

## food reservations

### Yanni's

John Calamas' new spin  
on Greek cuisine.

BY LOYD MCINTOSH

As almost anyone on the street can tell you, Birmingham's food is steeped in Greek tradition and history. From the meat-and-three and barbecue places throughout Southside, downtown and Finley Boulevard to the annual Greek Food Festival, the flavors and culinary styles of Greece have had a profound impact on the Magic City.

This concept is not worth debating. It's simply regarded as fact. There have been articles and books written about the Greek influence in our town, and that influence has generally been embraced by the hungry masses of all types and stripes.

Surprisingly, though, there have been few specifically Greek restaurants in Birmingham. You could probably name all the restaurants offering a traditionally Greek dining experience currently operating on one hand and have a finger or two left over.

So, for the ethnic food curious among us—myself included—who have longed for more traditionally Greek fine dining restaurants to pop up here and there, Yanni's Nuovo Grill, a new restaurant in the Vestavia City Center shopping district, looks like the perfect solution to this conundrum. However, long-time Birmingham restaurateur John Calamas doesn't want his new establishment to be thought of as simply a Greek restaurant.

"I've got a Greek name and there is a Greek theme to this restaurant, but I don't want to be known as a Greek restaurant, because we're not necessarily a



Shrimp and calamari with  
green tomatoes on feta grits



Greek restaurant," Calamas says. "I use Greek ingredients, but I fuse them with other things. I call it Greek-fusion."

Calamas spent ten years as the owner and operator of Justin's Seafood and Steakhouse in northern Shelby County, a cozy restaurant located in a strip center on Valleydale Road that had a sterling reputation up until its closing earlier this year. There Calamas specialized in traditional Southern seafood and steaks while incorporating some Greek-fusion dishes from time to time, many of which make up the majority of the menu at Yanni's.

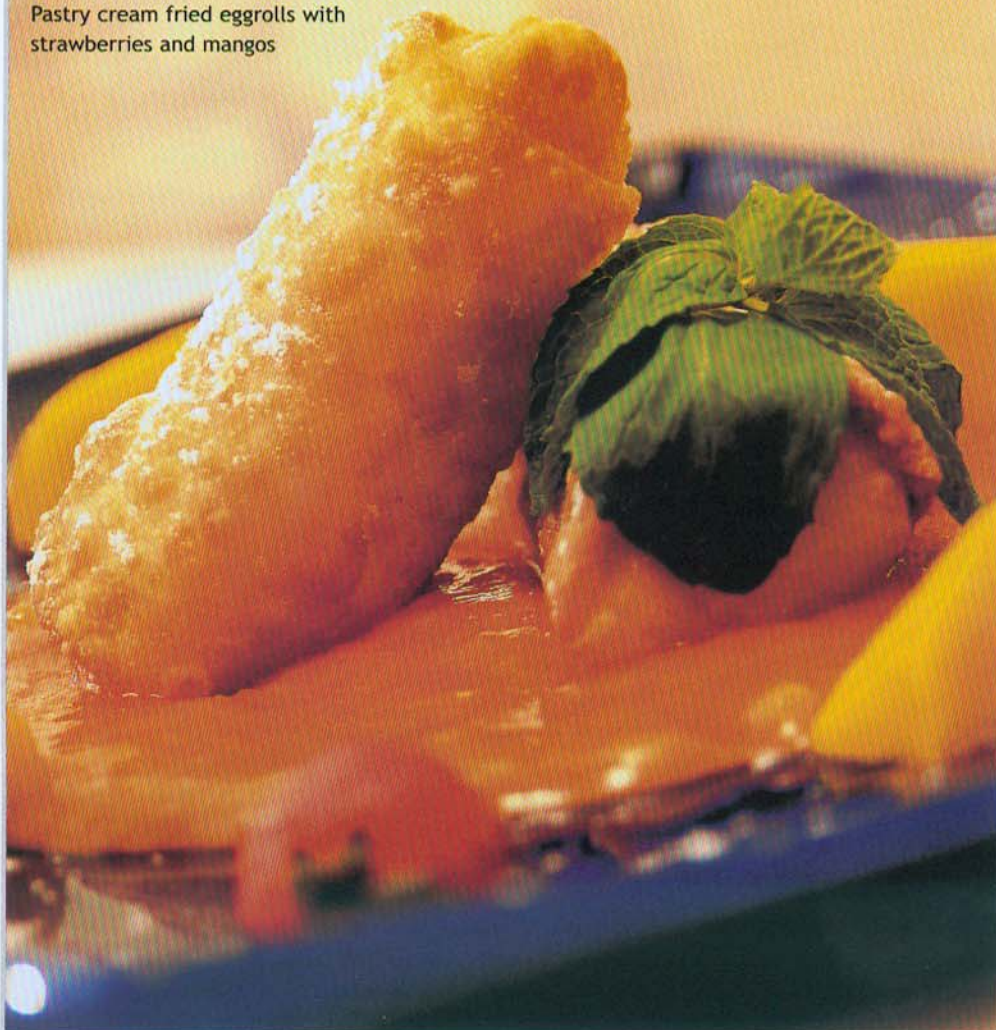
Calamas, born in Cleveland, Ohio, entered the restaurant business in Birmingham by way of Chicago where he lived for a while in his youth. There, he spent some time in the area of the city known as Greek Town and soaked up the flavors and styles of traditional Greece.

Calamas moved to Birmingham in 1968 and worked in several restaurants in the area, before taking over Justin's in the early 1990s. Longing to try something new for some time and with Justin's suffering from construction headaches and shifting neighborhood trends, Calamas decided to pack up shop and move 20 minutes north to Vestavia and stake his claim in the shiny new Vestavia City Center. Yanni's is the culmination of Calamas' desire to blend traditional Greek ingredients with new flavors, styles and techniques that have piqued his curiosity over the years.

