

Charlotte and the Greek Diner
photos & words by: Ellen Gurley



At the start of the 1900's, Greeks started coming to America and the patterns by which they did so were just as fascinating as they were practical. Often times, a brother from the family came over here, set up shop and literally sent for the remainder of his family once things were looking good. These family members either helped the first sibling out at their business or they opened up their own shop. Usually people from one village settled in the same part of the US; the majority of Charlotte Greeks are from Karpinisi or Fragista.

The lot of the Greeks came over in World War II out of necessity; their homes were literally ablaze. They came, like many immigrants, to escape political unrest and to meet eye-to-eye this place where a new life could be forged. Try as they may to keep their blood pure, many married American people and made the inevitable leap in the direction of blending in and living the dream in the free land. Some of my mother's siblings and cousins had arranged marriages while living in the US in the '50's and '60's. Had my mother's father not been deceased upon her marrying my father, I would never had been born.

Growing up "half white" was very bewildering. Try to explain to Greeks that Greek is an ethnicity and not a race. They get it now but back when I was a child, it was confusing and very apparent that some Greeky-Greeks did not approve of my mother's choice. Other children at church were speaking Greek fluently as toddlers. I taught myself to read and write it in my late '20's early '30's. My conversational Greek is a bit suspect, but I try sometimes and that's all that matters. When I was a child, there was just the one Greek church in town (Holy Trinity on East Blvd.). Now there are three Greek churches; the last two born out of this breeding with the whites (St. Luke and Nektarios). But just as it was in the beginning (the original church broke ground in the '50's), the Greek church is a place that holds so much community and love. It's really a beautiful thing to witness.



I don't have to tell you that Greeks own restaurants. If you have been in Charlotte for any amount of time, you know the presence of Greek diners in town is mind-blowing. Before the restaurant was the coffee shop. At what point they morphed into diners, I cannot pinpoint exactly. The coffee shop, or kafenion, according to Edward Levine in his 1996 article in the NY Times is "a rough place where men gather to talk and down cups of coffee and shots of ouzo".

While the closest you will get to a kafenion in Charlotte is Central Coffee Company, there is no liquor. There are, however, two generations of the Kleto family cranking out baklava, spinach and feta scones and kouroulakia (those twisted cookies). Jimmy Kleto and his wife Louisa (of Colombian decent) are serving up their take on the old school coffee house and not without the physical and emotional support of Olga and Nick (frequently present in the kitchen). Those recipes didn't come from nowhere, people (Olga's father owned the D & P Coffee Shop many moons ago).

Let it be known that in order to run a Greek diner, you don't even have to serve Greek dishes. Most of them are three/four vegetable places catering to the working class who want a fast, somewhat healthy lunch. From where did this demand come? Let's go back to when the brother moved here. He bought up properties all over the CPCC and area where the hospitals are. His brother came and did the same. They paid cash and were right in the middle of the bulk of Charlotte's workers. Yes, the Greeks know how to make Greek dishes but they were in your world now and were acclimating. (Smart.)



The Kokenes family weren't just innovative, they were pioneers; thus the name in the title of their restaurant : WORLD FAMOUS Open Kitchen Restaurant. After some inspiration from a trip up north, they were the FIRST restaurant in Charlotte to ever sell the good ol' pizza pie. Second generation Christina Skiouris and her brother Alex Kokenes are still proudly running the place. One out of their five collective kids, Stephanos, is also very hands on in his grandfather's legacy. They are the oldest Greek owned restaurant in town. It's a wonderful thing to see.

Some Greek's restaurants get featured on the Food Network, some are Italian joints, and most of them run the beloved greasy spoon. But one thing they all have in common is their love for meeting places. That has been carried over from the coffee shop and has spilled over into the churches. Greeks (like many other cultures) like to congregate and to help each other. Feeding yourself isn't just about caloric intake, it's about absorbing ideas around you. This dates back to the early philosophers. It's just another excuse to engage people. I strongly support the patronizing of all local restaurants, Greek owned no exception. But I, like many, grew up with it in my blood.

According to an article by Penelope Karagounis, my grandfather's brother (the one I said I never met) Stavros Stassinis came over before he did (Odysseus). My grandfather and his brother owned George's Grill near the hospitals. Stavros' son, my late uncle, Angelo, owned Stassinis Restaurant (and bought up other properties all over Charlotte). He literally became the wealthiest Greek man in town. By flipping burgers? Nope. Remember above aforementioned property being bought up? Well, the way a big city in the making does is that it grows. And once said hospital or community college expands, they need to buy the land around it. That, my friend, is how a lot of the most beloved Greek owned establishments in town met their demise (Athens of the Mantis, Housiadass and Nickopoulos families) and how their family got to finally see their proverbial ship come in. The American dream. It is both sad to see old places leave (Epicurean of the Castanas family and John's

Country Kitchen of the Margiotis family) and wonderful to see the blisters and foresight of the forefathers present the next generation with financial opportunity.



