



Lunch at Ayse's means top-notch service & food.
News photo: Robert Chase

SPOTLIGHT

The Ann Arbor News Entertainment Weekly

July 27 - August 6, 2000

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Perfection finds a home at Ayse's Courtyard Cafe

By AMY YAMASAKI

News Restaurant Reviewer



What do you know about Turkish food? The history of this country that sits with one foot in the east and one foot in the west has fascinated me since my school days. But what does the food taste like there? What are the flavors and dishes of this exotic and mysterious place? Back in 1993, Ann Arbor got its first taste of Turkish cuisine. Ayse's (Eye-sheh) is a charming little cafe tucked away in the back of the Courtyard Shops at Plymouth Road and Upland Drive.

It is a bright and cheerful space with table seating for about 25 people. The entire restaurant is nonsmoking. There are two white boards with handwritten menus featuring the day's specials hanging over a refrigerated case full of fresh, cold salads, baked goods and tempting desserts. You can dine in, carry-out or arrange to have proprietor Ayse Uras cater your next event.

The menu offers soups, cold salads, pilavs (Turkish pilaf), boreks (fritters), appetizers, entrees and vegetable stews. A daily selection of these is prepared on a rotating basis. Many of these items are vegetarian. However, if there is a favorite dish you're craving, you can request it two days in advance and Ayse will do her best to accommodate you. Entrees come with salad, bread and pilav. Also, there is a selection of Turkish beverages from which to choose: juices, imported soda, black tea and coffee. If you like cherries, try the sour cherry juice.

If you like soups, make sure you try the ones offered here. The cold yogurt soup is a refreshing way to start your meal on a hot summer day. This creamy, white soup comes with lots of finely diced cucumbers and garlic in every spoonful. The red lentil soup is a thick-bodied blend of legumes, rice, spices and herbs. It comes garnished with powdered sumac, which is red-dish purple in color and has a taste all its own - difficult to describe but very good. The orange color of the soup contrasts pleasantly with the purple-hued sumac and gives this simple dish a lot of elegant visual appeal.

It's the attention to small details that really gets me excited about eating here. Every dish comes to the table perfectly seasoned. Every ingredient, in some way, reveals itself to you in a way you may have never considered. On her menu, Ayse writes, "Turkish cuisine is the result of time-honored recipes of unexpected combinations that intrigue and delight the palette."

The other night, beef stew with new potatoes, carrots, onions and tomatoes was on the menu. This featured beef that had been braised and then simmered to tender perfection. Whole

cloves of garlic simmered with this savory stew, the onions had slightly caramelized and the carrots were cooked just enough to bring out the sweetness. All of this was set against a mildly peppered backdrop of rich beef broth seasoned with tomato. The stew was served with a bulgur wheat pilav that had a nutty sweetness to it and complemented the stew perfectly.

Also on the menu that night was a heavenly chicken dish. Tender chunks of white chicken meat were stewed with Swiss chard and seasoned primarily with thyme. Swiss chard is a dense green that at first blush has the flavor of spinach. But the firmer body of this green also quickly reveals a much more robust flavor. This dish was richly aromatic and pungent from the thyme. Ayse cooks with fresh herbs whenever possible and the difference this makes is outstanding.

If you get a chance to try Ayse's stuffed baby eggplant, don't miss it. I had it for lunch the other day and it was exceptional. This small dish features one baby eggplant stuffed with seasoned ground lamb with a hint of cinnamon and other sweet spices. A light tomato sauce over the top finishes it. The eggplant was tender and the lamb was finely ground. The dish was perfectly balanced in texture and taste.

Ayse Uras has created and sustained a gem of a cafe. She is a warm and gracious host. She is also an amazing chef eager to share the joy of her cooking with you whether you drop in for a visit or have her cater your next event.

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Ayse's Courtyard Cafe
1703 Plymouth Road,
Ann Arbor
(734) 663-1711

Food	10 out of 10
Service	10 out of 10
Atmosphere	10 out of 10

Hours: lunch - Monday-Friday 11 a.m.-2 p.m., Saturday 11 a.m.-3 p.m.; dinner - Monday-Thursday 5-8 p.m., Friday 5-9 p.m.; closed Sunday.

Liquor: none

Plastic: none

Prices: inexpensive to moderate; lunch \$6-\$8, dinner \$7-\$10

Wheelchair access: moderate. The cafe is small and the tables are close together but passable in a chair. The tables off to the left side as you come in offer a little more aisle room in which to maneuver. The rest room is located back in the kitchen. You have to navigate the aisle between the counter and the refrigerated cases and then into the kitchen.