

Opa!

Greek immigrants showed strong affinity with the restaurant business since the beginning of the 20th century when they began coming to the U.S. in large numbers. The reason for this is often attributed to a lack of English skills, but the first Greek restaurants, actually coffeehouses where patrons could linger, probably had more to do with the absence of women among early Greek migrants. Coffeehouses furnished community. Although, in big Eastern cities, many Greek restaurants continued to focus on Greek immigrants, many enterprising Greeks took the step of expanding beyond their compatriots. Some, such as Charles Charuhas who established the Washington, D.C. Puritan Dairy Lunch in 1906, were expanding or transitioning from the confectionery and fruit business.

While heavily invested in the New England lunch room business, especially in Providence RI and Lowell MA, Greek immigrants spread to many regions of the U.S, bringing restaurants to the restaurant-starved South. It is impressive that a Raleigh-based Greek trio opened its 15th restaurant in North Carolina as early as 1909. At that time, Greeks were said to be “invading” the lunch room trade in Chicago, operating about 400 places. Because of the simplicity of American cuisine, it was said that two months spent shadowing an American cook was all it took for Greek restaurateurs to pick up the necessary skills.

Other successful Greek restaurateurs of the past century included John Raklios who at one point owned a chain of a couple dozen lunch rooms in Chicago. In New York City, Bernard G. Stavracos ran the first-class restaurant The Alps on West 58th, established in 1907. The Demos Cafe in Muskegon MI was one of that city’s leading establishments. In Dallas, The Torch of the Acropolis had a 36-year-long run, closing in 1984, while the College Candy Kitchen was an institution in Amherst MA.

The children of successful Greek restaurant owners often preferred professional careers, but a new wave

of Greek immigrants arrived after WWII, gravitating to diners, particularly it seems, in New Jersey. In 1989, the author of the book *Greek Americans* wrote that according to his estimate about 20% of the members of the National Restaurant Association had Greek surnames.

And, as if demonstrating a flair for adaptation, according to a 1990 study, Greek-Americans were then dominating Connecticut’s pizza business.

[<https://restaurantingthroughhistory.com/2013/01/08/greek-american-restaurants/>]

