



Stella Bolla, a native of Greece, does a belly dance for patrons at the Mikonos Restaurant in Greektown.

photos by JERRY ZOLYNSKY/staff photographer

# Motown Greek: Not quite the real thing

By M.B. Dillon  
staff writer

If Helen of Troy and Zeus were to get gussied up and saunter through Greektown for a taste of the old country next Saturday night, they'd probably be appalled to see what passes for Hellenic culture in the Motor City.

The god and goddess wouldn't know what to make of Monroe Street's fern bars and flashing signs, electric cars whisking motorists to and fro on an overhead track, and establishments with names like Piza Papalis, Trapper's Alley and Lovin' Spoonful.

They'd share the sidewalk with sockless yuppies in khakis and scuffed-up top-siders; octogenarians in polka dot dresses, patent leather purses in the crooks of their arms; Greeks in western dress; Detroiters and tourists.

The Mt. Olympus natives would smell the aroma of seasoned lamb and freshly baked bread wafting over the narrow, well-traveled thoroughfare, and see aproned cooks stealing a smoke while surveying the scene in restaurant doorways.

They'd notice women selling fresh flowers, artists sketching portraits in vest-pocket parks, cops on horseback, old men on bikes and jewelry boutiques.

PEAKING THROUGH restaurant windows cluttered with neon and newspaper reviews, they'd see, huddled at tables, Japanese and East Indian businessmen, couples holding hands and families yelling Opa! as waiters ignited platefuls of saganaki cheese.

The mythological couple could eavesdrop as passers-by converse in Greek, and they'd feel at home playing backgammon and sipping demitasse in the few Greek coffeehouses that still dot Monroe Street.

A taste of the Greek isles, with a healthy dose of Americana. You probably couldn't blame Helen if, after touring trendy Trapper's Alley, she asked Zeus to hitch up the chariot and take her back to Olympus.

But if Helen and her date dropped by Athens Book Store, they would meet 79-year-old Basil Lukos who knows what's still authentically Greek in Greektown, and could reminisce about the days before development decimated the Greek community.

"In 1939 when I came here, I remember there were about 10 coffeehouses and only four or five restaurants," Lukos said. "We'd get together in the coffeehouses and play cards, read Greek newspapers, talk about politics, our businesses and this and that."

"It was kind of like a club or a social group. Little by little, they've turned those coffeehouses into restaurants. Now there's only two left."

Today, they're mixed up; they have machines for kids in there," he said, shaking his head.

"Three hundred Greek families used to live here," Lukos recalled. "The parking deck stands where they built the first Greek Orthodox church in Michigan — Annunciation. They built the Blue Cross building and the freeway where the Greek neighborhoods were."

DETROIT'S GREEKS are scattered throughout the metropolitan area, their old neighborhood less a community than a tourist attraction. But Lukos still does a good business with the Greeks who have hung onto their heritage.

Since 1943 he has sold religious supplies, imported bone china, Greek newspapers and records, and alabas-

ter likenesses of would-be customers Helen and Zeus, Aphrodite, Socrates, David and Venus.

If Zeus dragged Helen into the Laikon Cafe across the street, Chris Ioannina, their young Athens-born host, would echo Lukos.

"A lot of the Greek people have moved away," he said. "They don't come down much anymore. I know our culture is fading away — and I don't know how long it's going to stay around. I don't see a bright future. When everything turns com-

mercial, it loses its flavor."

Still, there's a bright side, particularly if food is a priority with Greektown visitors.

The cuisine of Greece, one of the most varied and original in the world — one reason why Ioannina's father, chef at the Laikon, refuses to cater to American tastes.

"Ninety-nine percent of the Greek clientele comes in here," said Ioannina. "We carry authentic Greek food. We haven't changed to appeal to Americans. The spices have remained the same."

Actually, such Greek delicacies as egg lemon soup, lamb, eggplant, pickled squid, stuffed vine leaves, tender baby octopus in wine sauce and quail with rice can be found in many of Greektown's dozen or so restaurants.

ALSO AVAILABLE are ouzo (anise-flavored spirits made from grapes), and mavrodaphne and retsina, popular Greek wines.

Before visiting the Bouzouki Lounge or Mykonos right club to savor the Syros, Kalamatainos or Tsamiko, Helen and Zeus could grab some dessert in Michigan's oldest Greek pastry shop, the Stemma Bakery.

Nick and Elizabeth Kotsosna are third generation confectioners. They use their grandfather's recipes to make kataifi (shredded wheat with nuts and honey); galatoburiko (custard and honey in flaky, paper-thin phyllo dough); and eggbread, among dozens of other items.

That's not to say the Kotsosnas haven't elaborated a little.

"We sell chocolate-covered baklava," said Nick. "It never existed in Greece, but it exists now. It was born in Detroit."

Bob Seger songs, Mrs. Field's Cookies, gift shops, Colombo frozen yogurt and the like may be the mainstay at the multi-level Trapper's Alley, but Greektown's biggest drawing card also features a place for lovers of Greek and European clothing.

