



AMERICAN TURKISH
ASSOCIATION OF
WASHINGTON DC

JUNE/JULY 2025

ISSUE 6

ATA-DC

HOUSE

Loading ::

LYDIA BORLAND

**ROOTED IN THREE WORLDS
HER MULTICULTURAL CHILDHOOD**

**TURKISH TEAMS IN SUAS
COMPETITION**

COMMUNITY NEWS AND BEYOND

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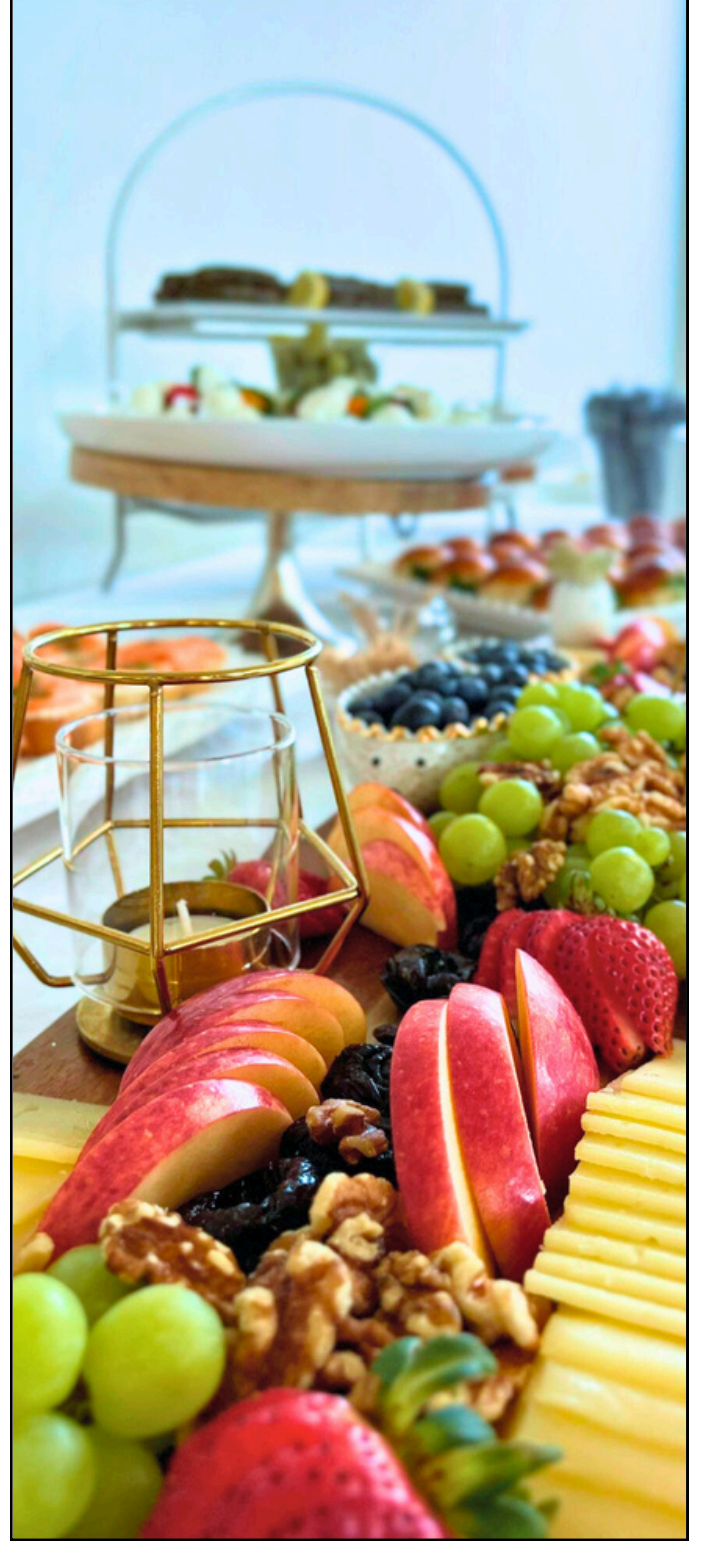
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PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

As we welcome the summer season, I want to take a moment to reflect on what has been an incredibly busy and fulfilling few months for all of us at the American Turkish Association of Washington, DC (ATA-DC). Since our last issue, we've experienced a vibrant season filled with community, celebration, and meaningful progress that continues to strengthen our bonds and our shared mission.

Over the past quarter, we kicked off with a lively 80s-themed fundraiser at the Akkaya residence to support our upcoming Turkish Festival. It was a fun and memorable evening where friends, families, and supporters came together to share laughter, music, and great company—all while rallying behind this important event that highlights our culture and heritage. Soon after, we celebrated the soft opening of our new ATA-DC house. This exciting milestone brought together donors, supporters, and embassy staff to experience the space that will serve as a hub for cultural activities, community programs, and new initiatives. It's a place that symbolizes our growth and dedication to serving you better.

In June, we organized a spirited trip to Hartford, Connecticut, to cheer on the Turkish National Soccer Team in their friendly match against the U.S. This event was a wonderful expression of pride and unity, reminding us how sports and culture can bring communities together. We capped off the quarter with our Father's Day picnic, a joyful occasion filled with laughter, delicious food, and meaningful connections. At the picnic, we announced the results of our Board of Directors election and proudly introduced our new board members. Meanwhile, our board members have continued important congressional outreach, advocating for our community's interests and strengthening our relationships with elected officials.

As summer begins, while we take a short break from hosting events, rest assured that we are working diligently behind the scenes preparing for Turkish Heritage Month in September and our flagship Turkish Festival in October. These celebrations are vital to our mission of sharing and honoring Turkish culture with the broader community, and I'm excited to reconnect with all of you during these vibrant months ahead. I want to express my deepest gratitude to all our members, volunteers, donors, and supporters—your dedication and enthusiasm make everything possible. I hope this summer brings you joy, rest, and time spent with loved ones.

With sincere thanks and warmest wishes,

Sertap Schreffler

PRESIDENT OF ATA-DC



turkish festival

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For the past year, Turkish community played an important role in Value Mortgage's growth story. Through Turkish Festival, we were able to foster a new era of brand awareness and we closed out the year by helping 30+ borrowers to fulfill their dream of home ownership. These numbers were only accomplished in less than 7 months with the help of ATADC and the Turkish community's amazing hands on engagement opportunities. This gave us the upper

hand to deliver a high quality, personalized mortgage solutions to our borrowers. We couldn't have been more pleased to contribute to the Turkish Festival by being one of the main sponsors and looking forward to further our engagement with the Turkish community in the coming days and months. I would like to congratulate ATA-DC's leadership and the festival committee to organize such a fantastic festival.