My 'white' father tried his hand at being a restaurateur against all of my mother's pleading. He had a good eight year run with a vegetable plate place called Cousins. He named it that because upon marrying my mother, she introduced everyone to him as her cousin. I thought that was cute but once he offered me college or to keep running the restaurant, I took off running. Restaurant work is the toughest trade you can pick and it will give you the best work ethic of anyone else out there in the world. I thank my dad for that in action. No 'race mixing' can take away my pride for the Greek diner and I scoff at those who are too good to slide into the booths of one of these Charlotte mainstays. Many-a comedian have done parodies on the stereotypical Greek in the window at the restaurant ("Cheeseburger, cheeseburger, no Coke, Pepsi" - SNL) and we are perpetuating that stereotype actively (and you know this if you've ever seen the "Fresh My Farm" sign at Gus' Sir Beef). But we love "that" guy. There's something very endearing about broken English and a smile. An extended full plate of food doesn't hurt appeal to the apprehension some Americans have of newcomers.

The fact that there are fewer restaurants in town that can be boasted as Greek owned and operated than there were, say, fifty years ago does NOT mean that the offspring are getting away from pride in the culture but quite the contrary. Though marrying out and generational procession occur, many still teach their kids the ideals, the language and the loyalty of the Greek people. Gary Anderson (the Don Johnson of the Greek community) still runs his father's place and raised his children in the church, though he married out. Anderson's was another of those properties scooped up around the hospitals. It was the go to place in Elizabeth for decades. Why did he turn his restaurant into a catering only company? Was it a product of his disregard towards his roots? Did he not *have it* like his daddy did? On the contrary! He downsized out of complete respect and admiration of his grandfather (papou) as he pleaded with Gary (on his deathbed) to "enjoy your life while you are young and make time to travel". He told him "if you don't, you will live regretting it."



Speaking of heart throbs, the prettiest family in town is the Photopoulos clan. Toula and Panos moved here in the '80's and brought with them three handsome sons (Frank, Greg and George). Panos used to do food supplying for restaurants in Chicago. Now-a-days the Greek markets are on busy streets and open to anyone, but "back in the day" it was kind of an underground, closed market. (No, nothing illegal, people.) When Panos moved here, he bought the French Quarter Restaurant. A handful of years later, they began the Greek Isles (one of the only Greek owned restaurants in town that really serves authentic dishes). And fast forward to today, one of their sons, Greg, is operating partner at three and counting Showmars. If you don't know Showmars and the Couchell family name, you don't know Charlotte. Greg (and Frank and George) couldn't imagine doing anything else to support their beautiful families. "Once it's in your blood, it's in there."

While some restaurants may leave the landscape and make the skyline less fat (Liberty East, Mantis, Knife & Fork, Shuffletown, Greg's, Sandwich Construction Company, Venus), there is and always will be the Yiasou Greek Festival. It was born the same year I was (1977). The festival will run the second weekend of September (2015) at the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Church (Thursday to Sunday). Go ... especially if you've never been. These yiyias (grandmothers) work all year round to make the pastries and prep the food. Enjoy their coffee (which is like Turkish coffee), and take in their beloved instrument this bouzouki (which is like Russian music) while enjoying their dancers (which are much like many other culture's line-dancing). If you think about it, we are all a little like each other and we can all like each other a little bit more once we can see past our differences and focus on our sameness. We are all in this together. We have to live, we have to work and we have to eat. Mixed marriages are no longer a big deal and cultural expectations have also lightened up. I know that it will only get more colorful as time goes on. Let me hear you say "OPA!"

Photographed here are:

- Gary Anderson at Anderson's Restaurant
- the Greek Isles Restaurant sign

- the Kleto family (Olga, Nick, Jimmy and Louisa) at Central Coffee Company
- the Diamond Restaurant on a cruise-in night
- Alex Kokenes, Christina Skiouris & Stephanos Skiouris outside the World Famous Open Kitchen

www.YiasouFestival.org (The Greek Fest.) is EVERY September at the Holy Trinity Greek Orthodox Cathedral located at 600 East Boulevard.

