

Chance (Summer 1997)

Let's Talk Turkey

Today's column is about two Turkeys. One is the beautiful and warmly hospitable country that hosted the recent meeting of the International Statistical Institute (ISI) in Istanbul. The other is the turkey who pulled my column from the issue of CHANCE before last.

You may have noticed my column missing from that issue, especially if you read the magazine from back to front, which you certainly do if you subscribe to the Hebrew or Arabic editions. (Actually, reading articles back to front is not just a linguistic phenomenon. Academic statisticians read articles that way. They first turn to the list of references cited in the back of the article and, if they see their name, they read the article.)

In place of my article was an explanation by the editor that I was on vacation. CHANCE is a quarterly publication. Who takes vacations three months at a time? Maybe they think I'm still a university professor.

A previously suggested explanation was that I had taken time off to enjoy more frivolous things, such as writing an article for the *Annals of Statistics*. In fact, the last article I wrote for the *Annals* was in 1968. Having been reminded about that, however, I called the editor, who assured me he would get the referees reports in within a couple of months.

I wasn't concerned about the *Annals* delay, however, because *Annals* articles never go out of date. Ten years later, an *Annals* article is just as useless as the day it was written.

The real reason my column was pulled was that they ran out of space. Such is life on the last page. It came down to a choice between my column and the Istanbul restaurant reviews by "Belizaire." (Not all readers may realize that "Belizaire" is a pseudonym, or nom de fourchette, for the CHANCE restaurant critic. It's origin comes from an eponymous, but misunderstood, approbation when he was caught once dining in a less than five star establishment: "His heart may not be in that restaurant, but he's Belizaire.")

In my mind, there was a clear choice, because publication of that issue of CHANCE was delayed until after the ISI meetings in Istanbul. The delay, I'm told, was because the ASA was too busy choosing a place to meet in 2003. They couldn't decide whether to return to Disneyland or to choose among Poughkeepsie, Punxsutawney, or Death Valley.

I told the CHANCE editor that he could easily use the restaurant column when the ISI returns to Turkey in 2021. All he would have to do, to account for inflation in Turkey, is to multiply the restaurant prices by 600 thousand million lira. Or, he could publish that column in the issue of CHANCE that comes out in November, when, at least, American readers might be more interested in menus for a Turkey dinner.

The Other Turkey: Istanbul was the venue for the ISI meetings. (Let me first explain that the good time I have at these meetings is irrelevant, immaterial, and incidental to the reason I deduct it from my taxes. My specific purpose, consistent with Internal Revenue Service Code 411.8, is to learn Bayesian forecasting techniques, so that I am able, for example to consult with meteorologists interested in forecasting yesterday's weather.)

The first thing that impresses you about Istanbul is the juxtaposition of old and new. Ancient mosques with their towering minarets are crammed into the unbridled proliferation of modern day housing and commerce. It's as if you took something of transcendent significance and forced it into a mundane, ramshackle development. You know, sort of what academia has done with statistics.

Istanbul is located on two continents. You can take a ferry across the Bosphorus and travel from Europe to Asia. You leave the European side of Istanbul, a hustling, bustling, noisy city with countless people beseeching you to buy something and, in a few minutes, you arrive on the Asian side, a hustling, bustling, noisy city with countless people beseeching you to buy something. I hadn't experienced such a dramatic cultural change since travelling from Minneapolis to St. Paul.

It wasn't that long ago that Turkey was ruled by omnipotent sultans. You get a sense of their all-powerful and arrogant egos by visiting the ostentatious great rooms of their palaces. You can, however, get the same feeling by walking through the Great Hall of the National Academy of Sciences.

During a tour of one of the palaces, I was impressed to learn about the Chief Eunuch, which was a powerful position requiring great diplomacy and skill. I asked the tour guide if, like other positions in the Sultan's palace, it was handed down from father to son.

Turkey is an interesting culinary experience. Almost every entree offered me was some type of kabob: lamb kabob, chicken kabob, fish kabob. After a few days, I felt that, if I saw a waiter bringing me another skewer, I would tell him what he could do with it.

The way I learned, however, to make the meals interesting is to order a variety of appetizers, or mezzes. In fact, you can make a whole meal just from the appetizers. Indeed, there is a sect of people in Turkey who go around the country eating in just this way. They're called the Whirling Hors D'oeuvre-ishes.

The Bosphorus, providing a route to the Mediterranean, was of strategic importance throughout history. That was because the ships had so many choices of restaurants to stop at.

Today, one dines overlooking the Bosphorus, by the side of the Bosphorus, or even floating on the Bosphorus. When I returned to the U.S., it took me three days to get my land legs back. I still, however, have not overcome my afternoon fix for eggplant salad.

Istanbul, in a word, is bazaar. You can get anything you want in a bazaar--and many things you don't want. Nothing, however, has a price tag on it. You must ask the price and bargain for everything. To avoid being overcharged, I soon became adept at trying a few Turkish phrases to get them to lower the price. First, I simply tried "Can you make me a better price?" But that didn't work. Then, I tried, "Have you anything cheaper?" Also, to no avail. The phrase I finally stumbled upon that worked in almost every case was "But I'm only on a government per diem!"

Bargaining can soon become second nature, even addictive. After I returned home, I noticed my performance at flea markets had improved immeasurably. But yesterday, they threw me out of Macy's.

Paying for something in Turkey can be tricky. Because of rampant inflation and no currency reform, everything is priced in hundreds of thousands of lira. The enormous prices for everything made me dizzy. Of course, my friends from OMB felt right at home.

A taxi ride from the airport would cost five or six million lira. If you give the driver a good tip, however, you might also get Boardwalk and Park Place.

With the large and varying exchange rate it would take me a while to figure out the price of anything. Until a colleague explained it simply: one Turkish Lira is approximately six nanodollars.

Some of my colleagues would complain about the amenities in Istanbul or how things were handled at the conference. But I find it no different here at home. If they complained about the large number of inordinately long lines to register for the conference, they should try dealing with our Department of Motor Vehicles. If they're concerned about drinking the water in a foreign country, it's no different here in Washington, D.C. And also here in Washington, the taxi drivers don't speak English either.

The ISI meeting coming right as it did after the American Statistical Association meeting in Anaheim begs for a comparison. At the ISI, you were presented with the culture of the Ottoman Empire. At ASA, you had the kitsch of the Walt Disney empire. At the ISI, sessions--so that everyone could understand them--were simultaneously translated. At the ASA, sessions that no one could understand were simultaneously presented. At the ISI, everywhere you heard the unworldly call to prayer chanted from a mosque. At the ASA, everywhere you heard "It's a small, small world" piped from Musak.

I felt we should have brought the ASA Board of Directors to the ISI meetings so that they could see what a difference the meeting location makes. Some might be too dense to notice, however. But, in that case, I would have a use for all those skewers from dinner.