EMRAH DILSIZOGLU, VALUE MORTGAGE

FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Hello friends and our esteemed readers,

I welcome you all to the July 2025 issue of ATANews!

This edition, like a photograph album filled with moments of joy, effort, and vision, captures a powerful season of renewal for the American Turkish Association of Washington DC.

Our pages this season are brimming with reflections of that spirit. From the heartfelt energy of Father's Day and the YCAP graduation to the dazzling 'Back to the '80s' fundraiser party and the inspiring success stories of Turkish students competing internationally, each feature pulses with commitment and connection. In this edition, we follow the powerful journey of a young gymnast, Defne Geyikçi, who moved from Manisa to Maryland, navigating setbacks with courage and grace. We also step into the thoughtful legacy of Lydia Borland's multicultural background as we explore both her personal and professional life.

What ties these stories together is the idea of home—whether it's a place, a language, a memory, or a dream. This issue reminds us that home is not merely where we are, but what we build together.

As we turn toward Turkish Heritage Month and the 2025 Turkish Festival in the fall, I invite you to carry forward this sense of belonging and purpose. Let's continue growing the legacy of ATA-DC, one story, one handshake, and one shared moment at a time.

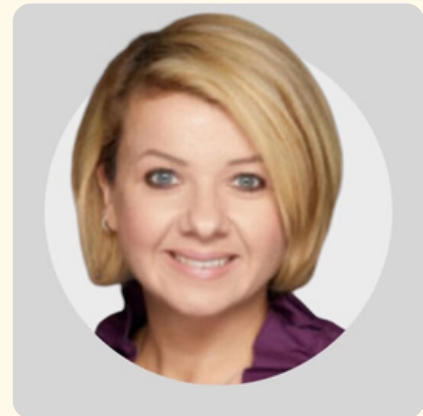
With heartfelt gratitude to every contributor, volunteer, and reader—thank you for being part of this journey.

Warm regards and cheers,

Özge Övrün-Sert

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

ATA-DC SECRETARY GENERAL





The American Turkish Association of Washington DC (ATADC) held its annual Father's Day Picnic and Board Election on Sunday, June 15 at Arlington's Quincy Park, bringing together nearly 100 community members of all ages—from children to grandparents—for a day filled with celebration, connection, and community spirit. The event featured delicious Turkish cuisine, with döner, pilav, and salad generously provided by Akivva Grill, and sweet baklava from Fairfax Bakery. Participants enjoyed the festive atmosphere, good food, and lively conversations, all while honoring the fathers in their lives. ATADC also proudly recognized 31 high school students who completed the Young Cultural Ambassadors Program (YCAP), a leadership initiative that empowers youth with skills in diplomacy, civic engagement, and cultural awareness.

A key highlight of the day was the announcement of ATADC's Board Election results. President Sevtap Schreffler congratulated all the candidates who ran for board positions and encouraged continued community involvement and volunteerism. In recognition of outstanding dedication to the American Turkish community, two board members—Özge Övün Sert and Elvan Ramazanoğulları—received the Excellence in Community Service Award for their exceptional contributions. ATA-DC extends heartfelt thanks to everyone who participated and supported the event. The picnic was a heartwarming success, made even more special by the community's shared celebration of Father's Day.

ATA-DC'S FATHER'S DAY PICNIC AND ELECTION

The American Turkish Association of Washington DC (ATA-DC) is proud to announce the newly elected Board of Directors for the 2025 term, following the results of this year's election.

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Koray Kukrer – Vice President

Özge Övün-Sert – Secretary General

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“PLEASE JOIN US IN CONGRATULATING THE NEW ATA-DC BOARD OF DIRECTORS. WITH THIS INCREDIBLE TEAM OF COMMUNITY LEADERS AND CULTURE BUILDERS, WE’RE EXCITED TO CONTINUE STRENGTHENING TURKISH-AMERICAN TIES AND EXPANDING OUR IMPACT ACROSS THE DMV AND BEYOND.”

SEVTAP SCHREFFLER, PRESIDENT OF ATA-DC



FESTIVAL FUNDRAISER PARTY: BACK TO THE '80S NOSTALGIA

Each spring and fall, ATA-DC's annual fundraising events—graciously hosted at members' homes—stand out as some of the most cherished gatherings of the year. They offer more than just a fundraising opportunity: they bring our community together in celebration, friendship, and shared joy.

This year's Spring Fundraiser transported us straight to the vibrant spirit of the 1980s, thanks to our generous hosts and board members, Özlem and Hüseyin Akkaya, who welcomed nearly 50 guests into their beautiful home. With the theme "Back to the '80s," the evening was a heartfelt and playful journey through time—reconnecting many of us with our youth, and others with cherished childhood memories.

The house came alive with neon colors, tidy trousers, oversized earrings, and the unforgettable beats of the '80s, curated by Büşra Kayı Tarhan. Iconic Turkish pop classics from Sezen Aksu, Nilüfer, Tarkan and Mustafa Sandal filled the air, setting the tone for a magical night.

As always, the culinary spread—lovingly prepared by board members and members of our ever-supportive community—was met with great enthusiasm. A surprise treat came from Deha and Gizem of Universal Deha Academy, who brought an extra layer of fun by painting guests' faces with whimsical patterns and leading an energetic Zumba session that had everyone on their feet.



One of the night's highlights was the Best Dressed Contest, where our guests dazzled in their throwback attire. In a well-earned and cheerful twist, our very own hosts, Özlem and Hüseyin Akkaya, were crowned the winners!

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Akkaya family for opening their home and hearts to us. We're also deeply thankful to our sponsors—Meze, Agora, Bistro Cocoa, Smyrna, Waldorf Astoria Washington DC, and Melrose Georgetown Hotel—for their generous contributions to the evening's raffle and auction.

All proceeds from the event will go toward this year's Turkish Festival—a celebration that wouldn't be possible without your unwavering support.





TÜRKİYE-USA SOCCER GAME IN HARTFORD, CONNECTICUT



Over 40 ATA-DC members and friends made the trip to East Hartford, Connecticut on Saturday, June 7, 2025 to cheer on the U.S. and Turkish Men's National Soccer Teams for an international Friendly match in front of a sold-out Pratt & Whitney Stadium crowd. The long bus ride and the pouring rain did nothing to dampen our spirits – and some even controversially claimed that this made the experience more memorable – as young and old together enjoyed an unforgettable day singing along to Turkish songs and cheering on the players. While the United States started the game fast, with Jack McGlynn scoring in the first minute, Türkiye responded with two goals of its own scored by Arda Guler and Kerem Akrotroglu in the 24' and 27' minute, respectively. The game ultimately ended 2-1 and fans left satisfied having watched an enjoyable game that exemplified sportsmanship and competition between the two countries. This was the 5th time the U.S. and Türkiye have played an international soccer match, with each team recording 2 wins, 2 losses, and 1 draw.

