



Ayse's tiny dining room bustles with activity.
News photo: Paul Warner.



Ayse's CAFÉ

Turkish Dine-In / Take-Out / Catering

A Turkish delight opens on Plymouth

By LAURA McREYNOLDS
News Restaurant Reviewer



Used to be, you'd have to travel as far as Windsor, if not Turkey, to sample Turkish cuisine. But no longer. Last month, caterer Ayse (EYE-shuh) Uras opened Ann Arbor's first Turkish restaurant at the Courtyard Shops on Plymouth Road.

Ayse's is a modest little cafe located on the far side of the shopping center, out of view from Plymouth Road. More than half the space is taken up by the large order counter-cum-refrigerator case, but there's enough room left over for a small dining area that seats 16. Despite the close quarters, the cafe is pleasant and restful, filled with good cheer and the homey smells of mint and stewed meat.

To many Ann Arborites, Turkish food won't seem completely unfamiliar. In fact, it shares many of the traditions of Greek as well as Middle Eastern cuisines. Dishes range from cold bean salads, stuffed grape leaves and rice pilaf to impeccably light, flaky stuffed phyllo pastries called boreks. Most of the daily lunch specials at Ayse's are lamb, beef or vegetarian stews, the latter often featuring eggplant.

Uras says the seasonings she relies on are parsley and mint, with an occasional assist from red pepper flakes or dill. She uses them deftly, as in her fascinating Yayla (valley) soup, a slightly thickened, aromatic broth with semolina wheat, a little rice, butter, and just the right touch of mint. Similarly, her cracked wheat salad, a bulghur wheat-based salad not unlike tabbouleh, is seasoned to perfection with onion, olive oil, lemon, some parsley and a pinch of red pepper flakes that give it a gentle kick.

Every day, there are two or three daily specials for around \$6.50 that come with a simple tossed salad and pillowy sour-dough rolls speckled with black seeds. "Many of my customers ask me what those seeds are called, but there isn't an English word for them in the dictionary," says Uras. "I just tell them they're little black seeds."

Tuesday's Mixed Meat Dolma is a sampler plate of grape leaves, cabbage leaves, zucchini and green pepper, all stuffed with rice and ground beef and served on cool, garlicky yogurt. Wednesday's Sultan's Delight features a tender, fragrant lamb stew alongside seafoam-green eggplant cream and a simple rice pilaf studded with orzo. Thursday's Kebab Papillote is a dab of beef and vegetable stew cooked in parchment and served with pilaf.

Some of the daily specials also are available as side dishes,

such as a leek and carrot stew with an assertive aroma and equally assertive flavor, or gut-warming potato stew made with tomatoes, sweet peppers and fresh herbs.

In fact, ordering a variety of side dishes and sampling a spoonful or two of each turned out to be my favorite way to eat at Ayse's. One day, three of us spent a wonderful lunch hour sharing several stews as well as a mouth-puckeringly tart lentil and feta cheese salad dressed with olive oil and lemon juice, an exotic chicken salad seasoned with paprika and spiked with walnuts, and red lentil/bulghur wheat rolls seasoned with tomato paste, herbs, olive oil and lemon juice.

Uras serves Turkish tea in elegant little gold-striped glasses, as well as miniature cups of Turkish coffee that come with a square of Turkish Delight, a taffy-like confection with the consistency of Gummi Bears. Between the caffeine and the sugar, this latter combination packs quite a wallop. For about a half an hour after lunch, I felt like I was moving even when I was perfectly still.

The other Turkish desserts I tried were equally intense. Noah's Pudding is a thick mixture of cooked and cooled whole wheat, dried fruit, chick peas, raisins and sugar with a pungent, slightly fermented taste. My lunch companions ordered a Cheese Ball, expecting a ball of feta cheese they could smear on bread. Instead, it was a ball of dough made with a hint of cheese that had been boiled, chilled and drenched in syrup. It tasted a lot like a donut hole soaked in honey.

Uras estimates that there are more than 100 Turkish natives studying at the University of Michigan. Many of them stop by Ayse's when she opens at 11 a.m. and ask her to make them a traditional Turkish breakfast: feta cheese, green and black olives, some meat and warm bread with butter and sour cherry jam. Uras says she'll make it for anyone else who asks.

That eating at Ayse's is so pleasant is due in no small part to Uras and her assistants, who are friendly and informative without being intrusive. It's an attitude that seems to convey

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Ayse's Courtyard Cafe
1703 Plymouth Road
662-1711

Food 8 out of 10
Service 9 out of 10
Atmosphere 8 out of 10

Hours: Monday-Saturday 11 a.m.-8 p.m.

Liquor: None.

Plastic: None. Personal checks accepted.

Prices: Inexpensive to moderate. Side dishes around \$2.50, daily lunch and dinner specials around \$6.50.

Wheelchair access: Good. No public rest room.