

**Around the Table: *Meyhane***

Social Structure of Meyhane Culture as a Space of Gathering

By

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to be 'Bke Uygur', written in a cursive style.



# Around the Table: Meyhane

## Social Structure of Meyhane Culture as a Space of Gathering

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## Abstract

“Around the Table: Meyhane” explores the heart of Istanbul's meyhane culture, revealing its intricate social structures, cultural dynamics, and broader significance that transcends geographical boundaries. At its core, it argues that meyhane culture is not limited to a specific city but rather centres around the table as a site of community and togetherness. By exploring the agency and geography of the table, *Around the Table: Meyhane* demonstrates how meyhane culture transcends physical limits by encompassing distinct characteristics, rituals, and recurring social and spatial elements within formal and informal meyhanes. Moreover, it reveals that meyhanes acquire their political and social significance through historical processes, effectively becoming political spaces in their own right.

Meyhane culture thrives as a celebration of shared humanity and the power of place-specific yet un-national phenomena. The focal point of this cultural exploration is the table itself, a space that acts as a catalyst for forging connections, nurturing community bonds, and perpetuating traditions. It is within the meyhane's tables that we discover a dynamic and adaptable culture shaped by the interactions between individuals, spaces, and time.

This research journey traverses a multidisciplinary terrain, drawing from qualitative research methods encompassing maps, songs, poems, documentaries, and interviews. It unearths the multifaceted nature of meyhane culture, unveiling its rich tapestry of social dynamics, collective identities, and the nuanced negotiation of power relationships within these cherished spaces.

Meyhanes emerge as vital hubs where social interaction takes centre stage, cultural expressions flourish, and traditional practices find a refuge for preservation. Through this thesis's lens, the table's scale emerges as a powerful agent in shaping and sustaining meyhane culture, transcending mere physical boundaries to become a symbol of collective memory.

In essence, "Around the Table: Meyhane" contributes significantly to the scholarship of meyhane culture, providing a profound understanding of this social phenomenon beyond its

physical manifestations. It beckons us to recognise that meyhane culture, with its tables as carriers of tradition, is a testament to the resilience and adaptability of cultural practices and spaces.







# I. Introduction

## ***İstanbul Hatırası***

*“Akşam gülkurusu rengiyle  
Daha inmeden Haliç’e  
İnilirdi Eşref Şefik’in meyhanesine  
Çay tabaklarında pıllaki, fava  
turp salatası, beyaz peynir  
sakız rakısı ve Taşdelen suyu”<sup>1</sup>*

Refik Durbaş, poet

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<sup>1</sup> Translation: "Istanbul Memory, Refik Durbaş  
With the evening's rose-petal hue,  
Before going down to the Golden Horn,  
We would go to Eşref Şefik's tavern,  
On tea saucers, there was pıllaki, fava,  
radish salad, white cheese,  
raki, and Taşdelen water.", Refik Durbaş.(Adam Yayınevi, 1998).

## I.I. Significance of Meyhane Culture

Nestled amidst the vibrant streets of Istanbul, the meyhane culture stands as a captivating and complex cultural phenomenon, defying easy categorisation. Meyhanes underscore the rituals and rhythms of the rakı table and the culture's unique importance in Istanbul's broader cultural landscape. Moreover, they emphasise the role of the rakı table in preserving and carrying this culture, challenging conventional ideas about culture being tied to a specific nation, instead positing it as site-specific, with the table as the locus in the intimate spaces it inhabits.

Meyhane culture's uniqueness lies in its embodiment of cultural practices that transcend the confines of traditional categorisations. Meyhanes, while appearing as ordinary establishments, harbour deep-rooted traditions and foster a profound sense of community. The rakı table is central to this culture, serving as both a physical space and an emotional conduit, echoing the sentiments of Ray Oldenburg's concept of a "third space." Like Peter Clark's research on English Alehouses, meyhane also foster a significant role in its own geography, providing people from all layers of society with a place to belong.<sup>2</sup> The character of third places<sup>3</sup> show themselves around the rakı table in meyhane, with its conversations, regulars, playfulness, home away from home with just one difference: Rakı table carries the third place from meyhane to home, to online platforms and to wherever there is a table.

Meyhane culture represents a dynamic interplay between culture and space. The rakı table, laden with its rituals and traditions, embodies the idea that culture transcends specific national boundaries, enriching humanity. This thesis celebrates meyhane culture as a valuable heritage of Istanbul, recognising its capacity to enrich our understanding of the city and foster a sense of unity among diverse communities. A comprehensive understanding of Istanbul's societal dynamics necessitates thoroughly exploring meyhane's history, transformations, and functions as spaces for community-building and socialisation. As the journey unfolds through Istanbul's vibrant streets, it becomes evident that the significance of meyhane culture extends far beyond the city limits, resonating with the broader implications of cultural practices in an interconnected world.

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<sup>2</sup> Gamze Yavuzer, *Istanbul Wine-Taverns as Public Places in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Master of Arts in History Thesis, Boğaziçi University, 2015), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Hearth of Community* (New York: Marlowe & Company, 1999).

As patrons gather around this table, they partake in a unique cultural performance, a delicate dance that transcends time and space. It is through this performance, etched into the fabric of the meyhane, that a distinct cultural identity is preserved and passed down through generations.

As this exploration unfolds, the chapters will delve deeper into the historical underpinnings of meyhane culture, exploring its evolution, role in the dynamics of the urban space, and intimate connection with the raki table.

### ***Significance of Meyhanes in Istanbul***

Meyhane culture, with its intricate rituals and intimate settings, holds profound significance in Istanbul's rich cultural tapestry. Beyond the bustling metropolis and historical landmarks, it is within the meyhane's cosy confines that the city's true soul reveals itself. These establishments, steeped in history and tradition, serve as living archives of Istanbul's collective memory.

Meyhane culture offers a lens through which we can explore the city's past, comprehend its present, and envision its future. It is a testament to Istanbul's ability to adapt, evolve, and thrive in ever-changing dynamics. At its core, meyhane culture embodies the essence of community, fostering connections and dialogue among people from all walks of life.

As this exploration unfolds, we will understand how meyhane culture has become inseparable from Istanbul's identity. It is not just about dining and drinking but about forging bonds, preserving traditions, and embracing the spirit of conviviality that defines this city. Meyhane culture transcends the boundaries of time and space, reflecting Istanbul's resilient and ever-vibrant spirit.

This thesis embarks on a multidisciplinary journey, drawing upon various fields of study to unravel the intricate tapestry of meyhane culture. It delves into the rich history of these establishments, tracing their evolution and profound relationship with the urban space. Through this journey, we will discover that meyhane culture is not just a facet of Istanbul; it embodies the city itself, where the past, present, and future converge in a timeless celebration of life and community. This exploration aims to demonstrate that cultures can be

inherently site-specific, finding their identity not in national borders but in the places where they come to life.



## II. The Rakı Table

“Rakılı sofralarda nice sorunlar çözülür ya da güncelleştirilir. Bir iki dostla rakı sofrasında oturup söyleşmenin tadı hiçbir başka şeyde bulunmaz. Ben rakıyı severim. Daha doğrusu severdim. Yine de arada özlüyorum rakı sofralarındaki sohbetleri. Her konudur tartışılan, yaşamın her köşesiyle bucağıyla içli dışlı olmak budur. Rakıyı kendine dost kılmak. Geçmiş günlerde sık sık bulduğumuz rakılı sofraları anımsıyorum. Günün ünlü şairleriyle, yazarlarıyla. Her kadehi yudumlarken o günler canlanıyor sanki! Dağlarca ile Necatigil ile Cumalı ile Özdemir’le ve daha çok şair arkadaşlarla anılaşan rakı sofraları...”<sup>4</sup>

Oktay Akbal, 01 September 2013 Sunday, Cumhuriyet

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<sup>4</sup>*Translation:* “At rakı tables, many problems are solved or updated. The pleasure of sitting with a couple of friends at a rakı table and chatting cannot be found in anything else. I like rakı. Or rather, I used to. Nevertheless, I still miss the conversations at rakı tables from time to time. Everything is discussed, intimately connected with every corner and nook of life. Making rakı your friend. I remember the rakı tables we used to meet at frequently in the past. With the famous poets and writers of the day. It's as if those days come alive with every sip! Rakı tables where we reminisced with Dağlarca, Necatigil, Cumalı, Özdemir, and many more poet friends...”, Oktay Akbal, Cumhuriyet Newspaper, (September 1<sup>st</sup> 2013).

## II.I. The First Toast: From Taverns to Meyhanes<sup>5</sup>

In the intricate tapestry of cultural practices, societies have long designated specific spaces for the consumption of alcoholic beverages. Pubs<sup>6</sup>, Biergartens, or taverns—all these venues witness the universal act of indulging in drinks, whether alone or in the company of friends, family, or even strangers who become friends during shared drinks. However, while drinking may be universal, the experience it engenders is distinctly unique. It's not solely about geographical preferences for drinks or the arrangement of social dynamics; it's about the individual character of each drink and the rituals that envelop it. The spatial journey within this experiential realm finds its essence in "rakı," an anise-flavoured alcoholic beverage that unfolds a story of its geography, discourse, and camaraderie.

At the heart of this spatial narrative is the "meyhane," a term forged from the fusion of "mey", meaning drink and "hane", meaning home. Unlike other global terms like taverns or pubs, the appellation "meyhane" carries a distinctive essence—a haven where the working class, poets and sometimes the Ottoman military congregated. Amidst the melting pot of cultures, the meyhane found its identity as a vibrant locus for intimate gatherings. As Istanbul, a historic crossroads due to its maritime prominence, beckoned diverse cultures and ethnicities for centuries, the rituals of drinking and assembly evolved into the pulse of the city's identity.

The distinction between taverns and meyhanes marked a turning point in the landscape of social spaces. This transformation was not merely semantic; it bore witness to a broader shift in the socio-cultural fabric of communities. As urban centres expanded and societal structures evolved, a need arose to create spaces to accommodate the evolving dynamics of social interactions. These spaces needed a name that would encapsulate the essence of the experience they offered.

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<sup>5</sup> The word is borrowed from Persian "may" (مے) which means "fermented drink, wine." The Persian word evolved from Middle Persian (Pahlavi or Parthian) "may," which had the same meaning. This word is cognate with the Sogdian word "maδu," which also means the same. The Sogdian word is related to the Avestan (Zend) language, where "maδa" means "a kind of fermented drink made from honey." The Avestan word "maδa" is derived from the Indo-European Proto-Language \*medhu-, which means "1. honey, 2. fermented drink made from honey." From the same root, we also have Ancient Greek "methý" and English "mead" (fermented drink).

"Kelime Kökeni," Etimoloji Türkçe, accessed 01.09.2023, <https://www.etimolojiturkce.com/kelime/mey>.

<sup>6</sup> Pubs, often abbreviated as "public houses," share similarities with meyhanes as they are both establishments licensed to serve alcoholic beverages. The origins of the very first pubs in Britain can be traced back to Roman taverns, where alcoholic drinks and food were served. This historical connection between meyhanes and pubs, their shared role as spaces for communal gathering and the nuances of their publicness will be explored in subsequent chapters.

The emergence of the term meyhane carried the promise of a unique socio-cultural experience. No longer mere establishments for the consumption of alcohol, these spaces were now meyhanes – designated hubs for friendliness, camaraderie, and shared storytelling. The term carries a distinctive purpose and character, setting meyhanes apart from their tavern predecessors. Since the 18th century, entertainment has seamlessly woven itself into the fabric of urban culture in Istanbul.<sup>7</sup> Initially confined to the precincts of the palace, entertainment spaces began to increase, ushering in a newfound diversity. Social life seamlessly integrated into the daily urban routine, and beyond the traditional public spaces like mosque courtyards and bazaars, society started dedicating more venues to leisure and enjoyment. During this period, meyhanes began to take shape and transform into the physical and social forms that persist today.

### ***Rakı meets meyhane***

While wine once held sway over meyhanes until the close of the 18th century<sup>8</sup>, the epoch of meyhane culture, as we know it, ushered in with the ascendancy of rakı. This anise-flavoured spirit catalysed a transformation in these spaces. Rakı's vibrant flavour and the shared rituals of its preparation and consumption offered an unparalleled dimension of sociability. Its metamorphic journey, from a crystalline state to a milky opalescence upon the addition of water, mirrored the transformation of the space itself—morphing from mundane taverns into captivating meyhanes.



Figure 1. IstanbulElsewhere: Pop-up Meyhane with Tan Morgül, YouTube video. 00:40. <https://youtu.be/qLPo14UEGDQ?si=0LW5E5jH0jnU9Gf>

<sup>7</sup> Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekar Odaları ve Meyhaneler Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Marjinalite ve Mekan (1789-1839)*, (Istanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü yayınları 32, 2016), 19.

<sup>8</sup> Hakan Kaynar, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler: İstanbul'un "muhabbet" Gemileri (Meyhanes from Ottoman to Republic: İstanbul's "conversation" ships)*, *Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı*, edited by Erdir Zat, Nilhan Aras, Engin Öncüoğlu, Onur Kutluoğlu, Umut Şumnu, Selin Özavcı, Murat Meriç, (Istanbul: Anason İşleri, 2022), 31.

As Ottoman society gradually adopted Western ways, it embraced greater tolerance for alcohol consumption, even in public spaces, notably during the reign of Mahmut II. These transformations bore witness to the multifaceted nature of life during the Ottoman Empire, a time when Westernization and a simultaneous attachment to Ottoman heritage converged and found expression within the drinking culture. While Ottoman elites indulged in Western imports like champagne and rum, they also held steadfast to their affection for a more "local"<sup>9</sup> drink<sup>10</sup>: rakı.

The ascendancy of rakı as a popular choice in Istanbul had a relatively recent origin, with its surge in popularity tracing back to a somber event—the Mora Rebellion, as Refik Halid Karay states<sup>11</sup>. Throughout the 19th century, the denizens of Istanbul increasingly elevated rakı to pre-eminence, although its cherished status in Anatolia spanned centuries. This resurgence of rakı can, in part, be attributed to the Greek community, which played a pivotal role in its proliferation. The correlation between the rise of rakı and the influence of the Greek community on meyhanes is unmistakable. As Greece fought for its independence during the Mora Rebellion, it unwittingly paved the way for rakı to become the beverage of choice. Notably, many meyhanes in Istanbul were owned and operated by Greeks during this era. This historical conjunction bore witness to Greece's independence and witnessed rakı becoming an integral facet of Istanbul's cultural fabric.

The "manners of drinking rakı," an intricate ensemble of customs, etiquettes, and rituals, found its roots in Greek traditions and the meyhanes that flourished during the Ottoman era. This tradition encompassed serving mezes alongside rakı, whether patrons convened at tables or counters. Political dynamics and evolving drinking preferences propelled rakı to prominence in Istanbul's meyhane culture.

