

## **Turkish Restaurant Business in Abroad: United Kingdom Sofra Restaurants Chain Sample**

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### **Abstract**

*Restaurant Management is a sub-sector of service sector where the demand is the most and therefore the most competitive due to its demanding and busy nature it is hard for businesses to make profit and survive without making a difference. To be distinguished from other restaurant managements, it is necessary to create a difference in service and presentation after determining customers' changing needs. Operating in the UK, Sofra Restaurants Chain is a management attracting attention with its modern, healthy and original presentations. The research is about the first Turkish chef Hüseyin Özer who is featured in Michelin Guide and how he improved Turkish restaurant management in the UK, what kind of contributions he has done for Turkish cuisine and how he represents Turkish cuisine abroad. For the research a face to face interview (semi-structured) is conducted with the owner of Sofra Restaurants Chain, Hüseyin Özer. According to the results, Sofra Restaurants Chain in the UK is a leading management contributing a lot to the representation of Turkish cuisine and hospitality.*

**Keywords:** Restaurant business, Turkish cuisine, United Kingdom, Sofra Restaurants

### **1.1 Introduction**

Although talking about restaurant management in its modern sense is relatively new, food and beverage services are quite old as an industry. For example, evidences of public food ceremonies found from around BC 10000 gives us ideas as to how old food organizations could go. Again in Chinese records dating back to BC writings about places where travelers can stay and eat shows us how far are the roots of today's restaurants concept extends (Bingöl, 2013a).

Though Restaurant management is defined as food and beverage management, the biggest feature of restaurant management which makes it different from other food and beverage managements is that the product doesn't consist of only food and beverage but also includes reception, service and entertainment together (Kılınç, 2011).

Considering the recent developments and trends today, the importance of restaurant management is better understood. With these developments and trends; there is a visible change in lifestyles, income and consumption habits, people's habit of eating out alone or with friends and family. This change leads to an increase in the number of restaurant managements and their quality (Yıldız, 2010).

Purpose of the research is to examine how Sofra Restaurant Chain became successful in the field of Turkish restaurant management in the UK. Also, how Sofra Turkish Restaurant Chains in the UK contributes to the Turkish cuisine and represents Turkish cuisine abroad takes an important place in the research.

### **2.1 Restaurant Management**

Restaurant managements have a very important place in the food and beverage business. In so much that some sources defining their food and beverage businesses as restaurant businesses. However in theory and practice, restaurant businesses should be studied under food-beverage businesses (Kılınç, 2011).

Restaurant managements are defined as enterprises which provide their customers a peaceful, relax place to eat and drink and if necessary work according to an accommodation facility (Gülal and Korzay, 1987: Akt. Bucak, 2012).

General objectives of restaurant businesses are specified as making profit, providing quality products to customers, making difference and operating in an efficient manner (Çalışkan and Özdemir, 2011). In addition to this, since achieving success in restaurant business depends on customer satisfaction, restaurant managements should look for new practices by measuring customer satisfaction, perceived quality and eating experiences of customers (Oh, 2000).

Restaurant businesses are seriously demanding and require intensive efforts like many other business fields. Which makes this situation even harder is, restaurant businesses take shape depending on people's the most basic need (Bingöl, 2013a).

It is indicated that the concept of restaurant first emerged after the French Revolution. Businesses producing and selling food and beverages in France named themselves "ristereuter", meaning "organizer". In time, this word passed into other languages as "restaurant" and these businesses are accepted as the ancestors of today's restaurant businesses (Bingöl, 2013b).

Restaurant businesses can be classified according to different scales from very different points as in all businesses. These classifications can vary depending on laws, perspective of industry associations and many other factors across the globe. But in general, classification of restaurants according to their structures and properties are accepted in theory as well as practice (Kılınc, 2011).

According to their structures, restaurants are divided into two types in general: "chain restaurants" and "independent restaurants". Classification according to their properties is adopted especially by the world's leading countries in the restaurant business and relevant scientists (Kılınc, 2011). Lee (2006) stated that the most emphasized types in this classification are; luxury restaurants (fine dining rooms), cafes, snack bars (café), fast food restaurants (quick service) common, ordinary restaurants (casual dining restaurants) ethnic restaurants, featured restaurants (specialty restaurants), restaurants in transportation centers, banquet centers and restaurants serving outside.