The Big Fat Greek-Owned Charlotte Restaurant List:

- **Acropolis** (Kapakos) : 20659 Catawba Ave., Cornelius, 28031, 704-894-0191, www.AcropolisCG.com
- **Akropolis** (franchise - multiple owners - not all Greek) : 8200 Providence Rd., #800, 704-541-5099 / 14027 Colan Cir., #2, 704-714-1113 / 3070 E.Franklin Blvd., Gastonia, 704-868-3636 - www.AkropolisKafe.com
- **Andersons Catering** (Anderson) : 1617 Elizabeth Ave., 28204, www.AndersonsDelivery.com
- **Art's BBQ**, (Katapodis) : 900 E.Morehead St., 28204, 704-334-9424, www.ArtsBBGToYou.com
- **Big View Diner** (Kaltsounis) : 16637 Lancaster Hwy., 28277, 704-544-0313, www.Facebook.com/TheBigViewDiner
- **Cafe South** (Kakouras) : 7901 Forest Pine Dr., 27273, 980-224-7328, www.CafeSouthCharlotte.com
- **Captain's Cove** : 11032 E.Independence Blvd., Matthews, 28105, 704-847-2285, www.CaptainsCoveNC.com
- **Carolina Prime** (Liapis) : 225 E.Woodlawn Rd., 28217, 704-522-8170, www.CarolinaPrimeCharlotte.com
- **Central Coffee Company** (Kleto) : 719 Louise Ave., 704-335-7288, www.Facebook.com/CentralCoffeeCo
- **Charlotte Café** (Roupas) : 4127 Park Rd., 704-523-0431 / 8200 Providence Rd., 704-542-9006 - www.CharlotteCafeINC.com
- **Chicken King** (several locations - Koutroulakis, Mantis, Housiadas) : 2301 The Plaza, 28205, 704-697-8807 / 7016 E. W.T. Harris Blvd., 28215, 704-535-0090 / 2400 Sugar Creek Rd., Sute A, 28262, 704-598-6542 / 3222 Rozzelles Ferry Rd., 28262, 704-393-2055 / 2604 West Blvd., 28262, 704-393-2055 / 5201 Nations Ford Rd., 704-561-4767 / 130 W.Charlotte Ave., Mount holly, 28262, 704-812-8266 / 13215 General Dr., 28273, 704-504-8192 / 423 Bradford Dr., 28208, 704-697-8807 / 1740 W.Trade St., 28216, 704-372-6493 / 9010 Monroe Rd., 28270 ,704-246-6730
- **Chris' Deli**, 3619 E.Independence Blvd., 28205, 704-536-2617, www.Facebook.com/Chris-Deli
- **Diamond** (once Pistoris now Kastanas) : 1901 Commonwealth Ave., 28205, 704-375-8959, www.DiamondCharlotte.com
- **East 74** (Raptis) : 10915 Monroe Rd., Matthews, 704-847-5035, www.Facebook.com/East74Restaurant
- **French Quarter** (Photopoulos) : 321 S.Church St., 28202, 704-377-1715, www.FrenchQuarterCharlotte.com

