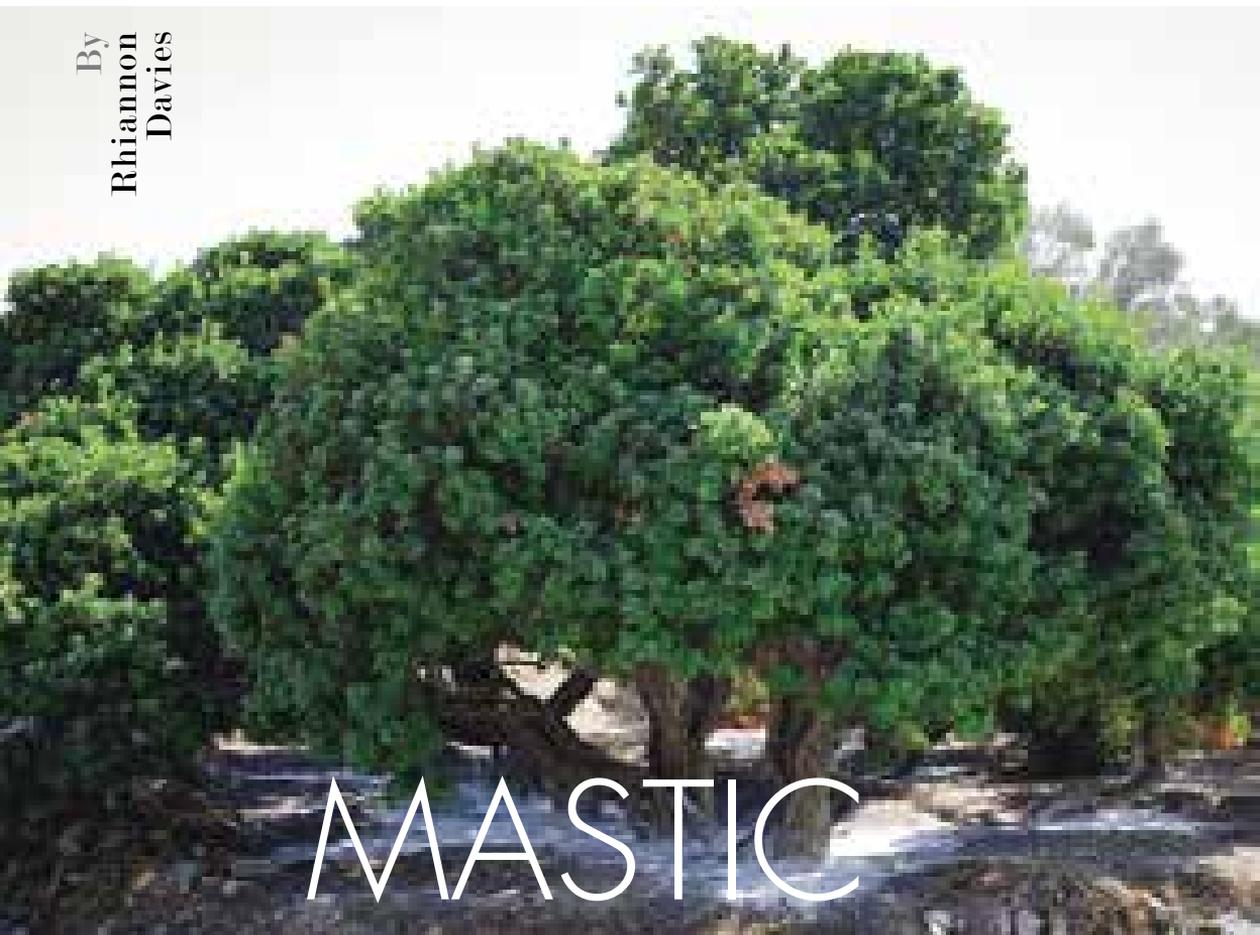


By  
Rhiannon  
Davies



# MASTIC

## TEARS OF A TREE

TO COLLECT  
THE SAP,  
'HURTS' ARE  
MADE INTO  
THE TRUNK  
AND MAIN  
BRANCHES  
AND THE RESIN  
IS COLLECTED  
AFTER IT  
'WEEPS' 'TEARS'

As slashes are made into their trunk, the trees begin to weep, their shimmering tears dripping down onto carefully placed mats, where they harden in the summer sun. You may have thought that weeping trees belong only to the fantastical realms of Lord Of The Rings, but this process is repeated on one particular Aegean island each year, causing a unique aroma to fill the air.

Although the *Pistacia Lentiscus* tree grows across Mediterranean Europe, it

is mainly on Chios where they have cause to weep. Chios is the fifth largest of the Greek islands but lies just seven kilometers away from Çeşme, on the Turkish coast. In this dedicated mastic growing area, the language used for the harvesting is somewhat emotional. To collect the sap, 'hurts' are made into the tree, and the resin is collected after it 'weeps' 'tears.' Known in Turkey as *damlı sakızı* and as mastic in English, the ingredient almost possesses mythical properties.

