

Michael Psilakis

REINVENTING GREEK CUISINE IN AMERICA

By **Chrysoula Economopoulos**

Making some of the biggest headlines around in the culinary world these days with his eclectic style of Greek cuisine is 40-year-old Long Island native **Michael Psilakis**. Freshly-christened **Bon Appétit** magazine's chef of the year in September 2008, Psilakis conjures up rustic Greek recipes at his Manhattan restaurant **Kefi** to the delight of his patrons and growing fan base.



Yet his real claim to fame emerged at his other flagship Manhattan restaurant, Anthos. Here, a pioneering vision to bring Greek cuisine to the haute level became a reality. Psilakis serves up both fully reinvented classics, as well as original recipes that only resemble traditional Greek cuisine insofar as they remain true to its flavor palette. Regardless of whether Psilakis is cooking traditional or nouveau, however, one thing is certain: This star chef has earned Greek cuisine a place at the very top of the culinary world, right alongside other world-class cuisines.

But Psilakis' journey did not begin under the tutelage of a French master chef, nor did it begin after years of toil rising through the kitchen ranks. Instead, this self-taught chef's comet-like ascendancy to culinary acclaim began just six years ago. Psilakis, who had first earned an accounting degree, took a job as a waiter at T.G.I. Friday's to help pay his way through law school. Discovering that the restaurant business was his real passion, he switched gears and eventually became owner and manager of Ecco, an Italian restaurant on Long Island, in 2002.

One lucky night – though he did not know it at the time – Ecco's chef did not come to work. So by necessity, Psilakis took the reins of the kitchen and simultaneously ignited his culinary career. Over the following year, he immersed himself in on-the-job training and reading up on anything cooking related to get up-to-speed and fluent in running the show in the kitchen.

In everything that Psilakis does, it is clear that his cultural background and family play an enormous role. He cites his mother as his primary source of inspiration. Yet his father has also played an important hand at teaching him to value the food that was put on the Psilakis family table. It is no wonder why Psilakis says, "I fell into the restaurant business really by luck, and as soon as I got into the restaurant business, I felt like I was home."

Currently, Psilakis is chef owner of three highly-acclaimed restaurants in Manhattan and is on the verge of opening a


fourth. Each existing Psilakis house, which he owns and operates along with long-time friend and business partner Donatella Arpaia, is earning serious thumbs up from patrons and critics alike.

Anthos in midtown Manhattan is the restaurant that has put Psilakis' distinctive stamp on the culinary world. Here, Psilakis turns out unique, often reinvented upscale Greek fare the likes of pear and fennel soup topped with a tsoureki crouton, and grilled swordfish spetsofai. The haute spin he has put on this primarily peasant-rooted food earned Anthos a Michelin star in 2007 and a James Beard nomination for best new restaurant in 2008.

Kefi is Psilakis' other great Greek success story. It first opened in the challenging space and location in which he made his first culinary foray into Manhattan with nouveau-Greek restaurant Onera. While Onera's unique approach to Greek food did not appeal to the neighborhood, Kefi made a big splash with the more traditional dishes that Psilakis' mother would not only be proud of, but could recognize as her own. Kefi recently moved to a larger location with a new look and feel, but still the same down-home cooking that has earned it a dedicated following. What will replace Kefi? That is yet to be revealed, but Psilakis makes no secret of his plans to install a new restaurant concept that promises to send even more waves through the food world.

And if this didn't keep Psilakis busy enough, he and Arpaia unveiled new Italian cuisine at cozy restaurant Mia Dona in early 2008 to rave reviews. This includes nomination to the New York Times' list of the ten best new restaurants of 2008, announced on December 31.

Psilakis, who dreams of opening up a restaurant in Greece, seems to only get better at what he does as the challenges increase. This latest dream may soon be a reality, as the media in Greece is also taking notice of the trail that he is blazing.

