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EATS, DRINKS & SCOOPS



RESTAURANT

mediterranean embrace

words by JOHANNA HARLOW • *photography by* PAULETTE PHILIPOT

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Step into bustling Barbayani Greek Taverna in Los Altos and find yourself transported. The blue shutters and faux balconies brimming with bougainvillea recreate the seaside homes of Santorini—while wicker chairs and woven pendant lights enhance the Mediterranean atmosphere. A bust of Poseidon, god of the sea, watches over guests dining on linguine with lobster cooked in ouzo. Outside, on a patio etched in string lights, an occasional burst of flames appears as orders of saganaki with kefalograviera cheese are pan-fried at tables.

At the heart of this getaway from the everyday you'll find Allen Isik. The taverna's executive chef/

co-owner (and interior designer) circulates the dining room alongside his servers. "I make sure everything is okay in the kitchen, then I'm jumping on the floor and going to every single table, asking about their experience," Allen says. "That way, I'm seeing who is finishing their plate." If someone's food is barely touched, "I can change it right away... I have to make sure everybody leaves this place happy!" This commitment to hands-on hospitality embodies the spirit of this establishment's namesake: Barba Yani (Uncle John, in English), whom the restaurant's website describes as a "black-bearded innkeeper with a smiling face. From hearth to bed-ding, he tended to every need."

To breathe life into this concept, Allen teamed up with co-owner Dino Tekdemir. The partners in hospitality oversee a dining trifecta that includes Anatolian Kitchen in Palo Alto as well as Naschmarkt, with locations in Palo Alto and Campbell. "Three years, three restaurants," Allen says with a sense of wonder.

Barbayani, the newest addition to the family, is a throwback. As it happens, Allen's parents inherited a Greek taverna from his grandfather in Istanbul. Growing up around the kitchen—a world of sizzling stovetops and spinning dinner plates—taught Allen





many lessons. He recalls one piece of advice passed down by his dad: “If you don’t throw away your food from yesterday, then you’re going to throw away your guests,” Allen recites. “Everything needs to be fresh!” Quality ingredients are also key to the restaurant today. “Our oregano and all the spices come from Greece,” he notes, their octopus pulled from the azure waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

Many of Barbayani’s wines—including the smooth and acidic Gavalas Santorini and Meden Agan (reminiscent of pinot noir, but richer)—came from lush vineyards cultivated in the cradle of Western civilization. “We made a couple deals with the wineries,”

Allen notes. “I was in Greece just a month ago.” Those who’d prefer cocktails with a Greek twist should order the Mykanos Lemon-tini or Apollo Cooler, both spiked with anise-flavored ouzo.

Those seeking distinctive dishes will welcome the octopus on a bed of baby arugula with roasted bell peppers, drizzled in red wine vinaigrette. Or the wild-caught fumée salmon marinated in Greek-style beet and pesto sauces.

A true standout is the lavraki, a whole sea bass. The initial salty lemony zing of the crispy skin gives way to the subtle flavor of fresh fish—appreciated all the





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more as diners take their time flaking delicate forkfuls off the bones.

You'll also find the traditional taverna staples like plevrakia (lamb riblets in a garlic and lemon vinaigrette), beef souvlaki with tzatziki yogurt sauce and spanakopita (briny feta and spinach layered between crispy phyllo sheets). Not to mention classic desserts like flaky baklava and creamy galaktoboureko with semolina custard.

Traditional Greek tavernas aren't just eateries, but places brimming

with music and dancing. "We're going to start live music every Monday," promises Allen, who wants to bring the sounds of bouzouki to the streets of downtown. "I want to bring some life here!"

Back in the present, Allen watches diners devour his dishes. "Always, my dad would say, 'I'm not your boss. Your guest is your boss. I'm not paying your salary. *They* are paying your salary.'" He gives a satisfied nod. "When I see my plates empty, it gives me happiness." **P**

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