

Over the past few years, our Charlotte's Classic Eats series has highlighted restaurants that have stood the test of time, including longtime favorites such as:

Carolina Family Restaurant

Greystone Pub

Open Kitchen

and Stockyard Restaurant.

With heavy hearts, we've covered the closing of community staples such as Mr. K's and Zack's Hamburgers, Soul Gastrolounge and Sister.

And we've written about Charlotte's oldest restaurants - including Bar-B-Q King, Gus' Sir Beef and House of Pizza.

Covering all of the aforementioned restaurants, there has remained a constant: They're all **Greek**-owned. That's right - go looking for Charlotte's longtime barbecue, burgers, pizza and other American staples, and you'll likely end up at a **Greek**-owned establishment.

The breadth and variety of **Greek**-owned restaurants in Charlotte is impressive - including Landmark Diner, South 21 Drive-In and many more - the list keeps going. This got us asking: How did the **Greek** community find so much success in Charlotte's restaurant industry - and why isn't there more **Greek** food?

A new chapter

Charlotte's **Greek** community thrived in the 20th century, growing from a small group of about 20 people to thousands of families. A drive through Evergreen Cemetery highlights a prominent history of this community - Cavalaris, Kakavistas, Karras and Politis among them. A brief history of Holy Trinity **Greek** Orthodox Cathedral gives insight into Charlotte's **Greek** community and its growth from 1910 onward.

Many **Greek** families immigrated to the United States after World War II, eager to begin a new chapter. During this time, last names were often shortened - Karagounis might become Karras, for example.

Coincidentally, Charlotte was also growing herself, nearly doubling in population (from 134,042 to 241,178) between 1950 and 1970 - and restaurant jobs were plentiful.

Many **Greek** immigrants found work in kitchens and, equipped with a hard work ethic, ended up opening their own establishments. Gus' Sir Beef founder Gus Bacogeorge moved to the United States in 1953. After working in kitchens from New York to Roanoke, he opened his Charlotte restaurant on Monroe Road in 1969. "He wanted to learn how to cook fresh vegetables," Gus' son Thrace told CharlotteFive. "He learned from Southern cooks and turned what he learned into his own recipes."

Christina Skiouri, owner of Open Kitchen, also belongs to a restaurant family. She grew up working in her dad's restaurant, who grew up working in his dad's Charlotte restaurant. Skiouri's dad, Steve Kokenes, was born in Charlotte and spent a few years in Washington, D.C.; he returned to Charlotte in 1954 and convinced his brother to serve a new dish he'd experienced in the nation's capital - pizza.

Upon closing Zack's Hamburgers in 2021 after 46 years in Charlotte, owner George Demopoulos' work ethic was obvious. "The hardest part (about closing) ... was the devotion we've had for the customers. That's where we feel bad," Demopoulos told CharlotteFive at the time. Almost half a century and the customers are his biggest concern - quite a testament.

Southern staples

Like Gus' Sir Beef's Bacogeorge, many **Greek** restaurant owners got their start in the back of another restaurant - learning to prepare American dishes like barbecue, fried chicken and meatloaf. When it came time to open their own restaurants, it made sense - and money - to offer Southern staples that most Charlotteans were familiar with.

Others, like Carolina Family Restaurant founder Pete Gavrillis, tried their hand at opening **Greek** restaurants but found it was not lucrative enough. "Originally, we served **Greek** food - authentic, home-cooked **Greek** food. But the demand wasn't there. People wanted meat and three (vegetables)," Maria Kotros (Gavrillis' daughter and Carolina Family Restaurant owner) said. Like so many other **Greek** restaurateurs, however, Gavrillis had a relentless work ethic. "My dad lived and breathed this restaurant. He never took time off."

When Greystone Pub opened in 1947, blue collar diners were in search of Southern food - "so we served grits and Salisbury steak," owner Tommy Koutsokalis said. "Now, the city is growing, with a lot of northerners bringing international influence. Everything changes with the times, and now people are more open to **Greek** dishes."

George Couchell opened Showmars in 1982 - the restaurant brought together his roots: Mediterranean, Southern and American flavors. "Mr. C wanted to ensure that Showmars had something for everyone, from gyros seasoned with custom **Greek** spices to an American-style burger served on a pita," Showmars CEO Dean Peroulas told CharlotteFive. "To entice his southern neighbors to try out the menu, Mr. C concepted Southern dishes, including a fresh, fried to perfection fish sandwich covered with his own homemade tartar sauce."

Brothers Chris and George Limberakis opened The Mad **Greek** of Charlotte in 1991 - originally named Hugo's Diner. The restaurant has evolved significantly over the past 30 years, amplifying its bent towards **Greek** cuisine and decor alike. It's more than just the food that makes the restaurant **Greek**, Peyton told us in February 2020. "From 3-5 p.m., all the Greeks come," Chris' son Peyton said at the time. "You can hear them hollering on the back patio, playing backgammon and drinking coffee."

Greek influences

Mediterranean food, including **Greek** cuisine, has risen in popularity in recent years, in large part due to health benefits derived from the concentration of fruits, vegetables and healthy fats including olive oil and avocados. It's becoming easier to find a **Greek** restaurant in Charlotte - and options such as ever-growing Greco Fresh Grille, which added another location in SouthPark last year, continue opening.

Next time you're eating at a Charlotte staple, be sure to scan the menu - there's no telling where you might find a little **Greek** influence tucked between fried chicken and collard greens.

CITATION (APA STYLE)

Freeman, P. (2022, September 2). Why our BBQ joints and pizza parlors are Greek-owned It's all Greek to Charlotte. *Charlotte Observer, The (NC)*, p. 4A. Available from NewsBank: America's News - Historical and Current: <https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy141.nclive.org/apps/news/document-view?p=AMNEWS&docref=news/18C4AC70BB8E71D8>.