In sum – the experience left many asking: “maybe it’s time Fenerbahce, Galatasaray, Besiktas or Trabzonspor came to visit!!”

TURKISH DAY PARADE AND GALA LIGHT UP IN NEW YORK

The Federation of Turkish American Associations (TADF) once again brought vibrant culture and community spirit to New York City with its annual Turkish Day Parade and Gala – a cherished tradition now in its 42nd year.

The celebration began on Friday, May 16, 2025, with a Gala at the Chart House, offering stunning skyline views and marking the 106th anniversary of May 19 – Commemoration of Atatürk, Youth and Sports Day – in a night filled with pride and unity.

On Saturday, May 17, thousands joined the Turkish Day Parade, marching from Madison Avenue and 38th Street to Madison Square Park. The city's streets were filled with red and white as the Turkish American community came together in celebration. The event concluded with unforgettable performances by Burak Kut, Çelik, Selma Geçer, and Pınar Ayhan, along with dazzling shows by Anadolu Ateşi, the Mehteran Band, and Caucasian Folk Dancers.

ATADC board members proudly joined the festivities, honoring a legacy of independence and cultural pride that continues to unite generations of Turkish Americans.



U.S. AMBASSADOR TOM BARRACK HONORS ATATÜRK AT ANITKABIR

On June 3rd, U.S. Ambassador to Türkiye Tom Barrack paid a solemn visit to Anıtkabir, the mausoleum of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. As part of the official visit, Ambassador Barrack signed the Anıtkabir Visitors' Book, leaving behind a gracious tribute that resonated with the enduring legacy of Atatürk and the shared values between the United States and Türkiye.

In his message, Ambassador Barrack wrote, *"Throughout the centuries many great men's dreams have remained a vision. However, destiny brought us you which made a dream embraced by an entire country a reality."* Referring to himself as "a distant son of your Republic," Barrack's words reflected a deep admiration for Atatürk's transformative leadership. His visit served not only as a diplomatic gesture but also as a powerful moment of respect and kinship, underscoring the lasting influence of Republic's ideals beyond Turkish borders.



CELEBRATORY SPRING CONCERT BY MOSAIC CHORUS

On April 26, the Mosaic Folk Music Choir held a vibrant concert at Gunston Arts Center in Arlington. The performance, titled "Folk Songs from Seven Regions in One Breath," featured traditional melodies from Türkiye, showcasing the country's rich musical heritage. The event drew a full house of music lovers who enjoyed an evening of heartfelt performances. Under the direction of conductor Barış Demir, the choir brought the songs to life—Demir himself energized the audience with his dynamic bağlama. In attendance were not only members of the Turkish-American community from the DMV area, but also representatives from local associations.



DMV TURKISH MUSIC ENSEMBLE MESMERIZED AUDIENCE



The DMV Turkish Music Ensemble captivated audiences with their "Barış Manço Songs from 7 to 77" concert. This marked their fourth concert within a year, and tickets sold out a month in advance, leading to a packed hall and rave reviews from attendees. Under the direction of Chief Tuna Yıldız, the Ensemble, comprising an 11-member professional musician team, 24 choristers, a 6-person technical crew, and a 12-person volunteer team, achieved another significant success. The audience enthusiastically sang along to Barış Manço's unforgettable songs. The concert, attended by the Turkish Embassy and other key organizations like ATADC, DMV Turks, and DMV Kadınları, offered an unforgettable experience.

WHOLESALE CABINET OPENED ITS FIRST LOCATION IN MANASSAS

Wholesale Cabinet Creations celebrated its grand opening with an event that brought together friends, supporters, and partners from across the region. Specializing in kitchen and bath renovations, the business is co-owned by Aykut Culcuglu and Firat Ozturk, who proudly welcomed guests into their newly launched showroom.



In addition to kitchens and baths, Wholesale Cabinet Creations offers full-scale home and office renovations, delivering custom solutions that blend quality craftsmanship with modern design. The company has already made a strong impression in the community, notably completing the recent renovation of the ATA-DC House.



KIRMIZI MIKROFON'S "ÖZLENEN ŞARKILAR" CONCERT IN MCLEAN

Kırmızı Mikrofon's concert in McLean, VA drew a packed audience eager to enjoy an unforgettable evening filled with heartfelt music. The theme of the concert, Özlenen Sarkilar—"Beloved Songs" deeply resonated with the audience, winning their hearts and creating a truly memorable experience. The event united our youngest to oldest community members, all brought together by a shared love for music and a strong commitment to making a difference. All proceeds from the concert were dedicated to establishing music rooms equipped with instruments in earthquake-affected regions of Türkiye. This initiative aims to provide children and communities with spaces to heal, express themselves, and find hope through the power of music. The night was a beautiful celebration of culture, compassion, and community spirit, leaving a lasting impact on everyone involved.



A MUSICAL EVENING AT TURKISH AMBASSADOR'S RESIDENCE



Ambassador Sedat Önal and his wife, Figen Önal, hosted a warm and elegant evening to welcome world-renowned tenor Murat Karahan, ahead of his performance at the Lincoln Memorial. Guests from the diplomatic, cultural, and artistic communities gathered to enjoy Turkish hospitality and cuisine. As a special highlight, Murat Karahan performed one song, captivating the audience with his powerful voice. The evening ended with lively conversation and photos, making it a memorable night in Washington, D.C. Distinguished guests included the Ambassadors of Latvia and Austria, Italian conductor Alvis Casellati, and CMS Administrator Dr. Mehmet Oz with his wife, Lisa Oz. ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler was honored to attend and take part in the celebration of Turkish music, culture, and friendship.

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A DREAM REALIZED: ATA-DC OPENS THE DOORS TO ITS LONG-AWAITED HOME



MARKING A MILESTONE IN **ITS 60TH YEAR**, ATA-DC UNVEILS ITS FIRST **PERMANENT HOME**, SET TO BECOME A CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL ANCHOR FOR THE TURKISH-AMERICAN COMMUNITY

BY GAMZE ÇAKMAK



On Thursday, June 5 2025, the American Turkish Association of Washington DC (ATA-DC) marked a milestone in its storied history. Celebrating its 60th anniversary this year, ATA-DC proudly hosted the soft opening of its very own home—bringing to life a dream that has lived in the hearts of generations. Though renovations are still ongoing, the majority of the work has been completed—thanks to the dedication of Wholesale Cabinet Creations and Firat Ozturk, who executed a beautiful and timely transformation of the

space. ATA-DC Board of Directors, thrilled to share this achievement with the community, decided not to wait any longer and opened the doors for a joyful evening filled with connection and celebration. Over 70 guests of all ages gathered for the occasion, along with ATA-DC board members and longtime community supporters. The evening featured a cocktail-style reception. Chef Aynur prepared a delightful array of appetizers and light bites, with contributions from both board members and members of the community.

