

A Second-Generation Ode to Greece

An unbridled take on a taverna, poster-size menu and all.

IF THERE ARE TWEEZERS in the kitchen of MP Taverna Astoria, they are banned from all tasks except, perhaps, yanking bones from branzino fillets before they go on the grill. Tweezers are definitely not asked to airlift feathery microgreens onto plates that endeavor to be meditations on negative space.

The kind of tool that might be used to put together a bowl of MP Taverna's marvelous ricotta dumplings would be something like a large ice cream scoop. The soft, round gnudi, the ricotta's young milkiness given depth by gratings of aged graviera from Crete, are piled around and around with pine nuts, crumbled feta, heaps of spinach and sun-dried tomatoes. There are spicy bites of lamb sausage everywhere, and a garlicky tomato sauce with white wine. It isn't a dish you meditate on. It's one you demolish, forkful by forkful.

The same goes for the grilled octopus appetizer, many tender sticks of it, lightly charred and piled all around with chickpeas, black-eyed peas, red peppers and parsley above a small lake of yogurt and golden olive oil. Golden fillets of lightly cured and deep-fried cod get two sauces, a glossy bed of garlicky skordalia and a blanket of tomato sauce that's half sweet and half sharp. Then they're shingled over with a roof of grilled bread sprinkled with lemon juice and tomato water. The only delicate thing about the restaurant's abundant, lusty plates is the prices: \$8.50 for the cod, \$11 for the octopus and \$15 for the dumplings, a main course that I couldn't finish, though I wanted to.

The MP of this crowded, unrestrained take on a Greek taverna is the chef Michael Psilakis. Those who remember his earlier odes to Greece — sung elegantly at Anthos, soulfully at Onera — may wish more of his old finesse had survived the trip from Manhattan to Queens. But MP Taverna broadcasts its intentions from the minute the host walks you past the bar, where TVs embedded in the wall are playing the Mets, and hands you a poster-size menu in a plastic sheath, diner style. (An upstairs dining room is quieter and more comfortable.)

Unlike a diner, though, MP Taverna turns over the back of its menu to a list of about six dozen wines by the half glass, full glass, half bottle and full bottle, and about as many beers, nearly all from craft breweries. A hefty share of the wines shows off the skill of Greek winemakers, including a 2011 Ritinitis Nobilis from Gaia Estate, the first retsina I've ever made peace with.

That list gives space to France, Italy,



Dishes at MP Taverna Astoria, top and top center, include a dip sampler, above left; meatballs, above right; and a barrel-aged feta dish, top right, being finished by the chef, Michael Psilakis.

Austria and the United States, too. This isn't unusual on its own, but it reflects one of Mr. Psilakis's aims for MP Taverna. The son of Greek immigrants, he has battled his whole career to win respect for the food of his family. His early Manhattan restaurants were sophisticated, elite campaigns. With his MP Taverna, a high-volume proposition with branches outside the city in Roslyn and Irvington, N.Y., he takes the struggle to the streets.

MP Taverna offers a second-generation, melting-pot vision of an America where Greek flavors have been woven into the fabric of American cooking so thoroughly that they're taken for granted. If yogurt companies can do it, why not chefs?

In this America, dense white cubes of feta pickled in wood barrels are widely recognized as an appetizer that can hold its own with burrata. Tender gigantes are a natural addition to mussels neatly arranged in a skillet. And cooks who rely on the salty, porky charms of sausage are apt to round out a dish with caul-wrapped sheftalia, which is a favorite in Cyprus, or loukaniko, made at MP Taverna with leeks

and orange peel.

Those sausages, along with merguez, lend terrific flavor wherever they turn up at MP Taverna, and they turn up a lot, though not under those names. (At times they run circles around their companions; the hanger steak served with loukaniko and the pork tenderloin in a mixed grill can't quite keep up.) Even the great beef sliders, pressed into gyro spice mix before they're griddled, and the lamb burger, seasoned with onion, scallion and garlic and then wrapped in caul and grilled, have strong sausagelike tendencies.

The flavors are so robust and the prices so unassuming that I was ready to overlook moments when a little more finesse wouldn't have been out of place: the acrid garlic cloves riding on the coattails of the roast chicken with a rich lemon-dill sauce; the fried squid that had no flavor at all; the hopelessly underseasoned pilaf with head-on prawns; the grilled watermelon that tasted as if it had been slapped down on the same part of the grate where fish is cooked.

One night, servers kept fumbling the



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MP-TAVERNA.

Atmosphere Metallic and publiclike downstairs, softer and more soothing upstairs; windows all around.

Service Bright and cheerful, though not always sure who ordered what.

Sound level Clanging on the street level, more restful on the second floor.

Recommended Greek sausage; gyro-spiced beef sliders; Grandma's meatballs; barrel-aged feta; octopus; yogurt dip; eggplant dip; dumplings; roasted lemon chicken; grilled fish; bulgur salad; Greek yogurt dessert; halvah brownie.

Drinks and wine An extensive wine list by the glass, half glass, bottle or half bottle, including strong choices from Greece; roughly as many craft beers.

Prices Appetizers, \$8 to \$12; main courses, \$15 to \$23.

Open Monday to Friday for lunch; Saturday and Sunday for brunch; daily for dinner.

Reservations Accepted.

Wheelchair access The downstairs dining room and accessible restrooms are at street level.

What the stars mean Ratings range from zero to four stars and reflect the reviewer's reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration.



simple mechanics of who gets what when. Food and drinks landed in front of the wrong person, and the main courses came while we still had our appetizers. Without asking if we were finished, the servers cleared one plate at a time to make space for a main course. For a few messy minutes half-eaten dishes and fresh new ones sat side by side.

But the servers were eager and cheerful, as they were on more-coordinated nights. A few off dishes were never enough to threaten the overall impression that MP Taverna is Mr. Psilakis's best restaurant in the city, at least for now. On the Upper West Side, Kefi has been closed since a ruptured water main flooded it in February. Mr. Psilakis hopes to open it in three months. A few blocks away is his other surviving Manhattan restaurant, Fishtag.

Yes, Fishtag survives. Sam Sifton gave it a Fair rating in a New York Times review in 2011. Not long after, the restaurant lost its chef, Ryan Skeen, who has left so many kitchens so rapidly he has to be considered a flight risk. Two years on, Fishtag is often full at 8, and everybody looks content. On an initial visit, I was, too. I loved raw kale with smoked trout, some of it flaked to coat the raw greens and some left in big meaty pieces. Sheep-milk dumplings, close cousins of the ricotta ones at MP Taverna, were just as seductive at Fishtag with crab meat and peppery speck.

But at a second meal, the kitchen seemed to have the summertime blues. Scallops in a ceviche were a flavorless non-entity, very good smoked octopus suffered from an olive-date purée that ran far too sweet, and grilled striped bass looked as if it had been on the wrong end of a bar fight.

I wouldn't travel more than a block or two for a meal like that. But I'd go back to Astoria.