

Review: Nusret Istanbul (Aka The Salt Bae Restaurant)

When my cousin suggested fifteen of us go to Nusret Istanbul (i.e. home of Salt Bae) at 11:30 PM, my first thought was, “Ugh. Why?” Convinced it was a tourist trap, I did not want to go there 30 minutes before closing. Or even worse – actually sit down and eat at a place made famous by a meme. But I was outnumbered and hungry, so I tagged along...and returned a few days later.



Background on Nusret (AKA Salt Bae)

You may not have heard of Nusret, but chances are you’ve come across the Salt Bae meme. It went viral two years ago when butcher, chef, and owner Nusret Gökçe began getting attention for his unique approach to preparing and serving steak. Some of it is borderline pornographic if you ask me. His signature move is the salt sprinkle. Every table has a bowl of Maldon sea salt, so guests can recreate the move.

Nusret Istanbul

Nusret's flagship Istanbul steakhouse is located in the Besiktas area, on a street lined with trendy restaurants. While the exterior looks unremarkable, the interior is pretty stunning. It has kind of a classy bistro vibe.

There is a kitschy little souvenir counter to the left of the entrance, selling Salt Bae t-shirts and swag. To the right is the butcher counter, where all the meat is on display. Behind that is the kitchen. The main dining room is pretty nice: Simple, trendy and backed by a glass wall separating the outdoor seating area.

The second level looks a bit more formal, but has its own outdoor seating area. It's furnished with a single large table – perfect for big groups. Because I didn't have my phone and relied on others to take photos, I'm missing some visuals. But this post is about food and I've got that covered.

The waiters dressed to the nines and sported either trimmed or twirled Salvador Dali mustaches. It was almost as if unique facial hair was a requirement for getting hired at Nusret ...

How to Get a Table at Nusret

Getting a table at Nusret is no easy feat. The wait for a reservation was at least six weeks when I was there. They do take walk-ins, though it can take up to two hours to get a table. When we showed up at 11:30 PM on our first visit (30 minutes before closing), I didn't have high hopes that they would accommodate us. The restaurant was packed and there were at least a dozen people waiting outside. But when we told the staff we had 15 people in our party, they swiftly scrounged together 15 chairs and a big table for us.

When eight of us showed up for dinner a few days later, the same thing happened. Despite the long line, we were seated within minutes, while smaller groups that showed up before us had to wait. That seems to be the key to getting a table at Nusret without a reservation: Bring a large group.

Nusret Dallas Steak (AKA Ribeye)

The down side to showing up with a large group 30 minutes before closing on that first night was that we had limited ordering options. The staff gave us a choice between New York and Dallas steak. WTH is Dallas steak? Apparently, that's Turkish for Ribeye.

Sides were limited to french fries only and the waiter brought out three huge plates for the table. I was fully expecting a terrible meal based on the limited food options and rushed nature of our visit. Not to mention, the steak was huge and didn't look appetizing at all. I fully expected it to be overcooked based on appearance alone.



All of that dissipated when I took my first bite of the ribeye. It was the most tender steak I've ever had. It was perfectly cooked (medium rare) and despite how massive it was, I couldn't help but finish the whole thing. The fries were pretty good, though there are definitely better sides you should try at Nusret.

Toscana Steak at Nusret

The Toscana steak at Nusret was hands down my favorite. I ordered it on our second visit and it cut like butter. It was perfectly seasoned and practically melted in my mouth. I'm telling you guys, this steak was unreal. The Toscana steak was served with a side of Caesar salad and it was so delicious that even my picky niece began digging into it.

Fun fact: The Toscana made an appearance on a Season 3 episode of Billions.



Butter Steak at Nusret

The butter steak is really what Nusret is known for. If you've ever seen a Salt Bae video on Youtube, you'll know what I'm talking about: It's a plate of steak, cooked in butter. Right at your table. The server usually stacks the steak around a bone (to resemble a volcano), then pours the hot butter right over it.