ATA-DC Board of Directors welcomed distinguished guests from the Embassy of Türkiye, Mr. Murat Uğurluoğlu, Deputy Chief of Mission; Mr. Fırat Sırma, Counselor at the Turkish Embassy; and Ms. Damla Güçlü, Representative of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in Washington, DC.

Mr. Uğurluoğlu and Mr. Sırma delivered thoughtful remarks, highlighting the importance of unity, cultural heritage, and the strength of the Turkish-American community. Both of them expressed their appreciation for witnessing such a vibrant and connected diaspora in the Washington, DC area, and emphasized that mutual support and cooperation between the Embassy and ATA-DC will be essential in carrying this momentum into the future. Former president and current supporter Engin Holmstrom, as well as ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler, gave heartfelt speeches that reflected on the association's history and its hopeful future—and respectfully honoring the association's founders, whose vision laid the foundation for this historic step. President Schreffler extended sincere thanks to the generous sponsors and donors who helped bring this vision to life. Notably, Tuna Yıldız of Beltway Glazing and Deniz Bidav of Stone Solutions contributed critical materials—flooring, glass doors, dividers, and wall mirrors—at no cost.



Guests toured the new space, which is centrally located with ample parking and accessible transit. Plans are underway to make the building a thriving hub for events, cultural programs, and educational activities. Of particular note is the vision to relocate the existing Atatürk School—currently held at McLean High School—to the new facility once the academic year begins. Four dedicated classrooms are being designed specifically for students, and renovations will continue throughout the summer to make this a reality.

Behind this joyful celebration lies a story of perseverance. After months of research, planning, and overcoming logistical and financial hurdles, the current Board of Directors succeeded in turning vision into reality. One especially meaningful surprise of the evening came when Ms. Dilek Barlas generously donated \$5,000 toward the ongoing kitchen renovations. While the space is not intended for large-scale food preparation, the kitchen will serve as a functional and essential part of ATA-DC's event and program planning.

ATA-DC President Sevtap Schreffler said “While much has been accomplished, we are not quite finished. We are now turning our attention to furnishing the new home and, most importantly, creating warm, welcoming classrooms for the children of our Atatürk School”. To help raise these final funds, ATA-DC is offering the community members a unique opportunity: dedications on copper plates mounted to the back of each classroom chair. With about 40 chairs remaining, supporters can sponsor one for \$250 or two for \$400. ■

If you are interested in reserving a plaque, please contact at info@atadc.org.





LYDIA BORLAND

***Born in Istanbul,
Raised in Izmir,
Rooted in Three Worlds:***

***Lydia Borland Reflects
on a Multicultural
Childhood in Türkiye***



BY ÖZGE ÖVÜN SERT

In an era when cultural bridges are more vital than ever, Lydia Borland's story offers a profound reflection on what it means to belong to more than one place, one language, and one people. Born in İstanbul and raised in İzmir by an American family, Lydia grew up immersed in a uniquely cross-cultural environment—where Italian, English, and Turkish coexisted at the kitchen table, and where identity was shaped as much by the streets of Alsancak as by summer voyages to North Carolina.

In this exclusive interview with ATANews Editor-in-Chief Özge Övün Sert, Lydia Borland shares her deeply personal journey—one that has taken her from childhood in Türkiye to a distinguished career in Washington, where she has become a

respected voice in Turkish-American relations. Through her reflections on family heritage, memory, and civic engagement, Lydia speaks to the heart of the Turkish-American experience: balancing heritage with responsibility, and carrying forward a legacy of connection, dialogue, and shared values across borders.

You grew up in Türkiye as part of an American family. Can you share what that experience was like, and how it shaped your identity and worldview?

My mom was Italian and my dad was from North Carolina. I was born in Istanbul and lived in Samsun until I was 3 years old when we moved to Izmir because there was a school run by

the Department of Defense which we could attend. My father was a civilian working as a tobacco expert at the American Tobacco Company, but US citizens could attend the school which was a converted tobacco warehouse if they paid tuition.

My classmates were mostly the children of US military personnel who served a minimum of two years in NATO related assignments. Most families moved after two years, some liked it and extended, but most didn't. There were also some civilians working in positions related to the NATO command. At home we spoke Italian with my mom because my grandmother who spoke 5 languages but somehow could never learn English lived with us. My dad spoke English with us, and of course school was in English. I didn't take even one class in Turkish because it wasn't available except for a very rudimentary "host nation" language class. The only Turkish I heard at home was with Kamile, a Roman who was illiterate but very kind and considered a part of the family.

Remember this was the early 1960s, so there was no TV. We really didn't listen to Turkish radio. My dad listened to VOA, and that's how we found out what is going on in the United States. My mom was afraid to fly so we would take ships to come to the US every two years. It would take us a month to get here, with ships stopping at different ports, and a month to get back. After landing in NYC we took a train to Reidsville, NC where all five of us piled into my grandmother's two bedroom one bath tiny house. She slept with a handgun under her pillow, and I don't think she ever traveled far from North Carolina. I remember some people walking barefoot around Reidsville. Imagine how different it was from Izmir, but it all seemed so normal.



From the pampered life in Izmir, with luxurious cruises, to the struggles of Reidsville—these experiences must have shaped my worldview without me even realizing it

How did you come to speak Turkish so fluently that even native speakers are surprised by your lack of an accent?

The only Turkish I heard at home as I mentioned is with Kamile the house cleaner, but when we used to play on the street with the neighborhood kids, they would correct my Turkish and say things like "haa denmez, efendim denir." They were appalled that I sounded like a "kadifekale sosyetesı" and took it upon themselves to correct my Turkish. The Yeni Asir newspaper was delivered daily and I would sit at the kitchen table, underline and write down words I didn't know, then look them up and memorize them. When headlines read "Deniz Gezmis" I would look out the window at the sea in Alsancak, Izmir and try to figure out how the sea was going for a ride. It was only after the headlines said "Deniz Gezmis Asıldı", did I understand that Deniz Gezmis was a person. I love using Turkish adages when I speak, which delights people and brings a nice smile to their faces. One of my favorites is

“Tencere yuvarlanmış, kapağını bulmuş” meaning “the pot rolled around and found its lid” to identify a couple. At a young age I figured out if I spoke one language and the person didn’t understand, I would switch to another until they understood. I was always interested in languages, and even tried to teach myself French with the book that my grandmother used to study English.

What are some of your most cherished memories from your time living in Türkiye?