"People ask me if I had wanted to do this type of restaurant for a few years. I tell them I've wanted to do this since I was eight," Calamas says. "I'm calling this a 'nouveau grill' which basically that means to me taking a classic item and putting a new spin on it.

"I have combinations on the menu

Pastry cream fried eggrolls with strawberries and mangos



you just don't think of," Calamas adds, "like watermelon and feta cheese. It's outstanding but you may never have thought that the two would have mixed well."

At Yanni's, inquisitive diners will find such unusual combinations as feta cheese paired with grits, blackened beef tenderloins fused with raspberry pepper sauce and ginger, and salmon crusted with pesto in a setting that is one part traditional Greek, one part post-modern sophistication.

Located on the west side of the development near the stairs leading to the Rave Theatre, Yanni's is simply a gorgeous space. Designed by Calamas, Yanni's takes advantage of the abundance of natural light provided by large windows that look out onto the street and the pedestrian areas throughout the development. The woodwork is painted white, including several large-scale Greek-style columns that reach toward the high ceiling.

Modern light fixtures with blue glass shades hang over the bar and small stained-glass embellishments add interest to the booths. The colors of Calamas' space all work to create a noticeable homage to the colors of the Greek flag. However, the dark granite bar, multi-colored painted wall treatment and selection of music playing everything from jazz standards to Sinatra make it clear you're not dining in a Greek-only restaurant.

The menu at Yanni's is the result of the cross-cultural pollination of culinary styles that began sowing in Calamas' mind many years ago. While items such as feta stuffed beef tenderloin with Greek potato salad or sautéed Gulf red snapper with Greek country salata are strongly rooted in traditional Greek flavors and styles, other dishes completely break free of that influence, a characteristic Calamas completely embraces.

"I don't want to limit myself to any





## THE DETAILS: *Yanni's*

PHONE: 823-7772

ADDRESS: 700 MONTGOMERY HWY.,  
SUITE 156

LUNCH DAILY, 11-3:30 P.M.  
DINNER MON.-SAT., 5-10 P.M., LATER  
ON WEEKENDS

HANDICAP ACCESSIBLE  
SMOKING AT BAR

one style. We do some Asian stuff with wasabi and fermented black beans. Any time you can mix those two together that's a good thing to me," Calamas says.

Case in point is an Asian-influenced tuna dish that has become a favorite on the menu. For this dish, Calamas takes a fresh Ahi tuna steak and encrusts it in sesame seeds. The tuna is then grilled to preferably a medium rare temperature. The fish is served with a generous helping of wasabi smashed potatoes with a sweet soy and horseradish aoli.

This specialty is, perhaps, one of the most out of the ordinary and flavorful examples of Calamas' Greek-fusion. The wasabi and horseradish from the potatoes add a hint of Asian-inspired spiciness that, invariably, mixes together with the tuna. The sesame seeds give the mouth something to crunch into, creating an appealing contrariness to the soft and succulent tuna. The smashed new potatoes are creamy and contain just enough skin to add texture and character to an already eclectic plate.

While there are a few beef and chicken dishes on the menu—a char grilled eight-ounce filet with raspberry pepper sauce and smashed garlic potatoes and rosemary roasted chicken with mustard greens and avgolemono sauce for instance—the majority of the menu consists of fresh fish of all types. Grouper, lobster tails, crab and

salmon are all available at Yanni's, along with other harder-to-find specialties. One dish in particular utilizes skate, a fish you don't find on too many menus around town.

Calamas panees a filet of skate—a type of ray from the Gulf of Mexico—and serves the fish with smashed garlic potatoes and a lemon caper sauce.

"Skate has a very silky, smooth texture and is really very good," Calamas says.

But, before you jump straight into the entrée section of the menu, diners should definitely try one of Calamas' inventive appetizers. For instance, the blackened beef tenderloins with raspberry sauce and fried ginger gets the ball rolling and is a noteworthy example of the culinary experimentation shaping up at Yanni's.

The blackened beef has a wonderful flavor that Calamas will only say comes from fennel. In addition, the raspberry pepper sauce is a fascinating interpretation of the sweet and spicy flavors that dot the menu.

However, extremely adventurous diners can give a little amphibian a try. Calamas has included an appetizer of pecan crusted frog legs that he combines with hearts of palm and a sweet red pepper sauce, a strange idea that he says he's not exactly sure of its origin.

"In the 70's it was a big trend to find hearts of palm on a lot of menus, then they just sort of disappeared," Calamas says. "I thought

combining them with frog legs was an interesting way to bring them back."

All meals at Yanni's come with a loaf of French bread and loaf of sourdough, both served hot and perfectly crusty on the outside and soft on the inside. The bread also comes with a small bowl of salata, a traditional Greek salad made from a variety of vegetables—purple onion, red peppers—and spices that can be compared to a salsa, where all of the ingredients are mixed together right before being served and retain their individual characteristics.

While the bread and salata are complimentary with any meal, they should not be overlooked but, instead, should be regarded as a highlight to a varied and delicious night at Yanni's.

Even the desserts at Yanni's can't escape Calamas' desire for experimentation. Flourless chocolate cake with raspberry ice cream is a definite favorite, as well as an assortment of homemade chocolate truffles incorporating powdered cocoa, coconut and pistachio.

The wine list is as varied as the influences that make up the food Yanni's. Wines from every region of the globe can be found on the list, including several from New Zealand and South Africa, such as a Rudeburg alternative red, a blended red wine that works well with the veal and steaks on the menu, but can also be paired with the tuna. 