

# Is the "Greek" still in Greektowns?

*A recent article in the Baltimore Sun about that city's Greektown sparked some ideas in our minds of what Greektowns today really symbolize; and whether in today's world they truly were 'Greek.'*

*As immigrant waves came into new countries (Canada, Australia, United States, France, UK etc), Greeks and other ethnic groups often settled into areas that they knew how to relate with, conduct business with and communicate with. This created numerous ethnic neighborhoods in many cities including the Greektowns that sprouted up in numerous cities. But as immigration has faded, the Greek element of many former Greek towns has been lost, and in many cases has been reduced to nothing more than a strip of retail*

*shops or restaurants. Some exceptions do exist; most notably in Tarpon Springs, Florida; Astoria, New York; and on the Danforth in Toronto; where a large Greek community still resides in the area and helps retain more of a cultural element to the neighborhoods.*

*But in U.S., the term Greektown has in many cases become nothing more than a tourist attraction. In Chicago, the former Greektown that used to span blocks and blocks and was home to dozens of businesses and hundreds of families was razed in the 1960s and today consists of three blocks of retail stores. (The Greeks who used to live there have dispersed to the northwest and southwest suburbs.) Detroit's Greektown is also a small*

*commercial strip, and Denver's Greektown is merely a collection of a restaurants on a busy street. The Tremont neighborhood of Cleveland has lost most of its Greek residents and the Greek neighborhoods of Los Angeles and St. Louis have all but vanished. In Australia, the same phenomena is occurring. Melbourne, with its huge Greek population has seen a population shift to the suburbs; a occurrence also happening in Sydney and Brisbane.*

*Something that should be noted is that although Greeks may still not reside in their former 'neighborhoods', Greektowns still serve as a focal point for the community and are hosts for parades, and large festivals celebrating our heritage.*

## Greektown develops Latin flavor

For 50 years, Greeks have made their way to Kentrikon, a shop on Eastern Avenue where they come to buy Greek music and trinkets, wreaths for weddings and christening ribbons after babies are born.

Only now there is a new draw, and new customers. "Musica Latina de Venta Aqui," reads a sign visible from outside Kentrikon - "Latin music sales here."

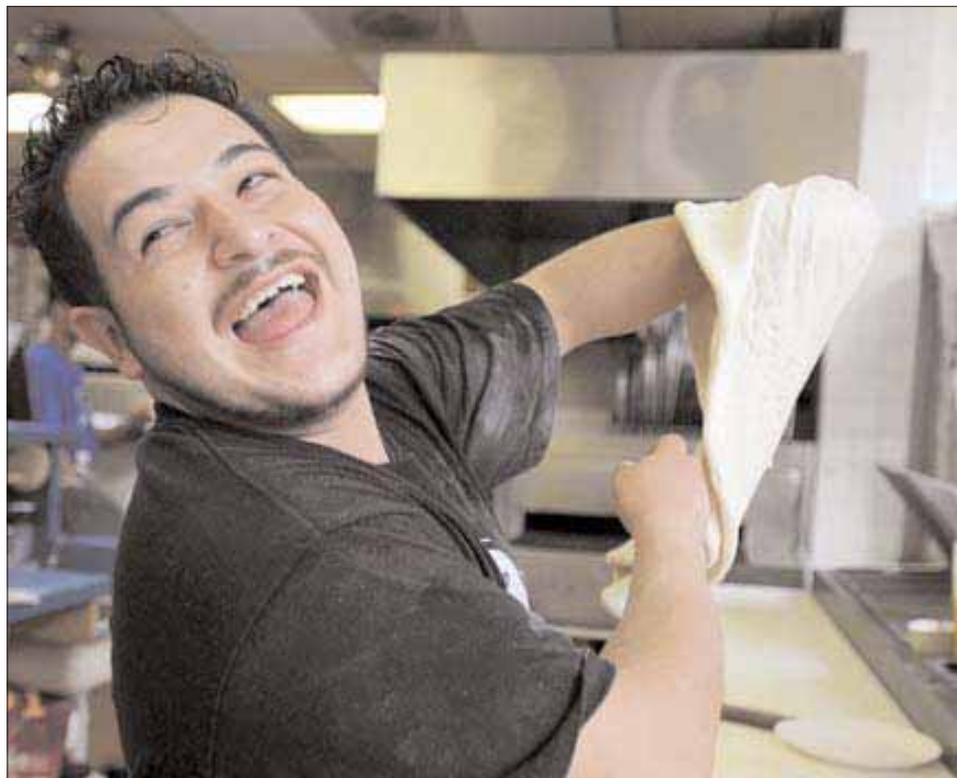
"The majority of people coming into the area are Hispanic," says owner Nitsa Morekas, 67, explaining her decision to branch out. "It's like Greektown international now."

The split personality of the city's Greek enclave is everywhere. Outside of Charro Negro, a bar that opened this year, the sign remained for Mylos, the Greek restaurant that it displaced. At El Artista barbershop, the sign on the door proclaims, "Greektown Barbershop," the hours and days written in Spanish.