Yet, the essence of meyhane culture extends beyond the beverage itself. The rituals, emotions, and shared memories transmute rakı from a mere drink to a cultural emblem. In these spaces, the resonant clatter of cutlery typical of restaurants and the uproarious

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of "local" will be thoroughly examined in subsequent chapters, particularly in its relation to specific places rather than being tied to a national identity. Despite the influence of Westernization on various social groups, opting for a local drink like rakı did not signify a national choice, but rather a preference associated with a particular geographical location, distinct from what was considered "Western." The political significance of rakı began to emerge as it persisted as a preferred beverage in meyhanes, representing a form of resistance and cultural resilience.

<sup>10</sup> Hakan Kaynar, *Muhabbet Baki Mahbuban Kayıp: Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler*, (Istanbul, Istanbul Araştırmaları Yıllığı 3 / Annual of Istanbul Studies 3, 2014), 7.

<sup>11</sup> Hakan Kaynar, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler: İstanbul'un "muhabbet" Gemileri* (Meyhanes from Ottoman to Republic: Istanbul's "conversation" ships), *Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı*, edited by Erdir Zat, Nilhan Aras, Engin Öncüoğlu, Onur Kutluoğlu, Umut Şumnu, Selin Özavcı, Murat Meriç, (Istanbul: Anason İşleri, 2022), 31.

laughter distinctive of pubs fade into the background. The fork's gentle clink barely resonates as patrons unhurriedly sing along to melodies or immerse themselves in intimate conversations. Even the melodies wafting through the air act as a subtle backdrop, intricately woven into the larger experience.

In the world of meyhane culture, it's not just the beverage but the synergy of seemingly minor elements—the whispers of shared stories, the harmonies of songs, the unhurried exchanges—that orchestrates an ambience where time is elongated, and connections are deepened. It's this very melange of subtleties that draws people beyond the mere act of drinking; it is the atmosphere—the very soul of meyhane—that beckons them into its realm.

As the curtain lifted on this cultural evolution, the meyhane became a place where tradition and modernity intertwined. The deep-rooted rituals of rakı consumption became a bridge between eras, a way of paying homage to the past while embracing the currents of change. The meyhane, with its distinct name and association with rakı, stood as a testament to the evolution of social spaces, reflecting a delicate balance between preserving heritage and welcoming the future.

The metamorphosis from taverns to meyhanes marked a momentous juncture in the cultural landscape. It signified a deliberate departure from convention, an evolution that acknowledged the changing dynamics of socialisation and the need for spaces that facilitated meaningful connections. The meyhane's identity, forged through the interplay of naming, rakı, and evolving societal norms, would endure as a testament to the resilience and adaptability of culture. With rakı, meyhanes gained political agency, becoming a statement piece.

As we traverse the annals of time, we uncover the milestones that propelled the transformation of taverns into meyhanes. From the emergence of the term "meyhane" to the integral role of rakı, this historical process is a journey of evolution, innovation, and the recognition of the profound importance of shared spaces that reflect the pulse of society.

In the landscape of social establishments, where pubs and taverns appear to share a functional core with meyhanes, a thought-provoking question arises: how did meyhanes differentiate themselves as they traversed the decades? The answer lies not merely in the passage of time but in the essence that underpins this evolution. It's essential to recognise

that "meyhane" traces its origins back to the Byzantine era, where it once referred to wine-selling venues. Today, it stands as the sanctum of rakı, entwined with the rituals that have organically shaped a distinctive culture around the table.

Notably, the term "meyhane" has persevered in its original form in this writing, a conscious choice that signifies more than just a name. It encapsulates a social structure—a haven, a realm that transcends formal limitations. Meyhanes, characterised by their rituals and the presence of rakı, can emerge in any location. What remains constant is their intrinsic connection to the table, where rituals unfold and culture finds its expression. This table, while it can vary in form and dimensions, holds a particular significance—the "sofra<sup>12</sup>". The very essence of meyhane culture crystallises around this shared space of dining and imbibing, an embodiment of togetherness and collective identity.

Distinguishing meyhanes from pubs, beyond the realm of rakı, rests upon the very concept of the table itself. The table, in its myriad forms, metamorphoses into a "çilingir sofrası<sup>13</sup>"—a term alluding to an inclusive, inviting atmosphere. From this point forward, the table transcends its materiality, transforming into a socio-geographical element. It's no longer a mere piece of furniture; it's an intermediary, a conduit that bridges individual experiences to a collective memory.

While the origins of meyhanes may date back to the Byzantine epoch, their enduring presence and cultural prominence lie in this evolution—from wine peddlers to the custodians of rakı rituals. This chapter untangles the threads of this metamorphosis, illuminating how meyhanes transformed from their historical roots into the enchanting spaces they are today—spaces that find their soul around the table, the "çilingir sofrası," a place where stories intertwine, memories are etched, and culture thrives.

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<sup>12</sup> "Sofra," when translated, can be equated to a dining table based on its function. What sets "sofra" apart from a conventional table is that it encapsulates the very essence of an activity. It's not merely an object; instead, it represents a sequence of actions that define the table within a specific timeframe. In this context, "sofra" serves as the quintessence of the rakı table, metamorphosing it from an inanimate object into a vibrant enactment of cultural rituals. The centrepiece of a sofrası is the food and drink, and it takes centre stage as people gather around the table to savour their meals.

<sup>13</sup> The term 'çilingir sofrası,' in addition to the word 'sofra,' carries a distinct connotation referring to a rakı table. Whether it takes shape in the vibrant ambience of a meyhane or within the confines of a home, it metamorphoses the table's physicality into a ritual. Be it composed of scattered newspapers or neatly set on a traditional table, as long as it embodies the essence of rakı culture, it becomes a 'çilingir sofrası.' This term encapsulates the most intimate expression of meyhane culture, representing a rakı table that can vary from opulent to minimalist, yet consistently serving as a space for communal enjoyment and shared rakı experiences.

## II.II. A Shared Table: Historical Roots

Around the table, where stories are exchanged, and toasts resound, an unspoken continuity of history unfolds. Each clink of glasses and each raised toast pays homage not only to the living but also to the departed souls and those absent from the gathering. This ritual is a shared gesture that transcends the boundaries of time and personal acquaintance, connecting those seated at the table to a legacy steeped in familial and communal narratives. This remarkable feature of meyhanes, the drinking houses, reveals that these spaces are not mere venues for drinking; they are living archives of tradition and cultural continuity.



Figure2. This is a traditional example of "çilingir sofrası". Informal, a table is determined by the borders drawn by a newspaper, the newspaper serves as a table, a "sofra" for sharing a slice of cheese to eat with rakı. As it is demonstrated, rakı table can be set anywhere.

Images from left to right:

Mehdi Shabani, Meyhane Dedemin Can Evi (Meyhane, My Grandfather's Home). YouTube video, 1:39. [https://youtu.be/6chOllVU\\_h4?si=qJ1Bhu2Ey7HdqtqK](https://youtu.be/6chOllVU_h4?si=qJ1Bhu2Ey7HdqtqK)

Kerem Yücel, Çilingir Sofrası, İstanbul. <http://www.postseyyah.com/spbgallery/cilingir-sofrasi-istanbul/>.

Meyhanes serve as vessels for transmitting rituals and customs, etching the collective memory of patrons. What sets meyhanes apart is their unique ability to impart these customs without formal instruction. Instead, meyhanes become the teachers, subtly imparting the essentials of their culture through every facet, whether in a household setting, an established venue, or aboard a boat with makeshift tables fashioned from newspapers and slices of cheese. Meyhanes have stood as silent witnesses, tireless narrators, and keen observers of the human experience. They've been present since long before the Ottoman Empire, enduring through the annals of history.

To comprehend the essence of meyhanes as they are known today, we must journey back to the Ottoman period, where this cultural phenomenon first emerged in Istanbul's social landscape.<sup>14</sup> The Ottomans, hailing from diverse ethnic backgrounds, encountered the concept of the meyhane for the first time during the reign of Bayezid II.<sup>15</sup> However, it's crucial to note that the term "meyhane" as understood today didn't emerge until the second half of the 19th century, coinciding with significant changes in the Ottoman Empire and its encounter with Western influences.<sup>16</sup> This period marked the integration of elements of the "European way of living" into Istanbul's daily life by establishing Western venues such as restaurants, cafes, hotels, and various social spaces, ultimately profoundly impacting the public sphere.<sup>17</sup> The transformation in meyhanes was part of this broader cultural shift, signalling the evolving nature of Ottoman society.

### ***Historical Landscape of Ottoman Meyhanes***

Historical accounts during the conquest of Istanbul suggest that the city's historical peninsula was dotted with meyhanes even then, particularly in the neighbourhood of Galata. By the 16th century, two distinct types of meyhanes had emerged: "gedikli" meyhanes, legally registered and elaborately decorated, catering to a more refined clientele known as "akşamcılar" (evening timers), characterized by their intellectual and art-loving nature. In contrast, "koltuk meyhanesi" (unauthorized meyhanes) were simpler, discouraged patrons from lingering, and often existed on the fringes of legality. The naming and character of these meyhanes often reflected the socio-economic strata they catered to, mirroring the prevailing dynamics in society.

In the 17th century, traveller Evliya Çelebi noted the proliferation of meyhanes in Galata, coining the phrase "Galata means meyhane."<sup>18</sup> By that time, around 200 meyhanes graced the streets of Galata, bearing names that revealed the origins of their owners, many of whom were not Muslims but Greek, Jewish, or Christian. This marked an era when meyhane interiors began to be described, documenting the presence of small appetisers and fish

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<sup>14</sup> This is not, in fact, their first encounter with drinking establishments, but rather with those structured similarly to contemporary meyhanes.

<sup>15</sup> Hakan Kaynar, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler: İstanbul'un "muhabbet" Gemileri*, 21.

<sup>16</sup> Murat Can Kabagöz, *Eğlenirken Modernleşmek : Meyhaneden Balozza, İmparatorluk'tan Cumhuriyet'e İstanbul* (Ankara: Heretik Yayınları, 2016), 18.

<sup>17</sup> Sevde Harmandar, 19. Yüzyılda İstanbul da Değişen Eğlence Anlayışı ve Yeni Eğlence Mekânları (*Erzurum Technical University Faculty of Letters Journal of History*, no. 1, 30 December 2020), 116. <https://doi.org/10.52003/etut.2021.6>.

<sup>18</sup> Morgül, Tan , and Yavuz Saç, İstanbul Meyhaneleri: Ehlikeyfin Uzun Hikayesi, <https://www.mizanplas.com/yazilar/2018/12/26/istanbul-meyhaneleri-ehlikeyfin-uzun-hikayesi-bolum-1>. Anason İşleri, May 2022.

served alongside wine. However, the same century witnessed the onset of recurrent prohibitions on alcohol.

### ***Diversity and Dynamics of Ottoman Meyhanes***

The struggle between authorities and meyhanes, as well as the regulation of alcohol consumption, predated the Ottoman Empire and the arrival of Muslim inhabitants in Istanbul. Throughout history, Istanbul served as a crossroads for trade, military control, and international relations, hosting various cultures and administrations. Within this dynamic, cultures intertwined, evolved, faded, and borrowed elements from one another. The tradition of meyhanes in Istanbul can be traced back to the Eastern Roman Empire, with establishments known as "taverneia," "pouskareia," and "kaepleia" offering wine, small dishes similar to modern mezes<sup>19</sup>, and tables, or "sofras".<sup>20</sup> Byzantine-era regulations governing these establishments mirrored those imposed during Ottoman rule, and religious and economic considerations influenced both. Emperor Leo, for instance, designated a sole chamber authorised to sell wine, with prices and sales methods strictly regulated. Byzantine authorities, sometimes aided by religious figures, maintained control over these drinking establishments, even, at times, restricting their extension into the streets.<sup>21</sup> The interplay of religious and economic aspects in the control of these establishments persisted, governing everything from opening hours to closing times. Despite—or perhaps because of—such stringent control, Constantinople claimed the title of Europe's foremost city for wine consumption, owing to its thriving port trade. Genevese and Venice traders, exploiting the loopholes of tax exemption, spearheaded the wine trade in areas such as Galata and Eminönü, where numerous drinking establishments flourished.

### ***Marginality and The Guilt of the Space***

Throughout the history of Istanbul, activities associated with crime and marginality have been primarily defined within the urban context and through spaces. In the stories of meddahs<sup>22</sup>, who provide realistic glimpses of Istanbul, traces of these places can be found.

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<sup>19</sup> Meze, appetizers served on meyhane tables in form of small plates, ensuring the meyhane and rakı culture is closely connected to the table to serve.

<sup>20</sup> Tan Morgül and Yavuz Çal, 'İstanbul Meyhaneleri: Ehlikeyfin Uzun Hikayesi'.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> A meddah is a traditional Ottoman storyteller. Meddahs primarily rely on oral storytelling. They use their voice, gestures, and expressions to captivate the audience and convey their stories. The stories are often memorized and passed down through generations. They are known for their socially relevant storytelling.

These literary texts and folk stories are important for observing social performances in marginal spaces. In fact, they reveal a much more realistic social situation beyond archival documents.<sup>23</sup> For example, the users of spaces considered marginal, such as meyhanes, are not marginal individuals at all times and under all circumstances. What produces marginality is the state of being in the meyhane. In this case, it is the space itself that constitutes the offense. Control is exerted more over the space than over the individuals. That is why there was always a need to discipline these places.

The 18th century was a crucial period in Istanbul's discourse on public space. Within the dynamics of the Ottoman Empire, public spaces were not merely venues for various groups to converge; they also represented arenas where the boundaries of legality and public morality were extended. After the uprisings in 1703 and 1730, the Empire intensified its control over meyhanes, perceiving them as venues where individuals from various social classes converged and could serve as platforms for political organisations.<sup>24</sup> In this context, Galata was the most known place to be discussed. The places, especially meyhanes, where this tension concerning public space was palpable, underscored the intricate relationship between urban life and society in the Ottoman context. It is possible to decipher the societal dynamics within the city by examining the meyhanes located at different points in the city and the discussions and transformations that arise from these spaces.

### ***The Interplay of Religion and Culture***

The Ottoman period in Istanbul was characterised by its multi-layered and eclectic social structure, which saw constant transformations and conflicts. This diversity was also evident in an ethno-religious context. Meyhanes were distributed throughout the city's crowded streets, reflecting different dynamics and social structures. To understand the historical processes better, it's crucial to consider what was perceived as a threat and what was accommodated within this urban history. Meyhane history is not extensively documented, primarily because it focuses on the history of oppressed and marginalised groups, a perspective not commonly utilised in Middle Eastern studies compared to Europe.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekar Odaları ve Meyhaneler Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Marjinalite ve Mekan (1789-1839)*, (Istanbul: İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü yayınları 32, 2016), 14.

<sup>24</sup> Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekar Odaları ve Meyhaneler Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Marjinalite ve Mekan (1789-1839)*, 46.

<sup>25</sup> *Stephanie Cronin, "Introduction", Subalterns and Social Protest: History from Below in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Stephanie Cronin, (London: Routledge, 2008), 1-4.