It would be appropriate to define the concept of chain restaurant business as Sofra Restaurant is analyzed in the research. Chain restaurants are enterprises operating as a part of a large organization (Ertaş 2013). Chain restaurants typically use the same type of menu and equipment and there are standards and practices developed for all the businesses in the chain (Sökmen, 2011).

There are many advantages of being a chain restaurant enterprise. These advantages are generally due to bring part of a large organization and closely following technological developments, staff training, investment and publicity provides advantages (Yılmaz et al. 2013).

### **3.1 The UK Sofra Restaurants Chain**

About 4 million in Western Europe, 300000 in North America, 200000 in the Middle East and 150000 in Australia, over 5 million Turkish people live abroad ([http://www.mfa.gov.tr/yurtdisinda-yasayan-turkler\\_tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/yurtdisinda-yasayan-turkler_tr.mfa)). Located in the Western Europe, The UK has the population of 53,5 million ([http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/08/130808\\_ingiltere\\_nufus.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/turkce/haberler/2013/08/130808_ingiltere_nufus.shtml)) and 22459 Turkish people live in the UK (<http://bilgistation.blogspot.com.tr/2012/06/hangi-ulkede-kac-turk-yasyor.html>).

Hüseyin Özer, owner of the Sofra Restaurants Chain, went to the UK when he was 21 years old. He bought the kebab shop where he worked, after its business went bad and the shop went on sale. Thus, he took the first step to his chain of restaurants. ([http://www.ekoayrinti.com/news\\_detail.php?id=137881](http://www.ekoayrinti.com/news_detail.php?id=137881)). He has become a legend in the field of eating and drinking and he also carries the distinction of being the first Turkish Chef who got into Michelin Guide. He has been serving in the UK for approximately 40 years (<http://haberciniz.biz/ingilterede-restoran-zinciri-kuran-ozer-turkiyeyi-tanitmak-icin-calisiyorum-2637927h.htm>).

In the capital London, where Sofra Restaurants Chain is located, there are 16489 restaurants ([http://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurants-g186338-London\\_England.html](http://www.tripadvisor.com.tr/Restaurants-g186338-London_England.html)). Sofra Restaurants Chain consists of six different restaurants: Ozer Oxford Circus, Sofra Covent Garden, Sofra Mayfair, Sofra St. Christopher's Place, Sofra Qatar and Sofra New York (<http://www.sofra.co.uk/index.html>). Each restaurant has its own unique properties. There are no elements such as music, accessory or paintings in the restaurants. (<http://fotoanaliz.hurriyet.com.tr/galeridetay.aspx?cid=16928&rid=4369&p=2>).

All of the restaurants' menus are almost same and first of all an appetizer is served which is made of hummus and green olive (<http://gezigmurguzellik.wordpress.com/category/sofra-restaurant/>).

There are approximately over 100 varieties in the menu of Sofra Restaurants Chain ([http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi\\_yemekleriyle\\_fethetti](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi_yemekleriyle_fethetti)). Menus in the restaurants are divided into six sections: hot appetizers, cold appetizers, starters, grills, fish and desserts. While cold appetizers include bakla, cacık, hummus, babagannuş and tabbule; hot appetizers include eggplant fries, börek, falafel and grilled foods such as sausages (<http://fotoanaliz.hurriyet.com.tr/galeridetay.aspx?cid=16928&rid=4369&p=2>). Sandwiches such as Inegol kofte, çoban kavurma, kuzu tandır and kısır, imam bayıldı, dolma, potato salad, plaki, Tokat sarması, okra, musakka and erişte are other foods that are in the Sofra Restaurants' menu (<http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-1418-34-soframiz-londrada-kuruldu.html>).

