

The Blue House – a Multicultural Experience

If you ask Eleonora Semerjian about her restaurant, the Blue House Mediterranean Café, expect to get an education. An education in healthy lifestyles, in building renovations, in world geography, and in design aesthetics. Oh yes, and in food.

By Scott Laird

Eleonora and her husband Sam are the owners of Vernonia's newest restaurant, located at 62467 N. Nehalem Highway, in the location previously occupied by the Spar Tree restaurant. A former industrial and graphic designer, originally from Armenia, Eleonora runs the daily operations of the restaurant mostly herself, with assistance from Sam, her friend Kat on weekends, and two of her four children. She has also worked as a medical interpreter, since she is fluent in both Russian and Armenian. That background in the medical profession makes her well-versed in health and nutritional issues.

"I am not a certified nutritionist, but I learned about nutrition working as an interpreter. I have read and studied a lot about nutrition on my own. And I have brought that knowledge to the food I serve in my Cafe," Eleonora said during a recent visit. "I like to use the freshest, healthiest ingredients I can find."

She also wants the restaurant to be welcoming to everyone. "Many ethnic restaurants are too ethnic, they feel too culturally exclusive. For example, if you go to a Russian restaurant, it feels very Russian. And if you are not Russian, you might not feel welcome there. I wanted my restaurant to be inviting, a place where people feel comfortable. In Mediterranean culture, they bicker over who invented the recipes and what the dish is called, even though they all have the same ingredients, and are prepared the same way. They are very competitive about their food. That's why we called it a Mediterranean Cafe, not Armenian, so no nationality would feel excluded."

Eleonora has even gone so far as to find different translations for the word "restroom," and painted them on the doors. Foreign visitors say they appreciate it. "They tell me it makes them feel special, and welcome." She hopes to add translations of other phrases around the walls of the restaurant. "We want it to feel warm, informal and relaxed for everybody."

Eleonora and Sam live in the Mist/Birkenfeld area. They decided to open the Blue House as a safety measure. Sam works in high tech, and they were afraid his position might be eliminated. "We had been doing home renovations, buying, fixing, and selling properties. This restaurant was available, and we decided to renovate and try a restaurant. Neither of us has run a restaurant before."

Eleonora says her upbringing in Armenia gave her experience as a cook. "Armenian women are brought up as cooks, that's what we do as women, cook for the men. Armenian men never cook. My grandfather would have starved to death before learning to open the refrigerator," she joked. "I have been making three meals a day for my family all my life."

The renovation of the building Eleonora explains, "Was so much fun! I loved it!" It took six months. The building was in very good shape to start. "My husband built the new front porch. Our neighbor, Larry O'Black, Jr. donated all the cedar for our counters. We never could have done it without Larry's help."

Another interesting feature are the counter tops made from the stone table tops they found in the building. "The table tops were made by a local artist who used cut Agates and Tiger's Eye sealed in a resin hardened process. We just had to find a way to use them," says Eleonora. You can see these beautiful pieces at the front counter where you order your food. There is also a hanging chandelier they found in the attic, that they have put to use.

So, about the food. Most of the food is vegetarian, with some lamb and chicken items mixed in. When asked about her philosophy for cooking and serving food, Eleonora told me, "Cooking healthy, fresh meals comes naturally. I put my heart and soul into my cooking. Armenians like to get together, to meet with family and friends, and eat, and eat, and eat. We take our food seriously."

Eleonora and/or Sam go to Portland themselves to pick the freshest and best ingredients. The family regularly eats a semi-vegetarian diet, and the meat they eat at home they raise and slaughter themselves. "We raise our own sheep to eat at home. It's



too complicated to raise ourselves for here at the restaurant, but we are very choosy about what we will serve to our customers," she explains.

When asked about the menu, Eleonora told me, "Our Veggie Gyro's are our most popular item. Our soups are very simple – I use only a few ingredients so the flavors don't compete." One new item on the menu is the Artichoke Pesto Flat bread, "I invented this one myself," said Eleonora. "During the renovation, we were working such long days it was hard to prepare food. My children were complaining there was nothing to eat. Artichokes and Pesto are staples of the Mediterranean diet. I created this for them – it was healthy, easy and quick – and tastes very good. Now it's on the menu."

Even desserts are healthy, or healthier... at the Blue House Cafe. "We buy those in Portland also. Mediterranean desserts are lighter, have less sugar. Ours are made with all natural ingredients. They aren't as bad for you," offered Eleonora.

Business has been good. "Sometimes it's very busy, other times slow. The slow times allow me to finish projects around the building that have not been completed," Eleonora explained. She is starting to see the same customers over and over. "I have, what I've learned, are called regulars," her restaurant inexperience finally becoming evident. "I see the same people two and three times a week. People tell their friends, and they come too. We've had lots of tourists and passersby – it's not just people from Vernonia."

"We are starting to get a lot of bicyclists, they like our healthy food. The motorcyclists – I'm not so sure about. They stop in and ask if we have burgers and fries. Some walk out, some stay and try it. I'm not sure what they think."

"I would really like to be an advocate for healthier eating habits," Eleonora said in closing. "This country is so progressive in so many ways, but our eating habits are really backwards. You should never eat your salad before your meal – you use up the digestive juices, leaving nothing to help with the main course. You shouldn't drink coffee by itself or before your meal, it irritates the stomach lining. I want to encourage people to eat properly and healthier."

It seems like everyone is getting an education at the Blue House Mediterranean Cafe – even the regulars and the owners.

The Blue House Mediterranean Cafe is located at 62467 N. Nehalem Hwy, just north of Vernonia, and is open from 10am- 8pm, Tuesday- Sunday. They serve healthy breakfasts, lunches and dinners, and have numerous vegetarian options.

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