

## Restaurant Review:

# Mariakakis: A legendary restaurant with a taste of the old country

By ANNE-RENEE RICE  
Staff Writer

There's something to be said about authentic ethnic food, you know, "the real thing." It needs no frills, no fancy introductions or presentations. There's a certain satisfaction in knowing that a native has formulated the recipes and that the food is prepared in the restaurant from scratch with quality ingredients.

You won't find frozen burritos or powdered Alfredo sauce at Mariakakis Restaurant and Bakery, a restaurant with a forte in Greek, Italian and Middle Eastern dishes. Everything is made in the restaurant and all their ingredients, which are available for customers to buy, are displayed on shelves in the entrance of the restaurant

in a small grocery setting.

"Actually, what we did was move the stockroom out into the restaurant," said owner Johnny Mariakakis. "People continued to ask us about our products and showed a desire to purchase good quality Mediterranean ingredients. So we put price tags on the stuff and put it out on the shelves."

Johnny Mariakakis' parents were among the first Greek families in Chapel Hill in the late 1930s. His father, who was born in Greece, got his first food service training in American and Southern-based dishes.

"At that time few, if any, people here were familiar with Greek cuisine," he said.

The elder Mariakakis opened a hot dog and hamburger stand on

Franklin Street called "The Marathon" in 1939. He later owned five restaurants, one of which was The Pizza Palace in Durham.

The present Mariakakis Restaurant and Bakery was opened in 1963 and is now owned and operated by Johnny Mariakakis.

Saturday night, three of my somewhat apprehensive companions and I went to Mariakakis to sample the unique cuisine.

The restaurant is located on the U.S. 15-501 Bypass, but is a little hard to find because there are no signs advertising it. Mariakakis advertises by word of mouth, folks.

As we entered the restaurant, which often has a line (we waited about 30 minutes at 8 p.m. on a Saturday night), it was evident

that the owners don't believe in elaborate furnishings. The interior probably hasn't been remodeled for some time. It's not particularly tidy; it's clean, yes, but the entrance, which serves as a deli/bakery/grocery, is a bit cluttered with coolers, freezers and shelves.

My taste-tester buddies became somewhat frustrated at the wait, but they were more worried about the foreign ingredients in the coolers.

Looking into the deli cooler, Buddy #1 noticed a can of tarma.

"Now what is tarma?" he asked. Well, tarma is a carp roe (fish eggs of carp) the restaurant uses to make tarmosalata, a spread consisting of tarma, olive oil, granulated garlic and lemon juice which is all mixed into a paste and served inside a loaf of bread. Don't knock it 'til you try it!

Other notable items stocked on the shelves are frozen packaged goods that are domestically made by APPOLO, a Greek-affiliated company that sends frozen bagels, bread and fillo dough to the restaurant.

In case you were wondering, fillo dough comes in onion-thin sheets, and several layers surround a vegetable or meat mixture or, most commonly, some sort of dessert filling.

Several bulk items on the shelves will also capture your attention as you stand in line oohing and aahing (and yucking) over certain ingredients.

We definitely yucked over the canned squid.

The rest of the products the restaurant uses for Mediterranean-style cooking seem safer — imported olives, coffees, nuts, wines, artichoke hearts, grape leaves and olive oils.

However, one item that was somewhat questionable was the olive oil. Mariakakis carries extra virgin, virgin and pure olive oils, with extra virgin being the most expensive.

After listening to the somewhat colored explanations my male



DTH/Sheila Johnston

Mariakakis' founder Tom Mariakakis with son and co-manager Johnny Mariakakis

cohorts offered about degrees of purity, I found out the real story from Johnny Mariakakis.

First of all, olive oil is produced from green olives; thus, it is a vegetable oil. Extra virgin olive oil comes from olives that are hand-picked from the tree and are then grated by hand. The oil that constitutes extra virgin oil is from the first pressing (extraction) of the olive. The second extractions

are termed virgin olive oil and subsequent pressings are called pure. The extra virgin olive oil is less refined than the others and thereby it has a more potent olive flavor.

