With socioeconomic liberalization and development, especially since 1980, Turkey has witnessed rapid changes in consumption patterns and fashion styles. Often one fad rapidly follows another, creatively combining symbols of the Ottoman era, foreign influences, and regional traditions. Kandiyoti argues that “[t]here is little doubt that class cultures in Turkey are increasingly being shaped and redefined through the medium of consumption.”\(^1\) Thus, consumption has emerged recently as a central concern and analytical tool in historical, anthropological, and sociological works on Ottoman and Turkish society. One trend focuses on the secular high-income class’ “globalized” consumption patterns and lifestyle, especially as expressed through shopping patterns\(^2\) and the commoditization of symbols of Turkish secularism.\(^3\) Another, more prevalent, trend is more concerned with the upwardly mobile Islamists’ attempt at articulating their newly gained economic status through consumption.\(^4\) A third directs attention to the history of consumption and “the everyday” to counter a previous emphasis on production and state politics in the Ottoman Empire.\(^5\)

Most of this literature on contemporary Turkey is concerned with the ways in which lifestyle, taste, and consumption have become both a field of and matter in identity politics, especially at the interface between “secularists” and “Islamists.” Issues that are addressed include veiling and clothing, cinema and music, Atatürk symbolism, architecture and urban space, magazines and cartoons, shopping, and literature. These new approaches generally attempt to go beyond the conventional analytical framework of traditional–modern and seek to elucidate how modernity and Turkishness is negotiated in an increasingly globalized world. They accept, even stress, that studies of consumption and lifestyle are important to the understanding of complex forms of distinction and differentiation.

Although the focus on consumption is welcome, this new literature is biased toward post-1980 Istanbul and urban life in general, toward a “shopping for identities” perspective on contemporary urban consumer culture and toward the assumption that large urban centers constitute the only space for cultural production and creativity.\(^6\) The combined focus in this article on the dialectic between different cultures of seafood consumption...
counters these tendencies. I will seek to demonstrate, as Stokes argues,7 that new forms of consumerism must be put in their historical place. Furthermore, I will claim that study of regional variations in consumption is crucial to an understanding of modernity in Turkey.

Although seafood consumption is of great importance in some regions in the Middle East, it has not received much academic attention.8 It is difficult to generalize about Middle Eastern approaches to seafood beyond recognizing that they are often informed by religion (Islam, Christianity, Judaism), which has divergent effects. In Turkey, Istanbul and Trabzon (eastern Black Sea coast) have been and continue to be natural centers of fishing and seafood consumption, although fish has not been a popular food in the “Anatolian peasant” villages of the interior. Per capita consumption of “water produce” in Turkey has averaged around 7–8 kg during the past decade,9 varying from 25 kg in the Black Sea region to 16 kg in the larger cities (Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara) to only 0.5 kg in east and southeast Anatolia.10 The Anatolian attitude has seemingly come to define the role of fish and fishing in “Turkish culture,” as indicated by the fact that most sea animal names are Greek11 and a general image of the Turk as having his back turned to the sea. Although per capita consumption of red meat, which is commonly referred to as a measure of welfare, is much greater among high-income groups than low-income groups,12 per capita consumption of seafood is much more evenly distributed among income groups13 and, therefore, seemingly not an important measure of relative status. There is, however, more to seafood consumption than volume. Surveys of seafood consumption in specific villages or urban neighborhoods indicate that roughly 70 percent of the population does not like to eat nonfish seafood, and approximately 10 percent do not eat fish and seafood at all.14 Given that these studies are embedded within a hegemonic scientific–bureaucratic discourse on seafood in Turkey that focuses on production, nutrition, and protein,15 they are not able to identify the reasons for the observed consumption patterns or outline different styles and histories of seafood consumption.

In this article, I argue that different styles of seafood consumption articulate powerful symbols of identity and that most Turks have vivid images of what it means to eat fish.16 Alcohol plays a major role in these images. To begin, I sketch typical practices and images in the Trabzon and Istanbul styles of seafood consumption during the 1990s and discuss how they relate to each other. Although people along the eastern Black Sea coast love to eat fish, they share with the population of the Anatolian interior a cautious approach to certain ways of seafood consumption. I consider whether this cautious approach can be explained within the context of Islamic seafood taboos. This text is followed by a historical survey of seafood consumption. The different approaches to seafood and its consumption can be interpreted as part of starkly contrasting ways of shaping contemporary Turkish lives or lifestyles. However, recent developments, in particular the rapid spread of new nonalcoholic “meat and fish” restaurants along the eastern Black Sea coast, indicate considerable change and creativity, resulting in an increasingly porous boundary between cultures of consumption.

ISTANBUL-STYLE SEAFOOD CULTURE

In Turkey, the lokanta is the most common kind of eating establishment, typically serving quick meals at lunchtime but no alcohol. One fills one’s stomach at lokantas, but one dines
at restaurants and drinks at meyhane s, the traditional-style drinking establishment. In the more refined and expensive of these evening eating establishments, seafood occupies a very important position. Although the annual consumption of fish in Turkish restaurants may only amount to approximately 10,000 tons of a total seafood consumption of 400–500,000 tons, the economic and symbolic significance of the fish restaurants far exceeds this proportion. Expensive seafood restaurants are found in large cities across Turkey, including Trabzon, but Istanbul is clearly the symbolic center of this consumption. In a 1998 list of top-class Istanbul restaurants, 44 of 105 were classified as fish restaurants.

A visit to a seafood restaurant in Istanbul, and elsewhere in Turkey, is generally a (late) evening social outing with family or good friends, preferably in a seaside location. The food—an entrée of meze followed by a few warm dishes before the main meal of fresh fish, usually an entire fresh fish each—is invariably accompanied by wine or the stronger anise-flavored raki. The variety of marine products that are served far exceeds the common person’s tastes and/or purchasing power; in addition to lüfer (bluefish)—the most popular and archetypal restaurant fish—the menu includes fish such as turbot, swordfish, sea bass, red mullet, and angler fish. A wide variety of nonfish seafood is highly esteemed, including crab, lobster, octopus and squid, prawns, and mollusks.

