

## **NEOLOKAL STORIES**

In this small booklet, you can read about each dish you will savor tonight as we take you on a voyage to the far corners of our Anatolian culinary culture. We hope you enjoy your journey with us.

### **SOUR DOUGH BREAD**

Her name is Neylan Ekşi. Neylan is a common girl's name and ekşi means sour. She was born on June 22, 2014, months before neolokal was born. Every day she gets wilder, which gives her character and a funky attitude. We serve the bread she produces with humus and colorful vegetable powders in a minimalist version of our iconic dish, Humus and Anatolian Landscape.

### **TOPIK**

Topik is a paradox and a prime example of neolokal's culinary credo, where we believe that geography shapes culinary habits more than ethnic roots. It's a traditional Armenian mezze, yet it doesn't exist in Armenia. It was created by Armenians who settled in Istanbul and embraced this dumpling-like Lenten dish of onion-stuffed -chickpea and potato- dough. In the 19th century, many Armenians summered on the Princes Islands, a minuscule archipelago in the Sea of Marmara. Here, we've sculpted a semblance of the Princes Islands in a tiny snack.

### **CIRCASSIAN DUCK WAFFLE**

After the 19th-century Caucasian-Russian wars, the Circassians who migrated to the Ottoman lands brought their culinary traditions with them and introduced the "Circassian chicken" recipe to these lands. This dish, made with boiled chicken meat, crushed walnuts, garlic, and bread crumbs, has become one of the common flavors of Anatolia and still finds its place on wedding tables, during holidays, and in meze plates. Due to the labor and patience required, it is often prepared in small communal groups, is a migratory dish with cultural significance. Inspired by this dish, we shred the whole cooked duck meat, mix it with its own fat and spices to create a stuffing. We serve it between sweet-salty wafers, coated with plum sauce and walnut croquant.

## **MUHAMMARA WAFFLE**

Muhammara is a traditional mezze from the Levant region, made with red peppers, tomatoes, tomato and pepper paste, walnuts, tahini, breadcrumbs, spices, and olive oil. Originating in Aleppo, Syria, it gradually became part of the culinary heritage of Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, southeastern Turkey, and particularly Antakya. Whether served at breakfast, dinner, special gatherings, or iftar tables, it's typically enjoyed with bread and shared among loved ones. At neolokal, we reinterpret this time-honored flavor through the lens of our chef's childhood memories. Inspired by a recipe passed down from his mother, we've adjusted its bold spice and heat to better suit our restaurant's palate. We serve it as an amuse-bouche: a refined bite tucked between a subtly sweet and savory wafer, accompanied by endive and a walnut croquant.

## **HERBS FRITTER with SALICORNIA**

Mücver is a traditional Turkish cooking method where vegetables are grated or finely chopped, then mixed with flour, eggs, and herbs to form a savory batter. It is generally pan-fried or baked. While zucchini mücver is the most common version—often served with yogurt at home or in taverns—many regions incorporate different vegetables, herbs, and even cheese, making it a beloved symbol of Anatolia's resourceful, zero-waste cuisine. At neolokal, we reinterpret this humble dish using green onions, Swiss chard, and salicornia—a mineral-rich wild herb from the salt marshes of the Aegean and Mediterranean coasts. We bake it into bite-sized portions and top it with lemon yogurt sauce and edible flowers for a fresh and vibrant finish.

## **FREEKEH PILAF with MUSSELS**

Whether eaten standing at a tray on the street, by the sea, in restaurants or around a family table, stuffed mussels are a beloved street food, each setting and moment of the day marked by its own small ritual. Inspired by this iconic dish, we created an amuse-bouche with a smoky twist. Instead of rice, we use freekeh bulgur sourced from Gaziantep, simmered in collagen-rich fish stock. It's then blended with fresh herbs, mussel meat, lemon, and butter. Meanwhile, mussels are simmered with aromatic vegetables to create a broth, which we emulsify with olive oil into a light foam. We top the freekeh pilaf with this foam and finish with chives and parsley. For our gluten-free menu, we use white rice instead of freekeh.

## **‘ÇİĞ KÖFTE’**

‘Çiğ köfte’ is a culinary tradition deeply rooted in the food culture of Anatolia, stretching from Urfa and Diyarbakır to as far as Aleppo. While regional variations exist, the essence of the recipe remains the same: raw meat kneaded with fine bulgur, isot pepper, tomato and pepper paste, and spices. This iconic dish has long symbolized generosity, celebration, and artisanal skill across the region. At neolokal, we use finely ground tenderloin, blending it with bulgur, onion, garlic, isot, traditional spices, pomegranate molasses, tomato and pepper paste. Instead of hand-shaping, we pass the mixture through the meat grinder to achieve a refined texture and modern presentation. Served in bite-sized portions on lettuce leaves, it’s garnished with finger lime pearls, pickled cucumber, and thin slices of beetroot for a vibrant, crispy, and tangy finish. For our vegetarian menu, we offer a meat-free version.

