

DINING

Generous 'King of Coneys' works hard

BY GEORGE DILA
SPECIAL WRITER

Panayote Stassinopoulos relaxes in the corner booth of his restaurant, stirring cream into a cup of coffee. It is 3 p.m., the quiet time between lunch and dinner. There is time to talk, to reminisce, to reflect.

Many years ago Stassinopoulos Americanized his first name to "Pete," but his accent gives away his Mediterranean roots. His face, rugged and open, and hands, strong and knobby, could be the face and hands of a farmer. When he was a boy, Pete lived on a farm near Kalamata, the town in Greece that gave its name to the prime olives produced in that region of the Peloponnese.

Stassinopoulos has earned anonymous fame. Throngs of people know what he does, but very few people know who he is. For the record, Pete Stassinopoulos is the King of Coneys.

Twenty-five years ago he opened a Coney joint in Southfield. Today, there are 13 locations, most of them called Leo's Coney Island.

"Some people tell me that when they come back from out-of-town, on their way home from the airport, they stop here for a Coney and a salad," said Stassinopoulos shaking his head as if even he is astonished at the order. "Before they even go home!"

In 1960 Stassinopoulos left his family farm and immigrated to Montreal. He worked as a dishwasher, then at a factory making women's stockings. Later, he moved to Windsor and got a job on the Chrysler assembly line. He lived frugally, and saved his money.

In 1966 he met a young Greek woman, Esther Kommons, at a church dance in Detroit. In 1968 they married. Pete took a job as a cook at the American Coney Island at Northland Center. After three years he and Esther decided it was time to have a business of their own. Using \$25,000 saved from his Chrysler job, and a loan with their house as collateral,

Hours: All locations are open 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday-Saturday; 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. Sunday.
Menu: Soups and salads, sandwiches, Greek specialties including shish kebab, Moussaka, spinach and cheese pie, burgers, breakfast specials, and omelets. Children's menu available.

Restaurant locations

Farmington Coney Island and Souvlaki
30985 Orchard Lake Road (between 13 and 14 Mile roads), Farmington Hills, (248) 626-8732
Leo's Coney Island locations
■ 1235 S. University, Ann Arbor, (734) 930-0084, opening soon
■ 154 S. Woodward, Birmingham, (248) 540-8780
■ 6527 Telegraph (at Maple Road), Bloomfield Township, (248) 646-8568
■ 1735 Canton Center, Canton Township, (734) 981-5483
■ 26540 Ford, Dearborn Heights, (313) 724-8182
■ 37580 W. 12 Mile Road (at Halsted), Farmington Hills, (248) 553-2360
■ Laurel Park Mall, Livonia, (734) 462-0121
■ 15131 Sheldon, Plymouth, (734) 254-0663
■ 3999 Center Point Parkway, Pontiac, (248) 335-3303
■ 841 E. Big Beaver at Rochester Road, Troy (248) 680-0099
■ 4763 Haggerty, at Pontiac Trail, West Bloomfield, (248) 669-2295
Southfield Coney Island and Souvlaki
15647 W. Nine Mile Road, at Greenfield, Southfield, (248) 569-5229

oral, they opened the 50-seat Southfield Coney Island at Southfield and 12 Mile roads, but had no visions of grandeur. Like many immigrants who open businesses, their only goal was to provide for their family.

Pete and Esther worked side-by-side, he as cook, she as cashier and hostess. Their menu had all the usual fare—coney, loose burgers, fries. But Pete was an innovator.

"Before, only better restaurants like in Greektown had Greek salads. No coney places. So I had Greek salads. We were the first."

On opening day they sold two Greek salads. Soon it was dozens. Greek salads put the Southfield Coney Island on the gastronomic map.

"Now everybody has Greek salads," Pete says. "But we were first."

Since then they've opened or purchased 12 restaurants. In 1980, Pete's younger brother Leo came to America and got involved in the business.

His formula for success has remained the same — long

hours of hard work, hands-on management, high quality food, and good service.

And these salads! Regular customers become almost addicted to them. The salad dressing is Pete's secret recipe. Bachar Ayoub, a partner with Pete in the West Bloomfield Leo's Coney Island, thinks Pete is successful because of the way he treats his employees and customers.

"He is very generous, and very helpful to people from the old country, or people who need a new start," Ayoub said. "And he gives customers more for their money — Better ingredients, and bigger portions."

Stassinopoulos, now nearly 65, still works every day at the Farmington Coney Island, the chain's busiest restaurant. He does a little of everything, helping cooks during big rushes, taking carryout orders, working the register.

"My father is trying to cut back, but he always seems to be here," said his daughter Chris, who helps manage the Farmington restaurant.



Coney king: Panayote "Pete" Stassinopoulos opened a coney island restaurant in Southfield 25 years ago. His coneys and Greek salads are a customer favorite at Farmington Coney Island and Souvlaki, and the other restaurants he owns.

