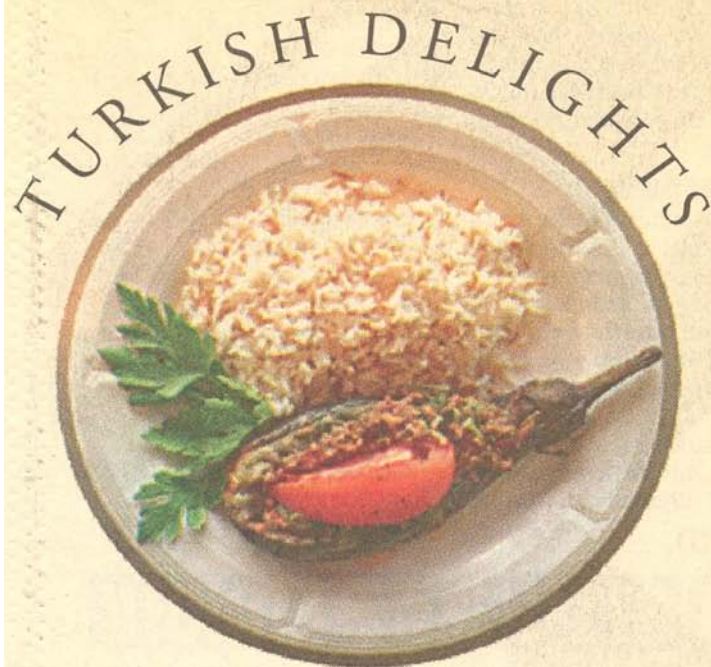


Turkish delights await at Ayse's Courtyard Cafe



AWAIT AT AYSE'S COURTYARD CAFE

Turkish food has always been a rarity locally. For too brief a time in the '80s, we were able to enjoy the offbeat and idiosyncratic Bagley Cafe, on Bagley and 24th, with its Turkish *tabbouleh*, tinted bright red with pomegranate extract, its yogurt-sauced eggplant and almond pudding.

When it closed, Windsor's Mason-Girardot-Alan Manor, where the focus is on both continental and Turkish dishes, was the only Turkish game around. And that business continues.

Now we can also find the refined cuisine, recognized for its healthfulness as well as its depth of flavor, in a tiny, immaculate cafe in Ann Arbor.

Ayse's Courtyard Cafe, one of the Courtyard Shops in a two-level strip mall on Plymouth Road and Upland Drive, is not far from the north campus of the University of Michigan.

Those who manage to find Ayse's (pronounced I-she's)



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have to be absolutely determined to do so. It is about as self-effacing as a place can be, hidden away in the back of the complex and invisible from the street. "Not a good location," sighs Ayse Uras, the guiding spirit behind the cafe.

Once you taste the refined cooking of the talented Uras, however, it won't matter. It is worth whatever perseverance it requires to find the tiny place and its 20 seats. Her *boreks* (flaky pastry triangles filled with spinach and feta, cheese and parsley, or other stuffings), her memorable soups and her lamb or beef stews are not just unusual and delicious, they are light, colorful and nicely served in what Uras originally thought would be mostly a carry-out situation.

When she opened in October, she says, "People came in and sat down, so we started serving them." Real china and flatware are used, not throwaways. And the room itself, with big windows on two sides and a baker's rack filled with such Turkish imports as hot pepper sauce, jams and candy, is a model of cleanliness, so I can well understand why people didn't just rush out with their bags and boxes. It's simply a pleasant place to sit and enjoy the fragrance emanating from the tiny kitchen.

As I sat at lunch on two occasions this week, enjoying a red pepper stuffed with a delicate mixture of rice, ground beef, mint, dill and flat-leaf parsley — herbs that, along with coriander and crushed red pepper, are prominent in this cuisine — I could see people pass by carrying fast-food bags from another of the restaurants in the complex. It was all I could do to resist rushing out to tell them what they were missing.

Some dishes can be found on the menu every day, for instance, the cheese, spinach and potato pastries (*borek*), and vegetarian side dishes and salads including lentil salad, white bean salad and baby eggplant with onions, tomato, pepper and garlic in olive oil. Others are daily specials. For instance, today there is vegetable stew; sauteed eggplant filled with meat and cooked in tomato sauce; as well as *lahmacun*, meat-topped pizzas. Saturday will see beef slices with tomato and yogurt sauce over toasted pita.

Everything is displayed in a glass-



JOHN COLLIER/Detroit Free Press

Ayse Uras is the owner of Ayse's Courtyard Cafe.

enclosed case. Diners simply browse the case, choose what they want, and the food is served to their table, along with Turkish juices or soft drinks, iced tea and, of course, strong Turkish coffee in tiny cups.

In my two visits, I didn't try a dish that was less than outstanding. If I were forced to choose, I'd have to rave about the three soups I tried: first the delicate *ezo*, a yogurt, tomato, mint and vermicelli soup blended so seamlessly and subtly the individual ingredients are almost impossible to identify. Also worth raves were the lentil, again subtle and feather-light, and a cold yogurt, dill and cucumber blend that was perfect for the warm day.

Yes, this is a rave review.

For the five years previous to opening her cafe, Uras catered university parties, after winning some fame among lucky friends who were treated to her cooking at home, where she was a full-time homemaker for her husband and two children. Now that the children are 16 and 12, she felt it was time to branch out.

Uras is the first in her family to be a restaurateur. Her husband, Mehmet Uras, teaches mechanical engineering. But not at U-M. He commutes from Ann Arbor to Detroit to teach at Wayne State University.

I wonder if he'd bring in a pot of soup once in a while for us deprived Detroiters.

ON VACATION: Ayse's Cafe will be closed for vacation the weeks of Aug. 22 and 29, reopening on Sept. 6.

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RATING: ★★ ★ 1/2