Dining out on seafood in Turkey is considered a luxury. While a filling meal at some lokanta may cost less than U.S. $2, a proper seafood meal at a good restaurant along the Bosphorus will not cost less than U.S. $40 per person. To get to the restaurants, most people will also have to travel by private car or by taxi. Thus, fish restaurants are generally frequented by the urban upper and upper middle classes. In Istanbul, or elsewhere in Turkey, it is difficult to find any regular lokanta that also serves fish. There are very few purely fish lokanta.

Seafood is associated with luxury, but riches and luxury may also be associated with dining on seafood (see Figure 1). One seaside hotel in Çanakkale marketed itself to the Turkish upper class through an ad in the elite-secularist daily newspaper Cumhuriyet (28 July 1998):

ÇAĞIN MOTEL, fish for every meal, the sea like an aquarium, quiet holiday far from the crowds and the vulgarity (kabalık). 2 persons 1 week 98 Million TL [U.S. $375].

The cartoon (Figure 1) also demonstrates other important aspects of restaurant seafood consumption. First, the fish should be very fresh and preferably served whole, including the head, when possible. Fish seems fresher if it is uncut, its identity is unobscured; a whole fish makes the best impression esthetically. The esthetic aspect of fish and seafood is repeated in conspicuous cooler-showcases, containing several prestigious fish and wine/raki, in front of the restaurant to attract customers, as well as in the elaborate decorations and the orderly arrangement of seafood and whole and uncut fish at well-stocked fishmongers. At the more refined restaurants, however, elaboration of dishes may take precedence over serving whole fish. Second, seafood restaurants are regularly frequented by women, who are invariably “secular” and uncovered (açık). Third, there is a very strong and pervasive association of seafood with alcohol in the public imageries of contemporary Turkey. Consuming seafood together with alcohol is seen by the elite as a hallmark of a wealthy, secular lifestyle, a refined and sophisticated way of creating moments of muhabbet—intimate, friendly conversation, companionship,
joy, and intimacy—within a context that is shielded from the crowds of vulgar, common people.

Furthermore, the Istanbul style of seafood consumption carries all the characteristics of civilized, yet relaxed, manners: the polite language, the napkins, the wiping of forks and knives before eating, new plates and utensils for each new serving, and so forth. Although this seafood culture finds its main expression in the restaurant and tourist sectors, luxury seafood is also consumed at home. Fishmongers seldom sell turbot and red mullet for less than U.S. $10/kg,21 which is considerably more expensive than red meat. Nonetheless, even when fish is served in the home—often on weekends or when entertaining guests22—or at some large workplace, it will certainly be commented upon and perceived to mark, or create, a special occasion. The sea and the sahil (seaside), especially along the Bosporus and in Aegean seaside resorts, are considered the ideal place for pleasure and recreation, for creating an atmosphere of the exceptional.

TRABZON “FISH FOOD” CULTURE

When talking about eating fish in Trabzon, what comes to mind is the Black Sea hamsi (anchovy). Turkish hamsi fisheries comprise one of the largest fisheries in the
Middle East and provide approximately three-quarters of all Turkish catches in the Black Sea. *Hamsi* is really cheap food; in the winter of 1998–99 a kilo sold for as little as U.S. $0.50 in Trabzon, which is much less expensive than other fish and meat. Some intermediately priced fish are also commonly consumed in the eastern Black Sea region, but there are taboos against consuming other locally available species such as crab, black mussels, sole, flounder, eel, greater weaver, and scorpion fish. These species are quite popular, however, in the Istanbul-style seafood culture. In Trabzon, the more expensive species tend to be consumed within the framework of the Istanbul-style seafood culture. Seafood restaurants in Trabzon even import valued species not found in the Black Sea from Istanbul or the Aegean!

The people of Trabzon also prioritize freshness when serving fish, and fish is always bought whole. Yet, the Trabzon fish culture differentiates itself in several respects from the Istanbul way of consuming seafood: fish stands are not “decorated”; fish will invariably be prepared and served without the head; and the multitude of ways of preparing *hamsi* are a source of both pride and ridicule. “They even make *hamsi* sweets!” *Hamsi* is generally served in two contexts: at everyday family meals at home and at open air locations where fresh *hamsi* is grilled over charcoal and eaten with bread—cheap, tasty, and filling fast-food. *Hamsi* is “everyday” food for all classes of people and, during the winter months, it is the most important source of protein for the larger share of the eastern Black Sea population. In addition, it fills an important place in peoples’ lives by providing a topical focus for shared experiences and desires and by contributing to a feeling of abundance in otherwise poor families.

Songs are sung about *hamsi*; poems are written about it. No other fish in Turkey, and no other produce in the Black Sea region, is as exalted, as familiar, as beloved as the *hamsi*. There can be said to exist a *hamsi* “cult.” Fish in general is believed to be nutritious, but the *hamsi* is praised for having life-giving power, for being şifalı (having healing, health-giving properties) and for enhancing sexual potency. Many interpreted the absence of *hamsi* around 1990 as the death of the Black Sea. Unlike the semiotics of seafood in general, *hamsi* is used not to signify the difference between classes, but is rather a potent symbol of the identity of a region, for the halk (people) at large. Because *hamsi* pervades so much of the eastern Black Sea existence, it simply cannot be overlooked by the elite classes and finds expression in literature and refined *hamsi* recipes. Yet, even the cultivated approach to *hamsi* consumption partly defines itself in opposition to the Istanbul seafood culture. One writer praises the “Trabzon” way of eating *hamsi* with one’s fingers. Thus, there are many differences between the seafood cultures. In contrast to seafood in the Istanbul culture, there is not a single reference to alcohol in texts and poems about *hamsi*, and in people’s talk and practice, it is rare to combine *hamsi* and alcohol. Moreover—and contrary to some meze within the Istanbul seafood culture—*hamsi* is never eaten uncooked.