Throughout history, meyhanes have been subjects of arguments and prohibitions but have never truly disappeared. These establishments were prominent in the economic fabric, subject to taxation policies that often shaped their existence and operation. While religious factors played a role, the economic infrastructure significantly determined the superstructure during the 17th century in the Ottoman Empire, where the state preferred to collect taxes through alcohol rather than prohibit it. The presence of "koltuk meyhaneleri" (illegal meyhanes) served as a clear demonstration of this dynamic.

Within the broader societal context, the religious landscape of the Ottoman Empire influenced individual perspectives and state regulations. Meyhanes, known for their role as spaces of conviviality and enjoyment, navigated a complex terrain where religious views intersected with cultural practices. The Ottoman state's approach to regulating meyhanes often swung between control and accommodation, reflecting broader societal discourses. In the intricate tapestry of Ottoman society, meyhanes held a prominent place as spaces of communal gathering, sharing, and storytelling. Yet, beyond their cultural significance, they also occupied a space in the economic fabric, subject to the ebbs and flows of tax policies. These regulations were influenced by economic considerations and the religious perspective on alcohol consumption and public morality. Despite these challenges, meyhane culture displayed remarkable resilience. The enduring appeal of these spaces was a testament to their cultural significance and their ability to adapt within the boundaries of state regulations and societal expectations.

Many of these regulations and prohibitions were influenced by religious factors. These measures needed to consider the significant non-Muslim population, especially in Istanbul. Certain rulers, like Ahmet III, sought to strike a balance in enforcing these policies. They prohibited Muslims from consuming alcohol while ensuring that meyhanes in non-Muslim neighbourhoods remained unaffected, preserving their existing character. Most of the time, even non-Muslims were forbidden from drinking, especially in public spaces.<sup>26</sup> This prohibition cast drinking as a marginalised act, shaping public morality. Sometimes, meyhanes would be closed down completely, only to reopen later.

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<sup>26</sup> Harmandar, 19. Yüzyılda İstanbul da Değişen Eğlence Anlayışı ve Yeni Eğlence Mekânları, 117.

## ***Micro-Resistance: Resilient Spaces***

Ilber Ortaylı draws a parallel between the call for the closure of all meyhanes during that time and contemporary measures aimed at silencing newspapers.<sup>27</sup> This analogy underscores that meyhanes, far beyond serving as symbols of micro-resistance, held political significance. They were not mere venues for the consumption of alcoholic beverages; rather, they provided a space where, under the influence of alcohol, inhibitions often dissolved, enabling unrestrained dialogue and discourse. Thus, meyhanes, akin to public spaces and newspapers, played a crucial role in reflecting and shaping public opinion and ideas. These places reflected urban life, demonstrating how they seamlessly integrated into everyday life and the social fabric they helped create. Due to their capacity to foster conversations and provide a haven for conviviality, these establishments were sometimes perceived as sinful and marginal, erroneously associated with criminal activities.

These prohibitions resulted in certain drinks receiving special treatment in terms of regulations. While beverages like wine were off-limits to Muslim communities, drinks like "boza" and rakı remained permissible. Boza was seen as a drink that "served the Islamic military," whereas rakı did not have a designated function. This situation highlighted the strength of political groups and the established order during that era, underscoring that powerful and dominant groups often had the latitude to act as they wished with impunity.

Similarly, civil Muslim communities adapted drinking regulations to suit their entertainment needs, primarily within meyhanes. These establishments often became their first stop when embarking on an evening out. This micro-resistance represented an intermediary state for Muslims. During the reign of Murat III (1577), Muslims would venture into non-Muslim neighbourhoods to patronise meyhanes. As Selin Önen aptly describes this situation, it was akin to "running away without leaving".<sup>28</sup>

This phenomenon can be seen as a form of micro-resistance, akin to Michel de Certeau's concept. According to Certeau, locals, while apparently adhering to the ruler's desires, subtly altered rules and traditions to align with an alternative order, effectively transforming them.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hakan Kaynar, *Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler: İstanbul'un "muhabbet" Gemileri*, 2.

<sup>28</sup> Selin Önen, *Toplumsal Tarih Çerçevesinde İstanbul'daki Modernleşme ve Eğlence Hayatı (Galatasaray Üniversitesi İletişim Dergisi*, 30 December 2018), 303. <https://doi.org/10.16878/gsuilet.499505>.

<sup>29</sup> Murat Can Kabagöz, *Eğlenirken Modernleşmek : Meyhaneden Balzoza, İmparatorluk'tan Cumhuriyet'e İstanbul*, 21.

### ***Spatial Dynamics: Locations and Formations of Meyhanes***

By reading the locations of meyhanes, it is also possible to read the social and political dynamics that were happening in the urban life. The location of meyhanes during the Ottoman Empire would define their meaning in Ottoman context, and later, that is today. Where non-Muslims lived, meyhanes often thrived. The sources written by Evliya Çelebi and Abdülaziz Efendi<sup>30</sup> highlight famous meyhanes and the neighbourhoods they were located in, pointing out that they were often in non-Muslim neighbourhoods. Two neighbourhoods that stand out are Galata and Beyoğlu, as mentioned before.

To gain a deeper understanding of the locations of meyhanes, it is essential to delve into the social context of everyday life and administration during the Ottoman era. A fundamental rule within Muslim communities was the prohibition of alcohol consumption. Drinking establishments, however, predated the Ottoman Empire, and their presence in Istanbul can be attributed to the non-Muslim populations who inhabited the city. Consequently, these establishments were predominantly owned by non-Muslims, with Greeks taking a prominent role due to legal permissions granted to them. This historical fact is echoed in the writings of Evliya Çelebi, who explicitly mentions Greeks as meyhane owners, with Jewish proprietors being a separate category.<sup>31</sup>

Greeks emerged as pioneers in the establishment of meyhanes for several reasons. They possessed a deep understanding of table manners, entertainment, nightlife, and the culture of eating and drinking. Moreover, their zest for life and hospitality extended to accommodating patrons who may have indulged excessively while maintaining a welcoming atmosphere and avoiding offence.<sup>32</sup> Thus, the religious aspect played a crucial role in the ownership and patronage of meyhanes.

The diverse social structure of the Ottoman Empire facilitated the proliferation of these establishments across various neighbourhoods known for hosting non-Muslim communities. Examining the historical meyhane map of the city alongside maps of ethnoreligious

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<sup>30</sup> Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekar Odaları ve Meyhaneler Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Marjinalite ve Mekan (1789-1839)*, 143.

<sup>31</sup> İhsan Erdiñçi, *Yenileşme Dönemi İstanbul'unda Meyhaneler ve Meyhanecilik (1826-1908)* (Trabzon: Karadeniz Technical University, 2019), 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

communities reveals a distinct correlation. Even in contemporary times, although many non-Muslim communities have relocated away from the city, meyhanes continue to thrive in their original locales, serving as a legacy from these communities.

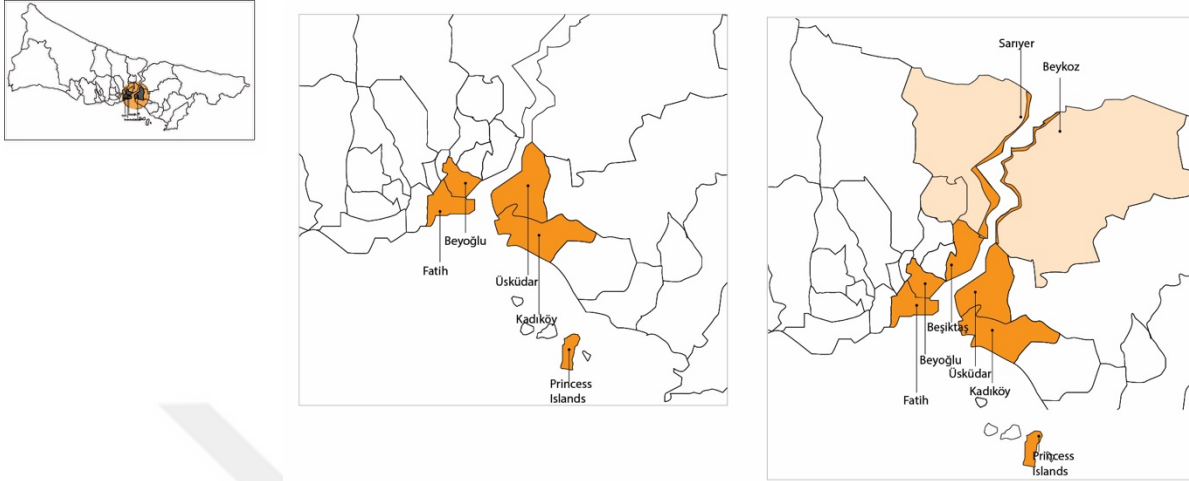


Figure 3. Istanbul map (top left) and Istanbul's Historical Peninsula (top left, marked).

Non-Muslim neighbourhoods and districts (second from the left), showing the historical peninsula was a home to many non-Muslim communities. While the number of residents decreased during historical processes, they are still known homes to many churches, synagogues, and residents.

Most known meyhane neighbourhoods and districts. (third from the left) As shown in the maps, meyhanes are in the historical peninsula, coastal areas, and a connection can be drawn with non-Muslim neighbourhood locations. While most of the non-Muslim areas are homes to meyhanes (the most known meyhane streets located in these districts; Beyoğlu -Nevizade-, Beşiktaş – Fish Market-, and Kadıköy), with the expanding city life, meyhanes also expanded their locations, with the Bosphorus becoming a connecting between meyhanes and Istanbul.

Images: Drawn by the author.

The continuity of everyday life processes across historical transformations remains pronounced compared to the more variable nature of political processes. This continuity is particularly evident in neighbourhoods like Galata, Beyoğlu, and Balat, which have consistently featured in historical sources as hubs of meyhane culture and vibrant social life.

### ***Meyhanes and Neighbourhoods : A Tale of Divided Meals***

The dichotomy between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, with the former embracing a more private lifestyle and the latter prominently involved in meyhane culture in public spaces, holds significant relevance in the Ottoman context. This distinction played a pivotal role in shaping the intimate and symbolic characteristics of meyhanes. While Islamic law didn't explicitly categorize spaces as "public" or "private," Muslims often recognized the boundary of their homes as a fundamental marker of space. This demarcation created an

implicit division between internal or domestic spaces (considered "private") and areas beyond the walls (deemed "public"). However, it's important to note that Fikret Yılmaz suggests the Ottoman Empire lacked clear-cut divisions between the private and public spheres.<sup>33</sup>

The concept of "neighbourhoods" further reflects this duality. The Ottoman term "mahalle" for neighbourhood represented a place where residents knew each other intimately, often being aware of private matters and fostering a strong sense of solidarity, taking collective responsibility for each other's actions. Neighbourhoods served as basic communities at the local level, providing inhabitants with a shared collective identity.<sup>34</sup> For example, the impression one made often depended on how they presented themselves within their neighbourhoods. Residents shared a collective responsibility for upholding the reputation of their neighbourhood, and Muslim individuals who visited meyhanes did so without lingering excessively, thereby avoiding the label of being "akşamcı" customers. Their visits tended to be brief. It was not uncommon for a newly married man to risk having his social standing downgraded, figuratively described as going from "gold" to "bronze," if neighbourhood residents observed him frequenting meyhanes too often. The reason for this scrutiny lay in the fact that these residents adhered to Islamic practices, including daily prayers, Ramadan celebrations, and fasting, and they expected others to do the same. Deviating from these norms often led to gossip and speculation within the community.<sup>35</sup>

Simultaneously, these neighbourhoods served as meeting points, with meyhanes often being the preferred choice, especially for non-Muslim communities. While opening meyhanes in neighbourhoods was legally permissible, there was a condition: they shouldn't be established near mosques or mescids. This practice is exemplified in the writings of French traveller Tournefort, who described Galata as an autonomous Christian region where taverns were not only allowed but abundant.<sup>36</sup>

Meyhanes were scattered throughout Istanbul, with concentrations in areas such as Kumkapı, Balıkpazarı, Unkapanı, Balat, Ortaköy, Kuruçeşme, Yeniköy, Üsküdar, and Kadıköy, and they were primarily frequented by non-Muslims.

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<sup>33</sup> Yavuzer, *Istanbul Wine-Taverns As Public Places In The Sixteenth And Seventeenth Centuries*, 8.

<sup>34</sup> Yavuzer, 9.

<sup>35</sup> Kabagöz, *Eğlenirken modernleşmek* 27.

<sup>36</sup> Yavuzer, *Istanbul Wine-Taverns As Public Places In The Sixteenth And Seventeenth Centuries*, 23.

In addition to the neighbourhood meyhanes, often situated in enclosed spaces that obscured activities within, there were open-air meyhanes along the Bosphorus during the summer months. These open-air meyhanes, by their very nature, were highly visible to passer-by, offering a unique dimension to the meyhane culture<sup>37</sup>, that gives a clue to what's to come in the beginning of the Republican Era.

As we delve deeper into the social fabric of Ottoman life and the emergence of meyhanes, it becomes evident that these establishments were not merely places to consume alcohol but integral components of a dynamic cultural tapestry. The interplay between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, the nuanced concepts of public and private spaces, and the distinctive character of neighbourhoods all contributed to the unique identity of meyhanes. However, meyhanes were not immune to the winds of change sweeping through the Ottoman Empire. The impact of historical events and shifting socio-political landscapes influenced the evolution of meyhanes, shedding light on their enduring significance in the face of cultural and political upheaval.

### **II.III. Table as a Witness: Impact of Historical Events on Meyhane's Transformation**

Meyhanes, integral to everyday entertainment and social life, have always been closely intertwined with various facets of society. Their historical roots reveal a deep connection to politics, working life, and ideology, forming a dialectic relationship. To understand the formation of this cultural phenomenon, one must delve into the historical evolution of entertainment spaces and their role in shaping cultural life. While meyhanes, as we know them today, trace their origins back to the 19th century, their physical spaces have transformed, with the concept of the table as we know today, a central element in meyhanes, emerging as a significant object only in the late 19th century. Before this, ground tables (yer sofraları) and mobile stools were used, paving the way for modern tables and chairs.

It's important to note that a "table" in meyhanes can encompass various forms. Over time, political influences and historical changes reshaped the concept of "sofra," aligning it with the meyhane culture we recognise today. In the Ottoman era, the table held a significant social

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<sup>37</sup> Yavuzer, 26.

function, typically known as "sini,"<sup>38</sup> and salt was the first item placed on it, symbolising luck and richness. This practice persisted even when there were no customers, highlighting the table's symbolic significance.

The locations of meyhanes have always played a vital role in understanding the impact of historical events during the Republican Era. These locations are not merely physical patterns but also social and historical archives of urban life. Beyoğlu and Galata, historically symbols of the West in the Ottoman Empire, underwent profound transformations throughout the 19th century. These neighbourhoods transitioned from centres of finance, trade, and entertainment, predominantly inhabited by non-Muslims, into more diverse areas. The shift in local and central administrations' policies significantly influenced the spatial dynamics of these neighbourhoods, leading to a rich tapestry of meyhanes in various locales.