Growing up in Izmir and attending church in Italian, listening to my mom speaking French with her Italian friends in an Italian accent, attending school in English as if we were on a DoD base in the United States, and socializing with my Turkish friends was my reality and each day was filled with memories. It seemed very normal to me, and something I will always cherish. My Turkish friends were kind and inclusive, while I somehow didn’t fit in that well with the families of the military kids. I felt awkward. My mom dressed me with clothes she sewed, and somehow to them being multi-lingual was strange. So I was painfully shy which no one believes, but we had a great childhood, playing on the street until my mom got on the balcony of the 5th floor of the Gündoğdu neighborhood



in İzmir and screamed “Christine/Clay/Lydia”, and no matter where we were, whose house we were, someone would come and say “Lydia, annen çağırıyor.” As I grew older I gained in confidence and shed my shyness, asserted my uniqueness, which forced my classmates to accept my differences and recognize them as a strength. My fondest memories are going to gorgeous beaches in Cesme, Kusadasi and Foca to name a few, which were pristine and not very commercial at the time, and enjoying the sun and sand with the crystal clear waters. I did have some sort of identity issues, questioning my identity but then embraced the different influences and recognized them as an asset. My graduation ceremony was in the ancient theater at Ephesus, and since I was class President, I delivered a speech without a microphone, as I recall. I realized later just how fortunate I have been. Although I live in Washington, I maintain my connection with my childhood friends, including those who corrected my Turkish, and when we get together, it is as if time never separated us.

In what ways do you feel personally connected to Türkiye today – culturally, emotionally, spiritually?

Most Americans think I’m Turkish, but I don’t have Turkish citizenship. We lived in Türkiye with living permits due to my father’s job. Yet I feel like a chameleon, able to fit into different cultures. I am able to adopt aspects of all different cultures I like and repel the aspects that do not fit my personality. Yet I am very much connected to Türkiye, having absorbed aspects of the culture such as offering drinks to guests and sharing. I follow news in Turkish, which keeps me up to date regarding developments in Türkiye and the region. It gives me the insight to see that the same development can be covered and told differently by the media in each country.



I travel often to Istanbul and Izmir which also keeps me connected. In addition, my daughter learned Turkish in college and is currently living in Istanbul which is of course a strong connection. She loves the culture and proximity to other countries she would like to visit.

You've built a distinguished career in lobbying and political consulting, focused on Turkish-US relations. What drew you to this field initially?

I never aspired to enter the government relations field, I wasn't even particularly aware that it existed. After studying international relations at George Washington University, I struggled trying to identify the ideal profession for me that would converge my personal interests and skills. If you believe in "kismet" I sat next to a person on an airplane who later told me about an entry level position at a company created to lobby for the Turkish Embassy. Someone else was supposed to sit next to me, but they got bumped off the flight. Although I was rejected after I sent in my resume, my reaction was "who are these idiots turning me down." I called and showed up anyway, even though I didn't have Hill experience or a master's degree—the two prerequisites at the time. I wasn't the ideal candidate on paper, but in practice, I was the only person retained after five years when the company lost the contract.

What do you think Americans most misunderstand about Türkiye, and vice versa?

It is very difficult to generalize but I am often astounded when Turks are certain that the U.S. is behind almost everything that happens in Türkiye, as if there are people deep inside the White House plotting to affect what happens in Türkiye. On the flip side, the average American doesn't know much about Türkiye, except that more Americans have traveled to Türkiye in the last 5-10 years, which helps in educating people. One of the biggest misconceptions may be that somehow Türkiye is dangerous. When they warn me about traveling to Türkiye, my response is always that it's much safer than New York City.

You've often emphasized the importance of political participation for the Turkish-American community. What does "civic engagement" mean to you, in practical terms?

In practical terms, civic engagement is actively participating in the life of your community and in democratic processes to



help shape society. It's about being an involved and responsible member of a community—not just through voting, but also contacting elected officials, attending town hall meetings or public hearings, volunteering for a campaign, nonprofits, food banks or running for local office.

What are the most effective ways the Turkish diaspora in the U.S. can become more politically and socially active?

Many in the Turkish diaspora spend more time following developments in Türkiye than what is happening in the United States where they live. Others are intimidated by the process. However, I tell everyone, elected officials are just like the rest of us. There is no reason to be intimidated. Also, because constituents vote for them directly, they are very responsive to constituents—those that have the ability to vote for them. Every constituent should be active in the local and/or federal level, depending on their interests. There are several ways in which one can be involved. Volunteering on campaigns. Attending town hall meetings and asking questions. Meet with the Member of Congress or congressional staff with a group of Turkish Americans, follow up with congressional staff. Attending local fundraisers is another way. The key is to develop relationships and be consistent. ■



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WINGS OF DETERMINATION: TURKISH TEAMS SOAR AT THE INTERNATIONAL SUAS COMPETITION

BY SEVTAP SCHREFFLER

This year, Türkiye's presence soared to new heights at the prestigious STEM competition Student Unmanned Aerial Systems (SUAS) held in Maryland. Among the standout participants were several impressive teams from Türkiye, including university-level teams from ITU and Hacettepe University, showcasing the country's growing expertise in unmanned aerial systems on a global stage.