**Contrasting Images: Cultivation and Morals**

Thus far, I have roughly sketched what the two seafood cultures mean to their practitioners. In this section I look more closely at public images and stereotypes of seafood consumption (summarized in Figure 2). Both in local self-definition and in popular nation-wide imagery, the *hamsi* is portrayed as a key symbol, a metonym, for the eastern
Black Sea region and the people living there. Once when I was riding in a taxi in Istanbul, the radio was tuned in to a local (Istanbul) call-in radio program. When one caller said that he had his roots in Trabzon, the program leader immediately sang “hamsi, hamsi, hamsi,” mimicking the folk song style of Trabzon. Hamsi is said to embody many of the region’s characteristics, primarily the energetic activity and vigor of its people. While the largely positive images concerning the hamsi are fairly uniformly shared, the cultivated elite tends to look upon the Anatolian and Trabzon approach to seafood as being steeped in traditionalist Islamic superstition, ignorant of modern, civilized food and dining. As is so common in Turkey, lack of education and cultivation is the perceived culprit.

The two seafood cultures clearly have contrasting approaches to alcohol, echoed, for instance, in diverging images of the Beyoğlu shopping and leisure quarter in Istanbul. For the religiously observant, Beyoğlu, with its meyhanes and brothels, is a symbol of all vices. For a man, drinking alcohol, gambling, and illicit sex consume his money, erode his moral standing, and ruin his family. Contrary to lokantas, meyhanes have no separate room for aile (family), that is, men’s legitimate female companions and children. The meyhanes—and by extension, the fish restaurants—are, therefore, places of moral corruption to be avoided. When the Islamist Welfare Party won the 1994 municipal elections in Istanbul, a restrictive policy on alcohol was one of the primary ways the new City Administration tried to assert itself in Beyoğlu.26 This policy was shared with other Refah municipalities such as Trabzon where the City Administration campaigned for their view on large signboards along some main roads that declared that “Alcohol is the source of all kinds of evil [badness].”

Although the city of Trabzon hosts a substantial secular and culturally refined urban upper class, people in and around Trabzon are popularly regarded as being, by Turkish standards, conservative and religiously devout. When, during the 1990s, parts of the city center became the focal point for meetings between Turkish men and nataşas, women from the former Soviet Republics, the association between illicit sex and alcohol was strengthened. It became even more important for “good Muslim” men to avoid places serving alcohol, for example, the approximately ten seafood restaurants located just outside of town.

The people in and around the small coastal town of Çarşabaşı are generally accepted as being among the more conservative in the province of Trabzon. Fishing is one of the

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Istanbul seafood culture</th>
<th>Trabzon fish culture</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Positive image</td>
<td>Negative image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>refined/sophisticated</td>
<td>morally corrupt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clean</td>
<td>dirty (alcohol etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(civilized) Istanbul</td>
<td>(decadent) Istanbul</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civilization</td>
<td>infidel/Rum</td>
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<td>cultivated elite</td>
<td>economic elite</td>
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FIGURE 2. Contrasting images of the seafood cultures.
primary livelihoods of the population, and fish is a favorite food of the local people. In this town of 10,000 inhabitants, there were approximately 15 eating establishments in the 1990s, but none served fish nor was there a seafood restaurant. When I questioned the reasons for this lack, I had trouble getting any clear-cut answers, but one fisherman tellingly said with a smile, “There is this: if there is fish there should be alcohol.” Being a very sensitive issue, there was no place in Çarşamba that served alcohol, and the sale of alcohol for private consumption was surrounded by secrecy. Although eating fish in Çarşamba and Trabzon is not generally associated with alcohol, the Istanbul seafood culture had such a dominant position in the national discourse on consumption of seafood that it prevented anyone from trying to open a fish restaurant in Çarşamba. The lack of drinking establishments and the lack of places that serve seafood (either Istanbul or Trabzon style) in Trabzon are both Muslim reactions to the immorality of a non-Muslim (secular) life.

The Istanbul seafood culture is perceived by many Black Sea Muslims as expressing a non-Muslim, Rum and infidel lifestyle and identity. Two young fishermen in Çarşamba discussed the prospect of going to Izmir to sign on as crew on a fishing boat there. One of them said that they should go before the upcoming Ramadan. His friend was skeptical: “That will be difficult. People there do not fast, you become very sinful.” Most people in Çarşamba have a clear conception of themselves being religiously more observant and morally less lax than people in western Turkey. Skepticism toward the “Istanbul way of life” is based on very strong moral concerns.

Whereas Beyoğlu for many is an alluring, but decadent place, it is for the self-declared civilized elite the symbol of (foregone) “cosmopolitanism,” “civilization,” and “elegance.” The cultural divide between the Aegean areas/Istanbul and Anatolia/Black Sea region is further articulated in the special significance attributed to the Istanbul sahil (seaside) which is popularly perceived (e.g., in films, music videos, literature) to be a zone of strong emotions, freedom, recreation, beauty, and muhabbet (sweet conversation). Popular texts on Istanbul and fishing invariably stress that the pursuit of lüfer (bluefish) has been an intensely social and cultivated practice since the classical Ottoman Age when men of the noble classes, including pashas, actively participated. Through the civilized sahil and the lüfer, contemporary Istanbul seafood culture evokes a historical connection to classical civilization. It is even claimed that “thanks to the lüfer, the Istanbul—even the Bosporus—culture came into being.”