Sofra Restaurants Chain uses a modern Turkish restaurant atmosphere is used. Along the left side of restaurants, there is ottoman with colorful pillows. Stylish, starched tablecloths and the most modern tableware are used in the restaurants. Also restaurants' walls are given an off-white tone which symbolically shows the colors of Turkish flag. Also for lighting the restaurants, lamps inspired by the stylized mosque lamps are used. Ottoman motifs are used in the decoration of Sofra Restaurants Chain

([http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi\\_yemekleriyle\\_fethetti](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi_yemekleriyle_fethetti)). In addition, distribution of leaflets of Turkey in all branches of Sofra Restaurants Chain seriously contributes to Turkish tourism (<http://www.medya365.com/ekonomi/ingilterede-restoran-zinciri-kuran-ozer:-turkiye%E2%80%99yi-tanitmak-icin-calisiyorum-h93997.html>).

Sofra Restaurants Chain in the UK's most distinctive feature of the other restaurants is the usage of the concepts guests rather than customer and host instead of waiter. Serving to customer is done not like a customer but "natural" and "sincere" like to a guest. Another important feature is in Sofra Restaurants' cafés and bistros, traditional Turkish foods' are served without their names changed. There is no chef in the restaurants chain. Foods are completely prepared according to Özer's taste and most of the ingredients are imported from Turkey (<http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-1418-34-soframiz-londrada-kuruldu.html>).

Employes in Sofra Restaurants Chain are generally Turkish people who came to the UK for education and settled down. From dishwasher to cook and waiters, all are university graduates in their fields or young people, who came to the UK to do their master or doctoral studies, earn their money from Sofra Restaurants Chain (<http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-1418-34-soframiz-londrada-kuruldu.html>).

Prices in Sofra Restaurants Chain are not high and they are prepared by the guests' requests by various ways. So to some degree guests can determine the prices. For example different set menus are prepared for noon, evening meals and between hours. 12 different appetizers for noon is (in Turkish Lira) 29 TL. The same menu in the evening is 35 TL. There are various possibilities in the a la carte list. For example for a single plate, 6 different hot and cold appetizers can be prepared in small amounts for 15 TL. A glass of wine (9TL) or a glass of Turkish Raki which Hüseyin Özer sells below its production cost (a glass of Raki 7TL) to introduce Turkish Raki to foreigners ([http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi\\_yemekleriyle\\_fethetti](http://www.sabah.com.tr/Cumartesi/2010/12/11/londrayi_yemekleriyle_fethetti)).

Sofra Restaurants Chain not only contributes to the restaurant businesses but also contributes in the field with various partnerships and programs. For example, with the partnership of "Work Based Learning and Skills Development Department" of Middlesex University, which has the most Turkish academic staff and students, Sofra Restaurants Chain is the first Turkish Enterprise to join this certificated education program for the future's qualified graduate chefs. The program's purpose is to educate restaurateur and leaders (<http://www.tourexpi.com/tr-intl/news.html~nid=36271>). Özer stated with this program he would train important names for Turkish cuisine and also contribute to Turkish Cuisine as courses in universities (Re 2011: 6). Özer serves as an instructor and gives entrepreneurship, restaurant and businessman courses in this program (Ay 2011: 10).

In order to educate entrepreneurs Sofra Restaurants Chain and University of Westminster signed an educational cooperation agreement. Students who graduated get a degree in "Business and Management" after the full time education they receive in Sofra Restaurants Chain (<http://www.sondakika.com/haber-diplomasiz-turk-isadami-mba-diplomasi-verecek-3017913/>).

In collaboration with Avrupa News Agency Dilek Bakırcı, Hackney Community College and Sofra Restaurants Chain, an Internship program has been created (<http://www.avrupagazete.com/ekonomi/7712-ozer-ben-milyonerler-yetistiriyorum.html>). The purpose of the program is to contribute to the growth of London's economy via cooperation and provide job opportunities for younger generations.

Implemented within the framework of the program, trainees receive training from renowned chef Özer([http://www.dha.com.tr/sofrahackney-college-isbirligi-yapti\\_390732.html](http://www.dha.com.tr/sofrahackney-college-isbirligi-yapti_390732.html)).According to this program, until 2016, 25 thousand young people in Sofra Restaurants Chain is expected to be interned. In addition, it is stated that this important project will contribute to the development of Turkish-British cooperation ([http://www.zamanbritain.com/en-tr/newsDetail\\_getNewsById.action?newsId=7131](http://www.zamanbritain.com/en-tr/newsDetail_getNewsById.action?newsId=7131)).