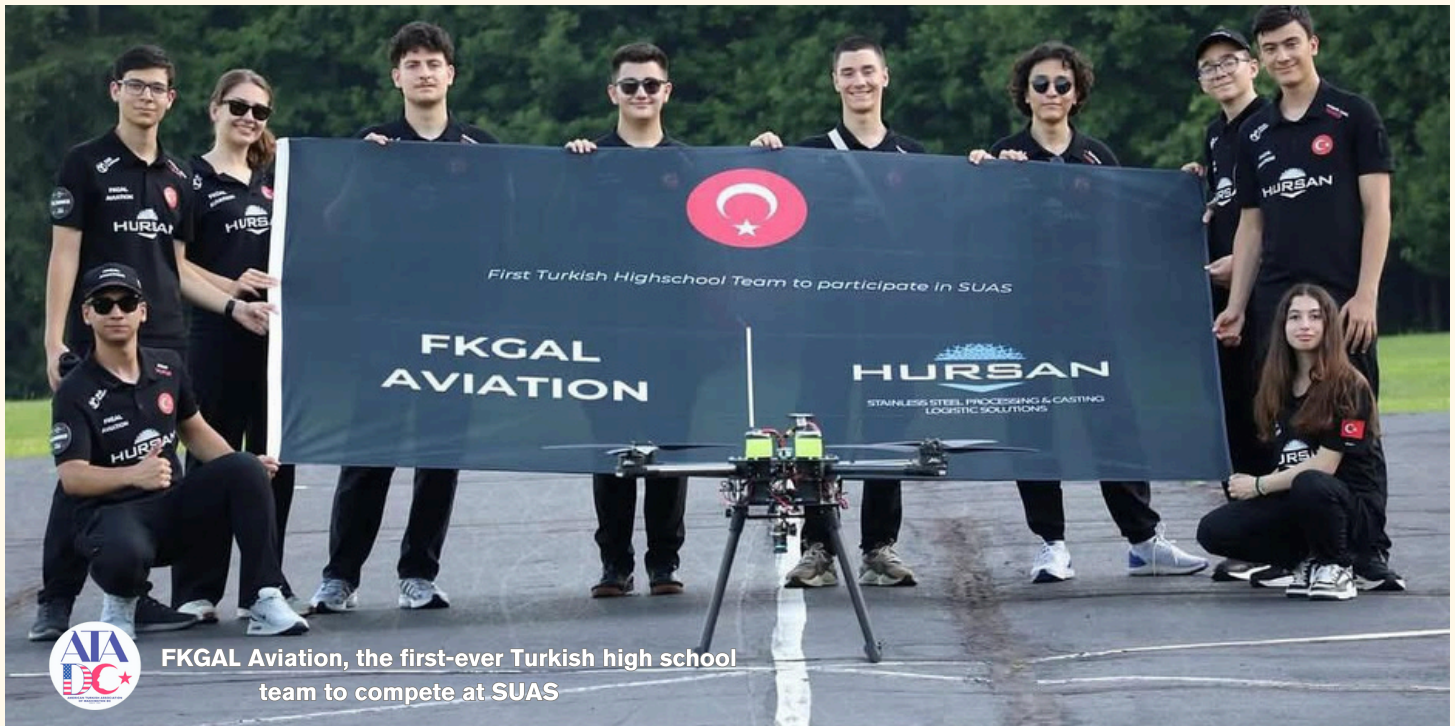
ATANews had the pleasure of speaking with two teams whose stories especially stood out: the ATLAS UAV Team from Istanbul, Kocaeli and Cerrahpaşa Universities, and FKGAL Aviation, the first-ever Turkish high school team to compete at SUAS. These teams represent both the deepening experience and the rising potential of Turkish youth in STEM.

Founded in 2018 under the University's IEEE club, ATLAS UAV team has emerged as one of Türkiye's leading student teams

in UAV development. Since 2022, they have represented Türkiye at SUAS with steadily rising global rankings—placing 20th, then 8th, and most recently, 5th. This year, although the team was unable to rank due to unforeseen events, they were widely recognized for their exemplary sportsmanship throughout the competition. Team captain İlçay Gözler shared insights into their journey and unwavering dedication.

Meanwhile, FKGAL Aviation—formed just two years ago by students at Fahreddin Kerim Gökay Anatolian High School in Istanbul—made history as Türkiye's first high school team, and the only non-U.S. high school team, to ever compete in SUAS.

Their determination and innovation earned them 6th place overall, 1st place among high school teams, and a special award, drawing widespread attention and setting a powerful example for aspiring young engineer.



FKGAL Aviation, the first-ever Turkish high school team to compete at SUAS

Can you introduce your teams and share what inspired you to take on the challenge of participating in SUAS?

ATLAS UAV Team (İlkay Gözler):

My name is İlkay Gözler, and I am a senior student in the Electrical and Electronics Engineering Department at Istanbul University-Cerrahpaşa. I've been part of the ATLAS UAV Team for three years and currently serve as the team's general captain. ATLAS was founded in 2018 by students passionate about UAV technology. Since then, we've competed in TEKNOFEST and Combat UAV competitions, achieving significant rankings, and have proudly represented Türkiye at SUAS since 2022.

FKGAL Aviation Team (Mert Tayfur):

My name is Mert Tayfur. We are a student-led team from Fahreddin Kerim Gökay Anatolian High School in Istanbul. FKGAL Aviation began in 2022, initially as a club hosting events and talks. By 2023, we had established a workshop and started developing our own UAVs. Seeing Türkiye's advancements in aerospace inspired us to compete internationally and proudly represent our country—even as high schoolers.

How did you prepare for SUAS, and how are your teams structured? Did you design your UAVs from scratch?

ATLAS UAV Team:

We plan everything meticulously with a GANTT chart, covering R&D, production, testing, and improvements. Our motivation stems from representing Türkiye abroad. Our UAVs are entirely original—both hardware and software are designed in-house.

FKGAL Aviation Team:

Our team includes 10 students and 2 mentors. We divided into PR, software, electronics, and mechanics. The aircraft body was designed and manufactured by us using carbon fiber. We trained our own AI system and used Cube Orange as our flight controller.

What type of support have you received, and what challenges have you faced in making this journey possible?

ATLAS UAV Team:

Our biggest challenge is funding, especially for international travel and sourcing UAV components. Some needed parts aren't even available in Türkiye, and importing them can be nearly impossible due to customs regulations. We're always



seeking institutional and financial support.

FKGAL Aviation Team:

We faced similar budgetary constraints. Our main sponsor was HURSAN Logistics, with material support from ORSAV. We also received help from T3 Foundation, Bull Technology, and others. We worked hard to professionally present our project and secure support through meetings and proposals.

What impact has representing Türkiye at SUAS had on your teams? What are the key lessons you've taken away?

ATLAS UAV Team:

It's been a tremendous source of pride. Even though costs were difficult, competing alongside global teams has taught us to persevere and innovate. Observing new technologies encouraged us to think differently and improve year by year—from 20th place in our first year to 5th place last year.



FKGAL Aviation Team:

This experience gave us a deep sense of global awareness and responsibility. Time and budget constraints tested us, but we developed strong problem-solving skills and grew more confident. It has changed how we see the world and our own potential.

What skills have you developed as a result of this experience –both technically and personally?

ATLAS UAV Team:

We've improved in engineering, software development, electronics, and project management. But more than that, we've learned about teamwork, resilience, and staying motivated despite setbacks.

FKGAL Aviation:

On the technical side, we learned a lot about AI, software, and CAD. Personally, we've grown in areas like crisis management, communication, and collaboration. Working together as high school students taught us how valuable unity and trust can be.

How are you thinking about the future—both as teams and as individuals?

ATLAS UAV Team:

In five years, we hope to evolve into a company and expand into the broader aviation industry. We believe Türkiye must stay ahead of evolving tech to maintain its UAV leadership—and we want to be part of that mission by always learning and innovating.

FKGAL Aviation Team:

Most of us want to pursue careers in aerospace, electrical engineering, or international relations. This project helped us clarify our goals, and we're excited about what comes next. This is just the beginning for us.

Finally, what advice would you give to other students in Türkiye or around the world who want to pursue big dreams?

ATLAS UAV Team:

It's not just about winning—it's about learning, producing, and growing together. Challenges will come, but as long as you move forward with hope and determination, success will follow. As Atatürk said, "All my hope is in the youth." Let's work together for a brighter future.