The images discussed here may indicate considerable continuity in seafood consumption and associated images of ethnoreligious identities since the Ottoman era. However, the native images may blur important aspects of this seafood semiotics and create an incorrectly static and essentialized picture of such consumption. My strategy for exposing the dynamic relationships between identities and seafood consumption involves a survey of historical changes in seafood consumption, analysis of recent changes in seafood “fashions,” and a short discussion of the possible importance of Islamic food taboos for the Trabzon approach to seafood.

SEAFOOD TABOOS IN THE TRABZON FISH CULTURE

Are people in Anatolia and Trabzon more observant with regard to Islamic dietary laws concerning seafood? Islam does not have very clear-cut dietary rules for sea animals.
The Maliki school is, in general, the most liberal, whereas the Hanafi school, which was the school the Ottoman emperors supported and is still the most influential in Turkey, is much more strict. Across the Muslim and Arab world, approaches to seafood vary considerably. Most species—including prawns and crabs—are popular where seafood has traditionally been easily available. There is a tendency, however, to regard nonscaled fish (especially among Shi’ite) and shellfish as suspect. In Turkey, some consider fish to be haram (forbidden) for good Muslims because it cannot be properly slaughtered—it is difficult to make the blood run and it is difficult to know whether one is using the knife in a religiously acceptable way. The “Anatolian” approach to seafood is seemingly influenced by this concern. In the rural regions of Trabzon, this concern has seemingly found its solution in a common rule that cutting live fish is haram—it will result in misfortune for the man who committed the sin, such as the birth in the family of a “crippled” child.

Although some men in Çarşıbaşı referred to Islamic rules to explain specific taboos, many also declared, with reference to Maliki, that “if my father comes out of the sea, even he is edible.” Thus, there is disagreement about what is haram, suggesting that people attempt to give local traditions a veneer of legitimacy by anchoring them in Islamic rules. Most people in Çarşıbaşı are actually hard put to explain the taboos. If a particular fish or sea animal is regarded as forbidden, various criteria (from Islamic jurisprudence) other than rules pertaining directly to seafood are applied. Thus, seafood taboos articulate concerns related to the primary Islamic food taboos regarding blood, pork, and alcohol.

What connects and constitutes many of the seafood taboos is the association with meyhane culture, an indecent, secular lifestyle and, above all, alcohol. Fishermen liberally consume high value species such as turbot and red mullet on the boats. These species are also popular among the Black Sea populace during Ramadan. When asked why they do not consume a certain sea animal and fish, such as sole or crab, people in Çarşıbaşı often say simply that “they eat it in Istanbul,” “it is possible to sell it to meyhane/restaurants,” or “that’s the business of the rich men.” In the Muslim Middle East, meyhane and alcohol are often associated with erotic and illicit sex. In Turkey, seafood, together with alcohol, are considered to draw one closer to tempting, yet immoral, erotic adventures. I suspect that this is why it is acceptable for young boys, but not adult males, in Çarşıbaşı to eat black mussels; alcohol and sex are not relevant temptations for young boys.

The way Muslim morality is articulated in approaches to seafood consumption in Turkey is clearly not predicated on a taxonomic system and related notions of purity and contagion alone. Food taboos are closely connected to the sociohistorical context of the consumption. Among Arab Muslims, where seafood occupies a less important place at the meze table and where the Rum context is lacking, prawns are very popular food. Devout Black Sea Turks, on the other hand, do not eat prawns, precisely because of the association with the meyhane culture. The seafood taboos as expressed within the Trabzon fish culture cannot be said to operate according to, or be reducible to, some cultural logic à la Douglas or Sahlins. Albeit of possible importance, structure of symbols cannot fully explain animal classifications and food taboos within Trabzon fish culture.
HISTORY OF SEAFOOD CONSUMPTION

Popular imagery of identities expressed through seafood in Turkey during the 1990s tended to confine identity formation to two reified and essentialized sociocultural groupings: Turk/Anatolia versus Rum/Istanbul. A mapping of these identities onto the Istanbul of the Ottomans could imply surrendering the terms of academic inquiry to politicized identity discourses of the present. The discussion below amounts to a critical examination of the ostensible continuity of the referents for identity claims. I outline the general pattern of seafood consumption in Istanbul and Trabzon during Ottoman and early Republican times. Although sources on relations between seafood consumption and cultural patterns are scarce, especially when it comes to Trabzon, enough evidence exists to address adequately questions such as How was seafood consumption configured within identity negotiations? Was Greek lifestyle appropriated by the new Turkish elite?

The Classical Ottoman Era

In Ottoman Istanbul, seafood seemingly constituted one of the few culinary distinctions between the different ethnic–religious groups. A close association between Rum, seafood, and alcohol was grounded in several conditions. First, the general interpretation of the Qur’an and the specific regulations enacted by the sultan meant that production, distribution, and sale of alcohol became primarily a task for Greeks and foreigners in Constantinople. Second, seafood consumption outside the house was probably concentrated in tavernas that were most often run by Greeks. Salted, dried, and marinated fish were regarded as ideal meze in the tavernas. Third, the Greeks and Armenians seem to have had a special preference for nonfish sea animals during Lent, probably stimulating a rich “Greek,” nonfish sea animal cuisine.

It is too simplistic, however, to claim that seafood was mostly a Rum business. Armenians were an integral part of the non-Muslim seafood culture, and Armenian men were influential as cooks in Istanbul. Furthermore, fish and seafood was regularly consumed by both the “common and poorer sorts of Turks” and by the noble and rich. Some sultans did secure regular deliveries of seafood, and at times the menu included nonfish seafood such as oyster, lobster, and prawns. Seafood even had its place at the tables of Muslim brotherhoods that drew together people from different classes. In the tavernas, Muslims joined the Rum and other Christians, and all, even Muslims, joined in the consumption of alcohol.

