

ALUMNI PROFILES – MELIS AYDOGAN, IH CLASS OF 2012

Finding your fortune in your coffee cup: Ruya's dream of possibilities

Courtesy of Kitsa Rhoad, Indian Hill Schools Foundation



Melis Aydogan

How does an ancient tradition of reading coffee grounds as fortunes find its way into the lives of modern-day, media-savvy coffee drinkers? One cup at a time.

That is the dream of Ruya Coffee founder Melis Aydogan. "Ruya means 'dream' in Turkish, and Ruya coffee is really my parents' immigrant dream of coming to the United States and offering me all the opportunities I have had so far," explains Aydogan. A 2012 graduate of IHHS, and 2015 early graduate of Boston University, Melis started her professional career with Procter & Gamble and is currently the Senior Brand Manager of e-commerce for the Olay brand. That alone would be enough to keep most people busy. But Ruya is a passion project that reflects her heritage and her family. Aydogan credits the marketing classes at IHHS with giving her that spark of inspiration to create a business that could also tell her story.

Melis is working her own dream by creating Ruya Coffee as a way to share the centuries-old tradition and cultural connection of the Turkish coffee ritual she and her family have known and loved. "It is really all about connection, community and conversation," she explains. "The Turkish coffee ritual is one where you slow down,

enjoy the coffee and each other's company. There is also a tradition of telling one's fortune by reading the coffee grounds left in your cup. It's not fortune telling in the dark, sinister sense, it is more of opening up a conversation about possibilities, about finding hope in the future."

"This is a form of oral history that is passed down in Turkish culture," explains Aydogan. One of the ways she was able to share the look and feel of the ritual was through a 2018 pop-up shop in Findlay Market. "I learned about People's Liberty and grants they were giving out as a social experiment. I applied for a grant and was awarded \$15,000 for 3 months to set up a temporary store front in the community. The goal was to prove out that giving small grants to individuals in their community can have great impact."

"I redid an empty store front in Findlay Market and modeled it after my grandmother's living room! We served coffee in the traditional Turkish custom and it was a lovely safe space for people to experience a different culture. It was a way to give a positive voice to immigrants through our product and through every conversation sparked by it." The shop was open from September through November 2018. "Really, the whole local Turkish community was thrilled to be represented. My mother, who sometimes felt overlooked in her American community, was now the star of the show. People were coming from all over just to have her read their coffee grounds. It was

amazing to see her shine and it was a real tribute to her as a keeper of this ancient tradition."

"Most people didn't realize it was a short-term grant, so they really missed it when we closed!" admits Aydogan. The year 2019 led to many other "pop up" showings of the Ruya coffee tradition – at a brewery, at private parties, cafes. She learned to make it portable to continue to bring the experience to others. "We had a fun collaboration with the Contemporary Arts Center and an Indian-American artist who was inspired by the colors of the traditional coffee cups. I have also partnered with the 21C Hotel for a special event."

And let's talk about those cups. All are imported from Turkey for complete authenticity to the experience. It is part of the inspiration in the experience.

Along came 2020, and Aydogan was



The Ruya Coffee experience embraces connection, community and conversation

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able to channel her expertise in online digital marketing to Ruya. Instead of pop-up experiences, she switched her efforts to her website, offering the Ruya experience at home via the sales of coffee and coffee kits, cup included! "Ultimately, this is authentic to the Turkish experience. The coffee ritual is usually enjoyed at home, with family and friends, after a nice meal. It is considered a time of sharing, laughing, community. It is a time of connection," she emphasizes. The coffee and the kits, along with the authentic cups, are available online. "The kits show some of the symbols one might look for in the grounds, for example, a blossom. What might that represent in your life? Are you open to that possibility? That vulnerability is when true connections and friendships are created. It allows reflection and a moment to dream bigger and brighter."

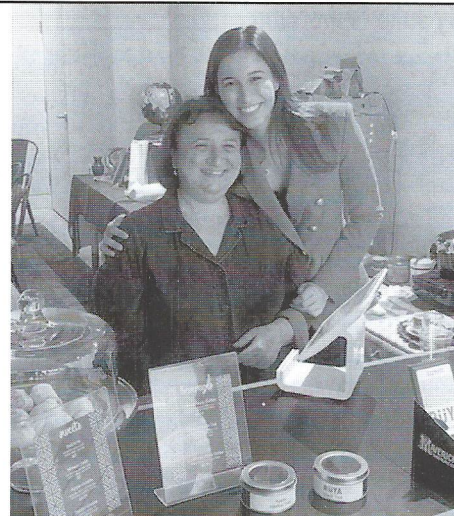


Ruya coffee was offered in a temporary storefront in Findlay Market in 2018 that Melis Aydogan modeled after her grandmother's living room

Another way she is able to share the experience is through a partnership with local specialty chocolate purveyor Maverick. Maverick, like another local Findlay partner, Rheingeist, were all "neighbors" of the original pop-up shop. "I approached them on a whim. Maverick took a few weeks to figure out the formula using the Ruya coffee, but they went with it! I am grateful to them for trying it," she says. The Turkish coffee kits are available in their stores and online. The Ruya chocolate bar proudly states on the label: "Dark as Hell, Strong as Death and Sweet as Love." While this ancient proverb describes the Turkish coffee, and always gets a big response on social media, Aydogan says, "this is actually a very traditional proverb and just another way to weave in my family's culture into the product and share our story." Ruya is more than the immigrant dream, she continues, "it is your own dream."

And what does Aydogan see in her own future? "I see human gathering and connection and laughter. My family is grieving the loss of my uncle this year as so many are grieving their own losses. Coming out of a grieving process reinforced the importance of moments and sharing those memories." With a prophetic tone, Aydogan assures us that "the future of human connection is being more genuine, authentic and vulnerable." One cup at a time.

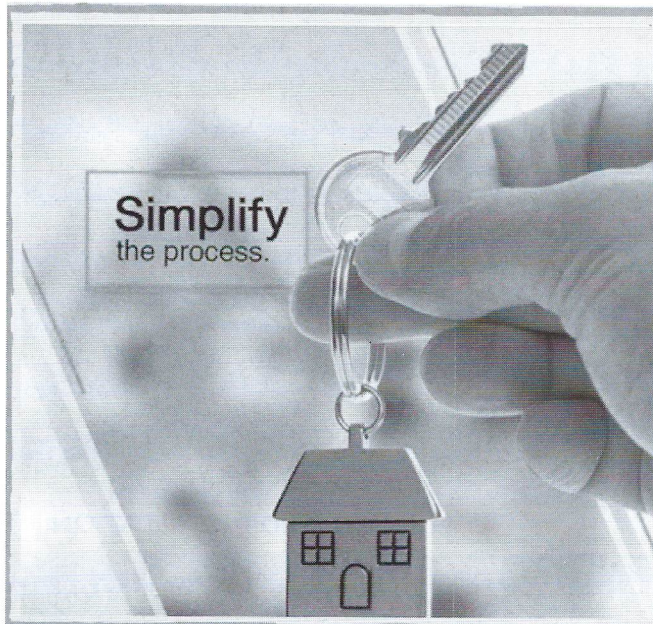
Want to experience Ruya for yourself? Ruya Coffee, coffee kits and chocolate are available online at ruyacoffee.com.



Melis Aydogan with her mother who was a star of the show for reading coffee grounds in customers' cups



Turkish coffee in a traditional cup embraces family, culture and future



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