

Vessels and Equipment Used by Street Food Vendors in Istanbul:
A Look through the History from the Nineteenth Century until the Present

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Istanbul has been and still is a very vibrant city where life actually takes place on the streets. Such activity is an important factor in the development of street food, and therefore to the development of vessels and equipment used to serve or transport these foods, which ranged from ready-to-eat items to dishes cooked on the spot. As Reşat Ekrem Koçu, author of the famous *Istanbul Ansiklopedisi*, puts it, street sellers are ‘tradesmen on foot’, and they are crucial to the life of the city: ‘Tradesmen on foot are the salt and pepper of great Istanbul, they are Istanbul’s trademark’ (Koçu, p.731).

In the nineteenth century, street food vendors were all over the city. During meal times, citizens of Istanbul would get a chance to communicate, to interact and share with each other by creating small communities around these sellers. In those times restaurants were not common, but even today street food remains indispensable to the lives of current Istanbul residents. In some cases, street food is even better than the fare of most restaurants as it is fresh, quick and cheap. The foods sold by the street vendors are usually seasonal and obtained locally.

The types of vessels used to transport these foods and drinks vary based on the commodities. There were wooden trays with tray stands, three wheeled carts, straw baskets, hand scales, mobile grills, brass jugs and other specialty containers specifically designed for the certain foods and drinks.

Street food’s popularity really increased in the nineteenth century, as residents came to appreciate the easy access to a wide variety of foods. They could shop for different ingredients

without straying far from the comfort of their homes or grab a quick, cheap lunch in various parts of the city. But street food has never lost its importance in Istanbul. It is an integral part of the city's colourful street life, displaying Istanbul's diverse cultures and helping people from many backgrounds to carry on their traditions. The vessels and equipment used to transport these foods have had a significant impact on the history of culinary culture of Istanbul. While some of the vessels used to transport these foods have changed over the years, others have stayed the same. These vessels fall into easily identifiable types.

Round Wooden Trays with Tray Stands

Round wooden trays have been a significant vessel of Istanbul street food, as they have been widely used to hold and transport the king of street food: *simit*, a kind of bread ring topped with sesame seeds. These round wooden trays vary in size, with a frame that is about five centimetres high. Trays were usually carried on the heads of the sellers, balanced on small round cushions, as they walked the streets. In order to rest from time to time, they also carried wooden tray stands. The stands had three legs like a tripod, and were not foldable. The three legs were attached with nails to a wooden round ring. Between each leg, there were two pieces of wood, hammered on either side to look like the letter 'X'. The stands could easily be carried over the shoulder of the seller while he carried the tray over his head. These trays lost popularity when the municipalities required *simit* sellers to use four-wheeled carts assigned by the municipality officials. Even before nineteenth-century, round wooden trays were the most popular types of vessels used for variety of products. They were very practical, easy to carry and, when used with the tray stand, they acted as tables to show off the food being sold. Round wooden trays were also used for selling *börek*, a baked savoury pastry made from layers of thin dough like phyllo with various

fillings; miniature versions of Turkish delight called *kuş lokumu*; and milk puddings or other puddings in fancy ceramic bowls. The round wooden trays used for puddings were usually painted with floral or leaf patterns.

Wicker Baskets

Street food sellers have long used various types of wicker baskets for both previously cooked foods and raw ingredients. A vendor could carry one type of food in one basket or he might carry several different size baskets with different kinds of ingredients. The most common of these vendors were the green grocers on foot. These salesmen were the favourites of housewives, as they could shop for ingredients to cook with just outside of their doorstep. These green grocers walked among the neighbourhoods, announcing their arrival by shouting out the names of the fruits and vegetables they carried. The most common type of basket used for this purpose was *küfe*, also referred to as pack basket. The largest type of wicker basket, the *küfe* was usually carried like a backpack or sometimes loaded on the back of a donkey.

The *küfe* usually consists of four parts, the base, sides, rim and straps, made from leather in old days and from high strength nylon material today. *Küfe*-making is considered an art form in some regions of Turkey, but there are less and less basket makers, and soon the skills may be completely lost as new generations have little interest in learning these art forms. The baskets themselves are most often made from chestnut or willow trees. The master basket maker uses certain utensils to prepare long and flat bands. The basket is made by laying the long sticks in place and then weaving the flat bands together with the sticks. The rim is woven in next, sometimes along with handles. Because the *küfe* is carried like a backpack gets straps, many vendors add cushions to protect the small of their backs.

These vendors also carried hand scales to measure their foodstuffs. Some used a pocket balance with a spring; others carried the traditional scales with two concave dishes, one for the weights and the other for the food being weighed.

In today's Istanbul these types of vendors are still randomly seen on the streets. Nowadays the *küfe* is most commonly used by porters who work in the open bazaar areas where shoppers hire them to help carry their purchases. On a funny note, in the old days porters who owned a *küfe* sometimes provided taxi service to drunkards. At night, they waited in front of taverns; drunken customers who wanted to go home would hire a porter, get inside his *küfe* and be taken home. Smaller wicker baskets were used for carrying various types of smaller fruits like lemons or garlic in older times. Today these small baskets are mostly used for selling sandwiches.

