

## Restaurant Reviews



### Ayse's Cafe

*Familiar, with a twist*

"Tucked away" doesn't do justice to Ayse's location. You have to know it's there, at the very back of the Courtyard Shops with virtually no road presence on Plymouth. By the time you enter the small, bright space, it feels like a discovery, a secret passed from one adventurous besotted diner to the next.

That's how, over the past fifteen years, Ayse Uras has built her following: customers come to her restaurant because someone told them about it. Part of the attraction is Ayse ("EYE-sha") herself. Born in central Turkey, she guides the dining experience here with an ebullient hand.

The other draw, of course, is the food, chosen from a chalkboard above the order counter. A display case shows off, deli style, the cold dishes of the day; the hot dishes, of course, are back in the kitchen, but the counter help will walk you through the offerings. If Ayse herself is up front, she will, by interview and intuition, divine which is right for you.

For those who have never had Turkish food, the fare stretches from peasant to palace, with a splash of European and a generous dose of other Middle Eastern cuisines, all of it undergirded by spices and methods picked up during the Turks' migration from central Asia to Anatolia. Many tastes are somewhat familiar but come with a twist. For instance, Ayse's eggplant salad is similar to baba ghanoush but has a deeper smokiness, plus a creaminess that comes from the addition of yogurt and a complexity provided by Turkish *maras biber*, an exceptional dried red chili pepper with midrange heat.

The casual atmosphere lends itself to luncheon, but Ayse's food shines even more brightly at dinner. I imagine that with a glass of wine, the serious dining el-

ement will be enhanced—Uras bought a liquor license in March, and since Father's Day she's been offering a small selection of beer, wine, and raki.

Our Saturday dinner started at the counter with Ayse, where we collaborated on a choice of appetizers: a dish of collards and Turkey's pasty, the *börek*, a classic Anatolian stuffed pastry. The salad of braised collards with tomatoes, rice, and kidney beans, served cold with a dab of thick, tangy yogurt, had an appealing mix of textures, although I felt there were too many competing flavors. A surefire starter would be one of the soups, which are generally superb.

While the appetizers were fairly rustic, the main courses were pure elegance. I had ordered a roasted Cornish hen whose orange-plum glaze gave the bird a deep mahogany color and provided a fruitiness over the rough meat texture. My husband loved it so much he took it in trade for his lamb stew—another happy blend of sweet-savory (in this case, apricots and lamb) with unexpected twists provided by tart, popping pomegranate seeds and crunchy almonds.

For lunch I could easily go with a *börek* and a bowl of Ayse's hallmark lentil soup. The *börek* has the built-in sensuality of a filled pastry; the spinach-cheese version layers paper-thin sheets of crisp pastry with an onion-spinach mix offset with crumbles of pleasantly salty goat cheese. The lentil soup is a spicy porridge, a rough not-quite-puree of reddish-gold lentils and rice with a heavenly texture and an understated richness. On a carryout visit, I took home a meze-style range of small vegetarian dishes: green beans with stewed tomatoes; cauliflower with onions and green peppers; cubed celery root with orange dressing; fresh artichoke heart scooped out and filled with tender lima beans. The salads were flavorful yet light, and I particularly appreciated those hard-to-find numbers with artichoke and celery root. I could eat this way all summer.

For a more substantial lunch, choose

from the chalkboard's list of entrees (most of which come with either soup or a house salad). These might include a chicken *köfte*—spicy meatballs in a tomato sauce with a side of bulgur pilaf—or perhaps a wedge of "chicken beshamel" casserole, a braise of tender breast meat with dark lentils covered with a béchamel-style sauce and baked, served alongside a delicate rice-pea pilaf. The seasonings were subtle yet surprising—new mixes of familiar spices, like pepper and cumin in the casserole and dill in the pilaf. Dishes are carefully plated: at one lunch, my friend's dolma looked like a still-life composition—a golden pepper filled with minced beef surrounded by a red puree of tomato sauce with a swirl of white yogurt. Even a mundane soup-salad combo is elevated here, as in that creamy lentil potage alongside a grilled pita stuffed with *çerkez tavugu*—Circassian-style spicy shredded chicken salad with walnuts bound together with a mix of stock and bread crumbs rather than mayonnaise.

After a meal, have a cup of tea in a fragile gold-rimmed glass or maybe an arabesque-patterned demitasse of Turkish coffee. A couple of desserts I tried were just too sweet for me: a baklava with a syrupy rosewater drizzle, and "Noah's pudding" with walnuts, wheat berries, currants, and pomegranate seeds, also with rosewater syrup. But the *sakizli muhallebi* pudding sprinkled with ground pistachios was splendid—Ayse calls it a "palate cleanser, like sorbet." This is a simple milk pudding, but the addition of *mastika*, the gummy resin from the Mediterranean acacia tree, gives it a refreshing pinelike flavor.

Once you've ordered and seated yourself, the waitstaff fairly dote on you, and food arrives and departs at a good pace. Ayse herself will probably stop by the table to see how you're doing.

Like India and China, Turkey is the seat of a once-mighty (and perhaps future) empire. Power comes and goes, and today its food is not nearly as well known as Indian or Chinese. But people always want a good meal, and Ayse's is a wonderful introduction to the depth, subtlety, and character of Turkish cuisine.

**Ayse's Cafe**  
1703 Plymouth  
(Courtyard Shops, behind) 662-1711

Mon.-Fri. 11 a.m.–2 p.m. & 5–9 p.m.,  
Sat. 5–9 p.m. Closed Sun.

Appetizers, soups, & salads \$3.25–  
\$4.25, entrees \$7.95–\$15.95 (specials  
occasionally higher), desserts \$1.50–  
\$4.25

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