Also Özer offers internship opportunities to students from Turkey who come to the UK with Erasmus Student Exchange Program. Özer provides necessary opportunities for students to improve their knowledge and skills about restaurant businesses and improve their English (Yetkinlioğlu, 2012: 16).

Özer wrote a book called Sofra Cookbook and his feelings towards London is presented as voice in London Museum. Özer was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Westminster and a documentary about him by the Discovery Channel was made (Ay 2011: 10).Also Özer won the "Entrepreneur of the Year" award in World Food Awards, which is one of the world's most prestigious organizations, with his restaurant named Özer Restaurant (<http://www.sabah.com.tr/Ekonomi/2011/10/08/sofranin-sahibine-yilin-girisimcisi-odulu>). Sofra was chosen "Providing Healthy Food Restaurant" by Evening Standart newspaper and "the Best Vegetable Restaurant" by Time Out magazine. The Times denotes Sofra within the first 7 restaurants in London. Özer's and his Sofra Restaurants Chain's success has a really important role in the recognition of Turkey abroad (<http://www.aksiyon.com.tr/aksiyon/haber-1418-34-soframiz-londrada-kuruldu.html>).

#### 4.1 Research Methods

Operating in the UK Sofra Restaurants Chain constitutes the research. Sofra Restaurants Chain is a restaurant business which has achieved significant success in Turkish restaurant management and shows significant efforts in introducing Turkish cuisine in the UK. Also At the same time the owner of the restaurant business Hüseyin Özer's being the first Turkish chef who got into Michelin Guide constitutes one of the main reasons as to why Sofra Restaurants Chain was chosen as the study area.

A qualitative research method, interview technique is used in the research. Participant's opinions were received with the help of semi-structured questionnaire. In addition to the main technique interview, document analysis and observation techniques were also used.

In the present study, an interview form, which was used as a means of data collection, had been created by studying the relevant literature. Research questions were examined by a qualified person and the validity of the question were analyzed in testing interviews. In the process of this analysis, understandability of the questions by the participant was examined and all questions were included in the research. Voice recorder was used during the interview and the notes were taken where necessary. Interviews were conducted with the owner of Sofra Restaurants Chain Hüseyin Özer.

#### 5.1 Research Findings

Participant opened a small restaurant in 1981 as a starting point in his restaurants chain. Afterwards Covent Garden, Mayfair, St. Christopher's Place, Qatar and New York were included in the chain. According to the information from owner of the Sofra Restaurants Chain Hüseyin Özer, locations of these restaurants are given in detail in the chart below.

#### 5.2 Chart1. Locations of Sofra Restaurants Chain

Name of the restaurant	Location of the restaurant
Özer Oxford Circus	LanghamPlace, Regent Street, London
Sofra CoventGarden	36 TavistockStreet,CoventGarden, London
Sofra Mayfair	18 Stepheer Street, Mayfair, London
Sofra StChristopher'sPlace	StChristopher'sPlace, Oxford Street, London
Sofra Qatar	Qatar (going to be opened)
Sofra Newyork	New York (going to be opened)

Source:<http://www.sofra.co.uk/> (Access Date: 05.03.2014).

Özer stated the menus in Sofra Restaurants Chain are divided into six categories as hot appetizers, cold appetizers, starters, grills, fish and desserts. He also stated some of the Turkish dishes they prepare are served without their name changed.

Özer stated İmam bayıldı, keşkek, Ali nazik, dolma, balya, Tokat sarması and kısır are some of the fore coming Turkish dishes on the menus. He stated baklava, kadayıf, tahinli helva and kazandibi are the Turkish desserts on the menus. He expressed during the Ramadan month specials menus are served for breaking the Ramadan fast. He stated Turkish dishes they prepare are healthy, modern and served in creative manner while leaving the dishes' originality (for example he likes and ensures natural dishes without sauces). He stated they put great emphasis on introducing of Turkish cuisine in the UK.

