



Hell's kitchen

George Calombaris gives classic taverna dining a baby-boomer twist that's confident, exciting and rekindles diners' memories of their Grecian adventures, says John Lethlean.

A couple of years ago, I went to Greece with cheese guru Will Studd and the crew of his *Cheese Slices* television series on the hunt for real feta, kefalotiri, kefalograviera and kasseri. Greek cheeses.

Naturally, I brought back plenty of memories (most good, but oh, the garbage problem in Greece). One was of a fabulous dinner at a little restaurant close to Nea Agchialos, near Volos on the Central Greek coast about halfway between Athens and Thessaloniki, our second night on tour. Apart from lovely, honest food and a wonderful host, the strongest memory of this particular evening was of a never-ending stream of simple red wine that came to the table in these peculiar red anodised aluminium pitchers called kanatoules, something like an old-fashioned milkshake cup but with a handle, and no taper to their cylindrical shape.

I'd never seen them before, but they seemed to characterise a Greek triumph of pragmatism over style: durable, no-nonsense, ideal in a commercial application where the Hellenic version of vino da tavola was nothing to intellectualise about, but there merely to drink and enjoy with salads and grilled fish, saganaki of local cheese and amazing yoghurts. I stand to be corrected, but you see these pitchers

more on the mainland than on the islands. Now you see them in Brunswick, too.

Melbourne may be famous for its Greek population, but I'd never spotted those kanatoules in our southern Australian Hellenic outpost before eating at Hellenic Republic, the latest project of Greek dynamo chef George Calombaris. It's just one of many signposts to an extraordinary attention to detail at this bustling restaurant. Order a half-litre of Heathcote shiraz made by Sandro Mosele, or a Yarra Valley sauvignon blanc by Sergio Carlei, and it arrives in one of these magnificently functional alloy vessels, straight from the tap.

Most likely, Calombaris's entirely successful attempt at creating an exciting, modern incarnation of the Greek taverna will have you quietly smiling over fond memories of your Grecian travels. Hellenic Republic trawls a vast reservoir of baby-boomer fondness among Australians for their Greek experiences, but it does so in a way that caters to a generation that's grown up with smart, professional and highly stylised restaurant experiences.

What North Bondi Italian Food and Giuseppe, Arnaldo & Sons are to Icebergs, Hellenic Republic is to The Press Club. It's simply Greek krasma over Italian brio. All the lessons learned at the grown-up

restaurant have been translated, but the language is simpler, less formal. And so much fun.

There is often a marvellously informal conviviality about Greeks, and Calombaris (with partners including George Sykiotis) has captured it, marinated it in Greek pride, and let it loose in a purpose-built restaurant space that references many of those taverna touchstones without reverting to cliché. Aegean blues, glossy white tiling, raw timbers, pale grey marble, lobster pots for lightshades and marvellous old monochrome photographic prints are but a few of the design elements that give Hellenic Republic its inner-city-meets-the-Cyclades character.

In the long, open kitchen dominated by an ironbark-burning charcoal grill are undoubtedly a few non-Greeks (led by head chef and Calombaris acolyte Travis McCauley, who, like so many here, has moved over from The Press Club). But on the restaurant floor all the staff are Greek-Australians – youngish and of both genders – and they seem to be getting a real kick out of educating the rest of us about the food, the language and pronunciation.

It's an enthusiasm that has long gone from Melbourne's traditional Greek tavernas. And that enthusiasm stretches to the food, too.

Here, there is a marvellously fresh and lively approach to traditional Greek cooking, a desire to do things properly and to present dishes in a clean, simple yet contemporary manner.

It is the real thing, made with great fruit and veg, crowned with a slab of feta, and it will take you straight back to a beachside taverna on Crete.

It's the sort of approach you would expect from a chef like Calombaris, a graduate of the old school despite his tender years. All the lessons learned at Fenix, Sofitel, Reserve and The Press Club – all his successes and his failures – have stuck.