As the march of Latinos continues to stretch east from Fells Point, Greek coffeehouses now sit alongside Latino bakeries and longtime restaurants like Ikaros and Acropolis share attention with one named Habanero Grill. Yet residents say that members of the two communities keep largely to themselves.

Baltimore's Latino population increased by more than 40 percent between 2000 and 2007, a time when the city's overall population declined. In August, the Census Bureau estimated that nearly 16,000 Latinos now live here, though community advocates say the true figure is at least 50 percent higher. There are no figures for the number of Latinos in Greektown, but residents and organizers estimate that a quarter to a half of its residents are immigrants from Spanish-speaking countries such as El Salvador, Honduras, Ecuador and Mexico.

The pattern of Latinos taking over older ethnic communities is common across the country. Little Italys become Little Perus. "The new immigrant populations are going in where they can find both a sense of community and also a place where they can be successful, and it makes sense for them to congregate in the



sort of same ethnic, same background communities," said William Frey, a demographer at the Brookings Institution. "And there is a kind of upward and outward mobility of some of the older groups."

Gloria Hertzfelt, a Mexico City native, remembers a different Greektown. The 77-year-old resident, better known as Dona Gloria, came 57 years ago. She recalls being one of the only Latinos at a time when other residents didn't want their children playing with hers.

"It was awful, horrible," remembers Hertzfelt. "They wouldn't accept just anybody, and I was Hispanic."

Now Hertzfelt serves as a matron for Latinos from near and far, fielding inquiries and pleas for help when they come to her for translations, questions about getting social services and ways to resolve disputes with employers.

One afternoon, she held up a claim for \$750 in unpaid wages that she was helping a man obtain. She feels

other residents of the community, power walking down Eastern Avenue and waving and hugging business owners, Greek and Latino alike.

"Hola, hola!" she calls into the Acropolis restaurant.

Dimitrios Augerinos is the owner. He lived in Greektown for 15 years before moving to Perry Hall. "This was the best town," he says. "The people, we try to keep it up."

Hertzfelt says interaction between Hispanics and Greeks is just starting. "It's very important for both sides," she says. "This is the beginning."

Residents say Greeks live primarily in the eastern end of the area, and Latinos keep to the western end.

"I don't know them; they don't live next to me," Helen Johns, 75, a longtime Greek resident, says of the Latinos. "If they say, 'Good morning,' I say, 'Good morning.'"

A first-generation Greek-American, Johns says many Greeks remain despite the influx of Latinos. She still loves the area, but she said, "the newer immigrants aren't that attuned to learning English or to abiding by sanitation laws, and they attribute that to language problems."

Johns said she doesn't fault the immigrants who aren't legal for coming to the United States. Rather, she blames the government for allowing it. "I don't blame them for wanting a better life," she says.

Some say the inevitable clash of cultures exists, subtle or not. There are com-

plaints about trash and worries about gangs such as MS-13.

"It's not great between the Greeks and Hispanics," said Todd Bonicker, 35, who is the founder of the Greater Greektown Neighborhood Alliance. "I've heard more times than I care to remember Greeks consistently calling the Hispanics, 'those people.'"

"It's odd coming from an immigrant population who should be the first ones to understand how great it is to be the first generation of a family making their way in a new country," said Bonicker, who is neither Greek nor Latino but whose wife is Greek-American.

Others say the two groups interact just fine. Jason Filippou is director of development for the Greektown Community Development Corp., which has begun an outreach to Latino entrepreneurs. "When the Greeks first got here, it was predominantly Polish and German, and the Greeks moved in and flourished," said Filippou, who grew up in Greektown for eight years and moved back four years ago. "We have a Spanish explosion now ... and we certainly would be hypocritical if we didn't welcome them."

Earlier this year, his group walked around to Latino-owned businesses, accompanied by Spanish-speaking representatives from the police and City Council president's office, as well as Hertzfelt, talking about the organization and the help it could offer.

Another organization, the Greektown Neighborhood Alliance, has created a new position. Its vice president of Latino affairs is Alejandro Necochea, 31, a Peruvian physician who moved to Greektown about three years ago.

Necochea has translated material for the group so it can distribute information in Spanish and says there is talk of holding part of the meetings in Spanish.

"The Latino community is not even involved in some of the planning and some of the neighborhood initiatives," said Necochea, speculating that might be because of its rapid growth. "It's a little challenging. ... How do we mobilize the Latino community to participate and to feel like this is their neighborhood, too?"

In Bonicker's view, the Latino-owned businesses are thriving in comparison with the Greek shops. He foresees a future in which Latino businesses will become dominant, as in parts of Fells Point and Highlandtown.

"Kentrikon in Greek means center," said Bonicker. "I joke to my wife that pretty soon they're going to call it Centro."

*Sumathi Reddy is a former reporter for The Baltimore Sun.*



equally at home with the Greek and