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Is this the best kebab shop in Britain?

Super Kebab in Stoke Newington won a coveted award for best takeaway this week at the British Kebab Awards. Sophie Dening stops by for a late-night meal

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Sophie Dening tucked into Super Kebab's mixed grill

By Sophie Dening
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There so much more to the kebab than its popular incarnation as a late-night booze sponge.

For years, I've remained faithful to Omar and the boys at Kuzu Sis on Well Street in Hackney. But the clamour of the third British Kebab Awards, which took place in London on Wednesday night, has turned my head, and here I am on Stoke Newington High Street, intrigued, hungry, and offering congratulations to the happy winners.

Super Kebab, a family-owned business established eight years ago, took the coveted national award for best takeaway on Wednesday, sharing it with sibling site Super Ocakbasi, a five-minute walk away.

Super Ocakbasi is a cosy, cheerful corner restaurant where the charcoal grill is king, in contrast with sparkling, painfully bright Super Kebab, where I count no fewer than seven men behind the 12-foot counter. Both places are clean as new pins, and festooned with food-safety and halal certificates.

At Super Ocakbasi, chef Cengiz Zeynep prepares me a mixed kebab for three people, £25, and a side order of kisir, £3.50, one of my favourite salads, which consists of finely ground bulgur, parsley, and tomato paste.

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As I get stuck into classic lamb sis, lamb kofte, lamb ribs and chicken wings, Cengiz proffers his phone, showing me photos of him suited and booted at the awards, brandishing his trophy among the Super Kebab cohort.

"We expected to win, to be honest," says Mislina Gilgil, a director of the business, "because we work really hard at what we do, the service and hygiene are excellent, and everything is healthy and fresh, made specially for by us for our

customers. All the chefs are highly experienced and understand meat, charcoal grilling and the art of the doner."



The chefs at Super Ocakbasi brandish their skewers

The meat comes daily from their own butchers shop, next door to the takeaway, and is halal approved.

He tells me that Super Kebab is considered such a paragon that customers have been known to buy freshly prepared lamb doner, freeze it, then fly back to Germany or Turkey so they can reheat it and assemble the doner of their dreams at home.

My lamb ribs, sis and chicken wings are indeed fresh and succulent, with a nice amount of char on the ribs. The kofte, made with red and green peppers and parsley, is the best thing on the plate, healthily laced with tasty fat, yet, like everything else, greaseless to a fault.

The order comes with rice, bread, chillies and two salads included: onion salad is spicy and acidic, not pungent, dressed with pomegranate juice, salgam (pickled red carrot juice) and sumac. Mislina brings me a plate of doner meat to try. Made with minced lamb shoulder, and a little breast meat, it is herby and tender and nothing like the last doner I ate, in around 1989 from a van opposite Amersham station.



Meats on the grill at Super Ocakbasi

If this is a staunchly old-school kebab, elsewhere the reputation of this often derided yet delicious dish is getting a fillip from innovative entrepreneurs. At DOM's Place in Clapton, a traditional Turkish grill, or mangal, has been revamped by younger members of the family, who are wise details such as quality coffee, craft beer and branding.

The mission statement at newly opened Chifafa in Clerkenwell, where doners and foam cartons are off the menu, is "to save the reputation of the kebab in the UK". And one of Wagamama founder Alan Yau's latest projects is Babaji Pide, where the Turkish equivalent of pizza is served alongside lamb or beef kofte, in a beautifully designed space where late-night loutishness is unimaginable.



Sophie tucks in to classic lamb sis, kofte, ribs, chicken wings, doner and a side of kisir

I ask Mislina about inebriated kebab-lovers. He says the takeaway inevitably serves some well-lubricated swayers at the weekend, but that Super Ocakbasi is very much a family restaurant.

The late-night kebab culture represents only a fraction of what the industry, which employs 200,000 people in the UK, brings to our culture and our economy, points out Ibrahim Dogus, the man (and kebab-shop entrepreneur) behind the British Kebab Awards. "What is great is that, with new businesses opening all the time, we are now seeing some fine-dining takes on kebab cuisine, as well as everyday takeaways and family restaurants."

The awards are getting bigger every year, and the outlook is looking healthy for the humble kebab. Food writer and wine consultant Zeren Wilson says: "The kebab scene has been ripe for a reassessment in the UK for some time now. There has always been big love for Turkish food among restaurant lovers, and meat grilled over charcoal will never go out of fashion, yet this is a cuisine that has remained untouched by trends – until now.

"I think we will begin to see more styled Turkish concepts, and more attention to styling and branding. The proliferation of casual dining restaurants and street food has probably helped Turkish food manoeuvre itself into a position where it can make some more noise."

On the way home, my black cab driver agrees that, on the whole, kebabs are far nicer than they used to be. But he still says: "I'd never have let you get in my cab with a doner."

THE AWARDS IN FULL

Best takeaway in London: Super Kebab Ocakbasi, Stoke Newington