Figure4. Işıl Çokuğraş, *Bekar Odaları ve Meyhaneler: Osmanlı İstanbul'unda Marjinalite ve Mekan 1789-1839 (Bachelor Chambers and Meyhanes, Marginality and Space in Ottoman Istanbul 1789-1839)*, İstanbul Araştırmaları Enstitüsü Yayınları 32, 2016, 147. (Original source: Hubanname-Zenanname, İstanbul University Library, 5502, 1793-94, y.41a)

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<sup>38</sup> In the context of the Ottoman Empire, the term "sini" refers to a large, typically round or oval tray or platter used for serving food. These trays were an essential part of Ottoman dining culture and were often intricately decorated with various designs, motifs, and patterns. The use of the sini extended beyond functional serving; it also held cultural and symbolic significance in Ottoman society. The sini was traditionally used for communal dining. It would be placed in the centre of a low table or on a rug, and various dishes and mezes (appetisers) would be arranged on it. Family members or guests would gather around the sini to share meals, reinforcing the importance of community and social bonds in Ottoman culture. The sini represented the practicality of serving food and the values of hospitality, togetherness, and shared meals that were highly cherished in Ottoman society.

Pera, known for its cosmopolitan social structure, experienced shifts driven by a nation-state approach that began in the 16th century. During the 17th century, as the Muslim population increased, these neighbourhoods transformed, particularly during the 18th century when European influence and wealth led to the constructing of grand mansions in Beyoğlu. Unlike Galata, which retained its financial and trade centrality, Beyoğlu became a residential area for the upper class. The 19th century saw discussions about relocating non-Muslims to the outskirts of Taksim, resulting in the establishment of meyhanes in new neighbourhoods like Feriköy and Tatavla. These political influences on city planning expanded the presence of meyhanes, and many of these original neighbourhoods still boast thriving meyhane culture today.

### ***Modernization and Political Shifts***

The modernization of Beyoğlu and Galata continued in the 19th and 20th centuries with the rise of modern apartment buildings and improved transportation, enhancing accessibility to the entertainment districts. During the early 20th century, as the Turkish Republic was established, rakı gained new significance. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Republic, was known for his fondness for rakı, and images of him enjoying the drink became symbolic. Cumhuriyet Meyhanesi, for instance, reserves a table forever in his honor.



Figure5. Tarihi Cumhuriyet Meyhanesi (Historical Republic Meyhane), a table reserved forever for Atatürk.  
Photo taken by: Erol Şaşmaz , <https://turkiyenintarihieserleri.com/?oku=3007>

However, during the drafting of the constitution, there was a proposal to restrict alcohol, a move driven by those opposed to Atatürk's policies. The Men-i Müskirat law, one of the early regulations of the Grand National Assembly of Turkey, can be seen as a discreet opposition to him due to his well-known fondness for raki. This restriction, applied from 1920 to 1924, was followed by state control over alcohol production and trade.

The Republican Era, which began in the 1920s, brought new ideologies and lifestyles. The government aimed to modernize the country, including renaming streets to align with contemporary standards. Beyoğlu's importance grew, and Taksim Square became the city's focal point. The square served as a symbol of government power, hosting national celebrations and public demonstrations.

### ***Political and Social Tensions***

Political shifts in Turkey during the 20th century significantly impacted meyhanes. Just before the 10<sup>th</sup> year of the Republic, newspaper articles about how the waiters were mostly Greeks, were published.<sup>39</sup> Naturally, it was inevitable that, from the late 19th century onward, meyhanes' stance on non-Muslims in Istanbul would become a target of political discourse framed around the nationalisation of the economy.

The multi-party system introduced by the Democrat Party led by Adnan Menderes in the 1950s brought about social, spatial, and economic changes in the Republic of Turkey. Some city planning decisions resulted in the demolition of historic structures, while Menderes used divisive rhetoric, including the phrase "Istanbul against Beyoğlu."<sup>40</sup> This period saw heightened tension between radical Turkish nationalists and non-Muslim groups, resulting in the re-naming of neighbourhoods and districts according to their historical and social backgrounds. The 6-7 September events in 1955, known as the Istanbul Pogrom, led to anti-Greek violence that affected Greek-owned businesses, including meyhanes. Additionally, Menderes's government introduced alcohol regulations, like shorter meyhane opening hours, affecting their traditional late-night atmosphere. These historical events exemplify how external forces, including government policies, significantly influenced meyhane culture.

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<sup>39</sup> Yenigün Newspaper, 12 July 1931.

<sup>40</sup> İpek Akpınar, Menderes imar hareketleri Türkleştirme politikalarının bir parçası mıydı?, (Istanbul: Arrademento Mimarlık 290, May 2015), 85-90.

### **Memories from Madam Anahit's Life**

*"I am known as Madam Anahit, but my real name is Anahit Yulanda Varan (Anahit Kuyrig). I was born in the house across from the old Niagora Greengrocer in Talimhane. I belong to a well-known and wealthy Armenian family. My family used to spend summers on Heybeliada. They had mansions on the Bosphorus. My maternal grandfather was a treasury inspector, and my brother Vosge Apeğa used to deliver sermons so powerful that people would talk about them for days after leaving the church. In 1953, he passed away due to alcohol-related issues. I had two sons from my first two marriages, Onnik and Berç, and two granddaughters. Despite my strong desire, no one else in the family developed an interest in music. The walls of my house were adorned with photographs of Ayhan Işık, Zeki Müren, Sadri Alışık, Kemal Sunal, and Yılmaz Güney. They were all good people and great artists, and they had great affection for me as well. Now, they have all become memories like me. I played small roles, sometimes as an extra, in many films such as 'Babanın Suçu,' 'Adalet,' 'Yalancı Yarım,' 'Cennet Çocukları,' 'Kadın ve Şarap,' 'Faize Hücum,' 'Bay Alkolü Takdimimdir,' 'Arkadaş,' '24 Saat,' 'Öğretmen,' and more. My life story was featured on Dutch television. I also appeared in music videos by Aşkın Nur Yengi and Grup Gündoğarken. When I was young, Johnny Weissmuller, whom I loved and admired very much, was an actor I adored. I used to beg my mother to take me to his film. 'Let's go to Istanbul, to Çiçek Pasajı,' I would say, 'Let them introduce me to him, and we can dance together.' The next day, I was featured in all the newspapers. Those were the days... Once, I told Nebil Özgentürk, who happened to pass by Çiçek Pasajı, 'Nebil Bey, we are going on stage, singing songs with wide-open mouths. I've even whitened my teeth with 32 pearls. How does it look?' I told him this with a smile. Those were the days!*

*I never left my house without applying my bright red lipstick. I played Istanbul tangos, Greek butcher songs, and Armenian tavern songs. Can you imagine that I sang Edith Piaf's songs? I played 'La vie en rose' and 'Yıldızların Altında.' I played Marlene Dietrich's 'Lili Marlen,' as featured in the film she acted in. I was featured in many documentaries about Beyoğlu and Çiçek Pasajı, becoming one of the symbols of Beyoğlu's photographs. If an archive of Istanbul's meyhane culture were to be created, I would probably be the most frequently seen person in the photographs. When people take out the photographs they took while having fun at Çiçek Pasajı or Nevizade, they can surely find me and my accordion somewhere in the picture.*

*During the 6-7 September events, I was deeply saddened to see how people who had enjoyed my accordion music and brought joy for years could turn into savages overnight after just a few drinks. Life, you see... Years after my death, they remembered me in a song called 'Düşler Ülkesinin Gelgit Akıllısı,' composed by Sezen Aksu, arranged by Mustafa Ceceli, and performed by İrem Derici. Being remembered still brings me joy.<sup>41</sup>*

*-Cezmi Ersöz, 'Son Yüzler' (Past Faces)*

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<sup>41</sup> Cezmi Ersöz, Son Yüzler (Past Faces)(İletişim Yayınları, 1997).

## ***Restrictions continue...***

Alcohol-related restrictions continued to evolve in Turkey. In 1984, a proposal to ban alcohol commercials was introduced, affecting government-affiliated channels. Throughout these political transformations, the consumption of alcohol and the locations where alcohol was consumed have consistently been stigmatised, often associated with sinful activities. Ottoman archives reveal that the issue was not the people but the spaces where alcohol was consumed. This association later extended to discriminatory attitudes, exemplified by events like the 6-7 September incidents. While meyhanes were at the centre of this discourse, narratives shifted to find new ways to demonise alcohol.

During the Gezi Park protests, the ruling AKP government accused protestors of consuming alcohol inside a mosque, leveraging this accusation to promote a conservative Islamic ideology and manipulate Islamic communities. The connection between alcohol and Islam was exploited for political gain. Subsequently, the imam of the mosque in question clarified that these accusations were, in fact, untrue. Nevertheless, the imam was removed from his duty for his statement. These accusations were just one aspect of the broader restrictions imposed during the rule of the current government, which elevated the political significance of meyhanes and alcohol. The political agency of meyhanes and raki has consistently played a vital role in reflecting broader societal issues and government policies. To this day, meyhanes serve as spaces for individuals who value their historical significance, have political opinions to express, and seek like-minded people with whom to discuss these matters.



Figure6. One of the last alcohol commercials from a raki brand. Yeni Rakı (translates to new Rakı). The title translates to:

"Commercials are over, farewell. From our manners (here, manners are used as a reference to raki table manners) we don't say goodbye, we kindly ask if we can leave. Because we know: whenever we get together again, our friendship and conversation always stay new, and not leave. Like it has been there for the past 500 years.

Always stay new."

Image source: Aposto, Banned series, Banned: Alcohol, 2022. <https://aposto.com/s/yasaklananlar-alkol>

Following the Gezi protests, new alcohol restrictions were introduced. The 2013 proposal led to bans on the depiction of alcohol in TV shows, commercials, and merchandise, the employment of individuals under 18 in alcohol-related establishments, the delivery of alcohol by mail, the sale of alcohol between 10 pm and 6 am, the sale of alcohol in clear plastic bags, and the inclusion of alcohol firms in the labelling of other beverages, as well as bans on alcohol sales in stadiums.<sup>42</sup>

Taxation regulations were also employed as a means of controlling these establishments. For instance, the price of a 0.7-litre bottle of rakı includes a 75% tax. Consequently, many meyhanes either went out of business or saw their regular patrons visiting less frequently. Over two decades, the demographics of these regular patrons also shifted. Even the longstanding regulars found it increasingly challenging to afford regular visits to meyhanes. In the late 1990s, an average university student could enjoy a meyhane outing once or twice a week with friends, often on Wednesdays and Saturdays. Documentaries<sup>43</sup> from that era often feature people lamenting these places' loss of soul and vibrancy. While once frequented by working-class individuals, students, and white-collar workers, meyhanes have remained culturally significant but have become special occasion venues due to their cost.

Notably, as these discussions about regulations and restrictions intensified, people became more critical of them than ever before. Meyhanes evolved into even more politically charged spaces, fostering in-depth critiques of the status quo.

***From a writer: Just as drinking alcohol alone should not be a political statement, being against alcohol should not serve the same purpose either.***

*“The prohibitions on alcohol are political. It’s about imposing one’s own lifestyle on others. They may not always do this with outright bans. Even using the phrase “consume alcohol” instead of “drink alcohol” is political. It’s absurd to cite alcohol-related bans as examples worldwide. Those in power in our country see combating alcoholism as combating alcohol. One of the first actions of Erdogan’s administration in the Istanbul Municipality was to ban alcoholic beverages in municipal facilities. The sentence he uttered to the delegation trying to explain the importance of the sector to the late Minister of Finance*

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<sup>42</sup> Aposto. “Yasaklananlar: Alkol,” December 18, 2022. <https://aposto.com/s/yasaklananlar-alkol>.

<sup>43</sup> Several people (sociologists, regulars, owners) interviewed in the documentary *Istanbul Meyhaneleri “Vuslatın Başka Alem”*, have mentioned that everything in Istanbul has changed and the culture of entertainment aimed at people with high salaries and high education. This is a sociological reaction because it comes down to the relationship between supply and demand. <https://youtu.be/6pVdqMLvBwY?si=UdM1upjDQ5nT6GX>

*in one of his first cabinets is quite meaningful. He said, "I don't care about you at all." When the producers complained that they couldn't survive, the state officials didn't care when they were collecting taxes. Amidst discussions of the sector's problems, high prices, etc., an important issue is being overlooked. Alcoholic beverages are being increasingly marginalized. The concept of the neighbourhood bar, pub, or meyhane has almost disappeared. Now, producers are finding fewer places to sell their products. Moreover, the old Tekel retailers, who cannot renew their licenses and cannot sell alcohol after 10:00 PM, are also disappearing. Their disappearance leads to the domination of large chains and leaves the initiative for already high prices in their hands. Just as drinking alcohol alone should not be a political statement, being against alcohol should not serve the same purpose either. They are gradually taking away our dream of a country that respects life, labour, and lifestyles more. We must stand up for our dreams. Our dreams are our existence."*

*Levon Bağış, Wine expert and writer, instagram*

Much like the efforts to shut down meyhanes in the Ottoman era, with historian İlber Ortaylı likening it to the closure of newspapers, meyhanes' role as hubs for political discourse remains unchanged. Meyhanes continue to celebrate their rituals, history, and stories.

#### **II.IV. A Lasting Legacy: Tables as Artifacts of Collective Memory**

Meyhanes, as integral elements of Istanbul's cultural tapestry, have inspired various forms of artistic expression. They are celebrated in literature, music, and films as enduring symbols of togetherness, camaraderie, and shared experiences. These artistic representations have helped convey the emotional depth of meyhane culture, even as the physical spaces and their identities evolved over time.

Meyhanes have been glorified as a part of Istanbul's culture. Over time, the influence of historical events has led to the transformation of meyhanes and their culture, resulting in various names, locations, and identities. Despite these changes, meyhanes have retained their essence as a steadfast symbol of togetherness, conversation, camaraderie, laughter, and sharing. They have served as powerful hubs of emotional experiences for all who have entered their doors. Some of the most popular songs have even been dubbed "meyhane songs," and certain meyhanes have become cultural landmarks mentioned in poems, further cementing their significance in the city's cultural fabric. These songs often accompany the setting of a rakı table in homes, turning meyhanes into iconic cultural touchpoints.

Meyhanes have played a pivotal role in various forms of artistic expression, including musical performances, literary works, and films. These spaces and the rakı table within them have served as powerful storytelling tools, helping artists convey their emotions. Creative productions have revolved around what transpired within these establishments, highlighting the central role meyhanes and rakı table have played in shaping cultural narratives. Despite some minor transformations, the enduring tradition of the meyhane table has allowed this culture to thrive for decades and centuries. Stories have been shared from one table to another, songs have been sung, and discussions have sparked literary movements throughout history. Books have been written, and political debates about the Republic have unfolded in meyhanes. Poems about lost love have found their muse in these spaces, and songs about heartbreak have been synonymous with rakı glasses. Meetings have been convened, and celebrations have been held. Photographs depicting Istanbul often feature meyhane scenes. In all forms of art, the table has been a recurring motif, a testament to its enduring legacy as a symbol, space, and act.