## **AYRAN AŞI**

Ayran aşısı is a cold, yogurt-based soup with chickpeas, wheat and fresh herbs. It’s enjoyed all over the country in myriad variations dictated by geography and local preferences. In our kitchen, we flavor salted yogurt with carrot, beet, red cabbage, red and yellow pepper, spinach, creating a colorful mosaic of tangy, vibrant aromas to awaken your tastebuds and kickstart this beautiful meal.

## **SEARED ‘LAKERDA’**

‘Zeytinyağlı’ is a typical traditional cooking technique similar to braising, which requires a generous amount of olive oil, often used together with onions, potatoes, and carrots depending on the main vegetable. We use an extra virgin olive oil made from Memecik olives and apply this method to baby artichokes, celeriac, potatoes, and carrots. The spotless black-eyed peas are also prepared using the same technique, but this time with fish stock to add depth. On top, we place fish slices marinated in a brine flavored with bay leaf and aromatic oils. Then the fish is quickly seared in a hot pan, sliced like lakerda—a traditional meze made by curing fatty fish in salted brine—and served over the olive oil-braised vegetables. We finish the plate with red cabbage and toasted spice seeds. You can also find the fish-free version on our vegetarian menu.

## **TALAŞ BÖREĞİ**

Istanbul is where the refined taste of the Ottoman cuisine meets Western cooking techniques, and ‘talaş böreği’ is a product of this very synthesis. As techniques like ‘feuilleté’ or ‘vol-au-vent’ from French cuisine entered the palace kitchens, rich buttery layers came together with diced meat and vegetable fillings. Traditionally served on special occasions, at banquets and guest tables, it is a dish that requires craftsmanship due to its hand-rolled dough. In our version, we stay true to this tradition by filling the hand-rolled buttery layers with sautéed spinach, aged Trakya cheese, and our neolocal made ‘pastırma’, which is cured with a spice mix called ‘çemen’. We serve it with a mint yogurt cream for a fresh and light balance. We serve the vegetarian version without pastırma.

## **CHICKEN KADINBUDU**

In Anatolia, many dishes receive their names from the cooking techniques or appearances they’re based on. Kadınbudu, meaning woman's leg or thigh, is a tried-and-true way for restaurants to repurpose leftover rice pilaf, while shaping it into something that resembles a lady’s limb. It’s made by combining pilaf with minced meat and spices and rolling the mix into large meatballs that are then deep-fried. We’ve replaced the red meat in traditional kadınbudu with sautéed, boneless chicken thigh meat and added fresh herbs. Our meatballs are coated in flour and egg and fried just like our mothers customarily fry them. Though we serve them differently, with a chicken and potato foam, a condensed chicken jus, and confit lemon. Our vegetarian version contains rice, potato, carrot, and chickpeas and is served with a potato foam with cumin seeds and a condensed vegetable jus.

## **CHICKEN & RICE**

Chicken and rice is a comforting and ubiquitous street food, served in a no-nonsense style with boiled or roasted chicken bits over chickpea-studded rice. Everyone in this colorful city has a favorite chicken and rice vendor who has perfected the art of making this simple treat; ours is İlhami Usta. He’s been at it for over 20 years, running a tiny operation down the street from neolokal. Without altering the essence of this street food, we aim to bring the grandeur of the past to the present by referencing Ottoman palace cuisine. Inspired by zerde pilaf served at great victories, weddings, births, and royal ceremonies recorded in

archives since the 17th century, we prepared a saffron zerde jelly. In doing so, we brought the unique flavor philosophy of palace cuisine—the harmony of sweet and savory—to our plate.

## **POACHED TURBOT**

Turbot is one of the Black Sea's most prized fish, celebrated for its thick skin, gelatinous texture, and naturally high collagen content. At neolokal, we cook this delicate fish gently—just enough to keep it soft and moist—staying true to the essence of 'buğulama', a traditional poaching method. As a base, we prepare a classic olive oil-braised 'şevketi bostan'—known as cnicus, a wild plant with edible root, native to the Aegean and Mediterranean regions—and leeks. What truly ties the dish together is the 'terbiye' sauce, an Anatolian technique used for enriching and thickening. We bind the collagen-rich fish stock with egg yolk, yogurt, lemon juice, and butter, creating a velvety and deeply flavorful sauce. The dish is finished with grilled asparagus, green peas, and parsley oil, bringing a fresh and vibrant balance to the plate.