Psilakis proudly points out, "We are practicing a genre of food in New York that they're writing about in the country of its origin. Think about that for a moment, and think about if you can say that about any other chef that you know here in the United States of America." Psilakis' current and future fans can take that to the bank. They can also stay tuned for Psilakis' yet-to-be-named cookbook, to be published in Fall 2009 by Little Brown. 

bon appétit

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THE BON APPÉTIT AWARDS 2008

Each year, the editors of the magazine set out to honor the top players in the world of food, the ones who are the most inspirational, influential, and innovative. We start with a very long list that—after much discussion, debate, and input from past winners—is whittled down to a select few. On September 15, Editor-in-Chief Barbara Fairchild will host a gala dinner at New York's Del Posto to celebrate their work. Here are this year's winners. Join us in our salute to the people and organizations that are changing the way we eat and drink—for the better.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY OLAF BLECKER

chef of
the year

**MICHAEL
PSILAKIS**

chef-restaurateur
new york city

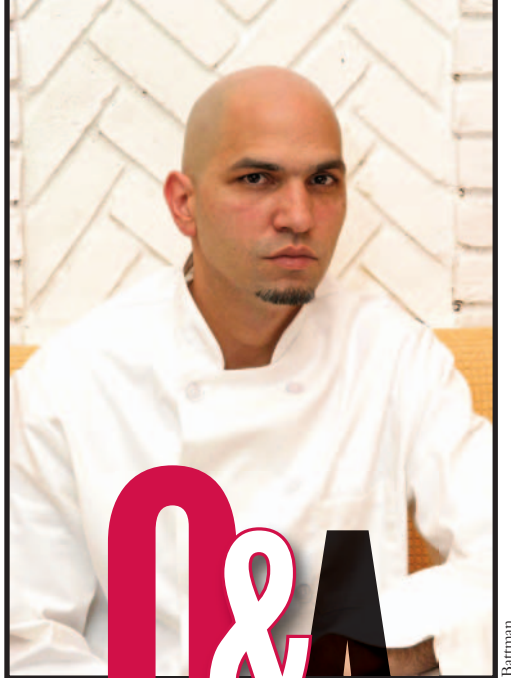
■ Growing up in a Greek household on Long Island, Psilakis learned the foundations of traditional Greek cuisine; today he is known as the man who totally reinvented it. During the six short years the 38-year-old chef has been cooking professionally, he has

pulled off nothing short of a Greek revival with his critically lauded restaurants Anthos and Kefi in New York. "It was a hard sell, especially in the beginning," says Psilakis. "I got tired of answering the question

"Is it really Greek?" His dishes—cubes of raw tuna dusted with chili powder and flavored with apple and feta; octopus with bay leaves, fennel, and lemon confit—may be unexpected, but they are perfectly in step with the flavor profiles of his Mediterranean

forefathers. Early this year he opened Mia Dona, a cozy Italian restaurant. Next up is a cookbook based on stories from his childhood, and possibly the realization of his ultimate dream: his own restaurant in Athens.





Battman

Q&A

Greek America sat down with Psilakis to get an insider's glimpse into his inspiration, his work, and his Greek roots.

Your connection to food runs deep. How did your early experiences growing up help to form this connection?

I grew up in a very traditional Greek household so there were strict, gender specific roles back then. My mother was a housewife and a wife and a mother, for all intents and purposes. That's what her job was so she was really the person who was responsible on a daily basis for taking care of her family. One of those responsibilities was cooking for us. Food – as for most Greek families during those times – was a variable that she used to bring her family together.

What you realized over time was that, as I got older and you really looked at what she was doing, she was cooking not necessarily for her. She was cooking for her family. It wasn't that she was just cooking to provide us food so that we could eat and survive. It was more about bringing us all together every night to sit down and have dinner as a family. What you begin to realize is that these people inherently look at food as a gift. It's something that they're giving back to their family.

I think as I started going into the kitchen a few years ago, what I realized was that I got so much joy, as my mother did during all those years from giving this gift, that I found myself wanting to give and give and give more....

When I fell into the kitchen on this kind of crazy magic carpet ride that took me from accounting into the restaurant business, and then from the front of the house into the kitchen, I realized that this was something that I, too, had not only a passion for but a craving for beyond I think could be satiated. It

was something that was inside of me and that I couldn't help. I think all great cooks have that. Cooking at home and cooking at the restaurant may be different, but at heart and in its soul is really the same. It's really about this gift.

Somewhat by necessity, you jumped in as head chef at your restaurant Ecco. During the time you spent learning your trade, did you have one single "aha" moment where you knew this was what you were meant to do?