In earlier centuries, meyhanes held symbolic value for poets, particularly those of the 16th century. These poets, often focusing on Sufi themes, used meyhanes symbolically as places where they found love and beauty. These symbolic representations went beyond mere metaphor; they set the scene for their poetic narratives. This usage was not limited to the poets of the 16th century but was a recurring theme in Ottoman poetry.<sup>44</sup> Meyhanes were described as "cay-l safa," places of pleasure; "ziba-mahal," heart-tempting; "dil-keş," heart-refreshing; and "dil-güşa," a nice beautiful place.<sup>45</sup> These descriptions linked the physical space of meyhanes to emotional experiences, laying the foundation for meyhanes to be seen as emotional places rather than solely venues for drinking. With time, the tables set in meyhanes and homes became symbols of these emotional descriptions, underscoring that the emotions represented by the space went beyond the act of drinking.

In later years, these descriptions evolved, and meyhanes transformed into more than just physical spaces. The sense of solidarity and togetherness extended beyond individual meyhanes and their tables; it encompassed entire neighbourhoods where meyhanes were concentrated. Meyhanes were often located close to each other, creating informal meyhane streets that defined urban landscapes. These streets became landmarks, and their collective memory was etched into the city's identity. In addition to what happened within individual

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<sup>44</sup> Yavuzer, *Istanbul Wine-Taverns As Public Places In The Sixteenth And Seventeenth Centuries*, 33.

<sup>45</sup> Yavuzer, 20.

meyhanes, the atmosphere spilt onto the streets, blurring the lines between different tables and establishments. Customers experienced the same sights, sounds, and scents, fostering a collective sense of belonging that transcended individual tables. Some well-known meyhane streets, such as Nevizade, became iconic symbols of Beyoğlu and Istanbul.



Figure7. Photos from different meyhanes (from top down) taken by Ara Güler, known as Istanbul's photographer.

Two men talking in a koltuk meyhanesi, 1959.

Image source: Melis Yenici, *Meyhane Photographs of Ara Güler as a Social Memory Record*, Istanbul Üniversitesi Yayinevi, 2020.



A drunk man in a meyhane, 1959..

Image source: Melis Yenici, *Meyhane Photographs of Ara Güler as a Social Memory Record*, Istanbul Üniversitesi Yayinevi, 2020.



A meyhane in Beyoğlu, 1962.

Image source: Melis Yenici, *Meyhane Photographs of Ara Güler as a Social Memory Record*, Istanbul Üniversitesi Yayinevi, 2020.

Within these meyhane streets, not only did shared actions and experiences shape the culture, but specific characters and personas also emerged. Some of these individuals became larger-than-life symbols of meyhane culture. An impactful example is Madam Anahit. Her legacy endured, and in the 2010s, a stage was dedicated to her in Nevizade, where she

was a familiar presence. This act of commemoration reflects how historical and political transformations have influenced society's perception of meyhanes.



*Figure8. Madam Anahit in her regular place, Çiçek Pasajı. This place is a known meyhane street in Istanbul, with Madam Anahit being its known symbol.*

*Image source: Gazete Duvar*

### ***Table as a stage***

Beyond individuals and characters, scenes from meyhanes found their way into various art forms, including movies, songs, and poems. These scenes served as powerful backdrops for storytelling, capturing the essence of meyhane culture and the emotions it evoked.

Through these expressions, the table culture has underscored its significance within meyhane culture. It emphasises that while meyhanes may take on different forms and identities, the table and the communal interactions surrounding it remain integral to the culture. The enduring importance of the table highlights that at the heart of meyhane culture are the shared experiences and conversations around it. Beyond the consumption of raki, the table itself serves as the unifying element. These scenes are crafted around the table, whether within the meyhane or in one's home, with the essence of the "sofra" at their core.



Figure9. Several iconic movie scenes. From left to right :  
Fakir Bir Kızı Sevdim (I Loved a Poor Girl), 1965.  
Davaro: Son Eşkîya, 1981.  
Çiçek Abbas, 1982.

Image1. "İstanbul Meyhaneleri Vuşlatın Başka Alem". <https://youtu.be/6pVdqMLvBwY?si=UdM1upjDQ5nT6GX>

Image2. <https://m.imdb.com/title/tt0252361/mediaviewer/rm580567553>

Image3. <https://www.nadirkitap.com/cicek-abbas-sener-sen-ilyas-salman-kartpostal-no-02-16-11cm-efemera26402118.html>

## II.V. Geography of Çilingir Sofrası : (un)localness of the Regulars

The essence of meyhane culture revolves around one key element: the regulars who gather around the rakı table. The table itself has become a vessel for these expressions and social connections. Regardless of the various forms meyhanes may take, one constant remains—the table and the people surrounding it. The intimacy of the table emanates from the individuals, while the intimacy of a meyhane is forged by its regular patrons. The bond among the regulars mirrors the shared ground of the streets, akin to the communal atmosphere of meyhane tables. The solidarity and the concept of a safe, non-private, and non-public space within Ottoman neighbourhoods find a parallel in the ambience of meyhane streets and their implicit boundaries. The idea of the neighbourhood as an intimate setting for daily experiences is mirrored in the relationships among meyhane regulars. Interestingly, those who idealise meyhanes as social spaces are often the regulars who have established trust, creating a tradition of mutual reliance. Regular patrons, while enjoying their rakı, place trust in the waitstaff and the owner, knowing they can rely on them for a safe journey home, even going as far as sharing a taxi in earlier times to ensure their safety. In return, the meyhane staff trusts the regulars to maintain a secure environment. Security has always been paramount for meyhanes, as they serve as safe havens for socialising without disruptions. Regulars settle their bills promptly and often act as mediators in any tensions,

ensuring that the harmony of the space remains intact. In this sense, they never truly "leave the home alone."<sup>46</sup>

Meyhanes consistently pay attention to their regulars. When a group of people adopts a particular meyhane as their own, loyalty to the place runs deep. During the early Republican era, writers, poets, and journalists often chose a meyhane as their literary sanctuary. Here, they engaged in discussions, read their own works, and established networks.

The nomenclature of meyhanes also plays a role in ensuring that regulars and newcomers alike respect the values represented by a particular establishment, often forming groups based on the meyhane's name. Examples include Cumhuriyet Meyhanesi, an establishment with a table forever reserved in honor of the Republic's founder, and Zübeyde Hanım Meyhanesi, which aligns with a more republican ideology and typically plays songs favored by Atatürk. Güneşin Sofrası is known among leftist groups, referencing the famous poem by communist poet Nazım Hikmet, who was exiled to Moscow due to his beliefs. Some meyhanes are frequented by members of professional chambers, such as those for architects and doctors. This naming tradition also resonates with the intimate sociospatial elements of meyhanes, creating spaces where like-minded customers gather, even though they are open to the public.

As historical processes transform names and locations, they also shape the demographic composition of meyhane regulars. During the early Republican era, Galata meyhanes raised prices to attract a more upper-class clientele, bringing about new representations.

### ***Women in meyhanes***

Before the Republic, women were primarily depicted as singers, performers, or even prostitutes in meyhanes and similar establishments. While they occasionally accompanied male guests during dinner, they were never considered customers, let alone regulars. Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar's<sup>47</sup> book sheds light on this issue in the context of the early Republican era. It tells the story of a newlywed woman who argued with her mother-in-law and left home with her husband to go to a meyhane. Around the table, various discussions unfolded, reflecting the clash of ideologies during this period. Although it was still uncommon

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<sup>46</sup> Kaynar, Muhabbet Baki Mahbubân Kayip: Osmanlı'dan Cumhuriyet'e Meyhaneler.

<sup>47</sup> Hüseyin Rahmi Gürpınar, *Meyhanede Kadınlar (Women in Meyhane)* (Istanbul: Atlas Kitabevi, 1972).

to see women as customers in meyhanes, the era marked a significant shift, with women gaining a seat at the table, enjoying drinks, singing, and dining alongside men or other women, symbolising a new era of social inclusivity.

Historically, women could interact with alcohol and venues serving alcohol not as subjects but as objects until the Republican period. Until the late 1940s, traditional meyhanes were also spaces without women. With the changing social life that came with the 1950s, influenced by the arts and literature circles, this absence of women began to change. From these years onwards, alongside male artists who frequented meyhanes, there were also female artists. Women also fought to feel a sense of belonging in these spaces. For example, in some meyhanes, there were urinals for men but no toilets for women because it was not thought that women would come to meyhanes. Today, meyhanes are more inclusive. Women now go to meyhanes alone, with their loved ones, whenever they want, feeling a sense of belonging and making others feel the same. The meyhanes that are visited after the March 8th marches exist as a result of the struggles where women initially had to demand their place.<sup>48</sup>



Figure10. A meyhane conversation. Known regulars of meyhanes and well known writers. From left to right : Melis Sökmen, Tomris Uyar, Leyla Erbil, Scottish academic Gyll.

Image source: *Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı*, 71.



Figure11. A newspaper article. Translation of the caption: Feminists barged in to meyhane.

Image source: *Milliyet newspaper*, 20 November 1989

<sup>48</sup> Pınar Öğünç, *Kadınlar Meyhanede: Feministler Meyhaneyi Bastı!* (Women in Meyhane, Feminists marched in to meyhanes), *Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı*, edited by Erdir Zat, Nilhan Aras, Engin Öncüoğlu, Onur Kutluoğlu, Umut Şumnu, Selin Özavcı, Murat Meriç, (Istanbul: Anason İşleri, 2022), 73.

## ***New tables***

These transformations and the stories of the regulars forge a social bond with the table, carrying its essence everywhere. What's essential to understand is that a meyhane can be created anywhere simply by setting up a table. The table alone suffices to create the desired atmosphere. The essence of meyhane culture transcends specific places, national boundaries, or particular establishments. Regulars can be regulars of the table itself, not necessarily tied to a specific meyhane. They become regulars of a culture, a social activity, sharing their experiences while pouring rakı, slicing cheese, and toasting to camaraderie. Despite the changes over time, the regulars have preserved the rituals. The table has proven resilient, enduring transformations yet remains a constant social entity. This has led to countless meyhanes in homes and on streets, varying in scale but sharing the same cultural essence. Where everywhere can be meyhane, it is certain that the friends who are there with you, who share the same experience with you, create the geography of the table. With them, çilingir sofrası is set.

"Istanbulelsewhere," is a global platform that extends the essence of Istanbul to a worldwide context by sharing stories, fostering connections, and representing what is quintessential to Istanbul's way of life. The platform's founders have expressed their love for being Istanbulites through an online platform focusing on meyhane culture. During the pandemic, they even created online meyhanes, sharing the sense of isolation with everyone. Their goal was twofold: connecting Istanbulites to a digital platform and offering outsiders a glimpse into the Istanbulite experience. They transported the rakı table to a global scale through virtual gatherings, and simultaneously, they brought it into people's homes. This emotional experience, rooted in the table, demonstrates that anywhere can become a meyhane if the right elements are present. While their pop-up meyhanes open up in London, the scale of the table expands, and the bonds created by people who want to feel closer to their homes surround themselves with something familiar. Istanbul is carried by the table, within the table.

In light of the table's role as the carrier of emotions, social structures, and cultures across different scales, it's worth noting that what transpires around the table gives rise to a unique experience that fosters togetherness as a cultural phenomenon: the rituals.

### III. Rituals and Rhythms of the Table

“Buranın garsonları giyimlerine son derecede dikkat ederler. İş görürken ağızlarında cigara olmaz. Elleri pırıl pırıldır. Tırnakları da hep dibinden kesilidir. Semih Mümtaz’ın anlattığına göre burada hızlı konuşulmaz. Bir şey içer, ya da yerken ağız pek açılmaz. Dirsekler masaya dayanmaz. Islık çalınmaz. Şunun bunun yüzüne dalarcasına bakılmaz. Burada rakı ile meze de verilir. Ama mezeler pastırmalı, sucuklu, sar-ımsaklı olmaz. Rakı içenler daha çok beyaz peynire, bir de, bir de, sıkı durun, havvaya yatar. Masalarda kelli fellî paşalar, beyler, mösyöler, madamlar, matmazeller başı çeker. Beyoğlu’nun kalburüstü yosmalarından Nemseli Anna, Deli Eleni, Kara Katina, Arnavutköy’lü Poliniya, Çakır Uskuhi, Benli Anjel de sık sık görünmeyi alışkanlık haline getirmişlerdir.”<sup>49</sup>

-Salâh Birsell, Kahveler Kitabı (Tepebaşı Bahçesi)

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<sup>49</sup>*Translation:* “The waiters here pay extreme attention to their attire. They don’t have cigarettes in their mouths while they work. Their hands are immaculate. Their nails are always trimmed at the base. According to Semih Mümtaz’s account, people don’t speak quickly here. When having a drink or eating, one doesn’t open their mouth too wide. Elbows don’t lean on the table. Whistling is not allowed. Staring at someone’s face as if diving or about to fight into it is discouraged. Here, rakı is served with meze as well. However, the meze is not made with pastırma, sucuk, or garlic. Those who drink rakı often prefer white cheese, and believe it or not, caviar. At the tables, prominent Pashas, gentlemen, Monsieurs, ladies, and misses take the lead. High-class women from Beyoğlu, such as Nemseli Anna, Deli Eleni, Kara Katina, Poliniya from Arnavutköy, Çakır Uskuhi, and Benli Anjel, have made it a habit to be seen here frequently.” Salah Birsell, Kahveler Kitabı (Istanbul: Sel Yayınları, 2019).

### III.I. Table Manners: Rituals and Customs Enacted at the Table

In the realm of meyhane culture, rituals unfold with distinct rhythms and etiquettes. The main course gracefully yields the spotlight to mezes, allowing patrons to relish the company of friends and fostering an unhurried atmosphere. Over time, as patrons feel ready, the hot mezes gracefully make way for the main course, although even this transition is marked by a leisurely pace. Laughter and conversation set the table's tone, with mezes and main courses as mere companions to the rituals woven through raki-infused dialogues. Unlike many culinary settings, the meyhane's tempo synchronises with its conversations, exuding patience and a genuine connection with patrons. The essence of a fulfilling meyhane experience lies here: it offers time like a cherished friend, indifferent to the world's rush.<sup>50</sup> Various types of meyhanes dot the cultural landscape, yet one unifying thread remains—each imbues a sense of familiarity, evoking a familial embrace. Every aspect, from the sounds and smells to the textures, carries a common essence that defines the raki table. Through its repetitive elements, the meyhane carves its identity. What happens around the table creates unique cultural rituals that foster togetherness. These rituals, whether toasting to camaraderie, choosing from the signature mezes, or pouring raki, are integral to the meyhane experience. The table serves as a cultural hub where these rituals are celebrated and preserved, ensuring the continuity of meyhane culture across generations and scales.