Sandwich sellers can be seen all hours of the day, especially in busy parts of town. The sandwiches are usually filled with white cheese, parsley, peppers and tomatoes – basically ingredients that won't spoil easily. These baskets are relatively flat with short sides and a wide opening. The vendors either carry them by their handles or place them over tray stands. The sandwiches are fanned out colourful flower petals and look very appetizing in the baskets.

Wooden Poles

Wooden poles are the simplest vessels used by various vendors, but the most significant of these vendors are the liver sellers. In the beginning of nineteenth century, the liver sellers usually consisted of Albanian immigrants living in Istanbul. In Turkish, 'liver' usually refers to all types of offal, so it might be more accurate to call these kinds of vendors offal sellers. The offal was sold as a complete set, with liver, lungs, heart, kidneys and trachea, hung by the trachea off either

sides of the pole. The seller would balance this pole over his shoulders and walk around the neighbourhoods.

The offal seller's worst enemies were flies and stray cats. There was nothing protecting the offal sets, so probably there was a lot of infestation by flies. When these vendors were making a sale, or bargaining the price, accidentally bending to either side would lower the pole close enough to the ground for hungry stray cats to get their paws on a set of offal.

Three-wheeled Open Carts

The fruit vendors in today's Istanbul have given up on using the *kıffe* and upgraded to three-wheeled open carts to sell their fruits and vegetables on the streets. These carts are made out of pine or hornbeam trees in sizes that average around one hundred seventy centimetres long and ninety centimetres wide. The three wheels resemble bicycle wheels, with one in the front and two in the back. The handle to push the cart is in the back. Ideally the vendors lay a blue vinyl cover – their trademark – over the top of the cart and place the fruits and vegetables over the vinyl. This vinyl protects the fruits and vegetables from getting bruised by the wood. The carts usually carry a table scale to weigh the fruits.

These carts are also used by the vendors known as the 'cucumber sellers'. These guys sell apples in the winter and cucumbers in the summer. And, for the very short season when they are available, they add raw melons to their repertoire. When serving apples, they use a vertical spiral slicer, which peels the apples as it slices in a spiral manner, and the spiral apple is presented to the customers in a napkin. When serving cucumbers or melons, they use a vegetable peeler. Peeled fruit is cut partway into four vertical slices that remain attached on the bottom. Sprinkled with some salt, these become the most refreshing snack on a warm summer day.

Similar carts are also used by a new type of vendor selling fruit juices. The fruit juice sellers usually work in winter times; they carry oranges and pomegranates. Using a new version of the vintage heavy-duty iron juicer, they provide freshly squeezed fruit juice to their customers who seek natural vitamins to fight the cold and flu of winter.

Three-wheeled Open Carts with a Grill

Another type of three-wheeled cart that includes a built-in charcoal grill is also a relatively new type of street food vessel. These carts can usually be seen around stadiums or open air concert venues, and cater to the attendees. The most popular type of food offered is *köfte*, minced meat patties, or *sucuk*, spicy beef sausage, served with grilled tomatoes, peppers, onions and red pepper paste inside a half loaf of traditional white bread. The smells of these carts are really intoxicating when one is hungry.

***Kokoreç* Carts**

Kokoreç is the grilled lamb's intestines that have been one of the most popular types of street food since the 1970s. Cleaned intestines are wrapped around sweetbreads, quite a few times, yielding a large piece of meat that looks like a thinner version of *döner* kebab. To be able to cook and sell *kokoreç* properly, there is a special kind of cart that is built for this purpose. The cart is made out of stainless steel, and it usually is about a meter high and about a meter long with a width of sixty to seventy centimetres. The top has a long half-circular section with a sliding lid, resembling a bread storage bin. The sliding door is opened to reveal discs that hold the *kokoreç* skewers in place. Charcoal heats this section; alongside is a flat iron grill heated with cylinder gas, located on the bottom of the cart. The small area in front of the grills provides space for a

cutting board and knife. Hooks along the cart hold plastic bags full of bread, napkins and wet towels.

Three-wheeled Carts with Glass Case

Carts with glass cases have become the most popular on the streets of contemporary Istanbul.

There are a few different types of three-wheeled carts, used for selling different types of street food.

These carts are usually made out of wood. Three-wheeled like the carts described above, these have an upper section with a glass case that holds the food. The glass case has two doors, which are closed while the cart is on the move or to protect the food from unsanitary situations.

In the carts used for selling rice pilaf with chickpeas, the bottom part of the glass case consists of a sheet of stainless steel sheet above a tub of water heated by cylinder gas. The hot water keeps the rice pilaf with chickpeas warm.

Another version of this cart is used to sell *poğaç*, a savoury pastry, similar to bread, stuffed with cheese, potato or minced meat fillings. These vendors usually work early in the morning because *poğaç* is a popular breakfast item, especially for those who don't have time to eat at home. In order to keep their *poğaç* warm, these vendors use a similar three-wheeled cart with a heating device underneath the metal sheet. They select these tasty breads with a pair of tongs and serve them wrapped in paper or napkins.

