

RESTAURANTS



JOHN COPLEY

Ayse's Cafe

Best-kept secret

Ayse's Cafe keeps an extremely low profile. Hidden away at the back of the Courtyard Shops on Plymouth, this ten-year-old restaurant isn't even open on Saturday nights. I lived right down the street for years without ever knowing it was there. Fortunately, Turkish neighbors introduced me to this little gem. Although Ayse's has a devoted clientele, it may be Ann Arbor's best-kept secret.

Owner Ayse Uras, tiny and auburn haired, with a charming Turkish accent, serves as chef, hostess, and waitress. Yet she never seems rushed as she calmly takes orders, suggests dishes, or jokes with customers. She's like your favorite aunt from the old country, cooking just for you. The entire restaurant is infused with Ayse's love for cooking and for people.

Ayse's serves no alcohol, but the imported Turkish soda—like Sprite without all the sugar—is a refreshing alternative. The appetizers are cold salads, marinated in the holy trinity of Mediterranean ingredients: olive oil, garlic, and lemon juice. I especially enjoyed the unusual flavor of the olive-and-pomegranate salad, as well as the white bean salad, flavored with bits of cilantro and onion. The lentil roll, with its garlic overtones and mealy texture, reminded me of a more-solid hummus, but if you'd rather have regular hummus, Ayse makes that too.

Ayse makes her famous lentil soup every day, and you can safely ignore whatever other soup is on the menu, knowing it will never be as good. Ayse carefully guards her recipes, but I do know it's made with red lentils, rice, and butter, pureed into a creamy goodness and topped with a few shakes of sumac.

Ayse says her recipes are inspired by "the village fair and the sensuous past of the sultan's palace."

The former seems more likely. This isn't company fare; this is home cooking at its best—familiar things like stews, stuffed cabbage, and meatballs in tomato sauce, but made with an exotic twist that is part European, part Middle Eastern, and all Turkish. Ayse cooks six entrees daily from her rotating repertoire of around two dozen dishes. She even takes requests if you call a few days ahead.

If Ayse could be said to have a signature dish, it would be the eggplant *kebab*: an eggplant and lamb stew held together with tomato, enlivened with onion and garlic, and topped with a rich sheen of olive oil. Another customer favorite is the lamb shank, stewed until it's falling off the bone and paired with whole chickpeas and tomatoes for a subtle, homey dish. Lamb meatballs are small but are piled generously on the plate, mildly spiced and served in a rich tomato gravy. The only stew I didn't care for was the spinach with ground lamb—its tomato-and-yogurt sauce was too sour for me.

Dolmas—stuffed vegetables—are popular in Turkey, and Ayse makes a superb red pepper stuffed with lamb and rice. She also stuffs cabbage leaves with the same mixture and tops it with her homemade yogurt. She even serves a half Cornish hen, marinated in orange-plum sauce and roasted to tender perfection.

All entrees come with rice pilaf, pita bread, and a simple salad of dark greens sprinkled with a salsa of tomatoes and white beans. You dress the salad yourself with the olive oil and vinegar that grace each table.

Turkish desserts are intense affairs. From the honey-soaked *burma*, made with phyllo dough wrapped around walnuts, to the baklava-like *kadayif*, to the rose water-infused Noah's pudding, a few bites were all I needed to satisfy my sweet tooth. The mild house pudding was the only exception: made with semolina and swirled with chocolate, it reminded me of Cream of Wheat.

Since the entire restaurant has fewer than a dozen tables, service at Ayse's is extremely personalized. Ayse and her one

server could give lessons in the art of service, which includes the Turkish custom of bringing a completely new set of silverware with each course. They don't hover, but they're available with the merest wave of a hand.

In addition to serving outstanding food, Ayse's is also a great value. After six of us absolutely feasted one night—appetizers, soups, entrees, and desserts—I was pleasantly surprised to be handed a bill for \$92. I walked out grinning, thrilled to be in on the secret.

—Margaret Yang

Ayse's Cafe

1703 Plymouth Road

(Courtyard Shops)

662-1711

Mon.–Thurs. 11 a.m.–2 p.m. & 5–8 p.m.,

Fri. 11 a.m.–2 p.m. & 5–9 p.m.,

Sat. 11 a.m.–3 p.m. Closed Sun.

Appetizers \$3–\$3.25, entrees \$6.75–\$9.95, desserts \$1–\$3

