

GROWING APPETITE FOR GREEK RESTAURANTS

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Greek cuisine has moved from back to center stage in the American culinary world. Over the last five years, Greek food and wine has surged forward in several ways, including: the acceptance of the notion of “Greek cuisine” (a term previously not associated with Greek food); the shift of awareness of Greek wines from retsina only to quality varietals from commercial and boutique producers; the growth in the number of award-winning Greek cookbooks and authors; and the broad availability of Greek ingredients.

These ingredients include everything from honey, premium olive oils, fillo, grape leaves and orzo to a variety of distinctive cheeses, as well as the more familiar feta and Kalamata olives. Previously available only in Greek ethnic stores, these products are now widely available in supermarket chains and gourmet stores and

through mail order catalogues and the Internet. Increasingly, retailers are creating Greek-themed promotions to help support sales of these products.

But nowhere has the growth been more dramatic - and visible - than in the restaurant world. Greek restaurants offering upscale, gourmet cuisine and fine Greek wines are surfacing in urban and suburban centers across the country. Whereas in 1992, there were only three “serious” Greek restaurants - Periyali in New York City, Papagus Greek Taverna in Chicago, and Sofi’s Aegean Kitchen in Los Angeles - today the serious restaurant-goer will find dozens of fine establishments from which to choose. And the number is growing by the month.

According to Food & Wine, “first-rate Greek restaurants are opening in New York faster than you can say ‘souvlaki.’” In the December “Year in Review” issue of the restaurant trade magazine Food Arts, Greek cuisine was ranked in the “On the Front Burner” category, just a notch below “Reigning Cuisines” (Contemporary American and Pan-Mediterranean). The Review also called mezes and kataifi (shredded fillo) “hot stuff”.

Gastronomia checked in with some of the latest additions to the Greek dining scene, and this is what we learned:

Estiatorio Milos, the renowned seafood restaurant in Montreal, just opened a Manhattan branch this past August, which has left owner Costas Spiliadis jetting between the two cities. Although it’s too early to determine Estiatorio Milos’s success,

Spiliadis says, “I think the same thing that happened in Montreal is happening in New York. Montreal is a very difficult and sophisticated market. It’s a French city, and people do take food seriously. We were able to redefine Greek cuisine for the mainstream market. It wasn’t easy. We’re still always questioned and we’re always the underdog. Manhattan is another difficult market with greater visibility. I decided that if I could achieve this in New York, then Greek food has indeed reached a new height. And it’s happening. The Montreal reputation has allowed New York to automatically receive attention.” Alan Richman of the Television Food Network said, “Milos has the right to be next to Le Bernadin for serious and classic seafood.” The restaurant has also won applause from New York and The New York Times, among others.

Another new spot in Manhattan is Molyvos, which opened last May. Molyvos, which specializes in Greek home cooking, is run by chefs Jim Botsacos and Rick Moonen, the latter known for his innovative cooking at Oceana. Greek cookbook author and Institute Advisor Aglaia Kremezi acts as a consultant. Molyvos has already garnered raves from the press: The New York Times gave it three stars. Reviewer Ruth Reichl exulted, “This Greek food is presented by people who passionately want you to love it.” Forbes listed it among their All-Star Eateries in New York, and Esquire and New York gave the food and decor high praise. Not only Greek food, but the whole culinary lifestyle - typified by Molyvos’s relaxed, cozy

atmosphere conducive to conversation - has found a new appreciation.

In Baltimore, The Black Olive opened last March. Dimitris Spiliadis (no relation to Costas of Milos), the son of chef/owners Dimitris and Pauline, notes that the style is "assaro taverna," a seafood restaurant where whole fish are filleted and cooked tableside. The Black Olive has introduced diners to a high quality of fish, says Spiliadis. "Sea Bream, also known as Dorade Royale, from the Mediterranean, Bronzini or Loup de Mer, St. Peter's or John Dory - all these are new to the American palate." Spiliadis says that the

restaurant has been packed. It's become known for its fish and fish preparation ("filleting at tableside is a hard art to teach," he notes), as well as the Greek wine selection, and the bread and desserts that Pauline bakes fresh daily. The restaurant was recently featured in a segment on the Food Network which, Spiliadis says, generated numerous calls from people asking directions from the airport!

Other new Greek restaurants joining this growing list include the second branch of the popular Papagus Greek Taverna in the Chicago suburb of Oak Brook, Illinois; Samos in San Francisco,

where the chef strives to use the highest quality Greek ingredients; and Vasilis Greek- American Grill in the Washington, D.C. suburb of Gaithersburg, Maryland, where owner Bill Horstopoulos is creating a newsletter for customers to educate them on authentic Greek cuisine.