FKGAL Aviation Team:

Never stop dreaming. Even if you start from scratch like we did, your goals are achievable with persistence and teamwork. International competitions aren't out of reach—they're within grasp if you truly commit.

These two teams—one from a university, the other from a high school—have proven that Türkiye's youth are not only ready to compete globally but are already shaping the future of UAV innovation. Their journeys, though different in age and experience, reflect the same values: curiosity, resilience, and national pride.■



Atlas UAV Team for Istanbul-Cerrahpasa University and Kılavuz Sarsılmaz Team for Koceli University



STARLINE SHADES

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MY JOURNEY IN GYMNASTICS: FROM MANISA TO MARYLAND



BY DEFNE GEYİKÇİ

I was born on July 1st, 2008, in Manisa, Türkiye. My gymnastics journey began when I was just 3 years old—not because I dreamed of flipping and jumping, but because I had asthma. My doctor recommended gymnastics to help with my breathing, and it worked. What started as therapy soon became a passion, and I stuck with aerobic gymnastics for ten years. One of the highlights of my early career was representing Türkiye at the Plovdiv Cup in Bulgaria. Competing internationally at a very young age gave me unforgettable memories and fueled my dedication.

But in 2020, life threw a few curveballs. The pandemic forced everything to shut down, including our training. Then, in 2021, I had to shift focus to prepare for the LGS exam—an important test that determines high school placement in Türkiye. With everything going on, I had to pause gymnastics.

In 2022, everything changed again: my family moved to the United States. It was a huge adjustment—new country, new language, new school. One thing that helped was joining the Young Cultural Ambassador Program (YCAP) through ATADC. It gave me a sense of belonging when I needed it most. On my first day of school, a fellow Turkish student helped me find my way, and I discovered that I had two Turkish classmates. As I got more comfortable, I realized there were many Turkish students at school—but no club or group to connect us. So, I founded a Turkish Student Association to bring us together. That same year, I was selected as the U.S. representative for the Stream It Up 3 (SIU-3) program. It's a Türkiye-based STEM initiative supported by the U.S. Embassy in Türkiye. Being part of SIU-3 meant attending lectures by professors, working on group projects, and learning new skills. It broadened my interests and strengthened my STEM knowledge.



Even though I joined school gymnastics and later cheerleading, I still missed aerobic gymnastics deeply. After searching everywhere, we found only two gyms in the U.S. that offered it—one in California and one in Virginia. California wasn't realistic since we live in Maryland, so Virginia became our only option.

I was nervous. The Virginia gym was home to the U.S. National Team, and I hadn't trained seriously in over three years. I doubted myself, but I didn't want to give up the one sport I truly loved. I took a leap and went to a trial class—and kept going back. A year later, I had regained most of my skills. In November, I traveled to Panama to compete—not as part of the U.S. National Team (I'm not a citizen yet), but as the only American gymnast in the Open Cup. Getting there was hard. I didn't have a travel permit because I was still waiting on my green card. Thanks to help from FIGA, I was able to get special permission.

Unfortunately, the day before the competition, I sprained my ankle during practice. I still chose to compete, but during my routine, I landed badly, reinjured the ankle, and fell. My score was lower than I hoped, and I didn't place. It was heartbreaking—but I learned from it. Now, I'm focused on preparing for the Pan American competition in Uruguay this September. No matter what happens, I'm proud of how far I've come—from a small town in Türkiye to competing on an international stage again. ■



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BY SELÇUK OFLAZ / DEMET CABBAR

ATATÜRK SCHOOL'S 1ST SEMESTER FILLED WITH JOY AND EXCITEMENT

We're thrilled to announce the successful completion of 2024-2025 Academic year at ATA-DC Ataturk School! On May 4, 2025, we celebrated the achievements of 40 students as they received their certificates.

Prior to the end of the year, we joyfully commemorated the 23rd April Turkish National Sovereignty and Children's Day on April 27, 2025. Our students showcased their talents through group performances, highlighting the significance of Turkish sovereignty. As we bid farewell to our current location at McLean High School, we're excited to share that starting next year ATA-DC Ataturk School will operate from ATA-DC House in Falls Church, VA.

While school administrators are currently working on preparations, online school registration will be open to public by August. We're looking forward to an exciting new chapter at ATA-DC Ataturk School! Stay in tune with the updates and achool calendar at www.atadc.org/school



ATA-DC YOUNG CULTURAL AMBASSADOR PROGRAM CONCLUDES 2024–2025 ACADEMIC YEAR WITH 31 GRADUATES

The American Turkish Association of Washington, DC (ATA-DC) proudly closes its 2024–2025 Young Cultural Ambassadors Program (YCAP), held for high school students from the DMV region. This year, 31 students successfully completed the program and received their certificates. This year's YCAP has once again upheld its mission—31 out of 37 students who started the program in the Fall of 2024 completed a transformative journey of cross-cultural dialogue, leadership, and community service.

A Year of Learning, Service, and Dialogue

Between October 2024 and June 2025, this hybrid program combined volunteerism, expert-led sessions, cultural events, and leadership development:

- Oct 15 – Virtual orientation (mandatory)
- Oct 20 – Volunteering kickoff at the DC Turkish Festival
- Nov 6 – Why a Career in Public Service? with Aycha Sawa, CFO of Milwaukee Public Schools
- Nov 10 – The Importance of Civic Engagement with Lydia Borland, LB Associates
- Nov 10 – Atatürk Remembrance Event
- Nov 25 – “It is neyhom, not turkey” Thanksgiving special with Demet Cabbar
- Dec 2 – Breaking Barriers: from Immigrant to Public Service, A conversation with Zuraya Tapia-Hadley, Member of Arlington School Board
- Dec 10 – YCAP alumni share their experiences and insights
- Dec 15 – In-person mixer at the new ATA-DC House
- Jan 9 – Turkish-American Relations: A Historical Perspective with Lincoln McCurdy & Sibel Mehmed
- Feb 6 – A Leadership Conversation with Alexandria City Mayor Gaskins
- Feb 25 – Being a Turkish Diplomat with Firat Sirma, Counselor at the Turkish Embassy
- Mar 26 – Entrepreneurship 101 with Guclu Özenci, Managing Director of Founders Institute
- Apr 16 – Türkiye and State of World Affairs by Dr. Dimitris Tsarouhas, Affiliate Faculty at Virginia Tech & Adjunct Prof at Georgetown University
- May 30 – Visit to the Turkish Embassy and a Diplomacy Conversation with Deputy Ambassador Murat Ugurluoglu
- May 27–Jun 10 – Group project presentations
- Jun 15 – Graduation ceremony at ATA-DC Father's Day and Election picnic



YCAP students visiting the Embassy of Türkiye

As part of program requirements, students worked in small teams to develop and present social responsibility or community projects, applying their learning in real-world contexts.