Nevertheless, Lent rules, Muslim concerns about alcohol, and the association of Rum with tavernas probably meant that Muslims and non-Muslims had a tendency to approach seafood from different viewpoints, with the Muslim’s attitude being more ambivalent. How then did seafood develop from being important Lent food for the common Rum and Armenian to being associated with upper class Istanbul culture in the 1990s? There is little reason to believe that the Rum of Ottoman Istanbul considered seafood to be elite food. Early developments in consumer culture provide some answers. Already in the 17th century “[a] perception of [Istanbul] as a place of comfort, sophistication, culture and opportunity . . .” began to take shape. The “Istanbul way of life,” a multicultural Ottoman or Levantine culture, came to be known for the joint pleasures of food, wine,
music, taverna, and often, the sahil and recreational night fishing for lüfer. This culture further developed during the early 18th century Tulip Era—a time that also marks the onset of a culture of consumption.

In Istanbul, the expression of social hierarchy through consumption used to be demonstrated through the provision of food to followers. From the early 18th century, sophistication, not largesse, became the tool of distinction. The rise of a cosmopolitan multicultural Mediterranean culture connected to trade brought with it a strong association of olive oil, vegetable dishes, the sea, and the noble classes—bringing seafood within a new semiotics of distinction. A visitor to Istanbul was served almost identical food, including “Istanbul-style” seafood, in the homes of wealthy Greek and Turkish families.

**Tanzimat to Republic: New Ottoman Lifestyles**

Because of the “capitulations” and Tanzimat (1839–1871) policies, the wealth and cultural liberties of Greeks and other non-Muslims increased during the 19th century. The classes connected to the sultanic household and the state were no longer able to keep pace with changes in, let alone monopolize, instruments and symbols for the expression of a prestigious lifestyle and “non-Muslims replaced Muslims as fashion leaders.” There evolved new elite lifestyles—expressed, for example, in architecture, consumption, rise of a restaurant culture, and “cultural activities”—that by and large were perceived as “Western.” It was from this point onward that the Rum emerged as representatives of the West in the East.

Although the Rum may have led the way, cultural intermingling likely resulted in similar patterns of elite consumption across a range of “nationalities.” Lifestyles were probably more a matter of class or status than expressions of “national” identity. The *Turkish Cookery Book* from the period includes a range of “Istanbul-style” seafood recipes (also shellfish and mollusks). A shared upper class elaboration of seafood as an articulation of refined manners and cultivation, thus, is probably a relatively recent phenomenon. There is little to indicate that specialized fish restaurants became common during this period. Perhaps seafood per se was not an important element in late Ottoman upper class’ work at distinguishing themselves from the poorer and vulgar classes because the “others” that they distinguished themselves from were themselves Istanbulites frequenting meyhanes and eating seafood? Certain kinds of seafood were clearly associated with alcohol but not necessarily with wealth. Although most restaurants, or lokanta as they were then named, served alcohol as an accompaniment to the food, meyhanes/tavernas were primarily considered places to drink and constituted a separate tradition. The meyhanes, for instance, remained exclusively male space.

The majority of the population did not take part in the development of refined consumption, and the extravagant consumption and “Western” lifestyle of the elite was widely criticized. Especially gender roles and alcohol remained sensitive issues. Importantly, not only Muslims but conservative Orthodox Christians criticized the new lifestyles of the elite.

**Early Republic: The Exclusion of Istanbul From Turkishness**

The Young Turk and Republican elites increasingly located the core or home of the newly constructed national identity in Anatolia. Istanbul became suspect to the new nation and
Republican, because it symbolized both Islamic traditionalism and Western imperialism. Republican Turkish scholars considering Turkish culture hardly paid attention to the urban traditions and practices of Istanbul (and Izmir). In stark contrast to the emphasis on seafood in the pre-Republican *Turkish Cookery Book*, Oğuz, in his monumental work about the cultural roots of the Turks, sets aside only half a page for seafood (notably *hamsi*) in his 50 pages about “Turkish” food. Oğuz’s selection was made on the basis of what was, at the time, a hegemonic nationalist construction of the “Turk” that excluded cosmopolitan and urban experiences and lifestyles.

Istanbul culture, despite official efforts to discount it, remained the cultural source for elite articulation, be it in language, clothing, or food. The elite even tried to recreate some of the Istanbul *sahil* atmosphere in Ankara where they could visit newly constructed *gazinos* (night clubs) and the like on the “shores” of pools constructed in the shape of the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. Seafood remained elite food and a preferred object of hospitality. Istanbul and *meyhanes* figured prominently in the elite’s idealized visions of drinking parties and *muhabbet*. During the Republican period, all drinking poems have been about Istanbul, often praising its seaside, fishing boats, and seafood. The new rulers in Ankara probably had very ambivalent feelings about Istanbul. It was ideologically suspect, but at the same time the “Istanbul lifestyle” was embodied and reproduced in everyday practice and images of cultivation.

Although the Istanbul-style seafood culture was reproduced in Ankara, in Istanbul, the restaurant culture lost much of the late Ottoman splendor. Demand for seafood decreased, but because many kinds of fish were cheap, it must have been common food among the urban poor. With the loss of the status to Ankara as the center of government, economic recession, and the later exodus of the minorities during the 1950s and 1960s, the city was becoming “poor and provincial.” Although the number of *meyhanes* also diminished during this period, they were probably instrumental in the preservation of the association of seafood with alcohol. Approximately half of the approximately 50 *mezes* listed in a 1950s text on *meyhanes* are various kinds of seafood.