I think I knew right away. It was just like "you're home." I'm the oldest son in a Greek family. We never went on vacations. We were always home, and we were always entertaining. A typical weekend at my house was 20 or 30 people. That was every weekend. As the oldest son, it was my responsibility to make sure that everybody was fed and that everybody had cocktails and everybody was happy. So when I started working in the restaurant business, it just put me right back to being the oldest son in this old fashioned Greek family. It was like I was coming home every time I walked into the restaurant. It was an immediate attraction – it was instant.

Your Greek heritage and upbringing is front and center if much of what you do. How have you turned the challenge of growing up with one foot in one culture, one foot in another into a blessing rather than a burden?

I think we all sort of lived this similar identity in that our par-



Mia Dona Restaurant

ents left Greece, and when they were leaving Greece, they took a picture of it and they brought that picture here with them to the United States and then they raised us in that picture. Now the country evolved, but that picture never did.... For them, I think the most important thing was that we didn't forget that we were Greek.

I think that, as you got older, the beauty started to outweigh some of the negatives that maybe some of us were feeling. But I think overall, what we realized at the end was that the amount of pride that was instilled in us from birth through maturity and into adulthood became the defining thing for us. It's part of our genetic makeup, and it defines who we were and who we are today in many, many different ways.

I don't think that I would be cooking the way that I'm cooking if it wasn't for that. I mean, I chose to do Greek because I wanted to show people that the food that my mother cooked and the food that we grew up eating here as Greek Americans in the United States was something that not only we are proud of, but that the culinary world should start to look up and take note of. Here, we've been just very, very fortunate to have turned some heads and hopefully opened some people's eyes up to the glory of Greek food and the potential that it has on the world stage.

The mission that you have to bring Greek cuisine up to that haute level, that's because of your love of the food and the culture and the way you've grown up?

If it wasn't for the importance that my mother and father put on all of these celebrations and on food and on family – the love of these things – I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing, especially not with Greek food. It's a very difficult hill that I chose to climb because Greek food is not very recognized here in the United States. Greeks in general are sometimes difficult with change as it is, so when you're trying to do something really for the betterment of a nation or of a people, and those people sometimes have issue with change to begin with, you're fighting not only for the Americans to introduce them to stuff that they've never had before, but also for Greeks who don't really want to see things change.

I don't necessarily want to change things. I just want to open up people's eyes to the possibility of what this really sort of peasant-rooted cuisine can be if we start to evolve it in a way that takes some of the soul of what these foods are and at the same time allows you to think about what it could be.

As executive chef at three restaurants, soon to be four, you are clearly a talented multi-tasker. How do you manage to not only keep it all together, but perform even better as the workload increases?

As you grow, you develop more resources. And the more resources you have, and the better you are at using resources, then the easier it becomes. I think the most important thing for anyone that's looking to achieve any level of growth, the foundation of growth is human resources. That, without question, is

the one thing without which the question of growth becomes a daunting one and probably an impossible one to answer.

There's no way that I could be in three restaurants at the same time to cook food for everyone going to those restaurants. You have to be willing to accept the fact that you can't do that and then empower people that you believe in and that you have faith in to do the things that you've taught them and to carry the torch, so to speak, for you. Without that, it's impossible.

I think it took me almost 37 years of life to stop micromanaging. Once I did, I realized that not only was I better at what I really need to do, which is to try and educate and motivate people who are doing the jobs that have to get done so that people can come into the restaurant and eat, but also to create and to give myself the freedom to learn and to grow and to allow myself to move forward.

What about the "new" Kefi? When will that be opening up, and will it be similar in concept to its first incarnation?

The new Kefi couldn't be more different than what the old Kefi is in terms of its location, and in terms of its size and décor and basic dynamics of how a restaurant works. The only thing that really is going to stay the same is the food.... We're making everything really just from scratch. These are the things that, from a culinary standpoint, we take a lot of pride in....

It's just a much larger operation. It's about three and a half times larger than the current space that Kefi's in. Interestingly enough, the little tiny space that Kefi's in right now – 222 – was my first restaurant here in New York. That became Anthos, which obviously is the restaurant that really has put a stamp on the culinary world. When I moved Anthos Midtown, I opened up Kefi and now that one's become very successful and we're moving that to a much larger location.

