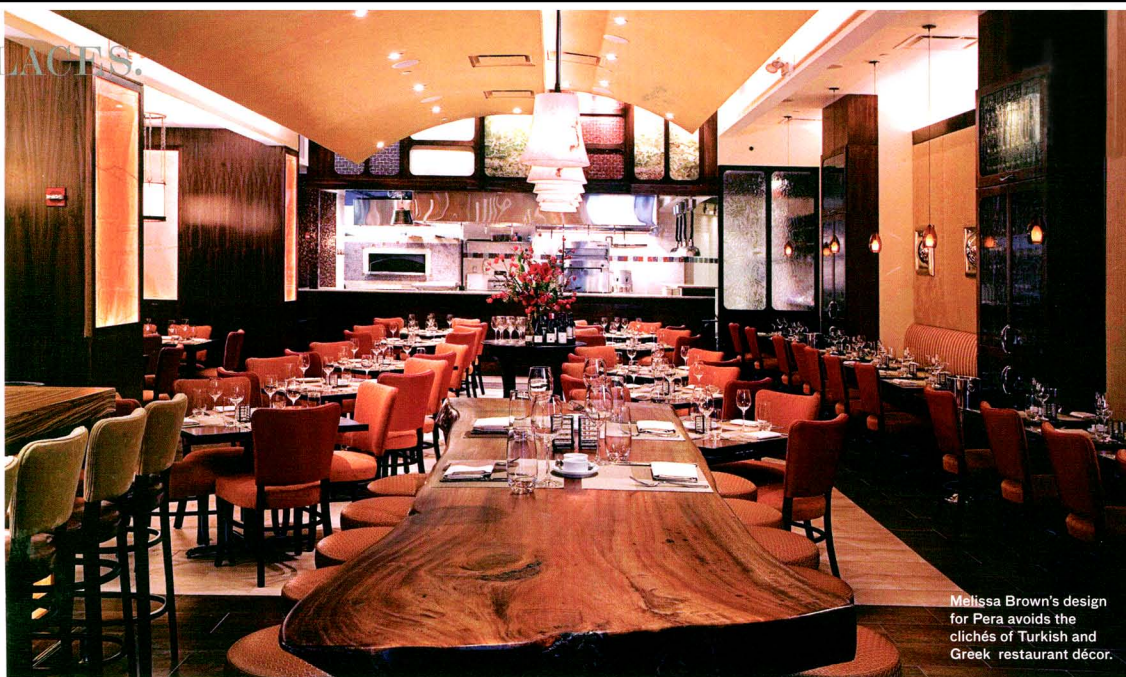


NEW YORK

PLACES



Melissa Brown's design for Pera avoids the clichés of Turkish and Greek restaurant décor.

RESTAURANTS

Ottoman Empire

Pera, a new midtown brasserie, takes a broad view of Turkish cuisine—one that stretches across the eastern Mediterranean from Greece all the way to Egypt.

BY JACKIE COOPERMAN

WITH ITS ALABASTER SURFACES, open kitchen, and buzzy atmosphere, the recently opened Pera Mediterranean Brasserie offers a definitively—and somewhat defiantly—midtown take on Turkish cuisine.

"We really wanted to do Turkish food properly, once and for all, but to do it in a metropolitan, New York restaurant, with a design and menu that reflected shared values of the Mediterranean," says Turkish-born Burak Karaçam, a former banker at Lehman Brothers, who co-owns Pera with Cem Erenler, who was also born in Turkey. "We didn't want to be the typical Greek restaurant with white and blue fishnets, or one of those Turkish places—all red and white, with big Ottoman brass trays."

Indeed, after designer Melissa Brown completely transformed what had been an Irish pub, Pera opened in November with luxurious finishes—walnut paneling; onyx inlays over the open kitchen; enormous, drum-like lighting fixtures; a zebra wood bar—and not a hookah or an evil eye

in sight. The restaurant is a big, jovial place that lures a cosmopolitan after-work crowd. On a recent night, a large table of young bankers devoured appetizers and bottles of wine, groups of middle-aged friends sat in front of the kitchen, and couples on dates shared the plush banquettes. Karaçam, a music aficionado, has created a play list of lively Mediterranean and Middle Eastern music, which cuts sometimes a touch too loudly through the hubbub.

Karaçam, whose family owns the successful Köşebaşı restaurant chain in Turkey, brought one of the group's star chefs, Sezai Celikbas, to run Pera's kitchen alongside a New York co-executive chef, Jason Avery, who had been at the Regent Wall Street. In the dining room, servers tend to be more enthusiastic than polished, but the kitchen has a knack for matching the festive ambience with robust flavors and carefully sourced ingredients.

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The private dining room at Pera.

Pera's wine list has a small selection from Turkey, Greece, Israel, and Lebanon, and a wider range of Italian, French, and American producers. Many diners start with one of the specialty cocktails, such as the Cherry Martini, which includes pistachio candy; the Pomegranate Cosmo; or the Peratini, whose fig syrup and cured olives are made in house. Waiters bring freshly baked lavash bread with a side of Tulum, a tangy sheep's milk cheese.

Among the many fine and easily shared mezes, there's a Turkish version of beef tartare called *çiğ köfte*. Raw bulgur grains, tomato and pepper pastes, dried herbs, and fresh tomatoes, blended and left to stand for 45 minutes so that the tomato acid cooks the bulgur, are added to chopped raw sirloin, molasses, parsley, mint, and lemon juice. The combination arrives at the table with Bibb lettuce cups in which diners wrap the meat, creating a kind of tartare dumpling. Vegetarian appetizers include an immense piece of warm, crunchy lavash topped with hefty scoops of smoked eggplant purée and roasted garlic cloves. Pera also makes delicious flatbreads called *pidettes*, served with an earthy blend of spinach and pine nuts or melting *kasseri* cheese. In winter, produce can veer toward the mealy, but on a recent chilly evening, the tomatoes in the tomato, walnut, parsley, and onion salad were exceptionally good, and stood up to the sumac, olive oil, lemon juice, and pomegranate molasses vinaigrette.

The main attraction, though, is Pera's expertly grilled meats. Chef Celikbas spent two years sourcing American lamb, finally finding that West Washington Meats, in Pennsylvania, met his standards. Lamb Adana, named for a Turkish city celebrated for its meat kebabs, is hand ground every day and marinated in a Turkish chili powder paste. It's the dish that Celikbas eats when he's homesick. Other seasoned meats offered in the mixed grill include chicken marinated in a milk and tomato paste and dusted with paprika and salt; lamb brochette flavored with tomato paste, yogurt, sunflower oil, paprika, and salt; and delicate lamb riblets.

In true Mediterranean fashion, the meat comes flanked by a generous pile of lavash and a trio of small, zesty salads: one combining arugula, dandelion greens, and mint in a pomegranate molasses; another with tomato, paprika, and lemon juice; and the third, a mix of sumac, red onions, and parsley.

Chef Avery, who went on a "culinary reconnaissance trip" to Turkey last year, sampling steak, lamb, and tripe, says he's eager to return and focus on the country's seafood dishes. For now, he's offering a few takes on fish, like a pan-fried mackerel with walnut purée and baby arugula, tomatoes, and crispy onions, and a satisfying if traditional grilled whole sea bass served with oven-roasted tomato, preserved lemon, roasted garlic, and fresh herbs.

Is adding more coastal cuisine a prelude to opening new restaurants? Karaçam, who drafted Pera's business plan while he was getting an MBA at Harvard Business School, clearly has his sights set on building an empire. "This is a very underestimated cuisine," he says. "We're out to change that." ■

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