**Urban Growth, Istanbul Nostalgia, and the Birth of the Fish Restaurant**

Although the Turkish state tried, especially after 1950, to stimulate seafood consumption, it was socioeconomic change and mass migration to the urban centers that would set in motion cultural forces that transformed styles, tastes, and meanings of seafood consumption. Murat Belge, a prominent Turkish columnist, writer, and intellectual, identifies the first seafood restaurant in Turkey as the *Amatör Balıcılar Kulübü* that was established under the Galata bridge in the 1960s. In those days, he writes, when the fish-loving minorities had left the city, and the new inhabitants of the city had little relation with fish, the *lokanta* under the bridge “served fish-loving Istanbulness” for the “real” (*has*) Istanbulites.

Thus, the Istanbul-style seafood restaurant may have been “invented” as a reaction to the recent phenomenon of mass migration to Istanbul from Anatolia that brought uneducated and “vulgar” people to the city. The *sahil*, the *lüfer*, the traditional *meyhane*, the cosmopolitan Beypazarı—all of these gradually emerged as important figures in an Istanbul nostalgia that, during the 1990s, was increasingly represented in popular books. Many would cite, for example, the early 20th century saying, “The one who
does not have knowledge of fish, who does not know the lüfer, does not count as an Istanbulite.”

The growth of seafood restaurants in Istanbul and elsewhere in Turkey was part of a general change and increase in consumption since the 1960s. Although dining arrangements at the seafood restaurants closely followed traditional meyhane etiquette, many of the new restoran (the luxury tag of “lokanta” had been eroded) were located out of town, especially along the Bosphorus, requiring the guest to come by car. The new seafood restaurants were rapidly appropriated by the upper classes who continued to look to Istanbul for inspiration concerning models and codes for cultivated and refined lifestyles. However, the new rich may care less about Istanbul nostalgia and simply patronize these restaurants because they are believed to confer prestige on the customers.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of restaurants in general and seafood restaurants in particular rapidly increased. The situation of two different styles of seafood consumption described at the beginning of this article emerged. Yet, the identity formations that were articulated through the Istanbul-style seafood culture in the 1990s answered to very different economic and cultural contexts than seafood consumption during the late Ottoman period.

Notes on History of Seafood, Alcohol, and Rum in Trabzon

Hamsi has been of continuous and stable nutritional and symbolic value for a majority of the people in the Black Sea region. A (probably) late Ottoman poem praises the hamsi for being “the life-giving food of the poor, the cure for the very ill.” An early Republican publication states, “Nothing creates among the rich, the middle, and the poor the same love and joy. And no foodstuff is as democratic and liberal as it.” The Rum of Trabzon undoubtedly took part in the hamsi “cult” alongside other groups in the region. Relations to Rum identity have, however, a more complex history.

Before 1916, there was a substantial rural Rum population in the eastern Black Sea region and, thereby, considerable Rum or Greek Orthodox influence on a partly shared culture and praxis among the populations of the region. In the city of Trabzon, the Rum and the Armenian commercial bourgeoisie benefited most from the Trabzon trade boom during the middle of the 19th century. The ties of this Christian bourgeoisie with Greeks and Armenians in Istanbul and elsewhere, the presence of many representatives of European powers, the widespread migration from Trabzon to Istanbul, as well as the local political elites’ age-old close ties with Istanbul meant that many in Trabzon probably were familiar with the latest fashions in Istanbul and that Levantine–Istanbul lifestyles were emulated in Trabzon. Thus, a lokanta culture, not unlike the one in Istanbul, was likely widespread in the city of Trabzon. In 1876, there were as many as 10 gazinos, 51 meyhanes, and 150 coffee-houses in the city of Trabzon. In this period, skepticism toward what was seen as the decadent, rich, drinking Rum was probably a response to the lifestyle of the emerging Greek bourgeoisie in the city of Trabzon (and similar experiences in Istanbul) and not an effect on interethnic relations in rural communities.

Alcohol was clearly an important issue in the local articulation of Turkishness in the heated years around 1920. At the very first meeting of the Meclis (Parliament) in
Ankara (1920), a Trabzon Member of Parliament called for a very strict and sweeping law to restrict the sale and consumption of alcohol. He complained that “[a] handful of Pontos Greeks [Pontoscu in Trabzon] produce rakı, exploit the local people [memleketi], and smuggle the money to Greece.” In 1933, after the ships and caravans had stopped visiting Trabzon and after the Greeks had left, there were a total of 102 coffee houses and gazinos in the city. Today, the Rum/Greek legacy has largely been erased, but some uneasiness and ambivalence remain among people concerning a Rum past that may live on in their own practices. When Black Sea people today tend to denounce Istanbul-style seafood consumption by saying that it is “Rum,” one aspect of this discourse may be a need to distance oneself from the taint of “Greekness.”

**RECENT DEVELOPMENTS**

New styles of seafood consumption have gradually emerged since the early 1990s. New twists have appeared in elite seafood consumption, partly in response to the erosion of classic Istanbul seafood culture as the new rich “eat into” this consumption style. Cooks come up with creative (and expensive!) seafood dishes, and sushi bars are the recent rage in Istanbul. The change and expansion in nonalcohol-related seafood consumption is even more remarkable and of greater consequence. Places along the Istanbul seaside that serve very cheap “fish in bread” have multiplied since the early 1990s, small stands (büfe) serving fast-seafood, including mussels, have appeared not only in Istanbul but also in Trabzon, fish is making inroads in regular lunchtime lokantas, and picnic-style outdoor establishments serving farmed trout have proliferated along rivers running down from the Black Sea mountains. Of particular interest is the sudden appearance and spread of “meat and fish” eating establishments in Trabzon and elsewhere along the Black Sea coast since the late 1990s.

