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Ayşe's brings taste of Turkey to town



LARRY E. WRIGHT, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Ayşe Uras, left, owner of Ayşe's Cafe, serves a customer. The cafe is in the Courtyard Shops on Plymouth Road.

Cafe offers authentic, mouth-watering food at low prices

BY SUSAN ISAACS NISBETT
News Special Writer

There are lots of homey touches at Ayşe's Cafe, set in the upper level of the Courtyard Shops on Plymouth Road. Pots of African violets or vases of flowers sit on the tables, cafe curtains and lace valences adorn the windows, and a hand-written menu explains the day's six main dish choices on the white board above the display case for salads, side dishes and desserts.

But the real homey touches are in the food itself, prepared by Ayşe Uras, the culinary force behind her eponymous cafe.

Uras has just expanded her restaurant with a new, spacious dining room, but the restaurant retains its casual cafe air. You can linger here, in comfortable dining chairs, long after the last crumbs of your walnut-filled bird's nest and the last sips of your Turkish coffee, and Uras is on site most of the time to greet

regulars by name and provide a friendly reception to the newcomers who might just become regulars after a meal or two.

The French are fond of calculating what they call the *rappor* *prix-qualite* – the price-quality relationship. Let's add in the word *quantite* – quantity – and just say that Ayşe (pronounced AY-shuh) gets it all right.

The dishes of the day, all between about \$7-\$9, all come with rice pilaf, pita bread and a sprightly green salad enlivened with a puckery dressing and colorful shreds of carrots and purple cabbage or a spoonful of lentils and peppers.

Side dishes – a tender, savory eggplant stew, for example, or a sweet turnip and carrot stew, served cold with a squeeze of lemon – are a filling \$3.75. Boreks – flaky pastry pockets filled with spinach and feta cheese or potato (the variety changes daily) – are around \$3.

Among the rotating main dishes that find their way onto the white board, the Cornish hen in plum sauce justly wins raves (and sometimes sells out). The other night, our list of favorites grew to

include heavenly ground-lamb kebabs served sliced atop a bed of toasty pita triangles slathered with garlicky yogurt. Save for that dish's allure, I would have been totally delighted with my tender quarter of chicken in a subtle, cinnamon-allspice-accented chunky tomato sauce, served with pilaf so good I ate every grain of rice.

Good and filling as the main events are, it's hard to resist starting out with one of the soups that the person taking your order will invariably ask if you want. And you do want them. The cold yogurt soup is exemplary, with its fine mince of cucumbers and touch of dill or parsley.

The lentil soup appeals even on a hot day, with its pretty salmon color, its soft, nubby texture (rice enhances the soup), and garnish of fruity, slightly astringent crushed sumac.

Desserts, exotic and not overly sweet, appeal, too. I love Ayşe's "Noah's Pudding," a blend of tender wheat berries, chick peas, dried fruits and very fresh walnuts in a gentle rosewater-perfumed syrup. The house pud-

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Ayşe's Cafe

1703 Plymouth Road (in the Courtyard Shops)

(734) 662-1711

Homestyle Turkish cuisine in a cheerful, casual cafe setting.

Hours: Lunch – Monday-Friday, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.; Saturday, 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Dinner – Monday-Friday, 5-9 p.m.

Liquor: No

Plastic: MasterCard and Visa.

Pricing: Inexpensive. All main dishes under \$10, substantial side dishes and vegetable stews, \$3.75.

Value: Excellent.

Noise level: A peaceful place for conversation as well as dining.

Wheelchair access: Good.

Smoking section: No.

The Bottom Line: Ayşe's Cafe is not on "restaurant row" downtown, but it's worth finding your way there for its friendly atmosphere, casual setting and fine Turkish cooking.

ding, a mild and creamy affair made with semolina, is equally good. The milk pudding, flavored with mastic, a piney resin, has its fans (including me – it's like eating a walk in a breezy evergreen forest) and its detractors; I think anyone with an adventurous palate should try it.

The phyllo-dough spiral of the bird's nest gets only the gentlest dose of sugar and lemon syrup – a nice change from honey-oozing baklava. And though it's not housemade like the other desserts, a slice of pistachio-studded sesame-paste halvah is a wonderful nibble with a cup of sweet Turkish coffee. For cold drinks, sample some of the fruit-flavored Turkish sodas (again, only mildly sweet) or the good Turkish juices – sour cherry, apricot, peach.