#### ***Rituals as the souls and futures of the raki table***

Within the meyhane, individuals converge with a specific objective—to relish one another's company, indulge in culinary delights, and partake in profound conversations. In doing so, they naturally impose a temporal and spatial order upon their actions, thus transforming the meyhane into a distinctive social space. This sociality arises from the interwoven rituals and rhythms, intricately connected to various social and spatial elements. Contrary to conventional wisdom, social space isn't merely an object among other objects or a product amidst various products. Instead, it's an intricate web of relations among these objects, a conglomerate of coexisting and simultaneous elements that alternately assume relative order and disorder. In the meyhane, rituals cannot be distilled into mere objects and actions, just as conversations extend beyond people; they are the soul of the meyhane, a product of past actions, laying the foundation for fresh interactions.

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<sup>50</sup> Ece-Oğuz Yalım, Çilingir Mimarisi: O bir ritüel (Çilingir Architecture: It is a ritual), Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı, edited by Erdir Zat, Nilhan Aras, Engin Öncüoğlu, Onur Kutluoğlu, Umut Şumnu, Selin Özavcı, Murat Meriç, (Istanbul: Anason İşleri, 2022), 366.

Henri Lefebvre's concept of spatial production, as elucidated in "The Production of Space", rooted in actions driven by specific objectives, imposes temporal and spatial orders upon related operations and expounds upon the concept of social space. These objectives mobilise spatial elements, encompassing tangible materials like stone, wood, and bone, alongside immaterial components such as tools, language, and agendas.<sup>51</sup> This concept fundamentally involves understanding how human activities, particularly those driven by specific goals, organize time and space. Relating this concept to the rituals enacted at the meyhane table, which construct the emotional and physical space of the meyhane through their rhythms and ceremonies, offers valuable insights. These rituals, comprising food and drink preparation, table settings, and toasting, exemplify spatial production in action. The objective here extends beyond sustenance to creating an environment where participants experience togetherness and cultural identity. The ordering of these rituals, executed with a particular sequence and timing, parallels Lefebvre's notion of actions structured by an objective that imposes spatial and temporal orders. In the meyhane, these rituals give rise to a unique form of spatial production, one that both reflects and constructs the cultural and social significance of the space. Thus, Lefebvre's ideas resonate in the meyhane's transformative capacity to generate a distinct spatiality through the performative and repetitive nature of its rituals, fostering a sense of place and shared experience among its patrons.<sup>52</sup>



Figure12. Welcoming everyone at the table

Image source: Istanbulelsewhere, Instagram

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<sup>51</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Reprint, Oxford: Blackwell, 1991, 1974), 71.

<sup>52</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73.

These emotional rituals also shape the relationship between the drink, the space, and the individual, transcending the confines of gastronomic experience. The meyhane rituals additionally infuse the space with a sense of home, as they encompass unspoken rules and manners that collectively respect the space. The mantra, 'a rakı table is the cornerstone; one must sit down sober and rise sober,' underscores this etiquette.

Furthermore, these rituals become conduits for cultural and intellectual transmission. Patrons gather to share 'rakı conversations,' exchanging tales of bygone meyhanes, renowned regulars, and the luminaries of yesteryears. Within the meyhane, a unique hierarchy prevails—one based not on age but on one's repository of stories and wisdom. Here, historical and cultural ambiance unites generations, bridging the gap between a 60-year-old and a 20-year-old, who, following meyhane customs, interact as equals. Johan Huizinga's game theory<sup>53</sup> that rules enhance the enjoyment of games is epitomized here; the rituals endow the rakı table with inclusivity and democracy.<sup>54</sup>

In addition to these rituals, the meyhane's identity hinges upon mezes, recurring spatial elements, and songs. Mezes<sup>55</sup>, small dishes designed for communal sharing, assume a unique role in crafting the rakı table's identity. Beyond a mere gastronomic function, they signify the taste of memory and ambiance. The selection and sequencing of mezes exhibit a hidden hierarchy, with cold mezes taking the stage before their hot counterparts. The common thread uniting these diverse mezes is the aroma of rakı, weaving them into a cohesive experience.

The spatiality of meyhanes and their ability to evoke the meyhane ambience anywhere are also shaped by recurring elements and songs. Rakı glasses, whether traditional tea

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<sup>53</sup> Johan Huizinga mentions game theory in *Homo Ludens*. The reason games are fun is because of the rules, not in spite of that. Rules make people feel equal. Meyhane table, with its rituals and customs, as well as the manners of the table, makes everyone around the table equal and creates a democratic environment.

<sup>54</sup> Reyhan Ülker, Tan Morgül'le: İstanbulluluk Ritüelleri ve Rakının Pozları., *Aposto*, May 24, 2023. <https://aposto.com/s/tan-morgulle-istanbulluluk-rituelleri-ve-rakinin-pozlari>.

<sup>55</sup> It means taste in Persian. While it is translated as appetisers in many sources, the definition of appetisers means small dishes to open up the appetite. Meze's case is different. They are not in fact, to open up the appetite because there is usually no main course in meyhanes, and if there is, it is usually fish. While modern-day meyhanes have increased the food choice, the traditional and historical roots of meyhane dishes are usually around meze. Most of Mediterranean cuisine has mezes in different forms, like tapas, pinchos, cicchetti. But rakı tables mezes have another layer. Clifford Wright mentions in his book that the Arabic and Middle Eastern food cultures have no appetisers. Most of the countries located in that geography have tables (sofras) that serve food simultaneously, and there is no particular eating order. This was also the case for Ottoman Empire until the effect of Westernization. Türkiye's case is slightly different because there is an order to eat food, but mezes are mainly the company of rakı. They can be served with other foods and places for breakfast or dinner, but the definition of meze is more suitable for a rakı table.

glasses or designated rakı vessels, including an extra for water, are integral. The pouring of rakı itself is a pivotal ritual, as the drink is meticulously prepared by adding water. As for the songs, traditional meyhanes often echo with melodies from the '50s and '60s.

### ***The profound meaning of rituals***

Yet, beneath these physical elements lies the profound significance of the accompanying rituals. These rituals are not arbitrary; they carry meaning. The drinking ritual does not commence until the first toast. Toasts occur throughout the conversation, marking moments of sadness, remembrance, and celebration. They commence with a welcome toast—a gesture that extends beyond greeting a companion. In a sequence of toasts, patrons honor those present, those absent, those departed (symbolized by the table itself), and ultimately themselves. Each toast becomes a celebration and a tribute, uniting participants around the meyhane table in a shared celebration of life and memory. The manners of drinking rakı starts and ends with sitting around the table. Without this spatiality, these rituals and rhythms would be lost, because the table is the anchor of these rituals.

### **III.II. Rituals Beyond the Table: Neighbourhoods and Streets**

"Intimacy" is a central concept in the context of meyhane settings. Essentially, these are places where individuals are embraced by the neighbourhood community, characterised by unchanging attributes. These spaces maintain their intimacy while coexisting with the modern world and various social groups. People who venture into meyhane-laden streets willingly accept the proximity to strangers, sometimes even touching shoulders with others in the bustling crowds. The terms "quiet" and "calm" are not typically associated with the meyhane ambience.<sup>56</sup>

The rituals that shape meyhane culture and infuse the space with a distinct presence, have their rhythm. While the series of rituals unfold around the table through gestures and table manners, the broader cultural space has its actions. These actions often manifest before even entering the meyhane. As discussed in previous chapters, the sense of a meyhane neighbourhood extends beyond the individual tables, creating a collective space.

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<sup>56</sup> Ece-Oğuz Yalım, Çilingir Mimarisi: O bir ritüel (Çilingir Architecture: It is a ritual), Meyhane İhtisas Kitabı, 366.

Meyhanes are rarely solitary entities and dedicated streets in Istanbul's urban fabric serve as hubs for this particular cultural practice, fostering a sense of unity. Neighbourhoods known for their meyhanes have their meyhane streets, and what stands out most about these areas is their architectural heritage, preserved through historical events and meyhane culture. In a way, meyhanes act as markers of these neighbourhoods, bearing witness to the historical facets of the city while carrying the collective identity rooted in these historical areas.<sup>57</sup>



Figure13. Nevizade Street. A known meyhane street in Istanbul.

Image source: Jorge Franganillo, 2013.  
<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/122518740>

While the rituals are performances in their own right, both around the table and within the meyhane's confines, meyhanes are not limited to their indoor borders. The streets, open to the public and accessible to everyone, provide a platform for meyhanes as collectives to share their experiences throughout the night. Their unity doesn't solely arise from physical closeness but also from the rituals and rhythms they collectively engage in. Most importantly, they share the street and coexist. Their repetitive nature helps foster a bond among patrons. Even though tables belong to different meyhanes on the street, they all partake in the same rituals. They raise toast in a similar manner, order very similar mezes, and enjoy the same drinks.<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

### ***Collective experience***

Unity extends beyond table rituals to what occurs on the same street. Street musicians with violins and singers perform while strolling down the street. They make stops at various tables, take song requests, and often collect tips from patrons. They are integral to the performance on the street, and their presence is linked to the meyhanes. Meyhanes contribute not only to the table but also to the urban landscape, integrating themselves into everyday life by being present and continuing their rituals. They create rhythms that transcend the boundaries of a specific space, turning it into a communal activity. The meyhanes serve as a shared space for waiters, customers, musicians, and city dwellers. They sing along to the same tunes and join in toasting rituals around the table.<sup>59</sup>

In addition to the musical rhythms of the street, there is also a common gastronomic experience. While mezes may vary from one meyhane to another, characteristic mezes are a constant presence in every meyhane, ensuring the continuity of the culture across different establishments.

There's also a sense of solidarity among these establishments; despite being economic rivals, they often lend each other a helping hand. Moreover, there is a ritual practiced by some regular groups known as "ara çayı" (in-between tea break). This segment of the evening serves to uphold table etiquette. After a certain time, tea is brought to the table to refresh patrons and ease their digestion. In certain meyhane streets, the waiter who delivers the tea usually visits several meyhanes, turning it into a collective action. These teas are typically complimentary and provided by the house.

### **III.III. The Role of the Table in Community Building**

During historical processes, the rhythms of society and rituals may have evolved from the past. While meyhanes have stood the test of time and exhibited resilience, so has their ability to foster communities through the intimacy of space and the conviviality of tables. These communities primarily consisted of groups of friends, but the unique names and ideologies associated with each establishment paved the way for the organic formation of distinct communities through an informal, self-selective process. With each establishment

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

representing its own distinct values, groups of like-minded individuals became regular patrons of specific meyhanes.

While these groups primarily formed around meyhane tables, other communities recognized the potential of meyhanes. Despite being an intermediary space, meyhanes exuded a sense of intimacy distinct from domestic settings. They were never quite home, yet they also were. Their unique characteristics cultivated an environment where locals felt at ease. As observed in *The Great Good Place*, people often remain lonely within their crowds in the absence of such settings.<sup>60</sup>

Some rituals of everyday life within certain communities found their way into meyhanes. For instance, the term "gün," meaning day, signifies a social activity and ritual conducted among women in Turkey. Typically, this involves a group of women who take turns hosting one another in their homes, each preparing appetisers. Usually, these groups consist of homemakers, and they take turns hosting, with the hostess receiving a small contribution from the others, often in the form of gold. This practice serves multiple economic, social, ideological, and cultural functions. The time and space are crucial aspects of these gatherings. Although traditionally held in homes during the daytime, some groups have transported this tradition into meyhanes.

Women groups initially connected through various organisations and developed social bonds. As their relationships deepened, they began meeting in meyhanes. In this way, the traditional "gün" gatherings that are attributed to women shifted in time and space, transitioning from daytime gatherings at home to evening meetups in meyhanes. However, the core social activities, including music, dancing, and dining, remained consistent. Historically, meyhanes were predominantly male-dominated spaces, but these women's groups illustrate how women, particularly those representing individual and independent identities, gained recognition in this context. The spatiality and characteristics of these spaces did not undergo dramatic changes. The intersection of women's identity and meyhane culture on the same plane demonstrates broader demographic and political shifts. While once male-dominated spaces, meyhanes transformed and became social hubs for women as their new "homes". Their gained seats at the table opened up broader discussions on the representation of women in society. The hybrid space of meyhane and

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<sup>60</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons, and Other Hangouts at the Hearth of Community* (New York: Marlowe&Company, 1999), Introduction.

gün as a social structure showed that rakı table could adapt to new identities and spatiality in its social context by sharing its rituals with different forms of gatherings.<sup>61</sup>

### III.IV. Preservation and Adaptation

The enduring rituals, spanning decades, do not imply that they have remained unchanged. The rakı table, with its customs and rituals, has navigated through various traditions and encountered numerous reactions. As a cultural phenomenon, it symbolises a tradition that has persisted, weathering different political administrations and influences.

These characteristics, rituals, and rhythms all imbue a space with meaning. Objects become the conduits for non-material communication between the space and its users. This meaning derives from history, individual memories, collective memories, and representations. Importantly, this meaning transcends location and form, retaining its significance. Consequently, people feel compelled to preserve, transmit, and adapt these traditions to contemporary conditions. Nostalgia emerges as a potent force in safeguarding such spaces, serving as a bridge between objects and history, weaving memories into a narrative for these objects. Nostalgia permeates artworks, music, and poems, connecting individuals to the cultural legacy. Those who have relocated to different cities or countries often play meyhane songs, recreate the meyhane table, and even form collective platforms, thereby finding their own space in diverse locations. As Lefebvre posits, people seek to decelerate elements that evoke tradition, striving to protect representational spaces.<sup>62</sup>

The ability to adapt has played a significant role in sustaining the meyhane culture, which has spread across a vast geography for centuries. The so-called "traditional" meyhanes of today were once the "new generation" meyhanes of their time. Throughout history, meyhanes have coexisted in various styles with different regulars, from Gedikli Meyhane to Ayaklı Meyhanes and the modern "new generation" ones we have today.

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<sup>61</sup> This result emerged from the doctoral research groups conducted by Nükte Sevim Derdiçok and my individual research and interviews. During this process, my personal research evolved as several different groups of women, brought together through the school's parent-teacher association, began to transform their relationships into a more social form by regularly going to meyhanes. Through conversations, it was observed that, similar to the conclusion reached in Derdiçok's research, these groups of women who extended their meetings to meyhanes shared socioeconomic levels that were compatible with each other, and they also held similar ideological values, actively participating in women's movements. Nükte Sevim Derdiçok, *Kadın ve Meyhane: Gün için yeni bir kültürel mekan olarak meyhaneler*, Meyhane Kitabı, eds. Emine Gürsoy Naskalı, (Kitabevi Yayınları, 2019) 543.

<sup>62</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Production of Space*, 68-160, 229-270.

