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Summer Salad



Seafood S

NOBEL PRIZE-WINNING ECONOMIST JOSEPH STIGLITZ RECENTLY TOLD CNN, "The American Dream is a myth." Perhaps Stiglitz hasn't yet visited Famous Greek Kitchen in the Byram section of Greenwich. It's a story for dreamers everywhere.

In the mid-1970s, John Karipides and his wife, Elizabeth, moved from Greece into a small apartment on North Water Street and started a family. He purchased the space directly below the apartment and opened a restaurant. Famous Pizza and Souvlaki was born to humble beginnings; though the name has changed, it's still serving pizza, souvlaki and other Greek fare nearly thirty-seven years later.

Maria, the youngest of John's four children and the marketing mind behind Famous Greek Kitchen, fondly recalls a memory that encapsulates her father. "It took this older man with a cane forty minutes to drive here. As soon as he opened the doors, he turned around and started walking back to his car because there were no tables," Maria says. "My father saw, chased him down the street, and asked him to come back. The man said, 'But it's packed.' My dad said, 'Don't worry, we'll find you a seat.'"



Maria smiles and explains why this story lingers with her: “This place is built on personal connection. Dad really had a relationship with everybody, and he still does. We call him The Mayor, because he stands at the door and waves.”

Pointing toward a nearby waiter, she says, “I know that his daughter’s birthday was last week. One of our waiters is having his wedding here. We all grew up in here, worked in here. I’ve been working here since I was ten. My birthday parties when I was younger were my three best friends sharing a pizza in that booth in the corner.”

A few years ago, John’s son Steve, the Culinary Institute of America-trained chef, who has been cooking in restaurants like Napa Valley’s Tra Vigne, New York City’s Periyali and Greenwich’s own Round Hill Country Club since he turned eighteen, devised a plan to reinvigorate the restaurant. “The food was outdated, the place was outdated,” Maria says. “Dad’s love and compassion for his community and his relationships with people were what kept the place going for thirty years.”

John didn’t hand over the reins easily. He was wary of his children’s ideas: starting a new menu from scratch and a complete interior renovation. “Dad had a full-on panic attack. He thought no one was going to come to the restaurant,” Maria says. Eventually, John agreed to the plan and took a vacation to Greece while Steve and Maria started the overhaul.

Even sister Sophia, an interior designer, added to the changes—freshly cut flowers, contemporary art, comfortable seating and a VIP-esque back room.

At Famous Greek Kitchen, everything you see, touch and taste has the signature of the Karipides clan. Maria is the voice. Sophia, the aesthetic aura of the well-appointed space. Steve, the culinary genius appearing from the kitchen only when his creations are complete to his perfectionist standards.

The summer salad, with baby arugula, heirloom tomatoes, feta, watermelon, fresh mint and parsley, grapes and pine nuts, is a delight, surprisingly fresh and flavorful. The tyrokafteri—a dipping sauce comprised of feta, jalapeño and habanero—and edamame hummus is magnificent with fresh bread. Also, do try the lamb baby back ribs, which are tossed in chimichurri and a little salt, grilled,

and served with a tzakziki dipping sauce of yogurt, dill and sour cream.

Famous Greek Kitchen prides itself on its sourcing, using only the highest quality ingredients, such as mostly wild seafood—specifically, its branzino and black sea bass. The seafood saganaki is an outstanding summer option; it’s a glorious arrangement of shrimp, scallops, clams and mussels tossed in a light tomato sauce with scallions, mint, dill and feta.

“Our dishes represent what we’re doing here: light, health-conscious cooking, with no butter, no fats. We use just garlic, olive oil, lemon and so forth. We don’t cut corners and we’re proud of that,” notes Steve.

Even the olive oil here is ethereal, and for good reason. “The olive oil we use I get from my in-laws’ olive trees in Kalamata. They ship here three times a year on huge pallets,” Maria notes.

By the door, a family—a mix of young and old—eats with zeal. In between bites, they laugh, tell stories and pal around with the staff. They remark on how wonderful the renovations look and how delicious the food is. A bashful grin plays upon the waiter’s face as he thanks them.

“We may have changed,” Maria says, “but Famous Greek Kitchen is about family. It’s what we are, it’s who we are.”