Özer stated the dishes they prepare in Sofra Restaurants are prepared by his own taste and most of the ingredients are imported from Turkey. He emphasized that all the restaurants in Sofra Restaurants Chain are carrying a Turkish restaurant atmosphere and the tablecloths and walls are given colors symbolically representing Turkish flag and Ottoman theme is used in the restaurants. He indicated that they are pursuing a Turkish restaurant atmosphere as a whole.

He stated employes in Sofra Restaurants Chain are generally Turkish people who came for education or relocated to the UK. He stated all the dishwashers, cooks and waiters, are university graduates in their fields or doing their master or doctoral studies. He expressed these young people, who came to the UK for learning English or studies, are all earning their pocket money from Sofra Restaurants Chain. He stated in this way he contributes both to Turkish people and education. He stated apart from Turkish people, other foreigners are also working in Sofra Restaurants Chain.

He stated the prices in Sofra Restaurants Chain are not high and actually are determined according to guests' requests. He expressed they prepare a different menu for each meal. For example a menu with 29 different appetizers including Tabbouleh, Falafel, Red Lentil Patties, Baby Broad Beans, Halloumi, Spinach & Mixed Cheese Pastry Parcels, Nut Salad, Sauteed (Diced) Lamb Fillet with Hummus and İmambayıldı is priced 29 Turkish Lira and these prices are changing during evening meals. Also various alternatives are offered in the menu's a la carte list. According to the answer of owner of Sofra Restaurants Chain Mr. Hüseyin, a table for fore coming Turkish dishes and the other dishes is given together with their prices. A chart of some of the dishes on the menus of Sofra Restaurant Chains is given below.

### 5.3. Table2. Some of the Dishes on the Menus of Sofra Restaurant Chains

Turkish Food	Price	Other Dishes	Price
Keşkek	32 TL	Grilled Salmon	38 TL
İmambayıldı	15 TL	Boat of Aubergine	32 TL
Ali Nazik	43 TL	Penne Dolce Latte	26 TL
Humus	12 TL	Spicy Chicken Meatball Pot	35 TL

Source:<http://www.sofra.co.uk/> (Access Date: 05.03.2014).

Özer stated that their customer portfolio is made up by mainly the UK and guests coming from China, Japan and other places in the world. Sofra Restaurants Chain attracts the attention of people from everywhere in the UK with their whole new approach to food and service. Sofra Restaurants are also frequently visited by Turkish people.

Owner of Sofra Restaurants Chain stated there are many small and big Turkish Restaurants in the UK's capital London. Located in the north and central London; Efes, Topkapı and Tas Restaurants are a few of them. However Özer stated none of them carry a Turkish restaurant identity and atmosphere. He emphasizes that Sofra Restaurants is a leading management.

He expressed that since the day he established his first restaurant in the UK in 1981, he has faced events like terrorist attacks, mafia threats, bureaucratic problems and the mafia even took his home and shop in Mayfair. He expressed that while about to start selling Turkish delight to the Queen of the UK in Shepherd shop and opening a Turkish bazaar for spices, charcuterie; he had to return the shop to its previous owner because of mafia. He stated that he has lost many businesses because of the problems like this and there are still some certain groups that create obstacles for him.

Özer stated there are main advantages and disadvantages of opening a restaurant in the UK. These advantages include the Sofra Restaurants Chain's guarantee for hospitality, food presentation, reasonable price, healthy and tasty food despite the different restaurants in the area. He pointed out that Sofra Restaurants Chain is recognized and separated from the others in such issues.

He stated their success and progress has been attempted to stop by mafia, bureaucratic obstacles, terror, accusations and slander. He especially emphasized that up to this time he has dealt with such issues and if there weren't such things the achievements he had would be in much better point.