At La Greca Boutique, Irene Dimitrakopoulos and Olga Tassopoulos sell evening gowns and dresses created by Greek, Italian, French and English designers.

The discerning shopper can find party hose adorned in French gold, 100 percent silk beaded tops and \$100 hats. A picture of Sophia Loren hangs on the wall behind the counter.

"Sophia Loren bought dresses here when she was here for a party 15 years ago," said Dimitrakopoulos.

LOREN'S POPPING in notwithstanding, Greektown's clientele was primarily Greek until the early 1980s. Jackie Onassis apparently helped change that.

"Only Greeks would buy until Jackie went to Greece. Now we're catering to tourists," said Dimitrakopoulos.

Homer, Hercules, Aristotle and those other guys who hail from the land of gods and giants, mountaintops and mariners probably would be as dismayed with Detroit as Helen and Zeus.

But this is Motown, not Mt. Olympus, right?

## Food fit for gods

What's good to eat, and genuinely Greek, in Greektown?

Plenty.

Here's a sampling:

**Moussaka** — baked eggplant, layered with ground lamb, parmesana cheese, eggs, milk and seasonings.

**Pastitsio** — layers of baked macaroni and ground lamb, with parmesana cheese, milk and seasonings, topped with a thick creamy sauce.

**Dolmades** — grape leaves stuffed with seasoned ground meat and rice, served with tomato or egg lemon sauce.

**Spanakotiropita** — thin layers of strudel-like dough with spinach, scallions, dill, parsley, feta cheese and seasonings.

**Khachapuri** — honeyed, layered phyllo dough.

**Halvas** — Take it from Peter Mandas, 49, who went to school in the neighborhood and still comes down from Huntington Woods to shop at the Monroe Grocery and Bakery.

"Halvas is the nectar of the gods. It's pressed sesame and honey, and it has more protein than you can shake a stick at."

Halvas comes in bricks, wrapped in wax paper. Just ask for a slice. It melts in your mouth.



Walter William Thomas holds "Opa" as he lights Saganaki cheese for diners at the Bazookie Lounge.



Hristos Tsaganis of St. Clair Shore stacks bananas in the produce window of the Athens Grocery in Greektown.

# There's some tasty finds among cheap wines

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The five wines we chose are available in almost any wine shop. We purchased these wines from Gibb's, on Gratiot in Detroit, because of the store's extensive selection. The prices should be about the same anywhere.

St. Julian Village White, \$3.89. This is the only Michigan wine we tried. Henry said while Michigan wineries, including St. Julian, make many good wines, most are not in the \$5 range.

The panel, with one exception, was

in agreement on this wine. "It tastes like Total no-lead," Sue Mason said. Jerry Zolynsky was the only one who liked it, citing the fact that it had no bite as the wine's best feature. Henry thought it had good color and a metallic flavor. Overall, the group gave it an S, for sucked.

**FONTANA CANDIDA FRASCATI, \$4.95.** Unusual, in that this is an Italian white wine, almost clear, indicating an early pick. Henry said it would be good on a hot summer day, or with lunch or brunch. Mary Klemic liked it, particularly the taste. It has a refreshing, light, crisp, taste,

but isn't full-bodied — something like a white wine that's had an ice cube in it for 10 minutes. While this is the most popular wine in Italy this summer, our group gave it an I, for incomplete. We'd drink it if it was there.

**Grand Cru Vineyards White Zinfandel, \$4.75.** In the mid-70s, Henry said California wineries had tons of red grapes left over when the sale of white wines took off. The vintners, stuck with those grapes, crushed them, extracted the juice quickly and came up with zinfandel.

This was a strong favorite. Henry said a good white zinfandel, like this

one, will be pinkish-blue in color, indicating freshness. Sharon LeMieux, who doesn't like white wines, said this one was sweet, but not too sweet — she liked it. It also is slightly effervescent and has a stronger red grape smell than many white zinfandels. Everyone thought this was a very good selection.

Henry said a good rule with white zinfandels is to drink them; that is, don't keep them around for a long time — they don't hold well.

George Dubocoff 1988 Beaujolais, \$5.49. This was so well received by the group that people started talking about what they'd drink it with.

LeMieux said beef or fish; Zolynsky said anything — baloney, Twinkies, who cares. It was the group's favorite.

**HENRY SAID** beaujolais comes from the gamay grape, another that you want to consume quickly and serve chilled, even though it's considered a red wine, to a degree. Diane Gale said it was her favorite; she liked the aftertaste.

The general consensus was that it has a pleasant, slight initial bite and is heavier than most beaujolais wines. Henry said it is slightly astringent, which cures the mouth to

pucker slightly.

Fetzer Gewurztraminer, \$4.40. A dessert wine, slightly spicy. Everyone kind of liked it, as 4 of 5 liked it, wouldn't want to drink a lot of it, and Henry said no one should — a glass after dinner is the way to go here.

Henry said, recorded, this is the type of wine that will hold up in the refrigerator for about a week without a problem. Mary Klemic said its taste was similar to biting into an extremely slight, almost cinnamon-type taste. It matched the category for the frascati — fine if it's there, not mourned if it isn't.