

AT OLYMPIA CAFÉ, COOKING TRADITIONS ARE ALIVE AND WELL

By CASEY BRAND For the Savannah Morning News April 7, 2015 Publication: Savannah Morning News (GA) Page: 6B Word Count: 902

A rainy afternoon in downtown Savannah finds Nick Pappas behind the counter at Olympia Café, joking with employees, his eyes crinkling as he laughs. Pappas is the co-owner and chef at Olympia, a Greek restaurant at 5 E. River St.

Over a lunch of seared salmon on Greek salad, Pappas speaks freely about his love of food and travel, his lifetime as a cook, and his affection for the city of Savannah.

Pappas is friendly and sociable, with a deep, gruff voice. His voice is accented, but he speaks with purpose and precision. He is dressed casually. Instead of chef's whites, he wears a white polo shirt marked by two small circles of rogue cooking oil.

Pappas grew up on a small island in Greece, without modern conveniences like electricity or ice. His family owned a menagerie of animals, including goats, sheep, a cow and a pig.

"It was like Noah's ark," Pappas laughs. "We had one of everything!"

A large backyard garden provided the family with tomatoes, cucumbers, eggplant, okra and five kinds of beans. To preserve the vegetables, the family dried them in the sun. Pappas remembers the vegetables fondly. His mother stuffed jars and pots with sundried eggplant and okra, lamb and fresh tomatoes. These were his favorite meals as a child.

Pappas is careful to make a distinction: These vegetables were actually dried in the sun, not in some room with artificial light or dehydrated in an oven. This insistence on authenticity and tradition is reflected in Olympia's menu.

The chef's culinary education began at a young age, spurred by his mother's expertise and an abundance of fresh, homegrown ingredients. His mother was his first teacher in the kitchen.

"I wanted to learn everything from her," Pappas says. "I wanted to cook like she did. And I figured there was only one way to learn it - by being next to her."

After a childhood spent in the kitchen, Pappas decided to study hotel and motel management. His studies taught him every aspect of running a business in the hospitality industry. As a student, Pappas washed dishes, waited on diners and learned to cook. Along the way, Pappas also picked up tricks from his family and friends. A Greek fisherman taught Pappas the secret to making perfectly tender octopus, a trick that Pappas still uses at Olympia today.

After graduating, Pappas left his little Greek island to see the world as a cruise ship employee. During the 1950s and '60s, cruise ships offered an abundance of high-quality food, an aspect of

the industry that enticed Pappas. At sea, he made dishes of hot pasta and cold lobster between courses of fine French cuisine.

"Back then, on the cruise lines, they gave you the best food money could buy," Pappas said. "It really opens up your mind, seeing food like that, especially coming from a small country. It was really elaborate."

Pappas recalls a particularly impressive presentation of lobster. Thick slices of lobster lay next to a whole lobster shell, claws and all, on ice. The lobster was garnished with Kalamata olives, cut to resemble flowers and shellacked with glaze.

Pappas worked on cruise ships for seven years, traveling from New York to the Caribbean islands and everywhere in between, before quitting to get married. Pappas and his wife then moved to New York, where he opened an Italian restaurant in midtown Manhattan, followed by a second restaurant.

Ever the traveler, Pappas then moved from New York to Detroit, where he opened a popular nightclub in the city's Greek town area. Pappas was on his way to Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., to begin his retirement when he stopped in Savannah, changing the course of his life.

"I was very impressed with the beauty of this small city," Pappas says. "It looked like my island."

The similarity between Pappas's Greek village and the seaside Georgia city convinced him to stay and open a business, even though his friends advised him against the investment.

"Everybody was telling me, 'Nick, you're gonna lose your money there,'" Pappas says.

When Pappas arrived in Savannah in the late 1980s, "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil" was still a few years away from being published. The Savannah College of Art and Design had not yet revitalized and reshaped Savannah's downtown. River Street was not a tourist mecca, but a blank canvas.

Pappas saw his opportunity and invested in a former warehouse, the same space Olympia occupies today. After almost eight months of renovations, Pappas and business partner Vasilios Varlagas finally opened Olympia Café in June 1991.

"When ("Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil") came out, all of a sudden, business started rising," Pappas says. "You would see people on the street holding that book. Up to that time, Savannah was kind of Sleeping Beauty."

When athletes flocked to Savannah in 1996 for the Olympic water events, Olympia Café experienced another boon. The restaurant even served a gold medal winner, Pappas notes proudly.

In the years since, Olympia has become increasingly popular with tourists and locals, buoyed by the friendly, familial attitudes of Pappas and Varlagas.

Today, retirement is nowhere in sight for Pappas. In his spare time, the husband and father of two likes to make jewelry, a skill he learned from his father.

As more customers sit down to eat meals of crumbly feta cheese, crisp vegetables and fresh fish, Pappas returns to his lively kitchen. Cooking, he says simply, is in his blood.

Casey Brand photos (1) The Olympia Cafe at 5 E. River St. in Savannah (2) Sandeep Tamrakar, left, and Nick Pappas

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