“Meat and fish” establishments, now numbering perhaps fifty around Trabzon, including two in Çarşibaşı, are typically located a 15–30 minutes drive from Trabzon or other larger Black Sea cities. These often spacious establishments (Figure 3) emphasize cleanliness and are conspicuously well lit. They avoid use of the terms restoran or lokanta in their names but often include family (aile) on the signboard. They do not serve alcohol and some are even decorated with Qur’anic citations. Their menus do not incorporate mezes, and the choices of seafood are limited to a few “acceptable” species of fish. These elements combine to create a profile that is an outright denial of the semiotics of the meyhane and the luxury seafood restaurants. On the other hand, main business time is evening and weekends, there is no separation between a male section and the family section, and some Istanbul-style etiquette is followed. Although more expensive than an ordinary lokanta, prices are well below restaurant prices. Both covered women, secular professors, and children feel at home here.

The inclusion of fish in eating establishments that do not serve alcohol indicates that the rigid distinction between the Istanbul-style seafood culture and the Trabzon fish food culture is diminishing. This finding is related to another trend: the development of a nationwide shared culture of fish consumption, especially at-home or private seafood consumption of a limited range of increasingly well-known, easily available, cheap or intermittently priced fresh fish such as hamsi, mackerel, sea bream, and sea bass, as
FIGURE 3. One of the nicer “meat and fish” restaurants at the Akçaabat seaside near Trabzon (2004). [A color version of this figure can be viewed online at www.journals.cambridge.org]
well as canned tuna. Fresh trout is a “new” species that is especially popular among those who did not consume fish previously.83

Many contextual changes have helped stimulate or make possible changes in seafood consumption. First, seafood is increasingly coming within the orbit of the expanding sector of industrialized, big capital production and distribution of food and other consumer goods in Turkey. Although over 50 percent of the overall retail market is still in the hands of small scale shopkeepers (bakkal) and open air bazaars, the hyper- and supermarkets have rapidly been increasing their share since the mid-1990s.84 Seafood retailing in Turkey was until recently completely in the hands of specialized fishmongers and itinerant vendors. Now some of the larger corporations in Turkey have included seafood in their attempt to create brands and to expand their share of the retail sector, and esthetically arranged seafood and fresh fish, including expensive and imported produce, are incorporated as choices in large separate, refrigerated sections or rooms of supermarkets and hypermarkets.

Second, cage rearing of sea bream and sea bass in the Aegean and freshwater trout in the Black Sea region and Anatolia “took off” during the 1990s. Since 1998, farmed fish has accounted for more than 10 percent of “water produce” production in Turkey,85 supplying increasingly cheap fish. Third, the price of fish and seafood relative to red meat has decreased as livestock production has been in crisis, primarily brought on by the unrest in southeast. Thus, contrary to popular perceptions, Turks now generally consume more fish and seafood than red meat. Red meat consumption fell during the 1990s from 9.9 to 5.6 kg per capita.86 Fourth, the European Union (EU) accession process suggests that Turkey adopts many of the EU laws and regulations, including stricter hygienic measures requiring all seafood to be sold from “clean” refrigerated steel counters.

Both well-established and more recent concerns shape the direction of the new developments. Age-old conceptions of the life-giving power of fish articulate easily with popularized scientific discourse about the health benefits of eating fish and seafood. Mention fish and many will respond: “medicine!” (ilaç). At the same time, people are increasingly aware that seafood must be fresh and clean. In the supermarkets that sell seafood, there is almost an obsessive concern about hygiene. Some of the retail chains emphasize that they control the quality of the product through their “cold storage chain” or their integrated control “from field to table” that Carrefour in Turkey first applies to farmed fish.87 However, concerns about the permissibility of certain kinds of seafood persist. Most of the catches of sea snail, prawn, and some other nonfish species are still exported. On the other hand, the previously strong association of all kinds of seafood served at eating establishments with alcohol has been weakened.

“Meat and fish” eating establishments seem to be a Black Sea trend, whereas supermarkets that sell seafood are primarily found in larger cities. No supermarket in Trabzon, for instance, sells fish—not even processed seafood. Supermarkets selling seafood are often located within larger multipurpose shopping and entertainment centers, submerging shopping into an experience of leisure. Shopping centers are typically, but not exclusively, patronized by secular middle and upper middle classes, who often reside in new kinds of suburban, residential areas. “Meat and fish” eating establishments in the outskirts of Trabzon provide an arena where people from many walks of life, including a devout new middle class, can intermingle and take part in modern lifestyles that are
not framed by the stilted classic stereotypes. It is part of modern consumer culture and may look “Western” at the surface, yet is sensitive to Muslim moral concerns. For an increasing number of people, irrespective of social background, the Black Sea seaside is perceived as a zone especially suited to new forms of recreation and leisure.88

Although anchored in very different economies, both “meat and fish” establishments and the incorporation of well-stocked seafood counters within supermarkets articulate a desire for “modern living.” Leisure has become, in time and space, an identifiable and important part of new lifestyle patterns that increasingly pull the middle class, family, and women into a culture of recreation and consumption. Use of private cars is often a requirement to take part in this. Despite severe economic crises in 1994 and 2001, the number of private cars in Turkey almost tripled between 1990 and 2003.89 In Trabzon, the upgrading of the coastal road has made travel to coastal locations outside of the city much more convenient.

When it comes to the future, my guess is that the culture or identity aspects of seafood consumption, so long ignored by state scientists and bureaucrats, will increasingly receive attention as large corporations try to monitor and create trends to increase market share and profits. This phenomenon may herald a change in how change is created: while the first seeds of the Istanbul-style fish restaurant and the “meat and fish” eating establishments in Trabzon were sown by small local entrepreneurs, large corporations may lead the way in future.