He expressed serving with 5 different restaurants in London, one of the most important centers in the world, where there is fierce competition between world cuisines; day after day they carry Turkish restaurant management to the place it deserves on a world scale. He also stressed that perhaps in the near future they will establish a Sofra Restaurants Chains all over Europe. He said the demand for their restaurants is great and they distinguish themselves from the other restaurants in the area in a variety of ways such as price, presentation, food, hospitality and so on. He connects the place of Turkish restaurant business in the UK to being the first Turkish who is featured in Michelin Guide. He stated they also try to heighten the standard of Turkish restaurant management in abroad by creative presentations. He stated they have regular customers coming to Sofra Restaurants for 30 years. In addition, he said they are working to raise interest and curiosity towards Turkish restaurants and Turkish food and they will continue making every effort to increase this interest.

He stated he found it wrong to know Turkish food as only "kebab" and "doner". Thus they serve rich vegetable dishes in Sofra restaurants and for the first time they adapted Turkish food for café and bistros. By saying "my dishes are simple, refined and pure" he emphasized the dishes naturalness and uniqueness. He said he had a wide variety of prizes in this way and Sofra Restaurants Chain is within the first seven restaurants in the UK.

Özer also stated Sofra Restaurants carry a Turkish restaurant atmosphere and not changing content and names of Turkish dishes is important for introducing Turkish restaurants abroad. He said by distributing leaflets of Turkey in all of Sofra Restaurants they contribute seriously to Turkish tourism. He said in fact this is a great example of how Turkish restaurants are represented in abroad.

Özer explained his future plans and expectations as introducing and representing Turkish cuisine and Turkey in the best way and continue doing this. He also said that since one of the restaurants weren't rented to him, he planned to close it and open a restaurant in Istanbul. Aside these, he said he plans to take part in various universities and projects about restaurant management. He expressed he will continue giving courses and provide young people with job and internship opportunities.

In order to open a Turkish restaurant and bring goods from Turkey afterwards, one is obliged to comply with certain obligations of Ankara Agreement. Ankara agreement is an agreement that creates a partnership between European Economic Community and Turkey. The agreement's purpose is the rapid development of Turkish economy and increasing the living and working conditions of Turkish people while enhancing trade and economic relations to continue without any pause and strengthening of these. In the agreement there are tariffs about goods, services, capital payments or transfers and customs taxes. In this way establishing a customs union between Turkey and the Community and bringing Turkey's economic policies closer to other countries in the Community are expected ([http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ile-avrupa-ekonomik-toplulugu-arasinda-bir-ortaklik-yaratan-anlasma-ankara-anlasmasi\\_-12-eylul-1963-.tr.mfa](http://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkiye-ile-avrupa-ekonomik-toplulugu-arasinda-bir-ortaklik-yaratan-anlasma-ankara-anlasmasi_-12-eylul-1963-.tr.mfa)). Therefore it can be said that necessary incentives are provided to establish Turkish businesses abroad and they are supported in different ways.

## **6. 1 Conclusion**

Located in the UK, Sofra Restaurants Chain is a management representing Turkish restaurant management in an excellent manner. Sofra Restaurants try to change the image and attitude against Turkish Restaurant Managements and Turkish cuisine. With their modern presentation of Turkish dishes, Sofra Restaurants is a management that continues to make feel the Turkish restaurant atmosphere. Flocked by people all around the world from Queen to people from Qatar, providing an excellent Turkish hospitality and services performed inside are playing an important role in Sofra Restaurants' success. Also succeeding in changing the prejudiced attitudes towards Turkish cuisine and restaurants, Sofra Restaurants continues to gain the appreciation of people mainly in the UK and people from many parts of the world. Therefore, branches of Sofra Restaurants are being planned to be opened in New York and Qatar due to the demand. When considered by its leading position in Turkish restaurant management in the UK and achievements in this field, it can be understood that Sofra Restaurants Chain provides an important contribution to the Turkish restaurant managements abroad. In this way it is aimed to introduce Turkey and break the prejudices towards Turkey.

Substantially distinguished from the other Turkish restaurants in the UK, Sofra Restaurants Chain with its prices, value creating presentations, service quality, pricing policy, differences in the perception of guests, undertaking a mission and embracing a vision, will continue to attract a lot of visitors from all over the world in the future too.

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