On occasion, Esther can still be found behind the register. Leo devotes himself mainly to management responsibilities. Chris, a graduate engineer who worked at Detroit Diesel for four years, gave up her career to work in the family business. A son, John, is a partner in a more upscale Greek restaurant in

West Bloomfield. The rest of Pete and Esther's five children pursued other interests.

How big does Pete want Leo's Coney Island to get?

"Maybe we open more stores," he says. "We look. But I say don't go too fast. Take time. Don't go a hundred miles an-

hour."

By following his own brand of philosophy, taking it slow and easy, working hard and long hours, taking care of his people and keeping the quality high, Pete Stassinopoulos has become the metro Detroit area's King of Coneys.

WHAT'S COOKING

Send items for consideration in *What's Cooking* to Keely Wygonik, Entertainment Editor, Observer & Eccentric Newspapers, Inc., 38251 Schoolcraft, Livonia, MI 48150, fax (248) 591-7279, or e-mail kwygonik@behomecomm.net

It's summer, and we're looking for suggestions for restaurants to feature on our Dining page. If you have a garden, or an interesting outdoor setting, let us know. Also, be sure to let us know about anniversaries, menu changes, and specials.

Send us your Father's Day menus as soon as possible.

RITZ-CARLTON, DEARBORN

Beer Lover's Barbecue, 6:30 p.m. reception, 7 p.m. dinner, Thursday, June 17. Cost \$30 per person, call (313) 441-2100 for reservations, information.

THE LARK

Shore dinner, 7 p.m. Monday and Tuesday, June 28-29. Cost \$85 per person, call (248) 661-4466.

BUDDY'S RESTAURANT AND PIZZA

Between now and July 4 visit any Buddy's location and enter their drawing to win a family vacation to Disney World plus other prizes. On Monday June 21 a portion of sales from all Buddy's locations will go to the 1999 Old Newsboys' Goodfellow Fund. Between 3-6 Tuesday, June 22, Buddy's will roll back prices to 1946, the year it all began. Large pizzas with cheese and one topping will be \$3 at all Buddy's locations (table service only, limit 2 pizzas per table).

There are 6 Buddy's restaurants in metro Detroit, two take-outs and one take-out/cafe location throughout metro Detroit.

CAPITAL GRILLE

Open on Father's Day, June 20, from 6-9 p.m. Gift certificates can be purchased at The Capital Grille in Somerset Collection North, 2800 W. Big Beaver Road, or call (248) 649-5300. Gift certificates also available.

SUMMER COUPONS!

SUPER COUPONS Use One or All!

20% off ANY DRESS DRESS BARN WOMAN	20% off ANY PANT DRESS BARN WOMAN	20% off ANY SHORT DRESS BARN WOMAN
20% off ANY SKIRT DRESS BARN WOMAN	20% off ANY TOP DRESS BARN WOMAN	20% off ANY 2 T-SHIRTS (Must Buy 2 T-Shirts) DRESS BARN WOMAN

DRESS BARN

Also at Dress Barn Woman!

For a store near you visit www.dressbarn.com or call 800-639-6064 8:30 am to 5:00 pm EST, M-F

DRESS BARN WOMAN PRICES SLIGHTLY HIGHER. MOST STORES OPEN 7 DAYS, 6 NIGHTS. MAJOR CREDIT CARDS ACCEPTED. SALE ENDS 6/15/99

Mama Mia

Banquet Facilities Available

LIVONIA • REDFORD • ALLEN PARK

27770 Plymouth 13255 Southfield 15005 Southfield
 11 Mile W. of Orchard Rd. East End of Orchard Rd. at Allen Park
 (734) 427-0030 (734) 527-0740 (248) 383-8800

DINNER FOR 2 \$12.99

CHOICE OF
 VEAL PARMESAN, CHICKEN SCALLOPIN,
 BROILED SCROD, TENDERLOIN STEAK,
 ARBOREZES, SAUSAGE, RIBS, BEEF
 OR PORK, NEW YORK STEAK, BEEF & BACON,
 RIB CROWN, PORK & CHICKEN, PORK & BACON, BEEF & BACON

MITCH HOUSEY'S

EVERY THURSDAY, FRIDAY & SATURDAY OLDSIES MUSIC

Now Appearing...Live THE SHOWCASEMEN

25000 Schoolcraft
 Depueville 1 mile north of I-196
 LIVONIA (734) 255-5520

AMPLE, LIGHTED PARKING • BANQUET FACILITIES AVAILABLE

PRIME RIB DINNER \$14.95

1/2 Off Second Dinner

When you purchase another regularly priced dinner entree of equal or greater value! With Coupon Offer Good Monday-Friday After 4:00 p.m.

* Not Good With Any Other Offers
 Coupon expires June 30, 1999.

OPEN DAILY MON-SAT AT 11:00 AM

BUSINESSMEN'S LUNCHES from \$5.95

DINNERS from \$6.95