Sandwiches have become another popular breakfast item among contemporary street food. The sandwich sellers use the same carts with the glass case. Instead of a heating mechanism, there are shelves located inside the glass case. The vendors display all their sandwich fillings on plates on

the bottom of the glass case, and on the shelves above they store items such as breads, back up sandwich fillings and sometimes drinks.

Other vendors use these same types of carts to sell different foods, such as various desserts and *çiğ köfte*, a Turkish version of steak tartar made out of bulgur wheat, minced meat, salt, red pepper flakes, onions, tomato paste and parsley – usually the street food version does not contain meat.

Four-wheeled *Simit* Carts

Vendors of the most popular street food, *simit*, have been upgraded from round wooden trays to four-wheeled carts, a change mandated by the municipalities of Istanbul starting in early 1990s. Unlike the three-wheeled carts described above, these carts are made out of sheet iron. Painted in red, with golden coloured rods and handles all around, they have become fairly standard all over the city. Each cart displays a stamp from the local municipality the cart. Although these carts are mobile, they usually stay in previously assigned locations.

Round Tinned Copper Trays

On a sweet note, the most popular street vendors among children were without a doubt the candy sellers. Although there were street vendors that sold hard candies, the equipment used by the candy paste sellers was more unique. These vendors used a round, tinned copper tray, which was divided into five equal triangles with a tiny round section in the middle. Each of the triangles was used to hold a different flavoured candy paste. The middle round part was used to hold a half lemon. Each candy flavour had its own metal skewer with a wooden handle used to serve this special paste.

In today's Istanbul, these candy paste vendors can only be seen in tourist areas, mostly on weekends, but they sell the pastes in the time-honoured style. Flavours can be combined or sold separately depending on the customer's desire. The candy paste is lifted with the metal skewer and wrapped around the end of a wooden stick that resembles a chopstick. Customers can get as many flavour layers as they want, and with each different flavour and colour the candy looks more and more appealing to the eye. Finally the prepared candy is rubbed with lemon to smooth out the surface and presented to the customer.

Water Sacks

Water sellers were very popular in the eighteenth century, though they began to diminish by the end of the nineteenth century, when, during Sultan Abdülhamit's reign, water pipes were built to bring spring water straight from the source to the city centre. However, in the beginning of nineteenth century there were still a few to be found on Istanbul's streets. Vendors carried water in sacks, narrow on one side and wide on the other, made of buffalo skin. The sack was carried on the back of the seller with the help of a leather strap. A hose that resembled an elephant trunk was used to pour the water out of the sack.

Ensemble of *Boza* Sellers

As mentioned in *Istanbul Eats: Culinary Backstreets*, *boza* is 'a thick, almost pudding-like drink made from fermented millet'. (Mullins, Schleifer p. 44) *Boza* sellers were a significant part of cold winter nights in Istanbul; they walked around neighbourhoods, announcing their arrival by 'calling out a long mournful "boooozaaa"'. (Mullins, Schleifer p.44) Vendors carried tin jugs, with lids, that could hold up to twelve kilograms of *boza*. In the other hand, they carried smaller

pitchers of water to wash the glasses used by the customers. The glasses used for offering *boza* were placed in a tin box, open at the top, is attached to a belt at the waist of the seller. This tin box also held a small container of powdered cinnamon. Since they worked at nights, *boza* vendors were required by law to carry small flashlights. It is very rare to see these vendors in contemporary Istanbul, however, as *boza* is now bottled and sold in supermarkets.

Sherbet Jugs

Sherbet jugs are among the most fancy and decorated vessels used in the nineteenth century. Although they can still be seen at times in historical and tourist areas, they no longer play an important role in the lives of Istanbul residents. Sherbets were popularly sold as a refreshing drink to overcome the heat of the summer.

Sherbet jugs were made out of brass that shined like gold and could be spotted from far away. They are shaped like large Chinese vases, narrow at the neck and bottom and quite large and wide in the middle. With attached straps, the jug was carried on the vendor's back like a backpack. The top of the jug was decorated with chains and beads; as the vendor moved, it jingled to announce his arrival. Just like the *boza* seller, sherbet vendors also carried a tin box for holding glasses, again attached to his waist, and a pitcher of water to clean the dirty glasses.

Mobile Coffee Vendors

Mobile coffee vendors do not exist anymore since coffee is now sold in all restaurants and coffee shops, but in the nineteenth century and earlier coffee makers were a common sight. These mobile vendors carried their own little grill with charcoal along with small basket containing

coffee pots, cups and coffee. Coffee makers would settle down in front of shops and make coffee for people coming and going from the shops.

Conclusion

Street food vendors still play an important role in the colourful, vibrant city of Istanbul, but in a few years time, strict municipal regulations and health safety issues may well drive them into extinction. Along with the food itself, the original vessels used to prepare and transport street food will also become obsolete and become mere antiques. However, while it still exists street food provides a great alternative to eating in restaurants. All over the city, these various vessels really are the ‘salt and pepper of great Istanbul’.

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