So this third concept now that's going into this same space, in similar fashion, my hopes are that this is the space that I'm able to sort of generate and conceptualize the new different concepts, and use a small, intimate space to really fine tune it, then see where that's going to take us. You know, it's happened twice before and the hopes are that the third time's going to be a charm.

How do you educate yourself about Greek cuisine, tapping into new trends, and researching old dishes and their history?

What I do is I read a tremendous amount. Unfortunately, I just don't have time to travel all that much. So when you don't have time to travel, you fall back on the second way of exposing yourself to new cultures and new things, and that's reading. For me, I spend a good amount of my time doing a lot of research. I'm constantly on the Internet. I'm constantly reading cookbooks. I'm constantly reading just general Greek history books, tracing food, culinary history in the Mediterranean region and how Greece affected it and how other countries affected Greece so that you can try and develop an understanding from a grass roots approach how this country was able to form its cuisine....

You have to be able to get out there and educate yourself constantly so that you can keep things fresh.

How does cooking imitate art?

First and foremost, all chefs I think what we do in order to sort of create the things that we perceive as our art – I take this as an emotional expression of things that either happened to us, or that we've seen, or that we've read about – and then we try and use food to illuminate that experience to the diner and hopefully, if everything works really, really well, we're able to take you on a journey to the place where we once were. That allows us to entertain you on many different levels. I think haute cuisine is defined by that for me.

I think what most people don't realize about chefs is that for us, food is just like a painter's canvas. It's our minds that create these things. We've taken these cerebral things and we've sort of manipulated them and create food. So for us, the plate is our canvas. It's an emotional attachment that we have.

How does Anthos distinguish itself?

Anthos really is one of those restaurants that really doesn't allow itself to have parameters. That's the reason why we've been so successful at developing Greek food in the way that we have, because we as Greek Americans grew up saying that we're Greek, but there's another side of us that grew up here in the United States. When you're able to take these two identifying cultures and put them together, I think it allows us to do certain things here as Greek Americans that sometimes when you're coming from a country that's very homogeneous, it doesn't because of certain restrictions or parameters that you set yourself.

I've given myself the freedom to do whatever I want as long as it fits within the spectrum of what I perceive as being essential to being Greek. And that really is defined by maintaining the integrity of the ingredients that we use, maintaining the integrity of the flavor profiles. Consistent with that, [we] support similar flavor profiles that I remember growing up. As long as those two identities remain true, then the exploration is open for any direction.

Which is the one ingredient that best symbolizes Greek cuisine to you and why?

Cinnamon. I just couldn't live without cinnamon – that and bay leaf, those two things. The easiest, easiest, easiest thing to say I think would be lemon, because we have lemon on pretty much everything, and I don't think a Greek would fault you for putting lemon on something maybe you shouldn't put lemon on. I mean we just love lemon.

But I think that cinnamon really allows the cook to obtain a depth of flavor from a savory perspective that is so simple and yet so special and deep that it really allows you to affect things in a way that really surprises people so many times.... Over time, I realized that, used properly, it just allows you to create



sort of an interesting, an elusive counterpoint to so many things that we eat as Greeks.

You have mentioned that your ultimate dream is to open up a restaurant in Greece.

I have not made any qualms about speaking aloud about my desire to go to Greece, not necessarily just Athens, but just to open up a restaurant in Greece. I think it's time. I was able to go to Sani [in Greece] this year to do a food festival and the response to what we were doing out there was just fabulous. I mean I was really, really overjoyed by what people were saying and what people had been writing....

There's no reason why we shouldn't be able to go over there and show people that know the food. I mean, that's what's exciting to me – people there know the food. They know what it is. I want to hear what they say. I'd love to be able to be over there and challenge them to look at what we're doing and tell me what their thoughts are.

How do you educate patrons about haute Greek cuisine?

The reality of what people know about Greek food is what we've exposed them to here as Greek Americans in the United States. So unfortunately, they know what, five things – they know pastitsio, souvlaki, moussaka, gyro, baklava. But outside of that, if you tell them imam bayildi, do they have any idea what imam bayildi is? No. And the reason is because we just haven't exposed them to it....