The staff at Nusret Istanbul didn't nail the presentation quite right, but the steak was still buttery and delicious. I knew I would love this dish when the waiter finished cooking the steak and then proceeded to dip the bread into the sizzling butter. That steak topped with butter-soaked toast is the reason I completely lost my appetite when I came home. Nothing has ever tasted that good again.

Fun fact: When Nusret Gökçe is in town, you can have him do his salt sprinkle schtick at your table for a \$60 upcharge.

Beef Carpaccio

I normally don't eat bread, appetizers or anything else before the main course, but the beef carpaccio at Nusret was too good to pass on. Nusret makes a show of everything and the beef carpaccio was no exception.

The waiters prepare it right at your table, tossing greens and cheese on the beef before rolling it up and dousing it with vinaigrette and mustard. I'm not a mustard fan, so I realize that sounds disgusting. Trust me when I say it's not!

The beef carpaccio at Nusret is sliced a little thicker than what I prefer, but it's amazing and you really shouldn't eat your steak before grabbing a bite of this. Wash it down with a glass of their perfect lemonade and you'll almost forget about the main course.



Baklava

After eating my weight in steak, it was time for dessert. Nusret waiters make the rounds with these huge plates of pistachio baklava, topped with Turkish ice cream.

I'm not a fan of Turkish ice cream's gum-like texture, so I just had the plain baklava. It was pretty damn good, though it still doesn't measure up to my mom's walnut baklava.

Sorry, Salt Bae, but you've got competition on this front.

As you may have predicted by now, even the baklava "service" entails a performance. On our first visit, I was so full, I initially passed on dessert. But watching the waiter cut, toss, and serve up perfect portions of baklava made me reconsider.



Regardless of whether you opt for dessert or not, the waiters will come around your table at the end of your meal with a huge platter of tea. Gratis. Even at 1:00 AM while the crew was ready to go home, they brought us tea. Now that's service!

Nusret Istanbul Prices

The average price for a meal at Nusret Istanbul is about 180 TL. During my time in Istanbul, the exchange rate was around 1:6:50, sometimes as high as 1:7.20. This translated to a cost of under \$30 per person for a steak, beverages and a couple of shared appetizers. That's an incredible bargain, considering the same meal at Nusret Dubai and New York will set you back over \$60 per person.

At the favorable exchange rate, Nusret was a bargain, but at any price point, you're getting grade-A steak seasoned and cooked to perfection.

Service at Nusret Istanbul

For a popular, touristy restaurant I expected the service at Nusret to be terrible. But like my assumptions about the food, it turned out to be wrong. The staff is super professional and on top

of things. They have at least three waiters taking care of each table, which is smart because it results in fast, yet attentive service.

Even though we had so many waiters taking care of us (even when there were *just* eight of us), we never felt rushed or hassled in any way. The staff doesn't hover, but they're around and you can easily get a hold of someone if you need anything. Overall, the waiters were friendly, professional, and attentive without being intrusive.

Is Nusret Worth the Hype?

After two visits to Nusret Istanbul, I can report without a doubt that it lives up to the hype. The quality of the steaks is unparalleled and the service is superb. Prior to visiting Nusret, I'd read some negative reviews about the New York location that put me off. None of that applies to Nusret Istanbul. From what I experienced, they serve the most high-quality meats, chosen and prepared with great care.

For a good month after returning home from Istanbul, I couldn't enjoy any food because I kept comparing it to what I had at Nusret. On several occasions, I almost pulled an Elvis and booked a flight to Istanbul just to gorge on my new food obsession. The only thing stopping me? That damn SSSS stamp I've been trying to shake since returning from Turkey...

If you're in Istanbul, Nusret absolutely worth a visit. Even if the exchange rate isn't quite as generous as it was last summer.

Have you ever dined at Nusret Istanbul? What was your experience like?