What defines a meyhane is essential for its continuity. It's about the meze, the ambience, the music, and, of course, the conversations. Although the content of these elements has evolved, they have persisted in different forms, and meyhanes continue to thrive. Still, various meyhanes offer different content for those who have their preferences. In essence, each meyhane of a different era is, in its way, a "new generation" meyhane.

Consequently, every changing, preserving, ongoing, or vanishing element within meyhanes serves as a vessel that carries the essence of the meyhane. Certainly, today's "new generation" meyhanes often do not adhere to the traditional meyhane characteristics. They have the music, the meze, the raki, and the tables, but the performance is notably different. The fine line between adapting and losing the essence is drawn here. Nevertheless, meyhanes have been enduring establishments and social formations for a long time. They require change and evolution while maintaining a connection to the past through rituals and their adaptation to the present. Change doesn't necessarily mean complete detachment. Nostalgia remains an integral part of the meyhane, whether through conversations at the table, reminiscing about individuals, or the historical connection and bridge brought by nostalgia should not be forgotten.

The sensory imprints from the past resonate through time, making the meyhane a portal for patrons to step into cherished memories or catch a glimpse of a bygone era. Meyhanes, often adorned with artefacts and decor that whisper tales of yesteryears, function as veritable time capsules. The creak of wooden chairs, the soft glow of lanterns, and the melodies of 60s record player music provide a visual and sensory journey into history. The meyhane table transcends mere furniture; it transforms into a conduit through which patrons are transported back in time, carrying memories forward. Yet, in the face of social transformations, meyhanes adapt to contemporary needs to avoid fading into history. Especially under the influence of new trends and popular culture, these in-between spaces, straddling the realms of history and the present, face growing challenges. Balancing preservation with adaptation becomes increasingly difficult, affecting meyhanes as well. While the rituals persist, the spatial essence of these places is primarily carried by the table, distinguishing them from other establishments.

### ***Towards a new generation old meyhane***

Tuba Yazıcı and Deniz Temel have established a space that carries historical traces while embracing modernity. From the ambience to the very design of the tables, their ability to blend the past with the present holds profound significance. This endeavour aims to preserve a fading culture and bridge the gap between consumer habits and tradition. It also responds to a different form of adaptation represented by the new generation of meyhanes. In these modern meyhanes, the traditional characteristics, including music and objects, are often stripped away, leaving only a space that serves rakı accompanied by contemporary pop music. Tuba and Deniz's adaptation serves as a counterpoint to these establishments, signifying their desire to uphold the reverence the rakı table commands. They carry forward the rituals, demonstrating how rakı has transformed through adaptation. While assimilating the transformations rakı has undergone, such as the introduction of ice into rakı and corresponding changes in glassware, has never been easy, Tuba and Deniz's attachment to meyhane culture, both as owners and regular patrons fosters a deep respect for both the changes and traditions. Deniz notes that passing tradition to the next generation necessitates internal evolution. Tuba adds that the new generation frequenting meyhanes has introduced a different mode of interacting with rakı, sometimes even consuming it while standing around the table. She underscores that adaptation is precisely this - a pathway to the future that is not stagnant but continuously renews itself. Amidst these transformations, from glassware to songs, the essence of the meyhane table has remained unaltered.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Reyhan Ülker, Tuba Yazıcı ve Deniz Temel'le: Rakının Bugünü. Aposto, May 17, 2023. <https://aposto.com/s/tuba-yazici-ve-deniz-temelle-rakinin-bugunu>.

## IV. Spatial Agency of Gathering



“Rakı nasıl içilir, size anlatayım. Her şeyden önce unutmayın, rakının kendisinden çok meclisi güzeldir. Tek başına oturup rakı içilmez, birkaç gönül arkadaşı olacak illaki. Sonra rakı öyle kısa sürede lıkır lıkır içilip masadan kalkılmaz. Masada sohbet saatlerce sürecek. Konuşa konuşa, yudum yudum içeceksin...”<sup>64</sup>

-Ahmet Rasim, writer

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<sup>64</sup> Translation: “Let me tell you how to drink rakı. First and foremost, remember this: the gathering is more important than the rakı itself. You don't drink rakı alone; there must be a few close friends with you. Then, you don't gulp down rakı quickly and leave the table. The conversation at the table will go on for hours. You'll sip and chat, sip and chat...”, Ahmet Rasim's quote, Halit Çapın, Takvim Newspaper, (September, 2004).

## IV. I. The Concept of Space: Exploring the Dimensions

Urban spaces, with their public areas, serve as environments that encompass human interactions and the necessary facilities to support these relationships. These spaces are intertwined with daily life, functioning as the backdrop for subjective and psychological processes, where perceptions and experiences transition into consciousness, and individual personalities and memories take shape through various meanings and connections. Spaces play a dual role in shaping both the public and city identities, serving as mirrors reflecting the state of civilisation.<sup>65</sup>

Space has been a topic of extensive discussion within the frameworks of various theorists like Habermas, Arendt, Mitchell, Sennett, Negt, and Kluge, particularly concerning the blurred boundaries between public and private spaces.

Entertainment life, a facet of everyday life, is intimately linked to other aspects of society, forming a dialectical relationship with politics, work life, ideology, and more. Research into entertainment life and the spaces it occupies is crucial for understanding how cultural life evolves.<sup>66</sup> Despite the appearance of stability in everyday life, it undergoes transformation influenced by societal changes across different times and places.

City's spaces, particularly public spaces, inherently harbour diversity. Istanbul's eclectic structure amplifies this diversity by preserving social and physical spaces, although not without challenges. This diversity fosters a culture that transcends national boundaries, linking culture more to geography than nationality. Defining such a space, which encourages an eclectic culture, is vital. A broad definition of space as a fusion of places and processes can provide some insight into public culture.<sup>67</sup> To comprehend the dimensions of space and its role in fostering cultural practices, it's imperative to understand the definitions of culture and space that can be considered public and identify which definition works for certain arguments better.

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<sup>65</sup> Müge Özkan Özbek, 'Tarihsel süreçlerde Taksim meydanı ve Beyoğlu Bölgesinin morfolojik Evrimi ve Sentaktik analizleri', *Tasarım + Kuram*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.14744/tasarimkuram.2021.83435>.

<sup>66</sup> Önen, 'Toplumsal Tarih Çerçevesinde İstanbul'daki Modernleşme ve Eğlence Hayatı'.

<sup>67</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Space and Pluralism: Can contemporary cities be places of tolerance?*, Culture and Tolerance in Public Space, eds. Stefano Moroni, David Weberman, (Budapest, Central European University Press, 2017), 35-44.

In German, "public space" is used in analytical and critical contexts. It explains "what" is societal and historical on the one hand and expresses "what it should be" as a normative principle on the other. In its first aspect, it is a spatial term where our experiences, ideas, and narratives are generated within our societal life, leading to the creation of culture, collectiveness, experiences, and the entire process resulting in collective bodies ranging from national units to global entities.<sup>68</sup> Distinguishing between public and private spaces is a discourse that draws boundaries around our everyday lives. The initial question is, what is public and what is not? In this sense, it's also a spatial distinction closely linked to normative definitions. Different worldviews define public and private according to their perspectives, making the struggle over space definitions a political issue. This also relates to how we perceive space. What Descartes referred to as "res cogitans" and "res extensa" is associated with the meaning attributed to space. Space belonging to "res extensa" objectifies and becomes a stable entity that can govern the subject. When space is detached from everyday life, it loses its societal and political context<sup>69</sup>. For Hannah Arendt, public space is akin to a round table where people gather, separating and connecting them.<sup>70</sup>

Space, as a societal product, arises from collective human actions, representing an object in human relations. In this context, space is both a productive product and a productive force. Simultaneously, it provides suitable settings for societal reproduction relationships.<sup>71</sup> In this sense, the production of space signifies the production of an entire societal structure, encompassing knowledge, institutions, and driven by economic value. Lefebvre posits a dialectical relationship between the physical, mental, and societal aspects of space.

Space also alludes to dimensions where mental and physical spaces coexist, extending into symbolic realms. Is space a social relation? Undoubtedly, it is, but it's inherently tied to property relations and linked to the productive forces that shape the land. Space is saturated with social relations; it is not just supported by social relations but is also a product and producer of these relations.<sup>72</sup> The production of space involves numerous agents, some

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<sup>68</sup> Işıl Özbay Tarhan, Kamusalın Politik İçeriğinin Mekana Yansımaları Bağlamında Kentsel Kamusal Mekanda Güç Mücadelesi, (Master Thesis, İzmir: Dokuz Eylül University,2016), 20.

<sup>69</sup> Işıl Özbay Tarhan, Kamusalın Politik İçeriğinin Mekana Yansımaları Bağlamında Kentsel Kamusal Mekanda Güç Mücadelesi, (Master Thesis, İzmir: Dokuz Eylül University,2016), 21.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Işıl Özbay Tarhan, Kamusalın Politik İçeriğinin Mekana Yansımaları Bağlamında Kentsel Kamusal Mekanda Güç Mücadelesi, (Master Thesis, İzmir: Dokuz Eylül University,2016), 34.

<sup>72</sup> Henri Lefebvre, State, Space, World, Selected Essays, eds. Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden (London: University of Minnesota Press,2009), 186.

focusing on macro decisions and others on micro decisions. These agents engage in interventions that are connected yet disconnected, occurring within a space that is both homogeneous and fragmented.<sup>73</sup>

The word "public" is a recurring theme in both public space and public culture. While the modern meanings of the term emphasise universality and equality, real-world conditions in modern societies, characterised by diverse people and groups with varying resources and status, complicate this meaning. In practice, the meaning of "public" has transformed into a social construct that influences behaviour within a space. Differences in the publicness of places and the social positions of individuals can limit the creation of a public space. The key factor here is the actual diversity within society. As a result, public culture is not monolithic; rather, it comprises subcultures, fragments, and processes. Public culture serves as a framework for public identity, a collection of narratives describing a shared way of life. However, it faces individual, group, and national challenges. The character of public culture varies, and there is no single public culture; rather, it consists of scenes from everyday life, places within the urban fabric that exhibit the rituals of daily life. Space expands on different levels depending on the subcultures, shaping a broader identity. It need not be focused solely on a nation; instead, it encompasses a collection of narratives centred around a specific space.

Public space refers to a segment of the physical environment associated with public meanings and functions. The term "public sphere," however, is often used to denote a broader concept encompassing the entirety of places, people, and activities that constitute the public dimension of human social life. Space thus forms an integral part of social reality. The spatial scale (ranging from the individual body to the home, neighbourhood, and city), degrees of exclusivity and openness (from the most private to the most public), and modes of social interaction and association with space (personal, interpersonal, impersonal) are all significant considerations.<sup>74</sup>

An accurate definition of public space may rest on the observation that the public spaces within cities, nearly anywhere and at any time, exist beyond the boundaries of individual or

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<sup>73</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *State, Space, World*, Selected Essays, 202.

<sup>74</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City* (London: Routledge, 2003.)

small group control. These spaces serve as intermediaries between private domains and are utilised for various functional and symbolic purposes, often overlapping.<sup>75</sup>

Public space carries different meanings in various societies, places, and eras.<sup>76</sup> The public sphere is rarely, if ever, spatialised because it can be described as the sphere of private individuals coming together as a public.<sup>77</sup> Defining the public sphere within society, rather than the state, aligns well with the definitions of meyhanes boundaries.

Simmel highlights that public space is the primary setting for existential efforts. He suggests that, in response to the forces of modern urban existence and rural traditions, the challenge in the new world is to protect individuality.<sup>78</sup>

Lefebvre asserts that each societal structure shapes its space, and social and spatial productions are interconnected.<sup>79</sup> Massey elucidates that this relationship is also influenced by space, and interactions and encounters among people change depending on their relationship with the space.

In addition to the distinctions between public and private spaces, there is another dimension of space: the concept of the "third place," as defined by Ray Oldenburg. Third places occupy the social realm between home and workplace and serve as anchors of community life, promoting broader and more creative interactions. These are spaces where people relax, encounter familiar faces, and form a sense of commonality. The characteristics of a third place are primarily rooted in social aspects, where users aren't obligated to be present, fostering a sense of community, and where conversation is a central activity. Regular patrons set the tone and create a warm, welcoming atmosphere, making it feel like a second home.<sup>80</sup>

There is a place for every group; they are formed through compatible communities and are preserved and transformed by these spaces. Thus, the term "space" isn't just a form;

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<sup>75</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, 99.

<sup>76</sup> Neil Smith, Setha Low, Introduction: *The Imperative of Public Space*, *Politics of Public Space*, eds. Setha Low, Neil Smith, (London: Routledge, 2006), 5.

<sup>77</sup> Neil Smith, Setha Low, Introduction: *The Imperative of Public Space*, *Politics of Public Space*, 7.

<sup>78</sup> Birge Yıldırım, *Kamusal Alanın Üretimi: Taksim Meydanı*, (PhD Dissertation, Istanbul: Istanbul Technical University, 2014), 27.

<sup>79</sup> İclal Dinçer, *Koruma, Kolektif Bellek ve Kültürel Miras Hakkını Birlikte Düşünmek*, (Istanbul: Marmara Belediyeler Birliği Kültür Yayınları, Şehir & Toplum 25, May-August, 2023), 25.

<sup>80</sup> Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Places*.

rather, it comprises a collection of memories, practices, history, and a collective sense of belonging, reflecting identity. Space can manifest in various forms, from physical spaces with walls to objects like a table. The definition of space and place is determined not only by physical attributes but also through social agencies.

The social agency inherent to the space imbues it with remarkable flexibility, capable of shaping space on various geographical scales. These micro geographies serve as mirrors, reflecting distinct group configurations, social interplay, urban landscapes, and spatial demarcations. In this context, the raki table takes on the role of space creator, moulding not only physical dimensions but also the essence of that space. With its profound significance, it forges a sense of place within each "sofra" or meyhane, independent of their physical locations. The table, in this regard, transcends mere furniture; it becomes an active agent in establishing a designated space for a cultural phenomenon.

#### **IV. II. The Role of Physical and Social Spaces in Cultural Practices**

Culture is not static; it evolves over time. Thus, both permanent and adaptive, updated aspects of culture are undeniable.<sup>81</sup> Culture represents inclusiveness without being confined to it; it's a creation shared and participated in by the collective. Culture is a product of collectivism, and it's intimately intertwined with political discussions. Defining culture is a complex task due to its multifaceted nature. Therefore, it's often best to choose specific definitions and narratives for discussion.

Three understandings of culture—sociological, philosophical, and aesthetic—can be delineated. Sociological definitions often refer to culture as a lifestyle or a set of rituals and customs determined by a community. This discussion pertains to the sociological dimension of culture. The third definition of culture by the Oxford Dictionary refers to "the customs, civilization, and achievements of a particular time or people."<sup>82</sup> This definition emerged in response to various historic trends reshaping modern societies. The modern concept of the public plays a unifying role in these trends, expressed in narratives about a way of life.<sup>83</sup> But

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<sup>81</sup>Cemil Arslan, Introduction, (Istanbul:Marmara Belediyeler Birliği Kültür Yayınları,Şehir & Toplum 25, May-August,2023).

