



- HOME
- RESTAURANTS**
- LIFESTYLE
- JERSEY SHORE
- ATLANTIC CITY
- TOWNS & SCHOOLS
- TOP DOCTORS
- EVENTS
- BEST OF JERSEY

- Restaurant Finder
- Reviews
- Recipe Box
- Breaking Eggs
- On the Vine
- Table Hopping with ROSIE

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A | A | A Share | Print

Jersey's Bumper Acropolis

A boom in ambitious new restaurants takes Greek cuisine beyond moussaka and gyro.

by Mary Ann Castronovo Fusco

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Photo by Erik Rank.

If you doubt we're in the midst of a Greek-restaurant boom in New Jersey, just ask Nicos Zavolas.

"About 27 or 28 places opened in the last two years with a Greek menu," says Zavolas, a sales rep for Lacas Coffee Company of Pennsauken, a Greek-owned firm that supplies restaurants throughout the state.

The new restaurants differ from traditional Greek diners and restaurants in the attention paid to the fine points of Greece's famously zestful and sun-splashed cuisine. "The competition is very high-end now," says Sofia Karakasidou, a native of Thessaloniki (Salonika) and chef-owner of **Kuzina by Sofia**, which she opened in **Cherry Hill** in 2007. "I'm very glad about that."

Greece's Mediterranean seafood bounty lies at the heart of its cooking. Restaurants like **Varka Fish House** in **Ramsey** (2005), **Axia Taverna** in **Tenafly**, and **Pithari Taverna** in **Highland Park** (both 2006), and this year's spangling newcomer, **Nisi Estiatorio** in **Englewood** ([click here to read review](#)) proudly display the catch of the day on ice in their dining rooms. "You can do so much with it," says George Vastardis, a native of Piraeus who opened **Limani Seafood Grill** in **Westfield** in 2007 (not to be confused with **Limani Blue**, yet another Greek restaurant, in **Mahwah**).

George Kyrtatas of Medford, author of *My Big Fat Greek Feast* (Small Potatoes Press, 2004) and owner of **Hathaway's**, a **Cinnaminson** diner, also runs the [littlegreekchef.com](#) website and is developing a Greek cooking show for TV. "If it's done properly," he says, "Greek cooking is extremely healthy."

Aegean restaurants are reproducing faster than you can say "alpha to omega." Peter Hajjyerou, a native of Cypress, opened **Greek Taverna** in **Edgewater** in 2006, then another in **Montclair** last year. He will open a third this spring in his hometown of **Glen Rock**. **Montclair's Greek Delights** recently expanded. **It's Greek To Me**, an archipelago of cozy, convivial restaurants, is adding an eleventh location (in **Clifton**) by early fall, plus a new concept—**It's Greek To Me Express**, to open in the food court of the Garden State Plaza mall in **Paramus** in May. **Limani Grill** also plans to expand. Even traditional Greek diners are "transitioning from what they've traditionally offered" to include more Greek specialties, says Deborah Dowdell, president of the New Jersey Restaurant Association. "It's the natural evolution of people's palates becoming more sophisticated."

That goes for the restaurateurs themselves. Many are scions of the diner trade. Hajjyerou formerly operated the **Tiffany Diner** in **Paramus**; his parents owned the **Heritage Diner** in **Hackensack** and the defunct Pier 17 restaurant in Paramus. Alex Nissirios, who opened **Stamna** in **Bloomfield** last year, also owns the venerable **Nevada Diner** in **Bloomfield**. Vasilis Mastrokostas, a native of Messolongi in central Greece, operated the Leonia Café before going Greek in 2007 with **Vasili's Taverna** in **Teaneck**. "I was confident people would like the food," he says.

Some trace the origin of the boom to the 2004 Summer Olympic Games in Athens. The worldwide spotlight "took us to a different level," says Hajjyerou. "It was time." But the new wave is not all-octopus-all-the-time. When **Erini Restaurant** first opened in **Ewing** in 2007, the menu "used to have more fish than meat, but the meat-and-potatoes people were a little bit upset. We had to tweak it," says Chris Fifis, who, with his son, Nick, co-owns the restaurant that bears Chris's late mother's Greek name. "We do Greek specialties, but the menu itself is not solely Greek."

In **Asbury Park**, Savas Tsivicos, a native of Cypress and president of St. George Greek Orthodox Church, refers to his restaurant, **Synaxis...at the Shore**, opened in 2007, as Mediterranean and Greek (synaxis is Greek for "coming together," he explains). "It's not as limiting," he says. "The Greeks are very peculiar. They think they are the best cooks. So they don't necessarily go and support Greek restaurants." New Jerseyans are much more ecumenical. The gods must be smiling.

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