izmir (*the city located in the Aegean Region of Turkey*). When the prison officer examines the box, the truth emerged. It was understood that there

were only a few dolmas in the pot, while the rest of it was wrappings of marihuana which were covered with yoghurt.³⁴

Notes

- ¹ *Asırlık Tariflerle Türk Mutfağı* (Kültür Ve Turizm Bakanlığı Yayınları, 2021).p.109
- ² *Asırlık Tariflerle Türk Mutfağı*.p.109
- ³ Özge Samancı, 'The Cuisine of Istanbul between East and West during the 19th Century', in *Earthly Delights Economies and Cultures of Food in Ottoman and Danubian Europe, c. 1500-1900* (Brill, 2018), p. 92.
- ⁴ Marianna Yerasimos, *500 Years of Ottoman Cuisine, 4th edn* (İstanbul: Boyut Matbaacılık A.Ş., 2010),p.176
- ⁵ Alan Davidson, 'The Oxford Companion to Food', ed. by Tom Jaine, *dolma* (Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ⁶ Günay Kut, *Ağız Tadı Türklerde Yemek Kültürü Eski Türk Edebiyatı Araştırmaları IV, 1st edn* (İstanbul: Simurg, 2021), p. 96.
- ⁷ Günay Kut.p.96
- ⁸ Marianna Yerasimos, p. 174.
- ⁹ Mustafa Altıntaş, *Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Ta'âm Bıdırub Satanlar: Aşçılar, Başçılar, Büryancılar, Börekçiler, Tatlıcılar(1500-1800)*, İnsan ve Toplum Dizisi (İstanbul: Kitap Yayınevi, 2020).p.57
- ¹⁰ Mustafa Altıntaş.p.58
- ¹¹ Pertev Naili Boratav, *Folklor ve Edebiyat 1* (Adam Yayıncılık, 1982).pp.124-125
- ¹² BOA.A).DVN.d.145-98
- ¹³ Abdülaziz Bey, *Osmanlı Adet, Merasim ve Tabirleri Toplum Hayatı*, ed. by Prof. Dr. Kâzım Arısan and Duygu Ansan Günay, Belgesel 4 (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 1995), p. 318.
- ¹⁴ Halide Edip Adıvar, *Sinekli Bakkal*, 8th edn (İstanbul: Can Yayınları, 2010).p.69
- ¹⁵ Eating out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining, And Snacks Since The Late Eighteenth Century, ed. by Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers, BERG (Oxford ; New York: BERG, 2003).p.3
- ¹⁶ Alan Davidson, 'The Oxford Companion to Food', ed. by Tom Jaine, Picnic (Oxford University Press, 2014).
- ¹⁷ Alan Davidson.
- ¹⁸ *Eating out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining, And Snacks Since The Late Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers.pp.3-4
- ¹⁹ Sevan Nişanyan, 'Nişanyan Sözlük Çağdaş Türkçenin Etimolojisi', Mesire <<https://www.nisanyansozluk.com/kelime/mesire>> [accessed 29 May 2022].
- ²⁰ Fatma Tunç Yaşar, 'Women in Early Modern İstanbul: The Use of Space' (unpublished Master of Arts, Boğaziçi University, 2004).p.110
- ²¹ Shirine Hamadeh, *The City's Pleasures İstanbul in the Eighteenth Century* (Canada: University of Washington Press, 2004).pp.129-138
- ²² Sermet Muhtar Alus, *İstanbul'un Geçmiş Günlerinde Yeme İçme*, ed. by Tuncay Birkan (İstanbul: Can Yayınları, 2021).pp.57-58
- ²³ Samiha Ayverdi, *Boğaziçi'nde Tarih*, Samiha Ayverdi Külliyyatı-14, 8th edn (İstanbul: Kubbealtı, 2013).p.381
- ²⁴ Balıkhane Nazırı Ali Rıza Bey, *Eski Zamanlarda İstanbul Hayatı*, 5th edn (İstanbul: Kitapevi, 2017).p.111
- ²⁵ Sermet Muhtar Alus, *İstanbul'un Geçmiş Günlerinde Yeme İçme*.p.61
- ²⁶ Ahmet Mithat, *Felâatun Bey İle Râkım Efendi*, Türk Edebiyatı Klasikleri-8, 4th edn (İstanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası Kültür Yayınları, 2019).p.110
- ²⁷ Samiha Ayverdi, *İstanbul Geceleri*, (İstanbul: Fetih Cemiyeti Yayınları 1971). p.203
- ²⁸ Abdülaziz Bey, p. 65.

²⁹ Abdülaziz Bey, pp. 290-92.

³⁰ Musahipzade Celal, *Eski İstanbul Yaşayışı*, Beşyüzüncü Yıl Serisi (İstanbul: Türkiye Yayınevi, 1946).p.23

³¹ Hagop Mintzuri, *İstanbul Anıları 1897-1940*, Belgesel-1, 4th edn (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2002).p.91

³² Musa Dağdeviren, 'Mardin,Midyat,Midye Mutfağın Sokaktaki Fedaileri', *Yemek ve Kültür*, 2012, 68-74.

³³ 'Midye Dolmanın Ustaları Mardinliler', *Yeşil Doğa* (CNN TÜRK, 2019).

³⁴ Sabah newspaper on June 8, 1891