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Greek dining beyond the Danforth: hold the ‘Opa!’

Mamakos, Greek Street, It's All GRK and Volos are among the new wave of Greek restaurants eschewing Toronto's well-established zone of Greek dining.

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Lively Mamakos on Ossington Ave. advises "We sell everything" in its window.

By: **Amy Pataki** Restaurant Critic, Published on Fri Oct 17 2014

The customized road sign outside College St. restaurant **Greek Street** makes its point: "Greek Outpost."

The skinny blue-and-white space across from Kensington Market's fire hall is exactly where the city's best souvlaki purveyor wants to be.

Here, six kilometres from Toronto's Greek dining epicentre on Danforth Ave., Greek Street grills juicy Perth County pork subtly perfumed with allspice, then wraps it in

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stretchy homemade pita for an \$8 sandwich built to tempt the area's academics and artists.

"Why would anyone in their right mind want to be on The Danforth?" asks Aristedes Pasparakis, owner of the street food-inspired eatery.

He's not alone. Greek dining is moving away from the long-established Danforth enclave. Restaurants on Ossington, Queen West and in the Beaches are part of a new generation offering modern design, fine wines and artisanal foods — or even just messy gyros — in trendy neighbourhoods where phyllo has never been a presence.

One such area is Ossington, where the front window of two-month-old **Mamak**s advertises in Greek, "We sell everything." Maybe not everything, but certainly killer frites dusted with grated kefalograviera cheese, sweetbreads splashed with lemon, capers and dill, and lick-the-plate-clean desserts like brûléed Greek yogurt in a raspberry moat.

What Mamakas owner **Thanos Tripi** first envisaged as a takeout spanakopita shop on the south end of the strip morphed into a sit-down restaurant. (You can still try the homemade pie, drizzled with thyme-infused honey, for \$8.) Designer Anwar Mukhayesh turned a former furniture shop into a whitewashed idyll with leather seats and a tungsten glow. Most striking is the colourful backlit frieze of **Karagiozis**, a hunchbacked Greek shadow puppet figure shown doing different jobs, including cross-dressing as a belly dancer like a Levantine Dr. Frank-N-Furter.

A purposefully un-Shazamable playlist of world music is far from "Zorba the Greek." Mamakas further stands apart with its French-style haricot verts and red-centred lamb chops. Plus Tripi stocks only Greek wine and beer, such as **Volkan's Santorini Black**, an ashier Guinness.

"Greek dining had to be brought up to speed. I'm bringing traditional Greek to a more contemporary setting and that juxtaposition works on Ossington," says Tripi, 39.

Good looks certainly help. **Paralia**, a gorgeous and huge space on Lake Ontario, is decorated like a boutique Santorini hotel, with jewel-toned cushions and blue-tiled reflecting pool popping against the white walls and thatched ceiling.

Until a few months ago, **Paralia** was called **Trinity Modern Greek Taverna** and served grilled seafood and certain Greek comfort foods. A display of whole fish on ice remains part of the stunning decor.

It's a far cry from the familiar frescoed dining rooms on the Danforth, where diners share mass-produced dip platters and pallid village salads. The new breed of Greek restaurants has even left behind the tableside flambéing of saganaki cheese, that flaming spectacle that Danforth patrons love to shout "Opa!" for.

Restaurateurs say they're banking on the healthfulness of the Mediterranean diet to drive wider acceptance of Greek food. That and Torontonians' worldliness.

"Diners had a pre-conceived notion of Greek food as souvlaki and moussaka, with everything fried. It's like how Italian was in the '70s, old Chianti bottles and big portions of spaghetti and meatballs. Now people have travelled and realized that's not the case," says Peter Tsebelis of **King Street Food Company**.

Diners aren't the only ones who have changed. The next generation in the industry now looks for inspiration to Athens, where the chefs of restaurants like **Aneton** and the Michelin-starred **Varoulko** shop the markets daily for their simple and unpretentious cuisine.

"There's a level of energy in Greece that the new places here are bringing to the table," says Andreas Antoniou, 31, of **Estiatorio Volos** in the Financial District.

Volos set the tone for the new Greek restaurant when it opened three years ago. The chic interior blew away blue-and-white stereotypes. The menu had no souvlaki or dips, which Antoniou says represent 35 to 40 per cent of sales at other Greek restaurants.

While the modernization has resulted in "rock-steady business," Antoniou still respects his Danforth elders.

“It’s great you’re seeing young professionals in the industry reinvent and repackage Greek dining, but it would be unfair to suggest that what we’re doing is harder than what they have been doing successfully for years,” Antoniou.

At Greek Street, Aristedes, as he is known, is both the old guard and the new wave. For 30 years he has pushed the envelope of Greek dining in Toronto; his last restaurant, Lambros on the Danforth, served modern Greek tapas.

He moved to College St. to get a fresh start.

“Right now you need to drop a nuclear bomb on The Danforth to turn the tide. The plates of rice and potatoes and oil and muck and horrible meat, it’d be a hard grind on that strip,” says Aristedes, 72.

Naturally, he’s doing something different with the 14-seat Greek Street: The big hits of what Aristedes calls “the Greek diaspora,” meant for takeout.

Besides the outstanding souvlaki, there are long poura pies filled with slightly tangy ricotta and grated zucchini with a hint of fresh mint. Dips like rough-and-smoky eggplant are packaged with homemade pita crisps. There are tubs of thick yogurt creatively topped with nuts and fruit (preserved or fresh). And there’s the \$10 so-called Sunday Dinner wrap, in which lamb, roast potatoes, sharp onions, crunchy cucumber and creamy feta have a party.

But in the great migration away from the Danforth, newer doesn’t always mean better. Take the new-wave gyros of **It’s All GRK**, which give the late-night, greasy-pleasure, shaved-meat snack a fresh look, if not taste.

Second-generation restaurateur Matty Tsoumaris last year opened [his shop](#) on Queen St. W., near Trinity-Bellwoods Park, hardly a Hellenic hotspot. Inside the handsome space decorated with imported olive oil cans and sea salt, customers line up before the open kitchen.

It’s not good food — not with bland meat and brown-at-the-edges romaine — but as with [Messini](#) on the Danforth, gyros can be a gold mine.

Tsebelis, who started his career with partner Gus Giazitzidis at Myth on the Danforth in 1993, now runs Italian restaurants like Buca and the upcoming Jamie Oliver project at Yorkdale. He says he’d seriously consider opening a Greek restaurant.

“We’ll go back to serving tables ourselves, put in backgammon and grow lush moustaches,” Tsebelis jokes.

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Getting to the Greek

Estiatorio Volos, 133 Richmond St. W., [volos.ca](#)

Greek Street, 370 College St., 416-413-9628

It’s All GRK, 756 Queen St. W. (and two other locations), [itsallgrk.com](#)

Mamakas, 80 Ossington Ave., [mamakas.ca](#)

Paralia, 1681 Lake Shore Blvd. E., [paralia.ca](#)

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