Cold pressing is the extraction process unique to extra virgin olive oil. Instead of the usual heat-applied method that helps the extraction, a cold press is used so

as not to break down the oil, which loses some of the flavor. Oleic acid is the olive flavor that is retained in the extraction process. The olive oil is kept away from heating elements and sunlight and is stored in a metal canister or a green bottle to preserve quality.

Get your bottle of Crisco never went through all that!

After the dilemma of the olive oil had been solved, we were seated at a not-so-sturdy table.

The interior of the dining area was informal — something reminiscent of a lodge. Despite the cheap paneling and beer clocks which adorn the walls, the restaurant has a warm, amiable atmosphere. You can just feel that you are in for a good homemade meal — Greek style.

Individual pitchers of water and iced tea are served if you order either of these beverages, and there are often beer specials. Saturday night there was a special on Red Stripe beer, a Jamaican import.

Buddy #2 took advantage of this special and got rather perturbed when he wanted round two; he had to wait a good 10 minutes before the waitress could be flagged down for further service. Needless to say, he was a bit miffed.

Upon my request, we all managed to order a variety of dishes so we could sample as many items as possible.

We started off with salads (a safe move), and each person received a generously filled bowl of either tossed salad or Greek salad. The only difference between the two is that the Greek salad contains feta cheese (a dry, salty, crumbly white cheese) and a black olive. The tossed salad comes with tomatoes and egg. The olive oil and vinegar dressing goes wonderfully with the Greek salad.

We also ordered Arabic cheese bread, a large pizza crust or pita bread with melted cheese — basically pizza without the sauce. They also served a pizza crust brushed with garlic butter. We

liked it immediately and wolfed it down. There's nothing like good warm bread!

After a reasonable wait of 15 minutes, our main course was served.

I chose the spanakopita, a mixture of cooked spinach and feta cheese that is wrapped in layers of fillo dough (like a strudel). The strudels were great — don't let the spinach scare you — but were somewhat small, although for \$1.50, their size was adequate. Perhaps they could make larger strudels for a higher cost. Anyway, don't rely on it for a main course. I don't prefer spinach, but in this mixture it was delicious.

Buddy #3 selected dolmades, which are stuffed grape leaves. A brave soul — no, not really — one mustn't turn up his nose so readily. A platter was served with about six stuffed grape leaves. It looked like six green egg rolls — the shape, that is. The leaves, which are stuffed with a mild meat mixture, were in a bed of slightly lemony sauce. Buddies #1 and #2 and

myself, although reluctant at first, gave the dolmades a try. Dolmades received a surprisingly positive response.

Buddy #1 decided he just couldn't live without trying their pizza. Mariakakis offers the usual toppings but also offers Greek toppings like feta cheese and black and green olives. He opted for the usual toppings. It turned out to be a very tasty pizza, with abundant toppings. He was a happy camper.

Buddy #2 also went out on a limb to order mousaka, a Greek eggplant and beef casserole. It looks kind of, well, mushed up — not very appetizing. But if you like lasagne, the taste of mousaka is very similar. Buddy #2 said if given a choice between the two, he would choose lasagne, but he certainly didn't disapprove of the mousaka.

Baklava is a must for dessert. It is a pastry made of many layers of fillo dough that have been brushed with butter. In between the layers is a mixture of ground-up nuts, spices and sugar. The

pastry is then doused with a honey and sugar syrup, making it very moist and thick. The waitress brought us each a warmed piece of the diamond-shaped pastry and we immediately savored each bite. Well, sort of. Buddy #1 attacked his, and within seconds, it was history, so he sat looking mournfully at the three of us who still had half of ours to go.

Mariakakis is a definite must on the list of Chapel Hill eateries. Its informal atmosphere lends itself to a great gathering place for a bunch of friends, big families or an informal first date. The food is appealing and unique, very reasonably priced and good. Many American favorites are served as well and are most likely of equal quality.

Mariakakis is closed on Sundays. It is open all other days from 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. Reservations are requested for parties of five or more people.

I say give it a try — you won't get to throw dishes, but it will be a truly Greek experience all the same.



Mariakakis is not just a restaurant—it includes a grocery store and a bakery as well



DTH/Sheila Johnston

Mariakakis is known for its food, but the restaurant has informal seating arrangements also