## **LAMB NECK**

In Anatolian cuisine, lamb is an essential part of both rural life and culinary heritage. Among its various cuts, the neck stands out with its rich connective tissue that transforms into tender, flavorful strands when cooked slowly over low heat. Traditionally used in hearty stews, this underrated cut reveals its full potential through long, slow roasting. In our version, we slow-cook lamb neck in the oven for 12 hours along with aromatic vegetables, then shred the meat, season it with spices, and shape it using molds. The accompanying bulgur pilaf is steamed with roasted red pepper purée and the lamb's own stock, then finished with green peppers, fresh mint, and parsley. One of neolokal's signature recipes, mom's meatballs, completes the dish with a nostalgic touch. The plate is finished with lamb neck jus, roasted pepper cream and foam, red pepper and chard leather.

## **GRILLED ASPARAGUS**

At neolokal, we reinterpret traditional Anatolian techniques with a plant-based approach. This dish focuses on a velvety 'terbiye' sauce, an Anatolian method for enriching and thickening sauces, traditionally used for meat or fish dishes. In our version, we use vegetable broth, egg yolk, yogurt, lemon juice, and butter to

create a completely vegetarian adaptation. The base is a classic olive oil-braised ‘şevketi bostan’ —known as cnicus, a wild plant with edible root, native to the Aegean and Mediterranean regions— cooked with leeks and rice. Fresh asparagus is blanched and then grilled over charcoal, adding a smoky depth to the dish. It’s finished with blanched peas and parsley oil, balancing the richness of the sauce. A celebration of seasonal vegetables and traditional flavors, brought together with modern finesse.

## **MOREL ‘MANTI’**

‘Manti’ is the traditional name for Turkish dumplings, usually filled with mincemeat and served with yogurt and garlic butter. At neolokal, we reimagine this iconic dish entirely through the lens of mushrooms—flavor, texture, and aroma. In our version, the dough is kneaded with a mushroom stock made from dried porcini, shiitake, and chestnut mushrooms for a deep umami base. The dumplings are filled with morel mushrooms and gently boiled in the same rich broth. We serve them with mushroom cream, emulsion, powder, sautéed morels, and a delicate mushroom leather—dehydrated from mushroom cream, rehydrated in warm broth, and draped over the entire dish. All about mushroom! A multi-layered, umami-rich creation celebrating the depth and elegance of fungi.

## **KEŞKÜL**

In Anatolian home cooking, milk-based desserts are ever-present—served in everyday meals as well as celebratory feasts, they offer a taste of warmth and a sense of togetherness. Keşkül, one of the most elegant expressions of this tradition, takes its name from the bowl once carried by Ottoman dervishes to collect alms. Though it appeared in different forms, from refined versions in the Ottoman palace to humble ones in public kitchens, it has always symbolized generosity and solidarity. Our version stays true to the classic: a light, creamy pudding made with milk, finely ground almonds, starch, and coconut. We serve it with almond crisps and a caramelised milk ice cream that draws out the subtle, nutty aromas of this timeless dessert.

## **BAKLAVA**

Baklava was invented in Gaziantep, and most baklava masters hail from Aleppo, Syria, because Gaziantep was once part of Aleppo before the Ottoman borders

were redrawn. For generations, they've made baklava according to strict, traditional methods that require great skill and expertise; rolling the dough see-through-thin is an art. Whether these methods should be revised or updated remains a hot topic. In keeping with our concept of respectful modernization, we've designed our version with less sugar, more butter and plenty of pistachios, yielding a distinct flavor and texture – rolls of crispy baklava baked with candied walnut and clarified butter, filled with a silky mix of Antep pistachios, lor (fresh ricotta cheese) and kaymak (clotted cream), served with our iconic burnt sheep's milk yogurt ice cream and milk skin.

## **FRIGO**

Eating chocolate ice cream bars at the movie theater was a mandatory tradition when we were kids. To this day, children of all ages eat them in movie theaters across the country. The unforgettable bar is called Frigo. Of course, we had to make it into a dessert; an icy treat of allergy friendly, gluten-free biscuits resembling mosaic cake with rakı infused sultana grapes, candied fig and citrus for a tart kick.

## **OVEN-BAKED PUMPKIN DESSERT**

This oven-baked pumpkin dessert is an homage to the Black Sea region, where pumpkins are simmered with a sugary syrup scented with cinnamon, cardamom and cloves. We pair it with tahini, as is customary, because the two are a perfect match, and finish the dish with an eggless meringue, made with gypsophilla root, or as we call it, 'çöven otu' -instead of eggs.