- **Gus' Sir Beef** (Bacogeorge) : 4101 Monroe Rd., 28205, 704-377-3210 / 106 Mariposa Rd., Stanley, 704-263-4528
- **Greek Isles** (Photopoulos): leaving Bland St. location and announcing new place in September - www.GreekIslesRestaurant.com
- **Greystone** (Koutsokalis) : 3039 South Blvd., 28209, 704-523-2822
- **Harrisburg Family House** (Katsanos & Nickopoulos) : 5429 Highway 49, Harrisburg, 28075, 704-455-3525, www.HarrisburgFamilyHouse.com
- **House of Pizza** (Kakavitsas) : 3640 Central Ave., 28205, 704-568-9410, www.Facebook.com/House-Of-Pizza
- **Ilios Noche** (½ Greek owned : Kaltsounis) : 11508 Providence Rd., 28277, 704-814-9882, www.Facebook.com/IliosNoche
- **Jimmie's** (Pourlos once the Dimos' Maid) : 7024 Brighton Park Dr., Mint Hill, 28227, 704.545.7750, www.JimmiesRestaurant.com
- **Jonathon's** (Matalas) : 10630 Independence Blvd., Matthews, 704-847-8911, www.Facebook.com/Jonathans-of-Matthews-Family-Restaurant
- **Landmark** (Kaltsounis) : 4429 Central Ave., 28205, 704-532-1153, www.LandMarkDinerCharlotteNC.com
- **Light Rail Family Restaurant** (Magitas) : 8045 South Blvd., 28210, 704-643-2121, www.LRRest.com
- **Little Village** (Georgopoulos) : 710 W.Trade St., 28202, 704-347-2184
- **Mad Greek** (formerly Hugo's Diner - Linberakis) : 5011 South Blvd., 28217, 704-523-8296, www.MadCreekCLT.com
- **Mr. K's** (Dizes) : 2107 South Blvd., 28203, 704-375-4318, www.MrKsSoftIceCream.com
- **Nefelie's** (Stamoulis) : 145 Brevard Ct., 28202, 704-464-4601, www.Nefelies.com
- **Nick's Café** (Gallis) : 6302 Fairview Rd., #101, 28210, 704-442-9550, www.Facebook.com/Nicks-Café-At-Southpark
- **Open Kitchen**, the World Famous (Kokenes) : 1318 Morehead St., 28208, 704-375-7449, www.WorldFamousOpenKitchen.com
- **Parkway House** (Kakavitsas) : 5821 E. W.T. Harris Blvd., 28215, 704-563-1323, www.Facebook.com/Parkway-House-Family-Restaurant-On-Union-Street
- **Rusty Onion, the** (Margiotis) : 6654 Carmel Rd., 28226, 980-219-7079, www.TheRustyOnion.com
- **Safari Miles** (Fotinos) : 390 N.Highway 16, Denver, 28037, 704-489-2366, www.SafariMiles.com
- **Sammy's Pub** (Balitias) : 25 S.Main St., Belmont, 28012, 704-825-4266, www.SammysPub.com
- **Showmars** (franchise - multiple owners - not all Greek) : 2136 W.Arrowood Rd. 28217, 704-522-0075 / 201 S.College St., 28244, 704-334-0064 / 7260 Hwy 73, Suite 119, Denver, 28037, 704-827-5801 / 1600 East Blvd., 704-375-3034 / 3225 Eastway Dr., 28205, 704-568-0565 / 1317 Emerywood Dr., 28210, 704-554-8477 / 9783 Charlotte Hwy, Fort Mill, SC 29707, 803-802-0667 / 2601 Freedom Dr., 28208, 704-393-2020 / 2301 Dave Lyle Blvd., Rock Hill, SC 29730, 803-329-7906 / 1451 E. Franklin Blvd., Unit B., 28054, 704-852-9005 / 600 E.4th St., 28202, 704-344-8686 / 700 Haywood Rd., Box 120, Greenville, SC 29607, 864-286-8005 / 214 N.Tryon St., Box 31, 28202, 704-333-5833 / 305 Herlong Ave., Suite 301, Rock Hill, 29732, 803-328-9009 / 9605 Sherrill Estates Rd., Huntersville 28078, 704-895-6199 / 101 N.Tryon St., 28246, 704-333-7469 / 2540 Little Rock Rd., 28214, 704-398-2240, 6850 Matthews-Mint Hill Rd., Mint Hill, 28227, 704-545-3946, 2398 W.Roosevelt Blvd., Monroe, 28110, 704-298-9009 / 138 Williamson

Rd., Mooresville, 28117, 704-662-3383 / 6801 Northlake Mall Dr., 28216, 704-921-7775 / 9925 Park Cedar Dr., 28210, 704-752-1111 / 10612 Providence Rd., Unit A, 28277, 704-847-0334 / 2004 E.7th St., 28277, 704-376-0565 / 1500 E.Dixon Blvd., Shelby, 28152, 704-481-8777 / 4400 Sharon Rd., Suite G-29, 28211, 704-367-1115 / 13000 S.Tryon St., Suite A, 28278, 704-588-4416 / 130 W.3rd St., 28202, 704-333-1528 / 115 McCullough Dr., 28262, 704-547-0265 - www.Showmars.com

• **Skyland** (Kakavitsas) : 4544 South Blvd., 28209, 704-522-6522, www.SkylandRestaurant.com

• **Soul Gastrolounge** (Kastanas) : 1500 Central Ave., 28205, 704-348-1848, www.SoulGastrolounge.com

• **Stacks** (Hatzinikitas) : 11100 Monroe Rd., Matthews, 28105, 704-841-2025, www.StacksKitchen.com

• **Steak & Hoagie** (Pappas) : 903-D Eastway Dr., 28205 / 3401 C. South Blvd., 28209 / 1542 Stallings Rd., Matthews 28104 - www.SteakNHoagie.com

• **Stockyard** (Kakavitsas) : 4925 Rozzelle's Ferry Rd., 28216, 704-399-9999, www.StockyardFoods.com

• **Sunrise** (Evgenitikis) : 6416 Albemarle Rd., 28212, 704-535-1350, www.SunriseRestaurantCharlotte.com

• **Ted's Restaurant**, 8625 Monroe Rd., G, 28212, 704-568-6624

• **Zack's Hamburgers** (Demopolous) : 4009 South Blvd., 704-525-1720, www.ZacksHamburgers.com

*** THIS LIST WAS COMPILED IN 2015. SOME OF THESE RESTAURANTS HAVE CLOSED.**

Nick Kakavitsas και Rena Caracostis Koufaliotis ... Σας ευχαριστώ για τη βοήθεια με τη λίστα εστιατόριό μου. Αν ξέχασα εστιατόριο του καθενός, με συγχωρείτε.