

Greek Treasures Found Near the Sea

GEORGE CHRYSsaidis LOVES LIFE IN HISTORIC ST. AUGUSTINE, where he knows everyone, similar to his hometown of Frixia, a small Greek village with a parallel heart and soul. Local residents and visitors to the Ancient City feel as if they know George, too. He is always present at his three restaurants from early morning until the city lights begin to dim.

Established in 2001, George's first venture, Athena Restaurant, exudes the simple heritage of Greece, featuring hand-painted murals that cover three walls and depict the Greek countryside, a place where hundreds of years and generations of family culture found joy in tending their olive groves. The restaurant's casual ambience on Cathedral Place is so comfortable that early each morning the 'big boys of St. Augustine' meet for breakfast and conversation, sometimes solving the city's issues while carrying on a tradition of fellowship in 'George's house.'



Who can resist Athena Restaurant's authentic homemade Moussaka. It features layers of meat, eggplant, tomato and béchamel sauce baked to perfection. Classically crafted Spanikopita - freshly chopped spinach and feta cheese in a golden brown puffed pastry served with Greek salad - can't be found anywhere else in St. Augustine. Everything is prepared on site and made to order: souvlaki, warm pita bread with tzatziki sauce, open-faced gyro sandwiches and a lengthy menu of pastas, steaks, chops, kebobs, fresh seafood and luscious Baklava. It's one of the city's most popular breakfast spots: serving breakfast until 2 p.m., lunch until 4 p.m. and dinner until...

By 2006, George was ready for his second adventure in the city. A stylized red and silver 1950s-era diner was waiting for 'Georgie.' Many locals recall when the Greyhound Bus Station was headquartered on Malaga Street where Georgie's Diner now serves old-fashioned breakfast, lunch and dinner daily. Cozy diner booths inside and canopied seating outside keep guests happy whether stopping in for a quick bite, power lunch or late night supper. Regular patrons show up daily to order homestyle favorites like meatloaf with mashed potatoes, liver and onions, country fried steak, corned beef hash and once again, the best Greek specialties that won't break the bank. NOTE: Every menu item requires a hearty appetite. At Georgie's, with lots of onsite parking, you feel hidden away from the city crowds although it's still only steps from King Street and US 1.



Keeping his eye on one of the most beautiful spots in St. Augustine for a third restaurant, George was ready to move into the grand Lightner Museum with Café Alcazar, a lovely 'secret' café surrounded by history. Its picturesque setting represents the 'Gilded Age' of America's oldest city, which was influenced by Henry Flagler's vision in the original Hotel Alcazar.

When you step into Café Alcazar you feel like you're entering the 'privileged' world of 1888. White clothed tables are rare in St. Augustine for lunch except here, so George's 'jewel in the crown' of his restaurant collection offers guests a stunning experience that aristocratic visitors to the city would have expected at the turn of the century.

Sip a glass of 'Shooting Star' Merlot or 'Lafitte' Sparkling Rose and linger over the menu. Glance around you and notice the towering street lamps that were moved from their original location on the famous Bridge of Lions. Large vintage Tiffany windows envelop the café, imposing stained glass gems from Otto Lightner's home in Chicago. You can almost hear sounds from the 1932 film 'Tarzan,' when Johnny Weissmuller filmed scenes on a diving board high above the deep end of the pool near a grand Chickering piano that enhances the dining room today.

The early hotel was a casino, health spa and entertainment venue for elite guests that frequented the world-famous Ponce de Leon Hotel across the avenue. This massive structure housed the largest indoor swimming pool in the world, a major focal point and attraction of the city. Café Alcazar now sits proudly in the space where the pool was located more than a century ago, surrounded by shops filled with antiques and the collection of Lightner's treasures.



Lunch is the main event at Café Alcazar. Innovative cooking styles are used with the freshest ingredients to, once again, create homemade soups, paninis, salads and entrees. Here you can dine healthfully or feast royally on crepes, shrimp scampi, grilled salmon with béchamel or marvelous chef-made desserts like Tres Leche Cake drizzled with caramel sauce. Refined service and a classical guitarist or polished pianist enhances lunch whether dining alone or with a big party.

George and his wife Paula know how to make guests feel welcome. Their dream of running a restaurant by the ocean came true with Athena Café. "It's in our blood; it's what we love," George says with pride. The Chryssaidis family has made close friends with customers, and there's always something going on: from Greek celebrations to old-fashioned conversation around a big table. What better place to start than in St. Augustine, where visitors have journeyed for centuries to find the quality of long life, pleasure in the sunshine and being near the sea.

"My ancestors would be proud to know we're continuing the tradition of abundance, glory and peace...the symbol of the olive tree," George said. Visit George's collection at thealcazarcafe.com ■