CONCLUSIONS

The meaning of seafood consumption in Ottoman and Turkish societies has been constructed primarily in local and national contexts. Shifts in seafood consumption patterns are primarily a result of negotiation of economic and demographic changes within Turkey. Although these economic and demographic changes have increasingly been shaped by economic globalization, recent developments in seafood culture are not the result of exposure to global consumer patterns. Changes in the symbolic referents of seafood consumption also predate the “new” phenomena characteristic of the post-1980 liberal era in Turkey. This finding is demonstrated, for instance, by the new search for “Istanbulness” through the genesis of the Istanbul-style fish restaurants during the 1960s.

The ambivalence toward seafood, as simultaneously prestigious and suspect food, has been negotiated in a multitude of ways through the centuries with different mappings onto class, regional, urban–rural, religious, and ethnic identities. Devout Muslims’ concerns about alcohol as part of the seafood meal and the (late) Republican association of certain kinds of seafood with the secular upper class have had a formative influence on the semiotics and consumption of seafood. The widespread skepticism toward Istanbul-style seafood consumption illustrates the way in which mainstream Islamists do not criticize or oppose the class system directly; rather they attack the symbolic referents of a secular high-class lifestyle.90

Some have claimed that consumption of food must be understood against the backdrop of attempts to create “national” cuisines.91 Yet, neither Trabzon- nor Istanbul-style seafood culture fit the requirement to be “national.” Both have been suspect in relation to an ideology of Turkish nationalism: the Istanbul style because of its association with
Rum, Istanbul, and so forth; the Trabzon style because it is regarded as traditional (many taboos) and Islamic. Despite its attempts, the modernizing state never managed to impose a national seafood cuisine.

I agree with Rouse and Hoskins, who in a study of food consumption among African American Sunni Muslims, argue that “food taboos are mired in a dialectical relationship between historical memory and identity versus social and ideological change. As a result, most foods occupy more than one category allowing fluidity for constantly shifting subject positions.” Thus, I do not consider the Trabzon (and Anatolian) style of seafood consumption, with its many taboos, to be the traditional background upon which creative modernizing change is taking place in the large urban centres of Turkey. The widespread concern among the Black Sea population about the kind of seafood they eat refers not only to different “tastes” within a competitive game of prestige but is grounded in a morally significant way of living. At the same time, their consumption choices involve not only a rhetoric of difference or resistance, they creatively produce new consumption patterns and lifestyles. The new nonalcoholic eating establishments that incorporate seafood articulate syncretic lifestyles responsive to Muslim moral sensibilities.

“Meat and fish” eating establishments attract customers across the secular–Muslim divide and demonstrate that there is widespread sharing of lifestyles across this ideological divide. Thus, the advent of “meat and fish” cannot be seen, like “Islamic chic” tesettür, as an expression of a refined taste in a new cultivated upper class lifestyle appropriate for nouveau riche believers. Several other factors contribute to make the conventional dichotomous mapping (as in Figure 2) problematic. On the one hand, “meat and fish” eating establishments are patronized not only, not even preferably, by the economic elite but also by a growing middle class. On the other hand, with the AKP elite preferring to eat kebab or Black Sea style pizza (pide) and drink fruit juices when they visit restaurants, it is no longer as easy to stigmatize all elites as seculars indulging in seafood and alcohol. Whereas through most of the 20th century it had been the “secular” Istanbul lifestyle versus the rest, there is now an increasing complexity and multiplicity of identity with food. The lines of stratification are less obvious. Increasingly, it is the same choice for all, throughout the country.

NOTES

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12“Yoksula,” *Yeni Şafak*.


16Ethnographic fieldwork started in 1990 and is continuous. I have spent a total of approximately 14 months in the Black Sea region, most of it in the small town Çarşıbaşi, and lived for several months in Ankara and Istanbul. Concerning sources on seafood consumption, popular and elitist approaches to seafood and restaurants are relatively well represented and, thus, accessible in the swelling Turkish literature on leisure and the like. For the Trabzon fish culture, I rely more heavily on my own field experiences.

17Elliott, “Türk su ürünlerinin,” 156.

18http://www.aktuel.medya.com/10.11.98

19Nevertheless, shark, skate, and eel are not commonly served in the restaurants, and dolphin and seal are regarded as inedible.
The monthly salary of teachers in the spring of 1998 was around U.S. $400. A newly employed industrial worker would have a salary just over U.S. $200.

In the winter of 2004, fishmongers in Beyoğlu, Istanbul, sold large red mullet for U.S. $40/kg.


Of the fifty recipes (excluding sweets) included in an official publication on traditional meals from Trabzon, eleven recipes are with *hamsi*, whereas only two are with other kinds of fish and six are with red meat. Mehmet Volkan Canaloğlu et al., *Trabzon Yöresel Yemekleri* (Trabzon: Trabzon Valiliği İl Turizm Müdürlüğü, 1997).

During the late 1980s and early 1990s ecosystemic disturbances, primarily caused by an invader species (*Mnemiopsis leiydi*), resulted in dramatic decrease in *hamsi* catches. GEF-Black Sea Environmental Programme, “Black Sea Transboundary Diagnostic Analysis,” (Istanbul: Programme Coordinating Unit, GEF Black Sea Environmental Programme, 1996).


The Greeks of the Ottoman Empire, eastern Greek.


Charles White, *Three Years in Constantinople; or Domestic Manners of the Turks in 1844*, vol. 1 (London: Henry Colburn, 1845), 75, 80; Dorina L. Neave, *Twenty-Six Years on the Bosphorus* (London: Grayson & Grayson, 1933), 205.

White, *Three Years*, vol. 3, 89–90.

414 Ståle Knudsen


44Kömürcüyan, *İstanbul Tarihi*, 5.

45Öğuz, *Kültür Kökenleri*, 593.


53Ibid., 144, 151–52.


56See e.g., Sülexer, *İçi ve Toplum*, 160.


Süük, *İçki ve Toplum*, 152.


Elliot, “Türk su ürünlerinin,” 183, 186.


Rouse and Hoskins, “Purity,” 237.

