

Greece Is the Word at Petros

Chef Petros Benekos Brings Hellenic Delights to the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn

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If you think a Greek restaurant is only as good as its travel posters of the blue Aegean, Petros, the new restaurant at the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn & Spa in Los Olivos, will disappoint you. The walls of the sleekly contemporary restaurant are clean of any art. But that just means you will focus on Chef Petros Benekos's food, which is so vibrant that it will transport you to Greece all by itself.

Benekos—who also owns an acclaimed Petros in Manhattan Beach—is after something different than what one might expect. "I hated the Greek cuisine as it was represented from the 1940s and '50s. It never progressed like Italian cuisine in the United States did," he explained. "I wanted to bring the authentic classic Greek cuisine that the great restaurants in the cities and islands of Greece served. For instance, in America, a Greek salad always comes with lettuce and vinaigrette. But it should just be tomatoes, olives, cucumber, great feta, and olive oil." Sure, Benekos gives it a bit of a California spin—he includes some avocado in his Greek salad—but the point is he's reinventing and adapting to where he and Greek cuisine are now.



George Yatchisin

Fess Parker Wine Country Inn

And don't even ask him about hummus. "It's not Greek; it's Lebanese, it's Middle Eastern," he said. "We're not serving Middle Eastern cuisine." Instead, he makes recipes that have often come from his mother, and are therefore reminiscent of the Greece of his childhood. There are dips—try the five-dip sampler plate—but these are all truly Greek, fiendishly simple, and utterly beguiling. The Melitzanosalata, for instance, is eggplantier than eggplant itself, deepened by the inclusion of some walnuts into its mix. "I don't believe the cook can make a difference but the ingredients can," Benekos insisted. So he uses Epirus feta from northwest Greece, and explained, "I don't use Kalamata olives, as it's a stereotype. I like to use Amfissa and Volos, big, juicy olives that I've loved since I was a kid."

How this gregarious man, who seems to know everyone in his establishment after having been open for only weeks, got to the Santa Ynez Valley turns out to be quite a tale. "A local realtor called to tell me someone wanted to lease the space," said Eli Parker, son of Fess and one of the hotel's managers. "Having had some challenges trying to run Marcella [the previous restaurant], as that's not our forte, I was happy to have someone express interest. But then she said, 'He serves Greek cuisine,' and I thought, 'That'd be a stretch.' But Petros invited us down to his Manhattan Beach restaurant and I had his food and instantly fell in love with what he was doing."



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Benekos fell in love with the Santa Ynez Valley years before, claiming, "It's an area Angelenos never understood, its magnitude and beauty." He bought a ranch there two years ago, in fact, and bided his time until the right opportunity came up. "Eli is a forward-thinking businessman, and understood it was time for a change, for something different. I'm looking forward to introducing the cuisine to Santa Barbara County in general."

People will want to hang around long after an introduction like his Nikos Saganaki, a sesame-crust-ed feta with golden raisins that's drizzled with Greek honey. "My brother took me to a peasant's tavern in Mykonos and they showed me how to make that dish," he said, "so I named it after my brother." It's a brilliantly balanced marvel of taste and texture, creamy and crunchy, salty and sweet. If food sang harmony, this dish could be its own barbershop quartet.

Petros also gets to expand the notion of a wine country inn. While the list features many Santa Barbara County superstars, it also gives one a chance to pour juice from grapes like agiorgitiko (a red somewhere between a merlot and cab franc) and assyrtiko (a white somewhat chenin blanc-ish) over one's tongue as opposed to trying to twist one's tongue in pronouncing the names. (Then again, the night I visited the lively bar scene featured one of Benekos's loyal patrons from Manhattan Beach trying to teach a hostess some Greek.)

Best of all are Benekos's homemade touches-the kitchen preps everything daily, from freshly baked pita and phyllo to making its own yogurt. That means the phyllo on his spanakopita doesn't just flake, it tastes, and the light doughiness makes the entire dish fuller of flavors. "You can't be cheap," Benekos insisted. "I believe in great ingredients. My tomatoes cost me \$1.20, but they taste like the ones you got 20 or 30 years ago. I have no partners, so I can run the business the way I want to."

Finally, this energetic chef/businessperson (he also markets vintage clothes), who looks a bit like a Hellenic Bruno Ganz, has one piece of advice: Don't use the word "opa" in his restaurant. "Opa means yee-ha!" he said derisively. Nonetheless, it's possible this fine addition to Santa Barbara County dining might leave people hollering all sorts of superlatives.

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Petros is located in the Fess Parker Wine Country Inn at 2860 Grand Avenue in Los Olivos. Call 688-7788 or see fessparker.com/restaurant.htm.