



### **Ararat International Fine Foods**

1800 Avenue Road

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Hidden gems rarely stay hidden. Especially in today's Google-abusing, blog-obsessed, gossip-loving world. As big as Toronto seems sometimes, from a food lover's standpoint, the city is tiny. [Caplansky's](#) flew under the radar for nary a month before food critics started extolling its virtues, and now their facilities are being expanded to avoid smoked meat shortages. **Sweaty Betty's** was a virtual unknown to anyone but locals until it started the Ossington revolution, and now nothing within a five-kilometre radius can stay under wraps until it opens. But some gems stay tucked away, for only the lucky and observant to find and enjoy. Ararat International Fine Foods on Avenue Road is one of those, and has managed to survive, and thrive, for forty years, on quality and word of mouth.



Started by husband and wife, Peter and Aurora Ararat, their shop was a

ground breaker in the city's multicultural boom that was underway in 1968. Immigrants were coming to Canada from all over the world and everyone wanted a small taste of home to help them feel more comfortable in a new and far-away place. Conventional grocery stores were just that at the time, conventional and unexciting. For downtowners, [Kensington](#) or [St. Lawrence Market](#) provided what they needed, but uptown was another story, and that's where Ararat came in. And it's that geography that keeps it off the radar of the downtown crowd.

Forty years ago, the city was a culinary newborn. "When we opened up, no one knew what pita bread was," says Peter, who still runs the store today. "Feta cheese, pine nuts, even garlic was all difficult to find in Toronto." It's hard to imagine anything being difficult to find now, but with so many Europeans, especially Mediterraneans, coming into the city to so quickly, there was a demand to be met and Ararat did just that.

Specializing in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern foods, the store is stocked to the rafters with dried beans, over a dozen kinds of olives, curries, oils, chocolates from around the world, and so much more. Much of what is available can be found in grocery stores, but the quality of the ethnic foods is what makes Ararat so different. Any store can source a decent red curry powder, but at Ararat, it is the best Madras curry available. The same goes for feta cheese. While most grocery stores carry Krinos or some generic brand, Ararat's brings in a Lighvan Persian feta from the Middle East.



For such a small store, the amount of different foodstuffs available is a bit overwhelming. While most regulars go for their usual spices and exotic ingredients, I often venture into the shop for something new and exciting to set the tone for a particular meal or dish. On my most recent trip, I asked Peter and Aurora to help me pick out some things I could use to experiment with for some recipe ideas. Without a moment's hesitation, Aurora was running around the store picking out items for me. She came back with an orange pepper sauce for shrimp or fish; a pomegranate balsamic perfect as a glaze or salad dressing just on its own; a difficult to find German marzipan named Niederegger Lubeck; and a rare tin of Green Label Madras curry. That personal service is what the store was built on, and will ensure that it continues to thrive for years to come.

For the average downtowner, Ararat might be a difficult spot to get to. But a steady stream of regular customers keeps the store busy and successful, while lucky food lovers who aren't so close should all take the opportunity to pop by when in the neighbourhood. After all, some hidden gems are better left unspoiled by the masses.



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