

# RAMADAN

## Before dawn, ancient drum rite wakes Istanbul faithful to fast

Historic davulcu tradition survives as one of Istanbul's last enduring street customs



Turkish drummer Hakan Ozbingol plays drum and sings traditional songs in the streets of Istanbul



Turkish drummer plays drum and sings traditional songs in the streets of Istanbul, to wake Muslims up for the sahur

● **Ramadan drummers wake Istanbul's faithful before dawn**

● **Tradition dates back to 19th-century Ottoman Empire**

● **One of few surviving street traditions**

AFP | Istanbul

It's 3:30 am and lights are slowly coming on in the homes lining a narrow Istanbul street as people are woken up by the rhythmic thump of a drum.

Emerging onto a balcony, Sibel Savas and her grandson look down as the drummer -- or davulcu in Turkish -- wanders through the Ayvansaray neighbourhood, his drumbeat waking the faithful for a last meal before

the daily Ramadan fast begins at sunrise.

For the past 55 years, Hakan Ozbingol has got up at 3:00 am every day during Ramadan to play his davul, a large double-headed drum carried with a strap and played while walking through the streets.

He inherited the role from his father, with whom he started venturing out when he was 10.

Although their nightly sortie is purely voluntary, local residents traditionally give a tip at the end of the month, says Ozbingol, who is now 65.

If once this amounted to enough to buy the children a nice gift, these days it's barely enough "to buy them clothes or to cover the bills", he sighs, as people struggle to cope with Turkey's bitter economic crisis. But for him, it's not a job but more of a sacred duty.

"As long as it's to do with Allah, this drum will never fall silent. We're doing Allah's work, it's our duty," he said hoarsely,

trudging with bent back through the winding streets.

### Ottoman roots

According to Harun Korkmaz, a music historian at Istanbul University, the Ramadan drum rite "dates back to the end of the 19th century" when the Ottoman military bands, or mehters, performed several times a day, setting the pace of daily life.

"The davulcu are continuing this tradition," he told AFP of a tradition that began in Istanbul and spread to the rest of the country.

As well as drumming, "real" davulcu will also chant "mani", or short rhythmic poems, under people's windows to flatter a sleepy audience, Ozbingol explained.

"In Turkey, there are few davulcus who know how to sing mani. It's not enough to pick up the drum and bang on it while walking around," he said, proudly tapping his temple to show where he keeps this knowledge.

**YOU KNOW WHAT**

**Around 3,000 Ramadan drummers still walk through 961 Istanbul neighbourhoods each night, making it one of the city's largest living cultural traditions**

The tradition began in the Fatih district near Istanbul's historic peninsula, and most of today's Ramadan drummers come from Turkey's Roma community, who today number around 2.7 million, research figures show.

As the davulcu walks the street where washing lines vie for space with Turkish flags draped from the high facades

of the buildings, he is warmly greeted by a pensioner called Zafer, who is also a musician.

"If the Roma weren't here there would be nothing. They are the musicians and Istanbul's Ramadan drummers," the 71-year-old told AFP.

### 'A tradition that must not die'

Still holding her grandson, Sibel Savas says she has no alarm clock and relies on the early-morning drum rite to wake her up.

"This tradition is important to us this. It comes from our ancestors," she told AFP.

In a nearby street, another drummer, 58-year-old Yurdaer, is trying to play a little more quietly as he passes the home of an elderly neighbour who has heart problems.

Across Istanbul, Turkey's largest city, there are a total of 3,000 davulcu who go out nightly to wake the faithful in 961 neighbourhoods, explains Selami Aykut, who heads an organisation

representing the megacity's local mayors.

Since the pandemic, when the nightly rite was briefly halted, the authorities doubled the number of accredited drummers.

"We have increased the number we work with in order to better pass on our Ottoman traditions to young people, so that they can feel the excitement of Ramadan," Aykut told AFP.

With street vendors hawking traditional foods increasingly scarce across the city's streets, their services replaced by supermarkets, the davulcu is one rare tradition not at risk of disappearing due to his unique role at Ramadan.

"There are no more people selling boza (a fermented cereal-based drink), no more yoghurt sellers, nor other street vendors -- they've almost all disappeared," said Ozbingol.

"Only the davulcu are left," he murmurs, wandering off up the street.

### Ramadan Recipe

## Stuffed Eggplant with Spiced Beef and Pine Nuts

Time: 45 mins | Servings: 6

### Ingredients

- 3 medium (about 14-ounce) globe eggplants
- 1/4 cup canola oil, divided
- 2 1/2 teaspoons kosher salt, divided, plus more to taste
- 3/4 cup finely chopped white onion
- 3 large garlic cloves, minced
- 12 ounces 80% lean ground beef
- 2/3 cup drained and rinsed canned chickpeas, patted dry
- 1 tablespoon tomato paste
- 3/4 teaspoon ground coriander
- 1/4 teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1 (14.5-ounce) can diced tomatoes, undrained
- 3/4 cup golden raisins
- 1/4 cup lightly toasted pine nuts,

- roughly chopped
- 3 tablespoons finely chopped fresh mint, plus small leaves for garnish
- Labneh
- Pomegranate arils (optional)

### Directions

1. Preheat oven to 450°F. Cut eggplants lengthwise down the center, slicing three quarters of the way through and leaving stem end intact. Drizzle eggplants all over with 2 tablespoons oil; sprinkle inside slits evenly with 1 teaspoon salt.
2. Place eggplants on an aluminum foil-lined baking sheet; roast in preheated oven until skin is browned and

flesh is very tender, about 35 minutes, turning eggplants 2 to 3 times during cooking. Transfer eggplants, cut sides down, to a wire rack placed over a rimmed baking sheet. Cover loosely with foil; keep warm.

3. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil in a large skillet over medium. Add onion and garlic; cook, stirring often, until softened, 2 to 3 minutes. Add beef and chickpeas; increase heat to medium-high. Cook, stirring often to break beef into small crumbles, until beef is browned but not cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes.



4. Add tomato paste, coriander, cinnamon, and 1 teaspoon salt to skillet; cook, stirring constantly, until fragrant, about 45 seconds. Add tomatoes with juices, and scrape bot-

tom of skillet to release any browned bits. Bring to a simmer over medium-high; reduce heat to medium. Cook, stirring often and crushing tomatoes and beef into smaller pieces, until liquid thickens and beef is cooked through, 3 to 5 minutes. Stir in raisins, pine nuts, and mint. Season with additional salt to taste. Remove from heat.

5. Spread labneh on a serving platter. Arrange eggplants, cut sides up, over labneh; sprinkle inside slits with remaining 1/2 teaspoon salt. Stuff eggplants with evenly divided beef mixture. Garnish with additional mint and pomegranate arils (if using).