



# BIRMINGHAM GREEKS

HOW GREEK FAMILIES  
FOUND A NEW HOME  
IN THE MAGIC CITY

BY GEORGIA CLARKE

Understanding the family tree of Greek restaurants in Birmingham, Alabama, is like solving a Rubik's Cube—a task best suited for the patient.

In Birmingham's Homewood neighborhood, there's Demetri's BBQ, a barbecue joint opened by Demetri Nakos in 1973 and currently run by his son Sam. Downtown, meat-and-three restaurant Ted's has been a local institution since Ted Sarris opened it in 1973; today, it is owned by Beba and Tasos Touloupis, another Greek couple who bought it from Ted in 2000. There's also Nabeel's, a café in Homewood owned by Ottavia and John Krontiras, and a jaunt away in Bessemer lies The Bright Star, a restaurant started by Tom Bonduris in 1907 that's still operating as one of the country's oldest family-owned spots. There's also Gus's Hot Dogs opened by Gus Alexander in 1947, and Sam's Super Samwiches owned by Sam Graphos, one of the original founders of Birmingham-based hot dog chain Sneaky Pete's. And you can't leave barbecue chain Jim 'N Nicks out. Opened by father-son team Jim and Nick Pihakis, this Birmingham-born eatery has expanded to 34 restaurants (and counting) in seven states since its founding in 1985.

When it comes to Tim Hontzas's family lineage, the confusion only thickens, with family hands in multiple restaurants around the Magic City. From Niki's West owned by Pete and Teddy Hontzas and The Fish Market run by George Sarris, to his very own booming "Greek and three" named Johnny's, Tim is a restaurateur with a family history as rich as the Greek-influenced Southern food he serves every day.

Tim's grandfather was Yanni (Greek for Johnny) Constantine Hontzopolous, who ventured to America in 1921 at the mere age of 16 with only \$17 in his pocket. He was from a small village called Tsitalia in the northern part of Peloponeso (a region in southern Greece) and made his way to New Orleans where his name was shortened and Americanized to Johnny Hontzas. He started washing dishes at a restaurant there before heading northward to McComb, Mississippi, where he officially dove into the restaurant business.

"It was in an old train depot," says Tim. "It was a tiny restaurant but that's where he got his start; he made lots of friends. Then he moved to Jackson, Mississippi, where he started the city at the time."



JOHNNY'S

In Jackson, Johnny opened the Plaza Café, which he strategically placed next to the state courthouse, giving him a built-in clientele. The restaurant was a great success, but then he was on to his next venture: his namesake restaurant, Johnny's, also in Jackson.

Once Johnny was settled on American soil, different family members migrated to the states under his wing. He would teach them English and help them learn the restaurant business.

"They would try to have one come over and get their roots planted," Tim says. "That's how it began. Once they've got a foothold on where they are, then they start sending more."

Those who were established gave relatives jobs in their restaurants, and once the newcomers got settled, they'd branch out and start their own businesses and help the next generation.

"That's what happened with Uncle Gus [Hontzas]," says Tim. "My grandfather brought him over and taught him the business. He lived with my dad and grandfather for six years. My grandfather then sent him to Birmingham to buy Niki's West from my grandfather's sister Margaret."

Ownership bounced between family members and family clans, but rarely escaped the Greek community.

For many of these Greek immigrants, beginning a life in America was difficult not only because they were in a foreign land away from their family, but because they knew very little English.

"There were so many immigrants in New Orleans when my grandfather was there that it was just this big melting pot," Tim says. "But you didn't have Rosetta Stone; you just put your head down and you listened and learned."

But what made the difference between success and failure was their desire to learn and their close-knit community. They observed their bosses and neighbors speaking and communicating and picked up on words and phrases from the English liturgy spoken in the Greek Orthodox Church. When children were old enough to go to school, they'd pick up English from classmates, and come home and teach their elders. If someone was hungry, they'd feed them, and if someone needed help, they were there to offer a hand. Life in America was hard, but to them, their new life was a gift.

"Life was so much harder in the village where they were from," Tim says. "They say if you had food in the village, you're rich. They wanted to come over here, they wanted to learn, and they wanted to be successful. They were so proud to be here, and they wanted to assimilate within the population, but it was hard for them to do so."

Greeks looked different, spoke differently, and worshipped differently, which meant they faced persecution, just like so many immigrants. Most joined the restaurant industry out of sheer necessity. It took little formal education and spoken English to successfully cook or bus tables, and with little money to spare, many could still afford things like a hot dog stand or produce cart. For these Greeks, it wasn't about spreading their culture with



others, it was about adapting to their new home. This is why many Greeks built their businesses not on the food they grew up with, but with the food that was already popular in the region.

"You didn't see Greek people serving spanakopita and tiropita and keftedes and this and that," Tim explains. "They served barbecue and they served hot dogs and they served meat-and-threes—Southern cuisine."

The original Johnny's menu had things like fried chicken, cheeseburgers, spaghetti, and sirloin steaks, with an occasional Greek-influenced item thrown in such as a Greek Omelet and Johnny's Special Athenian Salad. Most Birmingham-based, Greek-owned restaurants were similar, but they were also bringing their own ideas to the food scene.

These early Greek restaurants in the Magic City were often viewed as the Highlands Bar and Grill (acclaimed chef Frank Stitt's James Beard Award-winning eatery) of their time. They were the places doing things that Birminghamians had never seen before.

