

It's All Greek to Me

Written by Written by Kim Westerman

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Without so much as purchasing an airplane ticket, the Grecian fare at Athens on 4th Ave. evokes an evening in the Plaka.

Athens, Greece is one of the most beautiful cities in the world, with its awe-inspiring Acropolis and historic surroundings, and its most picturesque neighborhood is the Plaka. Whether or not you've been to the European country, you can imagine its ancient cobblestone streets winding toward the aroma of fresh fish on the grill or lamb stewing on the stove. One of Tucson's most beloved restaurants, Athens on 4th Ave., evokes the feeling of dinner under a starry sky on the Plaka.

For more than 15 years, the co-owner and executive head chef of the eatery, Andreas Delfakis, has run the Tucson favorite out of a charming space on the corner of Fourth Avenue and Sixth Street.. Georgios Varnasidis, Athens's co-owner, host, chef and general manager, is married to Delfakis's daughter, Cyriana. Together, the three have created a most welcoming and harmonious space as seen in the bougainvillea that elegantly climbs the fence that encloses the outdoor dining patio and the Greek music pouring from the speaker system inside.

Everything on the menu is a hit. An especially exciting appetizer is the tiri saganaki. Kefalotiri cheese, sautéed in clarified butter, is flamed tableside with Greek brandy—a dramatic presentation made more so by the exuberant “opa!” shouted as the dish sizzles. If you love gyros, but don't want to fill up on them, try the gyro appetizer.

The mildly spiced lamb and beef is sliced thinly atop a puffy pita with Greece's most famous sauce: tzatziki (a mix of cucumber, yogurt and garlic).

The menu also offers two potato-based spreads—skordalia, a strong garlic spread; and taramasalata, a salty spread made of cured fish roe. Both are good with bread or unsalted rice. Or try the avgolemono, Greece's version of chicken soup (with rice, lemon and egg, rather than noodles).

There are also salads, but they are not lettuce-driven as Americans have come to expect. Greece grows few leaf lettuces, as they represent impotence. (The gods turned beautiful Adonis into a wilting head of lettuce when he angered them by trying to steal Hera away from Zeus.) Instead, think ripe tomatoes, olives, sweet raw onions, feta cheese—and of course, the country's famed extra-virgin olive oil.

Main courses are equally tempting. Calamari, a popular dish in Greece (evidenced by the squid that hangs on lines to dry in nearly every beach town in the country), is the best in town—hands down. Breaded very lightly and pan-fried, the dish is served with homey Athenian potatoes, peeled and roasted, then sprinkled with Greek oregano. One of the kitchen's longtime signature dishes is the braised lamb shoulder, a Greek classic, browned in the pan and then slowly stewed with tomatoes, onions and spices. (It used to be an occasional special, but it became so popular that the restaurant promoted it to the daily menu.) Other meat dishes include pork tenderloin, lamb chops, a New York steak and chicken souvlaki.

Fish is done simply and without adornment, with the focus on the freshness of raw ingredients. The special is usually salmon, cabrilla, bass or halibut, broiled at high heat and finished with white wine and garlic. The same simple care, embellished by the addition of feta, is given to large prawns from the Gulf of Mexico.

Ignore the requisite list of wines from California; this is the only place in Tucson that offers a broad selection of Greek wines. (What could go better with traditional Greek food, anyway?) Greek wine has come a long way since the days when Retsina was the only variety available in this country: Try the Boutari white from Santorini, perhaps the island best known for white wine production. As for reds, the light-bodied Naoussa goes with almost anything, and the heavier Gaia Notios (made from Agiorgitiko grapes) is best with the meat dishes. The list even offers three organic wines.

Desserts are light, so there's no excuse not to try one. Baklava is always available, but even more interesting is galaktobourekio, a rich and creamy custard. Regardless of which dish you choose, you'll undoubtedly be inclined to belt an out a joyous “opa!”