## HISTORY

With production being confined to such a small geographic area, mastic has been an important source of wealth for Chios throughout history, since the beginning of its cultivation around 250AD. In the absence of dental hygienists, mastic was used by the Ancient Greeks as a chewing gum and later by the Romans as toothpicks. When Chios was absorbed into the Ottoman Empire, the Sultans introduced it into their harems as a breath freshener. It consequently found its way into Turkish cuisine. The chewy properties of this unusual ingredient and its popularity across the Middle East mean that it is also known as 'Arabic Gum.'

## TASTE & TEXTURE

Mastic has a distinctive flavor that's easy to recognize but harder to describe. Evergreen notes of cedar and pine combined with anise-like minty freshness brings a delicate aromatic flavor to recipes where mastic is allowed to shine. But, it is just as often used in recipes for the texture it creates. In Turkish gastronomy it is the secret ingredient that gives the unique texture to Turkish delight and *maraş dondurması* (the Turkish chewy ice cream that vendors like to play tricks with). It is also used in milk puddings such as *sütlaç*, *tavuk göğsü*, and as a key ingredient in *sakızlı muhallebi*.

## WHERE TO FIND IT

You can buy mastic 'tears' from *aktars* (spice shops) and find it amongst the heavily fragrant *Mısır Çarşısı* (Spice Bazaar). Pop one of them in your mouth, and chew. Once you get past the initial bitter flavor and crunchy texture, you'll be enjoying the original chewing gum. The other option is to grind the tears into a powder for use in the milk puddings mentioned above. For a simpler option, look out for *damla sakızlı türk kahvesi* (Turkish coffee with mastic) on café menus to get a very Ottoman taste; this can be found at cafes such as Kahve Dünyası, but also in smaller coffee specialists. (You can also

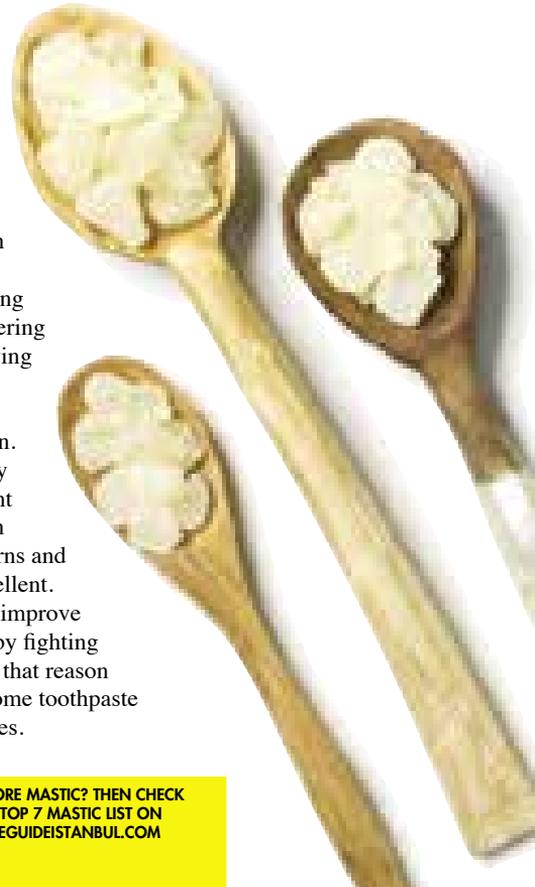
buy it in packets from Kahve Dünyası to make at home.)

If you have a particularly sweet tooth and want to enjoy mastic at its best, it's worth taking a trip to **Üç Yıldız Şekerlemecisi**, one of Beyoğlu's oldest sweet shops. Founded in 1926, this nostalgic store stocks mastic in a variety of forms: their mastic flavored Turkish Delight is soft, subtle, and beyond heavenly. You can also buy it as *beyaz tatl* (white sweet), a thick viscous mastic preserve that was previously consumed as a traditional 'spoon sweet,' in tea gardens on the Bosphorus and in nearby islands. Traditionally, they were served in special crystal glass and spoon sets, but this is seldom seen in Turkey today. Place a spoonful of this sweet into a glass of ice cold water as to make a refreshing 'submarine' dessert. You can buy it online from: [www.ucyildizsekerleme.com](http://www.ucyildizsekerleme.com)

## HEALTH BENEFITS

On top of its flavor and texture, mastic also contains many purported health benefits. These range from having cholesterol-lowering effects, to relieving digestive upsets to increasing blood circulation. It is also used by some as a sealant over wounds, an ointment for burns and as an insect repellent. It can allegedly improve dental hygiene by fighting bacteria and for that reason is included in some toothpaste and mouthwashes.

PLACE A SPOONFUL OF THIS SWEET INTO A GLASS OF ICE COLD WATER AS TO MAKE A REFRESHING 'SUBMARINE' DESSERT.



WANT MORE MASTIC? THEN CHECK OUT OUR TOP 7 MASTIC LIST ON [WWW.THEGUIDEISTANBUL.COM](http://WWW.THEGUIDEISTANBUL.COM)