

SPOTLIGHT

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cartoons in concert



Ayse Uras (right) describes the day's menu.
News photo: Linda Wan

Ayse's Courtyard Cafe a Turkish delight

By LAURA McREYNOLDS
News Restaurant Reviewer



Ann Arbor has no shortage of Middle Eastern restaurants, but it's got only a single Turkish one: Ayse's Courtyard Cafe.

It's been just over three years since Ayse (EYE-shuh) Uras opened her little storefront cafe in the Courtyard Shops complex on Plymouth Road. Since that time, her reputation has grown beyond Ann Arbor's small Turkish community to Washtenaw County and points east.

The fame is deserved. In a world of cookie-cutter chain restaurants, ubiquitous Chinese takeout and indistinguishable sports

bars, Ayse's offers a truly unique menu of simple, likable ethnicity, available for carryout or served in Ayse's pleasant little dining room.

Turkish cuisine is easy to get to know. Its core elements are lentil soup, rice pilaf, savory-stuffed pastries called boreks, meat and rice-stuffed vegetables called dolmas, and sweetmeats made from milk, pistachios, wheat and sugar syrup. Although lamb is the basic meat of the Turkish kitchen, Ayse's also serves chicken, veal and vegetarian entrees.

Ayse usually serves two or three homemade soups each day. One of them is generally her distinctive Yayla ("valley") soup, a yogurt-infused chicken broth spiked with mint and thickened with semolina and a little rice. I love this, but it's not for everybody. One taster thought the combination of tart yogurt and mint reminiscent of toothpaste.

On the other hand, everybody liked the other two soups of the day we tried: orzo in an herbed tomato broth, and lentil. Lentil soup is the most common first course in Turkish cuisine, and although it's made in infinite varieties, it almost always starts with mild, soft red lentils, rather than the more fibrous green, as its base. Ayse's version is no exception, and it makes a fine appetizer. Spooned over her rice pilaf, it also makes a nice light lunch.

Pilaf is another Turkish staple. Ayse's recipe is made with rice and vermicelli, cooked up light and fluffy and separated into individual grains. It's quite good on its own, but most people seem to use it as a bed for stews and sauced meats. Either way, its simple, clean taste is fresh and appealing.

Ayse's refrigerator case is kept well-stocked with boreks, desserts and salads available as sides or by the pound. I've tried any number of them over the years, and liked just about all of them. Last week, the selection included a fascinating celery root and carrot salad, a somewhat disappointingly bland

white bean salad that turned out to have more flavor when allowed to warm to room temperature, and a wonderful diced potato salad seasoned with yogurt and fresh dill.

Rotating lunch and dinner entrees range from aromatic lamb and vegetarian stews to mixed meat dolma platters featuring rice and beef-stuffed grape leaves, cabbage, zucchini and green pepper. The selection is small, but varied, with something to please just about everybody. Recently, I even picked up a chicken and broccoli casserole in Bechamel sauce that went over quite well with the under-5 set at my house.

In Turkey, lamb dishes are made from skewered meat grilled over charcoal, or marinated meat roasted on a tall, vertical spit. In this latter form, it's sliced and served, like a gyros, in flat bread.

Ayse's combines tender, cubed lamb with eggplant, peppers, carrot and other vegetables in wonderful, fragrant stews that warm the spirit as well as the body. Served with a side of rice pilaf and a soft, homemade roll, it remains one of my family's favorite dinners from Ayse's.

Everyone also liked a moist, Cornish hen half served in a light orange sauce, as well as a large green pepper stuffed with rice and ground beef. Each dinner came with pilaf, a roll and a small tossed salad.

Turkish desserts are generally small, but intense, such as helva (flour, butter and granulated sugar cooked to a syrup and then formed into balls), fried dough, Turkish Delight and dried fruit and semolina pudding. Ayse's small retail selection offers another traditional Turkish treat: rose jam, made with rose leaves, sugar and a bit of lemon.

Turkish cuisine isn't at all intimidating, but if you're not sure where to start, all you have to do is ask. Uras and her amiable staffers are informative and helpful without being overwhelming. Most importantly, given Ayse's tiny confines, they know when to hang back and give you some privacy. That's no small feat in a restaurant that only seats 16.

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-Thursday 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-8 p.m.; Friday 11 a.m.-2 p.m., 5-9 p.m.; Saturday 11:30 a.m.-9 p.m.

Liquor: none.

Plastic: none; personal checks accepted.

Prices: inexpensive to moderate; soups and sides around \$2.50. Dinner entrees around \$7.50.

Wheelchair access: small, but accessible. No public rest room.