

'Yeehaw!' ... or maybe, 'Opa!'

Eatery combines best of Greek and Polish cuisine

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TRAVERSE CITY

"It used to be just servers shouting 'Opa!' when we light the cheese on fire. But now, I can't even go anywhere in public without someone pointing at me and shouting, 'Hey! Opa!'" server Tracy Smart said while sharing one of her favorite aspects of Opa Coney and Grill - or "Opa" as local patrons affectionately call it.

"Opa!' is just another way of saying 'yeehaaw!' in American (English)," Smart said when asked to explain the meaning of the expression.

Traverse City's residents have always had the luxury of easy access to many different kinds foods from cultures around the world. But until about a year ago, what they were lacking in Greek and Polish cuisine was made up for by Opa's founders Paul and Brigette Barbas.

Raised in southeastern Michigan, Paul found the Traverse Bay area enchanting, and decided to make the move five years ago. At the time, he was given the opportunity to work for an electronics company. But soon the travel involved with the position made Paul realize he wasn't spending as much time with his family as he would have liked. So the Barbas family decided to pursue their first real love, making and preparing their favorite food dishes.

Paul was born in Greece, and moved to the U.S. with his parents and brother when he was two years old on Thanksgiving Day 1973. He laughs while mentioning that the day seemed appropriate.

His wife and high school sweetheart Brigette is 100 percent Polish, hence Opa coming up with its theme of Greek and Polish Cuisine.

"Both ethnicities have great food. Polish is a little milder, and Greek has a little more punch," Paul said about the unique combination. "They just complement each other."

The restaurant's most popular dish, the Greek gyro, is served as a meal unlike traditionally serving it as a sandwich. But if Polish is what you crave, Opa also



Opa owner Paul Barbas is shown with four of his favorite dishes (from left) Gyro meal, Pot de Creme, Ravni, and Greek salad.

provides other top-of-the-line pirogues, sausages, and similarly tasty dishes.

"Almost 90 percent of our meals are made in-house, but 100 percent of our desserts are made here." Paul said when asked about how he runs his special kitchen.

With products imported from Chicago and New York to keep authenticity the key ingredient at Opa, making desserts like Zeus's Birthday cake and Ravni (a Greek strawberry shortcake) are just plain fun for Paul.

The Barbas's are very active in the community, case in point being the restaurant itself. Upon walking in, you notice the vibrant colors of paintings on the wall done by students attending Suttons Bay High School. They have also participated in projects for community hockey teams, and given to charitable foundations such as AC Paw.

Everything about the restaurant has an added touch to make it different and special, but also familiar. Like opening a fresh can of coffee, but still recognizing that same aroma as the one you've had every morning. Even Opa's booths were handcrafted by Paul himself.

Two upcoming projects planned at Opa include the "Taste of Greece" and "Taste of Poland." Both allow a group to reserve an evening built around the food of Greece or Poland, which would include about six courses of each depending on the leading theme. Paul also said the restaurant is currently exploring the option of serving beer and wine with the meals.

Paul and Brigette continually enhance the selections on Opa's menu. They are always open to new ideas and believe a key element to success is listening to their customers.

"It's one of the reasons why we are looking into serving beer and wine," Paul said. "You have to listen to your clientele to make sure you're satisfying their needs."

While looking at a drawing his daughter Abigail made for him, Paul smiled and said he is regularly reminded that family is everything.

"It's a key ingredient not just in Greek or Polish culture, but in American heritage as well," he stated. "And we hope Traverse City welcomes us as another key ingredient in their community."

Opa Coney and Grill is located at 1752 S. Garfield Ave. in Traverse City. For more information, call (231) 947-6721.

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