

Taste of Greece Festival is April 29–May 1 in Tempe

Written by By David M. Brown
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The 28th Taste of Greece festival returns to Tempe Town Lake April 29, 30 and May 1.



A celebration of Greek culture in America, the annual event offers traditional foods, imports, live music, folk dancing, carnival rides, games and other activities.

The event takes place 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Sunday, with proceeds benefitting St. Katherine Greek Orthodox Church of Chandler and its philanthropic activities and community charities. Admission is \$3 for adults, \$2 for seniors, students and children 12 and up, with those under 12 free.

"We're proud to carry on a tradition from a homeland rich with unique tastes and culture," says James DeDakis, this year's festival chairman and a two-year member of St. Katherine. "I am extremely proud of my Greek heritage, both from a historical point of view as well as present day. I always get a lot of joy showing, educating and demonstrating our ethnic DNA.

"Taste of Greece represents what Greek culture has to offer," adds DeDakis, a Greek native who grew up in Chicago and moved to the Phoenix area in the mid 1970s. "And, you don't have to be Greek to enjoy the festival; there's something here for everyone."

The Phoenix area holds four of these events annually — each sponsored by one of the four Greek Orthodox parishes in the Valley. The other three are Holy Trinity, Phoenix; Assumption, Scottsdale; and St. Haralambos, Peoria.

The events are held in the respective cities. The Chandler event is at nearby Tempe Town Lake because of the growing number of attendees each year. The first festivals were held on the grounds of St. Katherine and then downtown Chandler, with the last five festivals at Tempe Town Lake.

"The main reason for the change in venues is the increased popularity in our annual festival," says Harry Kantarze, a native Ohioan who joined St. Katherine in 1989 and served as its president for 10 years and is now vice president of the Parish Council. He notes that the last two years events have averaged approximately 14,000 attendees each.



St. Katherine members volunteer at the event and for weeks prior. For instance, dozens of parishioners prepare traditional Greek appetizers, entrées and desserts. These include Grecian chicken; lamb on a spit; dolmathes, grapevine leaves stuffed with ground beef, seasoned rice and herbs; spanakopita, thin filo dough filled with spinach and cheeses; souvlakia, lamb shish-kabob; saganaki, flaming cheese; and pastichio, a Greek lasagna with baked macaroni and ground beef covered in bechamel sauce.

Also available will be home-made pastries such as ouzo cake; baklava, filo dough filled with nuts and spices; kourabiedes, shortbread-like cookies covered with powdered sugar; and loukoumathes, pastry puffs sweetened with honey and sprinkled with cinnamon.

Young Greek folk dancers will appear in authentic costumes and Grecian Express, a local dance group which has been performing for more than 40 years, will perform traditional songs for community dancing. In addition, children will enjoy carnival attractions and adults the "agora" marketplace where vendors will offer arts and crafts, jewelry, CDs, books, icons and Greek imports celebrating traditions and religious beliefs.

Founded in 1982, St. Katherine, 2716 N. Dobson Road, is led by Father Phillip Armstrong, who joined the congregation in 1993.

"Our annual festival affords the Southeast Valley the opportunity to be transported to Greece for a weekend," Father Armstrong says. "It is a family event that allows our parish to give a glimpse of the faith and culture of the Greek-American."

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Comprising about 200 to 300 families, the congregation represents the East Valley parish of The Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America, whose metropolitan, or archbishop, is in San Francisco and ecumenical patriarch in Istanbul, Turkey, as the leader of the Church of Constantinople. The church is allied with but not identical to others such as the Russian Orthodox and Serbian Orthodox churches, which maintain separate hierarchical leadership and adhere to similar but not identical tenets.

"The St. Katherine Greek Festival has been the event that introduced me to fellow Greeks upon my arrival in Arizona in 1995 from Montreal," says Nick Tsontakis, AIA, the Scottsdale architect who designed the 30,000-square foot church facilities. "It's a community within a community which makes my family feel welcome and secure."

"How special is it to see three, sometimes four generations of family all volunteering their time for a common goal," DeDakis says. "It is not uncommon to see a yiayia and papou [grandmother and grandfather] working in one of our booths alongside their children and grandchildren. And, don't be surprised if you see the great-grandparent sitting in a chair telling everyone what to do. You will see that same family on the dance floor exhibiting their passion for life, dancing to traditional Greek music.

"We Greeks have an expression called 'kefi,' a zest for life," he adds. "We as a culture have an exceptional work and party ethic. We work hard and we play hard."