<sup>82</sup> Oxford dictionary

<sup>83</sup>Ali Madanipour, Space and Pluralism: Can contemporary cities be places of tolerance?, Culture and Tolerance in Public Space, eds. Stefano Moroni, David Weberman, (Budapest, Central European University Press,2017), 35-44.

how does culture persist when the connection between the producer and user of a space and that space itself is severed?

Memory contains both spatial and temporal elements, with individual and societal dimensions, being both dynamic and constructible while serving a functional purpose. This is the essence of how culture is created.<sup>84</sup> These terms take us to a sense of belonging somewhere, often described as the "soul of the space," with experiences and memories that nourish each other. Collective memory is formed through culture, space, and time, and it's essential for creating the essence of a space.

The concept of collective memory came into use in the early 20th century, with Maurice Halbwachs playing a significant role in the idea of linking collective identity with the city.<sup>85</sup> Halbwachs defines collective identity as something passed down from generation to generation, connected to shared values, experiences, and memories. He emphasizes that memory is derived from social context and requires the presence of others. However, as spaces transform, memory can blur, leading people to hold on to visual references.

Culture can be viewed as a system of everyday practices and ways of doing things. Traditionally, entertainment is often excluded from everyday life practices, but Lefebvre argues that work, leisure, and other activities fundamentally shape one's daily routine and should be included.<sup>86</sup> While everyday life may appear ordinary and unproblematic, it is far from static. It undergoes gradual transformation over time and may appear unchanged but is highly dependent on its context, changing with societal shifts and geographic variations. Existing meyhanes, although part of daily routines, are sometimes marginalised as non-conforming to daily life. Ironically, these marginalised spaces often become symbols of certain places.

Culture, as it is conventionally understood, emerges within daily life and is often associated with a specific place, a particular group's daily life, or, at the very least, their norms and routines.

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<sup>84</sup> İclal Dinçer, Koruma, Kolektif Bellek ve Kültürel Miras Hakkını Birlikte Düşünmek, 23.

<sup>85</sup> İclal Dinçer, Koruma, Kolektif Bellek ve Kültürel Miras Hakkını Birlikte Düşünmek, 24.

<sup>86</sup> İlhan Tekeli, Gündelik Yaşam, Yaşam Kalitesi ve Yerellik Yazıları (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2009), 18.

## ***Geography of being local***

Local lifestyles have historically been tied to specific geographic regions, giving people a sense of identity within a society. However, in today's globalised world and in historical shifts on “owning”<sup>87</sup> a land, lifestyles extend beyond national boundaries, as localities define themselves within a broader international context. These localities, in essence, represent subnational spaces. What is global in this context pertains to places containing capital, products, and images but often lack a distinct identity, rendering them unidentifiable. They gradually infiltrate localities, transforming them. The local cultures with identity and authenticity are expected to resist the global forces. When considering localities, focusing on their dynamic, changing aspects is crucial rather than viewing them as static.<sup>88</sup> Each period has local characteristics, and each society creates its unique local identity. What makes a place local is not its timeless essence but the complex interplay of historical and political processes. These localities encompass both physical spaces and the communities formed within those spaces. These communities share collective experiences, interactions, and communication, giving localities their significance. Individuals become intertwined with their surroundings, forming an integral part of their identity. Notably, the local is identified through its objects, people, and public and private connections.

Each locality can be considered a selective space, and through these selective processes, we can describe both locality and the global by examining their relationships with local elements. True globalisation is impossible. It implies that localities have no distinct aspects and require disregarding contexts, human factors, politics, history, geography, and objects. Locality essentially represents subcultures.

As cities have expanded, and diversity and inequality have intensified, a fragmented social geography has emerged. This has resulted in a diminished desire and possibility for diverse groups to coexist. Public space, designed as both a physical place and a process for bringing strangers together, offers the opportunity to recreate coexistence and facilitate active engagement. The physical coexistence of strangers is essential for living in the same society.<sup>89</sup> Becoming familiar with others through shared spaces and communication can lead

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<sup>87</sup> Historically, cities have been occupied and changed ownership. The concept of land ownership raises the question of who possesses a place? Similar to meyhane culture, it is entrusted, borrowed, and changes hands, but it is not truly owned; instead, it exists as a collection of past societies, politics, and more.

<sup>88</sup> İlhan Tekeli, *Gündelik Yaşam, Yaşam Kalitesi ve Yerellik Yazıları* (İstanbul: Tarih Vakfı Yurt Yayınları, 2009), 169.

<sup>89</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Space and Pluralism: Can contemporary cities be places of tolerance?*, *Culture and Tolerance in Public Space*, 35-44.

to the creation of public space through coexistence. Cities expand socially through internal relationships, creating a rich backdrop. These spaces retain traces of their time and place, cultivating cultures and collective memories.<sup>90</sup>

Public space, as part of the public sphere, can impact spatial arrangements and serve as a catalyst for coexistence through active interactions. However, larger groups and activities sometimes lead to clustering, preventing full coexistence. Examples of this can be seen in Istanbul's meyhanes streets, situated in specific neighbourhoods. In his famous manifesto, Kant argues that freedom is essential for enlightenment, emphasising the freedom to use one's reason publicly. Tönnies later adds that such freedoms transform communities into societies. As culture becomes the basis for social analysis, old class divisions are replaced by divisions between group identities. Engels asserts that the dynamics shaping societal order also influence the city, often resulting in the segregation of different groups and classes within spaces, disconnected from each other.<sup>91</sup> The current debate centres around recognising cultural spaces and their role in public culture. The proliferation of cultural products indicates rich cultural activities, but their relationship with commercial interests, inability to penetrate society deeply, and competition for presence in public space make the relationship between public space and public culture complex.<sup>92</sup> The public-private distinction has been a fundamental organising principle shaping cities' physical spaces and their citizens' social lives.<sup>93</sup> The division of space and society into public and private spheres influences individuals' mental states, regulates their behaviour, and imposes a lasting structure on human societies and their inhabited spaces. Cultural places and local traditions can extend their influence beyond their immediate boundaries by disseminating their distinctive elements and rituals. However, it's important to note that this expansion rarely, if ever, encompasses an entire city or country, even as it reaches beyond their geographical borders. Consequently, culture takes on a local rather than national character, as it derives its definition from localised elements and boundaries rather than national ones. These micro geographies play a pivotal role in shaping cultures, and in turn, cultures give rise to distinct localities. These locales, even when they share certain values or customs, remain inherently unique and are not ubiquitous but confined to select spaces.

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<sup>90</sup> İclal Dinçer, *Koruma, Kolektif Bellek ve Kültürel Miras Hakkını Birlikte Düşünmek*, 24.

<sup>91</sup> Tarhan, *Kamusalın Politik İçeriğinin Mekana Yansıması Bağlamında Kentsel Kamusal Mekanda Güç Mücadelesi*, 28.

<sup>92</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Space and Pluralism: Can contemporary cities be places of tolerance?*, *Culture and Tolerance in Public Space*, 35-44.

<sup>93</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*.

#### IV. III. Meyhanes Role in Creating a Sense of Cultural Public Space

The definition of public space in Turkey's context is influenced not only by state ownership but also by users and their habits. This definition diverges from the idealised definitions put forth by thinkers like Arendt, Sennett, Habermas, Mitchell, Negt, and Kluge. In Habermas's definition, the state is not considered part of public space. However, in Turkish language, the word "public" translates to "kamusal," which is directly related to "kamu," meaning state and administration. The word is often used interchangeably with the state. Consequently, the context of public space and its definition can vary.

The dynamic perspective allows us to navigate between public and private spheres, which have historically been strictly separate. The significance of each sphere highlights the interdependence between the two. The concept of privacy also plays here, as meyhanes are not entirely public and have an element of intimacy. The word "private" has its origins in Latin, where "privus" meant single, individual, and private, while "privatus" referred to being withdrawn from public life and something peculiar to oneself. For instance, Hannah Arendt viewed private life negatively, believing that private actions should have significance or consequences for others to exist truly.<sup>94</sup> In this context, meyhanes can be considered public spaces, albeit not entirely public. According to Ali Madanipour, a home provides personal space, a territory, protection from the elements, a place for engaging in social life, and a social unit. While regulars traditionally ensure that meyhanes remain protected spaces, it is not entirely accurate to label them as purely public.<sup>95</sup>

While not entirely accurate, most definitions of "public" align with the nature of meyhanes. For instance, the Oxford Dictionary defines "public" as an adjective encompassing or pertaining to the entire population, community-related, representing the community, and used or shared by the community. "Personal" is private, while "impersonal" is public, according to Ali Madanipour's investigations into the private sphere.<sup>96</sup> In this sense, meyhanes occupy an intermediate position, serving both intimate and public circles.

The blurring of lines between public and private spaces during the Republican era in the Ottoman context, along with spaces designed for in-between states, made public spaces

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, 64.

<sup>96</sup> Ali Madanipour, *Public and Private Spaces of the City*, 96.

seem intimidating. In the Ottoman urban organisation, the first boundary was drawn between the home and the street. The spatial arrangement redefined the limits of the public through balconies and terraces. Taking something that doesn't belong to anyone (in this case, the streets) was considered an unspoken social contract for bending the rules of using the existing space. Because a public space that doesn't belong to anyone is a space that can be incorporated into the self. This tradition is still visible in the chairs and tables of meyhanes occupying the streets, representing a new way of adapting public space to usage patterns.<sup>97</sup>

Streets serve as nodal points between private and public spaces, blurring the lines between these terms. Traditional public spaces require production public spaces, and public spaces of production depend on traditional public spaces for existence. Streets act as a bridge between these concepts, both facilitating economic activities within meyhanes and creating urban public spaces.

Debates about what matters most have sparked disputes between physical and social improvements. The question arises: should improvement focus on enhancing the built environment or social institutions and processes, both integral parts of culture? During the modernist era, influenced by functionalist thinking and Marxian analysis, the primary focus was on political and economic issues, with culture seen as a superstructure following economic production's underlying logic. Today, improving public spaces or any spaces is often seen as an investment in a city's competitiveness by municipal authorities. This process, often driven by private developers, has overlooked marginal areas. Public culture has primarily been reflected in central public spaces, neglecting the diverse mosaic of subcultures that constitute urban society.

The public space's role should be to provide the infrastructure for presenting and accessing cultural products. Such public spaces can take various forms, from libraries, theatres, galleries, and museums to websites and open urban spaces. Meyhanes, with their social and physical structures, presence in urban areas, and shared spaces, contribute to a sense of publicness. Streets, with their tables, chairs, customers, glass facades, terraces, and music, facilitate cultural sharing through public spaces. However, meyhanes cannot be considered entirely public. Privatised public spaces and gated neighbourhoods are spatial manifestations of this defence of a particular way of life. Meyhanes, while sharing elements

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<sup>97</sup> Yildirim, Kamusal Alanın Üretimi: Taksim Meydani., 29

of public spaces, also maintain an intimate character, challenging conventional categorisations.

Meyhane, with its distinctive blend of tradition and adaptation, stands as a testament to the complex interplay between public and private spaces. It defies easy categorisation, offering an intimate yet communal experience transcending conventional definitions of publicness. Meyhanes represent a specific cultural thread in Istanbul's intricate tapestry. They highlight the role of streets as dynamic bridges between public and private realms, where culture is shared and exchanged.

In the broader context, the discourse surrounding the representation of cultural practices in public spaces continues to evolve, with cultural institutions like meyhanes playing a vital role in shaping this discourse. By providing institutional infrastructure for presenting and accessing cultural products, these spaces contribute to the richness and diversity of urban life.

Meyhanes are not mere drinking establishments but reflections of Istanbul's history, culture, and society. Their enduring presence reminds us that the boundaries of public and private are not fixed but fluid, shaped by the people and the spaces they inhabit. In the heart of Istanbul, meyhanes continue to serve as preservers of tradition and agents of cultural evolution, enriching the city's cultural public space with visibility through streets.

## V. Conclusion



“Güzel bir dünyada yaşamak istiyorsanız  
siz de öyle bir meyhane bulunuz”<sup>98</sup>

-Orhan Veli

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<sup>98</sup> Translation: “If you want to live in a beautiful world, find yourself a meyhane like that.”

## V. I. Broader Implications for Cultural Practices

In the bustling streets of Istanbul, amidst the echoes of centuries-old history and the vibrancy of contemporary life, the meyhane culture stands as a living testament to the power of place-specific, yet transcultural phenomena. As this exploration into the significance of meyhane culture in Istanbul draws to a close, the broader implications of cultural practices that challenge conventional notions of nation-based identities come into focus.

The raki table, with its communal tables as culture carriers, epitomises the idea that culture can be deeply rooted in a specific locale while simultaneously transcending national boundaries. It defies easy categorisation, reminding us that cultures are dynamic, fluid, and adaptable, shaped by the interactions between individuals, spaces, and time. In the heart of Istanbul's meyhanes, we find a culture that is not bound by ethnicity or nationality but thrives as a shared human heritage.

The journey through the raki tables of Istanbul has revealed that meyhanes are more than just establishments for food and drink; they are sanctuaries of shared experiences, conversations, and camaraderie. They exemplify how cultural practices can serve as bridges between individuals, fostering a sense of belonging and unity in a diverse world.

The meyhane culture challenges the traditional boundaries of public and private spaces, emphasising the interconnectedness of physical and social environments. It underscores the idea that culture is not confined to formal institutions or predefined categories but is instead a dynamic force that emerges from the everyday lives of individuals and their interactions with their surroundings.

In the broader context of cultural practices, meyhane culture serves as a poignant reminder of the value of preserving and celebrating unique traditions that enrich our understanding of the world. It encourages to recognise the beauty in the diversity of cultures and the potential for cultural practices to transcend national borders and create bonds of understanding among people from different backgrounds.

The meyhane culture of Istanbul is not an isolated phenomenon but a beacon of hope for a world where cultural practices can be celebrated for their ability to unite, inspire, and transcend the limitations of nation-based identities. It beckons us to embrace the richness of

cultural diversity and to cherish the unique cultural practices that make our world a tapestry of shared human experiences.

The essence of meyhane culture resides in the understanding that the table itself serves as the carrier of this rich cultural tapestry. However, it's essential to recognize that this culture isn't confined solely to the physical locations within a city; rather, it extends beyond geographical boundaries and transcends traditional spatial definitions. It beckons us to explore the intricate web of spatial experiences that meyhane culture weaves across different scales. Through objects, rituals, and the dynamics of social interaction, meyhane culture reflects not only the unique character of specific locales but also the broader interconnectedness of human experiences. This culture underscores the idea that our understanding of space isn't limited to a singular dimension; it can manifest in various scales, forms, and boundaries, highlighting the profound impact of place-specific practices on our collective human identity.





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