Jokingly but seriously at the same time, I opened up Kefi

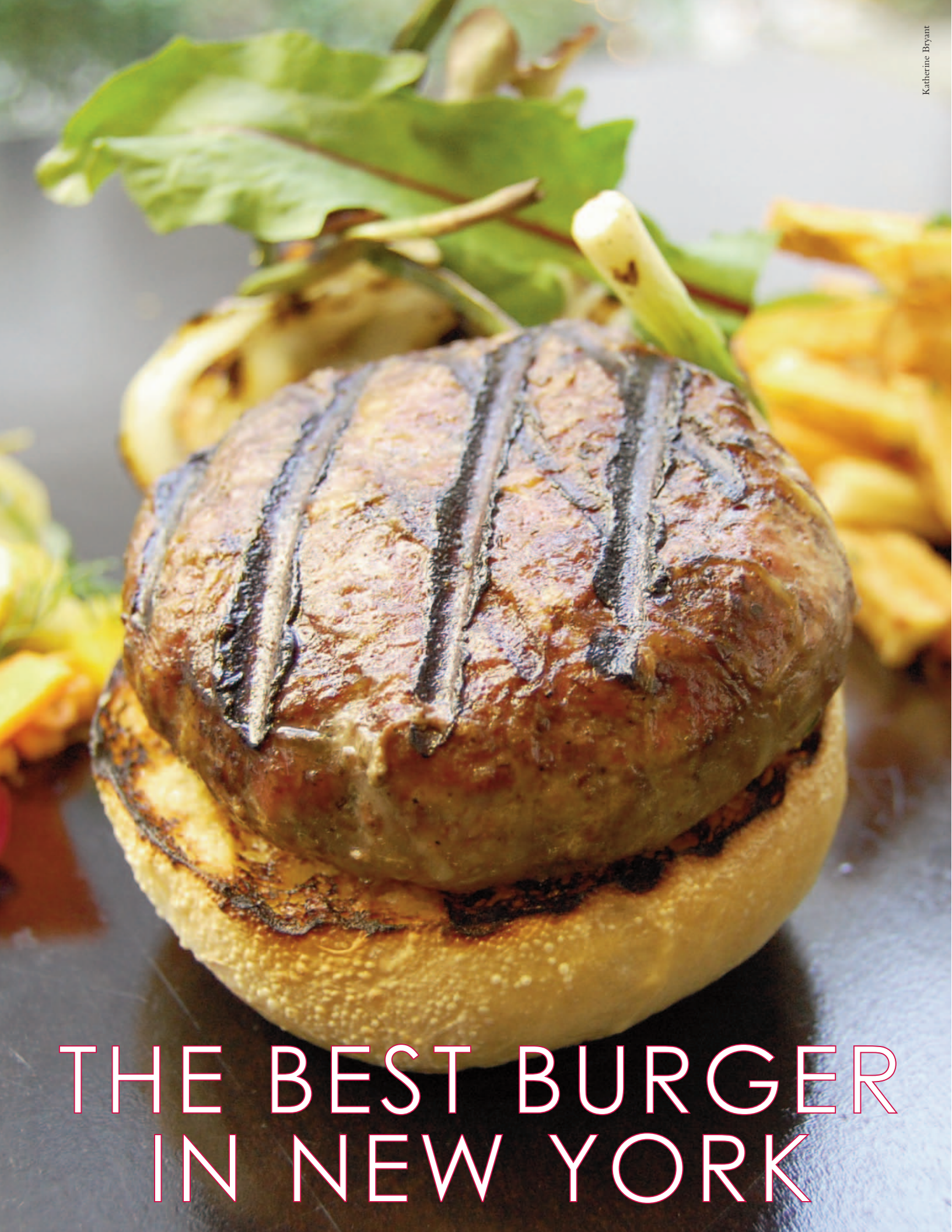
before I opened up Anthos specifically to take writers there and to show them what the simple version of what this particular dish is, and when they were there dining, I said to them "You have to eat hilopites with kouneli stifado here because I'm going to show you what hilopita is in Anthos. It's going to be different, but if you eat it here, you're going to recognize what I'm trying to do here, and maybe then you'll understand what we're trying to capture."

We did that for about eight dishes where literally I was cooking them at Kefi and I was changing them and evolving them for Anthos, and it worked! I mean it really worked. People started to say "Holy shit! This is really good. Now I really get it. This really is Greek food."

How do you answer people who ask you "Is this really Greek food"?

