

Food

It's all Greek

New wave of Hellenic hot spots are here

By ANDREA STRONG

TURN the clock back 20 years, and the world of Greek cuisine in New York City was limited to family-run joints in Astoria. Uncle Nick's in Midtown and a high-end hideaway on 20th Street called Periyali. Fast-forward to 2006, and the landscape has significantly changed, with haute *estiatorios* like Molyvos, Milos and Avra. But the growth spurt continues, with a new slate of Greek restaurants offering something a little different than the standard fresh-fish-and-meze formula.

KELLARI TAVERNA, 19 W. 44th St.; (212) 221-0144

Above the bar at Kellari, the new Greek taverna in Midtown, the words "Enter as Strangers, Leave as Friends" are printed on a placard. And it is this feeling of warmth and hospitality that pervades the entire experience at Kellari, an

impossibly cozy Midtown gem, with wood-beamed cathedral ceilings and walls warmed in sunset hues. Greek for "cellar," Kellari



Michael Sotiriou

STEAK A CLAIM: A killer cut at Christos Steak House

offers 250 wines by the bottle and dozens by the glass — ample choice for pairing up with an extensive menu of contemporary Hellenic fare by an impressive pair of chefs — Costas Tsingas, the former 2004 Olympic Games chef, and Peter Spiropoulos, who was previously chef at Avra and Mylos. "Our goal is to be innovative and to provide variance

from the Greek norm," explains managing partner Nick Lyras, "but to remain consistent with traditional flavors and raw materials of the Greek kitchen."

The menu starts with dips like melitzana, smoked eggplant with black sesame (\$8.95), and *sardalia* (pumpkin, almond and garlic), and is followed by a unique selection of raw and marinated fish like the signature barbouri, a red mullet soaked in vinegar, rosemary and olive oil (\$14.95). Traditional whole fish is sold by the pound and grilled with lemon and olive oil, but the kitchen also offers more ambitious dishes like *siogrida*, a red snapper grilled in grape leaves with pumpkin, almonds garlic and greens (\$25.95).

But the book here is the lion's selection of *saganaki* (think Greek fondue) such as *karsikioti*, a warm goat's cheese baked with spiced apricots and crushed almonds (\$12.95), and *vichou*, a peasant cheese crusted in walnuts, sautéed with sage and apples, and flamed with ouzo (\$13.95). Don't try this at home.

AMMOS, 52 Vanderbilt Ave.; (212) 922-9999

Greek for "sand," Ammos is a sunny and breezy slice of the Greek coastline smack in the middle of Midtown. Chef/partner Charis Christou's menu takes you on a tour of regional Greek cuisine spanning more than a dozen cities from Cyprus to Piraeus. "We created a menu that is based on regional selections from Greece, to give people an idea of the variety of cuisines," explains George Trantides, a partner in Ammos.

Try *koupe*, jumbo lump crabmeat with lobster and caramelized onions in bulgar-wheat crust (\$10) from Cyprus; *pestrofa*, smoked trout with boiled Thikon gold potatoes and house pickled quail eggs (\$14) from Macedonia; and *peari pikli*, oven-braised sea bass cooked in a clay pot with white wine, onions, tomatoes, zucchini and fresh sage (\$28), a preparation from Crete.

But Trantides not only wants to share the regional cuisine of his homeland, he also wants to share its spirit. On Saturday nights, he brings in a live Greek band. "People get on the tables and dance and throw flow-

ers," he says. "We don't throw plates." We substitute flowers."

CHRISTOS STEAK HOUSE, 41-06 23rd Ave., Astoria, Queens; (718) 777-8400

While seafood is the thing at most Greek restaurants, Christos takes a carnivore's approach with a menu of beautifully marbled dry-aged prime beef. This Astoria landmark was born as Christos Haspo Taverna in 1974 and was reborn Christos Steakhouse in January, when Allan Wartski and George Stergiopoulos purchased the restaurant, redesigned the space and hired chef Mina Newman, the perfect choice. This woman knows her way around a slab of beef from her days as chef at Dytch Prime, but she is also schooled in the world of Greek cuisine from tenure at Thalassa.

"We wanted to bring the restaurant in tune with 2006 standards, but we did not want to abandon our Greek roots," explained Wartski. "So our appetizers offer a twist on the traditional dishes, and main courses offer what people expect from an American



FISHY STORY: Chef Peter Spiropoulos of Kellari with the catch of the day.

steakhouse."

Striking this balance, Newman's starters include grilled, bread-on shrimp wrapped in grape leaves (S16) and a Caesar salad of romaine hearts dressed in a creamy feta-yogurt dressing. Main courses follow the Peter Luger route: a 48-ounce porterhouse for two (\$67), a 24-ounce T-bone (\$29), and on and on. To

keep things on point, Newman tips her hat to Greece in sides (\$6) like sautéed spinach and feta cheese, and baked orzo with *kafelou-graviere* cheese, alongside classics like thick-cut onion rings and the ever-important vegetable charade known as creamed spinach.

BARBOUNIA, 259 Park Ave. South; (212) 955-0242

The latest restaurant from the group that brought us Sushi Samba, Barboounia is by far the most stylishly chic of the new Greek entries, with lofty archways, ceramic tiled floors and a long, lean, white marble bar lit with bare bulbs and backed in dramatic floor-to-ceiling windows.

From a stunning exhibition kitchen, chef Michael Crescotti turns out contemporary Greek fare through the wider lens of the Mediterranean, reaching out to Italy and Turkey for inspiration — dishes like *kolhe* kebabs of minced lamb and coriander, with a mint tahini dipping sauce and Turkish salad (\$13); house-made feta gnocchi with ouzo-brained fennel, sweet sausage and aged pecorino cheese (\$14); and *rimonaro*-braised beef short ribs with zucchini, tomato, eggplant and spinach (\$25).

But the menu isn't the only place where Greece comes to life. The cocktail list plays with Greek ingredients as well, like the ouzo menthe, a refreshing mix of muddled fresh lemons, mint and Orzo 12 (\$9). As they say in the old country: *As pi*



MEAT SUITE: Chef Mina Newman in her steak-aging room.

Grecian classics

Uncle Nick's is a longstanding Midtown spot that offers authentic Greek fare, from gyro and kebabs to moussaka at great prices. 747 Ninth Ave. at 50th St., (212) 245-7992

Since 1983, Periyali has been the benchmark for contemporary upscale Greek fare. Don't miss the unbelievably tender red wine-marinated, charcoal-grilled octopus. 35 W. 20th

St.; (212) 463-7890

Crowds come to Zygbes Taverna for its souvlaki and for the best tzatziki in Astoria. 22-53 31st St., (718) 728-7070

Tilly's Taverna is known for oversized portions, delicious fresh grilled whole fish, and its oversized back patio, perfect for large groups. 2813 23rd Ave., (718) 728-9055