Celebrating Success

During the June 15 Father's Day picnic at Quincy Park in Arlington, the 31 graduating ambassadors received their certificates among family, friends, mentors, and peers. The event celebrated not only their efforts and cultural growth but also featured several YCAP graduates who were accepted into their universities of choice, showcasing the program's long-term impact. Some of the YCAs found internships with offices of Mayor Gaskin, and Loudon County Congressman Suhas Subramanyam, as well as opportunities with other Turkish or American leaders on interesting research projects.

What's Next?

The 2024–2025 cycle may have concluded, but ATA-DC is already preparing for the next year. Applications for the 2025–2026 YCAP will open in September 2025, and are open to high school students from the DMV region. Interested students should keep an eye on ATA-DC's website and communication channels for updates at www.atadc.org/ycap



THE FIRST INDEPENDENCE CAKE RECIPE FROM 1796 BY AMELIA SIMMONS

BY DENİZ ORHUN

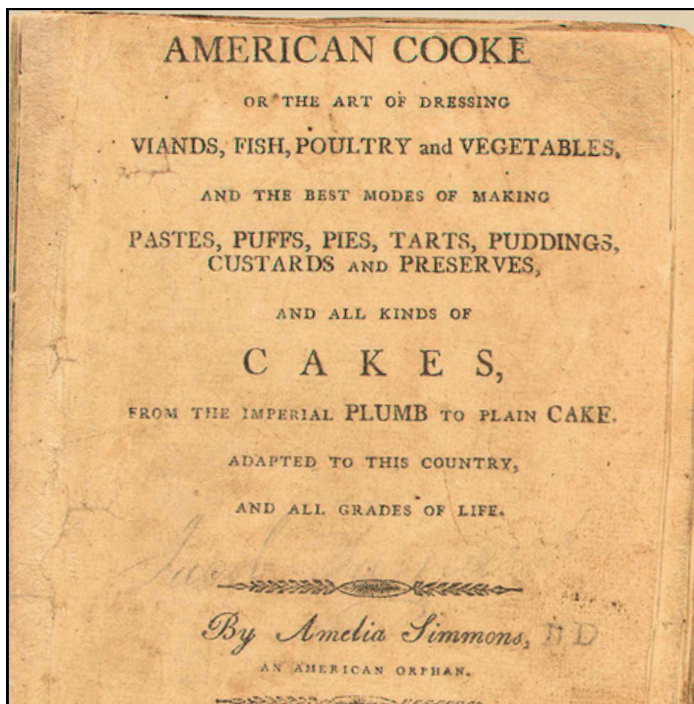
I love all seasons, each of them has its own special gifts for us. Summertime is especially special to me, because it has turning point dates for both countries: July 4th for the US, August 30th for Türkiye. “Independence”.

Just like nations, there are time periods in history when kitchens are born, liberated, and developed. When you plant a seed in the heart of your kitchen skills, in times of need, you harvest the seed for your victory. I call it “culture”. Whatever you plant today, with your knowledge, those in the future will be inspired by the seed you planted in times of need. With this in mind, I came across the recipe for the first Independence Cake ever made and presented to President George Washington in 1789, while searching for cultural cooking methods.

This search led me to discover extraordinary recipes when diving into American cuisine. Among these early influences, one cookbook stands out: the first American cookbook, “American Cookery” was written by Amelia Simmons and published in 1796. She was the first American-born cookbook author, and you can find a copy of the first edition at the Library of Congress.

Cookbooks had been brought by colonists in their bags. Every group of early settlers brought the following cookbooks :

- Plymouth Colony: The Compleate Cook (1671) by Dame Alys of Asthorne Glen
- Virginia Colony at Jamestown: Gervase Markham's The English Hus-Wife (1615), The Huswife (1623)
- The Dutch Sensible Cook & Housekeeper (1669)



Resource: *Our Founding Foods*, Jane Tennant with S.G.B.Tennant

- Virginia Colony at Jamestown: Gervase Markham's *The English Hus-Wife* (1615), *The Huswife* (1623)
- The French *Le Vrai Cuisiner* (1651)

However, cooking methods changed over time based on available ingredients, resources, and nature. Culture has adapted itself. Through challenges, opportunities, and influences of natives, American culture was formed. What's more, early colonists, Native Americans, the Dutch in New Amsterdam, the Spanish in the West, the French in New Orleans, African Americans, Irish, and Germans all participated in shaping American culinary traditions.

Speaking of these early recipes, here are some example recipe names from the first American cookbook: Hoe Cakes (Johnny Cake), Indian Pudding, Shrewsbury Cake, Tongue Pie, to dress a Turtle, to dress a Calf's head, Rice Pudding, Indian Slapjack, Sunderland Pudding, Apple Pudding, Diet Bread, Pickles, and Jams. What's fascinating is that for those we count as summertime seasonal products and some glossary, the book mentions the following: American citron: African-native watermelon variety; Damsons: Syrian-native plum variety; Frost Grape: American-native grape, also known as chicken grape; Indian meal: corn meal; Ketchup: English ketchup made from walnuts, mushrooms, or oysters; Mango: Pickled small melon; Pearl ash: early form of baking soda

We can see that the words or ingredients we know today did not have the same meanings in those day. The cakes, cookies are not as fancy as they are today. I would like to share a recipe with readers. You can arrange sizes and some ingredients for today's mouthfeel to create your cake.

Oatmeal Chocolate Bar (Yield: 5 servings)

Ingredients:

1/3 cup brown sugar	5 walnuts
1 tablespoon molasses	1 handful raisins
2 egg whites	1 tablespoon hazelnut paste
1 teaspoon cinnamon	For the topping
2 cups oats	1 cup dark chocolate
Half a cup of flour	1 cup cream
3 tbspoon slightly melted butter	1 tablespoon powdered sugar

Instructions:

- Chop the walnuts and raisins in a food processor. Mix all ingredients except the eggs.
- Whisk the egg whites until they are almost snow-white, and mix them with all the other ingredients. Then, put the mixture in the baking dish.
- Bake in a 180 C preheated oven.
- After it cools, melt 1 cup of chocolate in the Bain Marie method.
- Whip 1 cup of cream with powdered sugar until it becomes thick.
- Mix the melted chocolate with the whipped cream and spread it on the cooled oat mixture.
- Let it rest in the refrigerator. You can keep it in the freezer for 10-12 minutes to cut small finger-sized slices.

May this summer be one where you are independent in your kitchen and expand your culinary skills with culture and technology. Enjoy your meal and Happy Fourth of July!



Resource: *Our Founding Foods*, Jane Tennant with S.G.B.Tennant, Jr. Published by Willow Creek Press ISBN 978-1-62343-551-6, Library of Congress Cataloging – in Publication Data



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