When I first had Anthos, people were constantly asking me "Is this Greek food? How is this Greek food?" Greeks would ask me that too. And the funny thing is that they would go to a great restaurant like Jean Georges [Vongerichten] or they'd go to a great chef's restaurant like [Alain] Ducasse and they would eat his food there, or eat Jean Georges' food in his restaurant, they have no issue saying that they're French. But what makes that restaurant French? It's all Asian influenced food. Is it because he's a Frenchman?

Well, I'm Greek, so then by default this must be Greek food. It's just when there isn't an understanding, it's just very hard for people to grasp what the evolution of a dish is before they actually have a foundation to understand where it's evolving from. 🍷



THE BEST BURGER IN NEW YORK

Spicy Shellfish Yiouvetsi

MAKES 4 SERVINGS

2 tablespoons olive oil
 2 shallots, sliced into rings
 1 garlic clove, minced
 1 black pepper to taste
 1 cup orzo
 ¼ cup Sherry vinegar
 2 cups fish stock (or chicken stock)
 Selection of shellfish (prawns, clams, mussels)
 2 teaspoons fish sauce
 1 teaspoon dill
 1 teaspoon parsley
 2 tablespoons lemon juice
 Kosher salt



Pre-heat the oven to 350 degrees. In a heavy, ovenproof saute pan or Dutch oven over medium-high heat, combine 2 tablespoons oil, shallots, garlic and pepper. Stir and cook for 1 minute. Deglaze the pan with the sherry vinegar. Add 2 cups of stock, the orzo, salt and fish sauce. Bring to the boil, cover and bake for 10 minutes. Stir every 2 minutes. Add shellfish, mix well, cover and cook until all mussels and clams open, about 5 minutes. Add a little more fish stock if mixture seems dry. Add fresh herbs and lemon juice. Taste and adjust seasoning with salt and pepper. Drizzle with 2 teaspoons of olive oil before serving.

Michael Psilakis' Lamb Burger

MAKES 4 10-Ounce Burgers

30 ounces ground lamb
 10 ounces ground pork
 3 egg yolks
 ¼ cup pureed garlic confit
 1 large sliced and grilled Spanish onion
 4 finely chopped scallions
 3 tablespoons Dijon mustard
 2 tablespoons fresh chopped parsley
 2 tablespoons fresh chopped mint
 3 tablespoons dry Greek oregano
 1 tablespoon fresh dill
 4 zested lemons
 1 teaspoon crushed coriander
 1 tablespoon Espelette pepper
 Kosher salt and black pepper to taste
 Caul fat
 4 brioche buns

“ In this era of burger madness, the un-beef burger takes all sorts of bizarre and curious forms. A diligent burger-meister can dine on tofu burgers, salmon burgers, burgers made with tuna, burgers made with assorted vegetables, and burgers made with veal. But when we have the urge for a grandiose, non-beef burger, we head to Anthos, in midtown, for a taste of Michael Psilakis's epic lamb burger. The great master of nouveau Aegean cooking mixes his lamb with crushed garlic, sweet pepper, and possibly even a little pork. He wraps it in caul fat, char-grills it to juicy perfection, and serves it on a freshly toasted brioche. The main condiment is a creamy feta-cheese sauce, which dribbles pleasingly down the chin when you take that first gargantuan bite. And hold the greasy fries, please. This noble, un-beef burger comes with a stack of crispy fingerling potatoes speckled with sea salt. ”



NEW YORK

In a large mixing bowl combine the lamb, pork, egg yolks, garlic confit, chopped grilled onions, chopped scallions and mustard and mix thoroughly. Gently fold in all the herbs, lemon zest, coriander, Espelette pepper, kosher salt and black pepper. Adjust seasoning as needed. The meat should be slightly spicy and taste distinctly like lamb. Test a small piece on the grill to be sure. Divide burger into 4 10-ounce portions. Using a ring mold approximately the same size as the brioche bun, lay a single layer of caul fat over the mold, leaving excess caul fat to fold and encase the burger meat. Pack the burger meat into the mold, and overlap the backside of the burger. Trim the excess caul fat. Season the burger with salt and pepper, place onto the grill with the folded side of the caul fat face down. Grill until desired temperature; serve on toasted brioche with htipiti and French fries. Please note: this lamb burger is best served cooked to medium. If undercooked, the meat will be fleshy since it contains no beef.