"They were going to Panama City in an old station wagon with the back seats cut out," says Tim. "They'd pile it up with fresh fish and throw ice on it. When they got here, they'd pull all the fish out, break them down, bleach the station wagon, and go back the next day. Niki's and John's and Bright Star were the first places doing fresh whole fish brought from the Gulf and hand-cut steaks."

Today, new generations are operating these decades-old institutions, and many of them are doing so the same way their parents and grandparents taught them.

At Johnny's in Homewood, Tim is that old-school kind of restaurateur. He doesn't hide behind an office door, but rather he's the face of the restaurant—the face you'll see peeking over the kitchen counter six days a week or walking from table to table, greeting friends old and new. He opened Johnny's in 2012 as an homage to his grandfather and the tradition that Johnny started when he arrived in the United States almost 100 years ago. Tim, too, serves things like fried chicken, but you'll also find menu items

that speak to his Greek heritage, like keftedes (Greek meatballs) and fasolakia (stewed green beans and tomatoes).

If you ask Tim, there's an obvious correlation between Southern and Greek hospitality, whether it means helping your neighbor or feeding a stranger.

"My grandfather would take care of people off the street all the time. He'd bring them out of the cold and give them a hot meal," says Tim.

In keeping with Greek and Southern cultures, he believes that, "as long as you've got food and family, you've got something."

*Bring the flavors of Tim's Greek heritage to your dinner table with recipes for traditional keftedes and tiropita on page 58.*



## KEFTEDES WITH TOMATO GRAVY

Recipe courtesy of Tim Hontzas  
Makes about 6 servings

When Tim's mom makes this dish, she sears the meatballs and simmers them in the tomato gravy in her cast-iron pans. He also serves this dish at his restaurant, Johnny's.

### Meatballs:

- 5 tablespoons olive oil, plus more as needed
- 1 large yellow onion, diced
- 2 tablespoons grated garlic
- 2 cups finely crushed Ritz crackers
- ½ cup fresh mint leaves, chopped
- ½ cup fresh oregano leaves, chopped
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt
- 3 large eggs, lightly beaten
- 1 pound ground beef
- 1 pound ground pork

### Gravy:

- 2 large onions, diced
- ½ cup minced fresh garlic (about 3 cups whole cloves)
- 2 cups shredded peeled carrots
- 2 (28-ounce) cans peeled plum tomatoes, crushed by hand
- 2 cups low-sodium chicken stock
- ¼ cup tomato paste
- 5 sprigs fresh thyme
- 5 bay leaves
- 2 sprigs of fresh mint, torn
- 2 teaspoons kosher salt
- ½ teaspoon ground black pepper

1. For meatballs: In a 14-inch enamel-coated cast-iron braiser or large Dutch oven, heat 3 tablespoons oil over medium heat. Add onion; cook, stirring occasionally, until golden brown, about 12 minutes. Add garlic; cook for an additional minute. Transfer onion mixture to a large bowl, and let cool. Wipe pan clean.
2. To onions, stir in crackers, mint, oregano, and salt until combined. Stir in eggs until combined. Add beef and pork, and stir with hands or a wooden spoon until fully combined. Shape meat mixture into golf ball-size pieces, and place on a baking sheet.
3. Heat remaining 2 tablespoons oil in same pan. Working in batches, gently brown meatballs, about 3 minutes per side. Remove from pan.
4. For gravy: To pan, add additional 2 tablespoons oil, if needed. Cook onions over medium heat until caramelized, about 20 minutes. Add garlic and additional oil if



needed; cook for an additional 10 minutes.  
5. Add carrots, and cook for 10 minutes. Stir in tomatoes, stock, tomato paste, thyme, bay leaves, mint, salt, and pepper. Add browned meatballs. Bring to a simmer; cook, uncovered, for 1 hour.

## TIROPITA

Recipe courtesy of Tim Hontzas  
Makes 1 (10-inch) pie

A flaky cheese pie, tiropita is often served on its own with salad greens or as an appetizer.

- 1 pound feta cheese, crumbled
- 1 pound grated kefalotyri or Parmesan cheese
- 1 pound myzithra or whole-milk ricotta cheese
- 3 large eggs
- 2 lemons, zested
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice
- 1 tablespoon extra-virgin olive oil
- ½ pound phyllo dough (about 20 sheets), thawed according to package directions

½ cup unsalted butter, melted  
Salad greens, to serve

1. Preheat oven to 325°.
2. In a bowl, combine feta, kefalotyri or parmesan, and myzithra or ricotta. In a separate bowl, whisk together eggs and lemon zest and juice. Add egg mixture to cheese mixture, and stir until combined.
3. Brush bottom and sides of a 10-inch cast-iron skillet with oil. Place one layer of phyllo in bottom of skillet, letting excess extend over sides of skillet. Brush well with butter, and add another layer, rotating the sheet a quarter turn to partially cover exposed sides of skillet. Repeat with 8 more layers, turning skillet each time. Add cheese mixture. Top with remaining phyllo dough, brushing and rotating each sheet again. Fold excess phyllo over top toward center, and brush generously with remaining butter. Refrigerate for 15 minutes.
4. Bake until top is golden brown, about 45 minutes. Let cool for 30 minutes, 1 hour before slicing. Serve with salad greens, if desired.