With its timber presentation boards, innovative ways of serving ouzo, cured meats and proper Greek oregano-dusted potato chips in a branded wrapping paper from prominent feta supplier Dodoni, Hellenic taps into the zeitgeist. And when it comes to the modern obsession with sharing dishes, well, this is a cuisine with a natural head start.

For so many Australians, like me, who got their dining training-wheels in the Greek restaurants of inner Melbourne, the format will appear the same, a familiar routine done with unfamiliar quality.

Dips? Of course.

But here, along with a generous basket of pita warmed on the chargrill and quartered, the taramasalata is made with white roe and whipped to a light and sublimely silky texture, garnished with Greek olive oil. Pink fishy paste? Think again. Similarly, the melizanosalata is light as a feather – and not smoky like a baba ghanoush – dressed with more oil and claret-coloured onion slivers braised in red wine. Wonderful stuff.

Octopus tentacles are whipped from the charcoal grill all pink and blistered, chopped, dressed with lemon, oil, fresh parsley and oregano and served on>

Zeitgeist zing
The restaurant's design gives it an inner-city-meets-Cyclades character, a perfect atmosphere for savouring dishes such as loukanika (bottom), with cracked wheat salad (middle) and horiatiki salata (top).

PHOTOGRAPHY TIM JAMES

MELBOURNE REVIEW

HELLENIC REPUBLIC

434 Lygon St,
Brunswick East,
(03) 9381 1222.

Licensed

Cards AE DC MC V

Open Tue-Thu 5.30pm-late; Fri noon-late; Sat-Sun 9am-late.

Prices Small plates \$5.50-\$12.50; large plates \$24-\$40; desserts \$8.50-\$12.50.

Noise Appropriate.

Wheelchair access Yes.

Vegetarian 12 or more sharing plates, 3-4 mains.

Plus A palpable sense of young Greek pride.

Minus Demand will outstrip supply.

snappy rectangular dishes with the restaurant's logo. If you're smart enough to order some ouzo to go with these tastes of the sun, you might get a 200ml bottle of Karafaki that comes in an iced glass bucket with separate pots of ice and water, the whole deal.

Order 'cured Hellenic meats' and you'll see the Greek equivalent of Robert Marchetti's salumi presentation at Crown: four meats presented on more of that Dodoni paper in much the same way it's done at Giuseppe, Arnaldo & Sons. Here, of course, the meat's different: lounza, a Cypriot cured and smoked pork loin; bastourma, an air-dried beef; kapnistio arni, a hot-smoked leg of lamb; and hiomeri, a cured and then cold-smoked pork.

A Cypriot cracked wheat salad will remind you very much of Lebanon's tabbouleh (and done well, as it is here, that's not a bad thing), while Hellenic's horiatiki salata – literally 'village salad' – is doomed to be branded a 'Greek salad' regardless. Never mind, it is the real thing, made with great fruit and veg, crowned with a slab of proper feta striped with dried oregano and olive oil. It will take you straight back to a simple beachside taverna on Crete.

But just about the best of the piata is the saganaki, a one-dish lesson in the balance of salt and sweet and the juxtaposition of complementary textures. It's a chef's dish. Here, a wedge of golden, pan-fried kefalograviera – crunchy exterior and semi-molten/chewy within – is topped with a 'sauce' of sweet preserved baby figs and coarse black pepper. Served on a smart cast-iron rectangular pan, itself on a timber board, the effect is quite magical.

Unsurprisingly, the charcoal grill is at the centre of most of the savoury action (although baked Greek standards such as pastitsio and moussaka are there, too, plus the possibly more Turkish imam bayildi

eggplant and tomato bake and a rather good braise of pork, tomato and feta with risoni pasta, the lot served in a terracotta pot).

After the sublime loin chops last month at Collingwood's Gigibaba, I can take or leave Hellenic's chargrilled chump chops – paithakia – served with a lemony oregano dressing. A little dull.

