

## **Opa!**

Al Parker

Paul and Brigette Barbas are guided by a simple business philosophy.

"We want to bring good food at reasonable prices to our customers," explained Paul, an outgoing 36-year-old whose new eatery, OPA! Coney and Grill, opened in early June at Traverse City's Cherryland Center.

OPA! marks the first time the Barbases have owned a restaurant, but Paul, who was born in Greece and came to the U.S. as a toddler, logged plenty of time working at his parents' restaurant – The Astoria Coney Island – near Detroit.

After growing up in Livonia, Paul graduated from Eastern Michigan University and went to work as a marketing rep, but grew tired of the constant travel demands. Four years ago, he and Brigette, a University of Michigan grad, moved to Traverse City.

About a year ago, they began planning their restaurant and followed up by locating a just-right location in the Younker's courtyard area of Cherryland Center, near the second busiest intersection north of Grand Rapids, according to Barbas.

"We looked around a lot before finding this," explained Paul. He built the comfortable booths and did most of the woodwork inside the restaurant, which seats 67 diners inside. Another 32 can dine al fresco in the courtyard area.

### **YA GOTTA HAVE ART**

Highlighting the interior of the 100 percent-smoke-free coney island is a series of Greek-inspired paintings done by Suttons Bay High School students Taylor Mentzer, Molly Branson, Shane Nelson, Summer Giddens, Lorie Forton and Justin Cox. Instructor Scott Tompkins oversaw the project. TBA-ISD Career Tech student Sarah Fisher created the OPA! logo.

"We want people eating here to feel excited about their meal, their experience," said Paul. "We talk to the customers – How's the food? What did you like? What did you not like? We want their feedback."

Paul and Brigette work seven days a week at the restaurant, arriving well before the doors open and staying until closing. They lead a staff of four cooks, six servers and four dishwashers. Paul's mother, Vula, has been invaluable in helping launch OPA!

"She's the mortar between the bricks, keeping everything together," said Paul with a laugh. "She and my father, Angelo, have been very important in getting OPA! started."

Breakfast lovers will find a breakfast menu of eggs, omelets, pancakes, pastries, oatmeal, and oversized Texas (not French) Toast.

When lunch time rolls around, OPA! is the answer for Traverse City coney lovers who have often longed for a big-city-style coney island to satisfy their cravings for the chili-smothered dog concoctions.

Sure, almost any eatery can grill a hotdog, slather some chili on top and call it a coney dog. But, like its downstate counterparts, OPA! offers much more, such as the Loose (ground beef and no hot dog), the Licky Fingers (a coney topped with ground hamburger and finished off with chili, mustard and diced onions) and a Greek Taco (ground hamburger served on a hot dog bun with chili, mustard, onion, lettuce, tomato and cheese).

### **MORE THAN JUST CONEYS**

Reflecting Paul's ethnic background, OPA!'s menu offers some delicious Greek dishes, including the traditional saganaki (imported Kasseri cheese) or loukaniko (char-grilled Greek sausage) both of which are flamed with a flourish right at the table.

Gyro lovers will want to try OPA!'s version of the tasty beef-lamb treat. They also offer an open-faced chicken version. All are topped with crumbled feta, fresh tomatoes and diced white onions and highlighted by homemade tzatziki sauce, a creamy blend of yogurt, cucumber and garlic.

After 4 p.m. OPA! features several hearty platters, including souvlaki (select cuts of marinated pork) or chicken kabobs. Both are skewered and char-grilled with green peppers, chopped onions and fresh tomatoes served on a bed of rice.

There's also keftehes (ground sirloin that is seasoned and molded into bite-sized meatballs that are grilled and served on a bed of tasty rice), which are hard to find north of Flint.

As a tribute to Brigette's Polish heritage, the menu also features Polish pork chops served with garlic mashed potatoes, and pierogi and bigos, six handmade cheese potato pierogis served with baked sauerkraut mixed with pork and mushrooms.

There are six different meal-size salads, homemade soups made daily and an assortment of desserts, including

rizogalo (Greek rice pudding), baklava, and cherry filo, stuffed with cherries and baked to a golden crisp. All desserts are made in-house.

Beverages include Pepsi soft drinks, milk, tea and coffee, including a special Greek coffee. All of OPA!'s meals are available for carry out.

"All we want to do is to feed people—make 'em happy, make 'em smile," said Paul. "Our goal is to offer good food at a great price."

OPA! Coney and Grill, at 1752 South Garfield Ave., is open from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. Monday-Saturday, 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Sunday. Call at (231) 947-OPA1(6721).