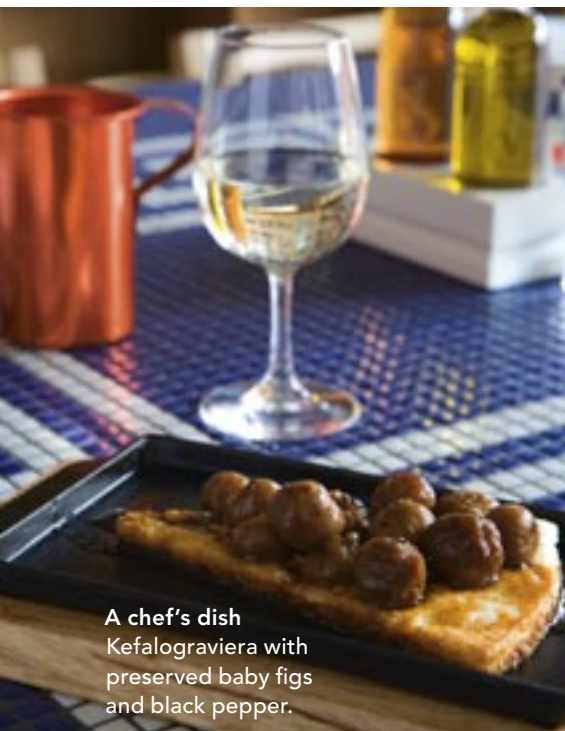
Far better is a combination of loukanika – grilled pork sausages – with sweet baby whole yellow and red peppers and a sweet and sour caramelised onion. Or a whole rock flathead, its cavity filled with lemon and parsley, the skin and upper-side flesh carefully scored before hitting the chargrill, splashed with oil to serve.

It shows confidence in the produce, that's for sure. And the simple fact is that nothing at Hellenic over the course of several meals has really disappointed me and most has, in fact, been exciting; the kind of simple, pure, summery food that motivates you to get on the phone to a few friends and organise a table. This is the most social of cuisines.

I'd be tempted to share desserts, too, and order carefully. Some are heavier in style than you might be ready for after all this clean and really well-cooked savoury stuff. And I concede to having tried just one: ekmek kataifi pagoto, a pudding of shredded (kataifi) pastry soaked in some kind liqueur, a sort of semi-set custard, sour cherries and their syrup, and mastic ice-cream. It will appeal to traditionalists, as will things such as rice pudding (risogalo), doughnuts (loukoumades), and another pastry and custard combo, the galaktobourekos.

The first time I visited Hellenic Republic, the customer mix was fairly diverse, on the face of it. The second time it struck me how many Greek-Australians were there, having a great old time and even rattling the odd worry bead. There was a sense of pride about the place that I found absolutely infectious.

But both occasions reminded me of sunny times in a sunny place. George Calombaris has shaken off the clichés to capture the spirit of Greece – through the eyes of a first-generation Australian. It's a very satisfying perspective.*



A chef's dish
Kefalograviera with
preserved baby figs
and black pepper.

and also...

PASTRY HEAVEN

Pâtissier Guillaume Dequidt's small Hawthorn shop is home to Melbourne's best French pastries: sublime croissants, pain au chocolate, tarte fine aux pommes and, of course, the famous St Tropez gâteau from which the business takes its name, La Tropezienne. La Tropezienne, 780 Glenferrie Rd, Hawthorn, Vic, (03) 9818 1895.

SURF 'N' TURF'S UP

Order sensibly at Kingsley's, the rather smart and masculine new Melbourne outpost of a multi-city meat franchise, and you will eat reasonably well. Go crazy on the most expensive steaks – or crabs, for that matter – and you'll want to hope someone else is picking up the tab. Yet another Flinders Lane restaurant. Kingsley's Steak & Crabhouse, 91-93 Flinders La, Melbourne, Vic, 1300 546 475.



BACK TO BASICS

Jacques Reymond's legacy at Federation Square – having now sold Arintji – was to hire Joe Grbac as head chef before leaving. His light, progressive cooking, honed as a sous chef to Philip Howard at London's The Square, may just put this little bistro back on the map. Perhaps a better wine list would help its fortunes, too. Arintji, Federation Square, Melbourne, Vic, (03) 9663 9900.