

Migrations

Diners in Changing Hands; Greek Ownership on the Wane

NICK KARKAMBASIS arrived in New York City from Sparta, Greece, on Dec. 22, 1968, when he was 16 years old. By Dec. 24 he was working as a dishwasher at his uncle's Delta Diner in Massapequa on Long Island.

He moved up by taking a traditional path of Greek immigrants — dishwasher, busboy, short-order cook, waiter — until he mastered the full menu of diner routines and squirreled away enough money to buy his own in 1988. In 1995 he graduated to the Yorktown Coach Diner, a plain-spoken brick stand-alone in a shopping mall here. Its typi-



Tired of the stressful life as the co-owner of Executive Diner in Hawthorne, in Westchester County, 71-year-old Elias Spyrocoulous is looking to sell. He is not the only one.

A couple of articles in the New York Times this past weekend spoke of the wave of Greek owned diners that are changing hands, often to new immigrant groups. Historically associated with the Greek community, Greeks opened diners all over the USA, Canada and Australia in the 1950s to 1970s as waves of immigration brought thousands of Greeks to those countries shores. Many opted to enter the diner business, often working many hours a day, seven days a week, and having menus that more resembled a catalog than a menu. But as first and second generation Greeks received their education, fewer and fewer Greeks are opting to remain in the business; leaving owners to sell their businesses to others - which often include new immigrants.

cal diner touches include stainless steel streamlining, faux Tiffany lamps and a display case that shows off cheesecakes tall enough to cast a shadow.

Like other diner owners, Mr. Karkambasis has worked 16 hours a day, six days a week, not just making sure the food is tasty but also acting like something of a convivial Rick in a cafe far from Casablanca, making the guests feel at home with his patter.

But Mr. Karkambasis, like many others in the business, foresees the end of a chapter in American restaurant history — the ownership of a large share of diners by Greek immigrants. The son and daughter he put through college have become Wall Street traders and are not interested in the long workdays and hurried vacations his job entails. Meanwhile, the immigration pipeline from Greece that peaked between the 1950s and 1970 has dried up as Greece has prospered. Mr. Karkambasis' current staff of 23 hails mostly from South America.

All that is not to mention what Peter Makrias, publisher-editor of a magazine for the Greek-American food industry, says are the two most insidious forces wiping such diners off the map — the banks and chain drugstores that are buying up those enviable roadside locations and the competition from franchise restaurants.

Mr. Karkambasis, who at 56 is thinking about retirement, is luckier than most. He has a son-in-law, Konstantinos Moissiadis, a graphics designer for I.B.M., who started out at

18 working at an uncle's diner in Norwalk, Conn., and likes the business. But Mr. Karkambasis, who is also a director of a New York purchasing co-op of 437 diners, estimates that the proportion of Greek-owned diners in the New York, New Jersey and Connecticut region has declined in 10 years to 70 percent from 90 percent.

"To tell you the truth, the parents don't want their children to go into the business," Mr. Karkambasis said. "It's a lot of hours, and most of us don't want our children going through what we went through growing up."

The Park View Diner in Fairview was sold roughly six months ago to Korean owners. The Broadway Diner, a streamlined and Hopperesque throwback in Yonkers, is now owned by an immigrant from Bangladesh. The Parkside Diner in Yonkers was rebuilt a year ago as part of the homespun Malecon chain of four Dominican chicken and rice-and-beans restaurants. In Paramus, along Route 4, the Forum Diner building is about to become a Jeep dealership.

A sharper decline is looming, said Bill Kapas, one of the largest diner brokers, as the generation of Greek immigrants that founded more than 600 diners in the New York region retires. Mr. Kapas, 38, is the son of a Greek immigrant.

Greeks say they have cultivated a geniality that has worked well in 24-hour restaurants, where people often show up just to while away the time. They do well both with peckish Broadway nighthawks craving a nosh

or teenagers testing their parents' tolerance for staying out late. Owners like Mr. Karkambasis seem especially attuned to the idiosyncrasies of midday customers like Stan and Kay Rose of Yorktown, an elderly couple who drop by for lunch at his diner three or four times a week.

"We sat down and they knew us, and they had a tea on the table for us — we didn't have to order," said Mr. Rose, nibbling on a tuna on toast. "If Nick is gone, the whole flavor of the place will change."

At 71, Elias Spyrocoulous, the co-owner of the Executive diner, in Hawthorne in Westchester County, has a pacemaker and is getting tired of the stress that comes with running the restaurant. He has begun looking for a buyer.

The business has been good to him. He arrived in the United States with \$2 in his pocket as a 19-year-old from a family of seven children who lived in the olive-growing region around Kalamata. Unlike some other diner owners, he did not jump ship.

"Everybody was saying the money is easy in America and as a young fellow you don't realize what's ahead," he said.

The diner, which he owns with a partner and fellow Greek immigrant, Dee Pappas, 67, helped put two of his three children through college and let him meet many interesting people, "from the smallest to the highest ones." Those, he proudly said, included celebrities like Peter Jennings and Howard Cosell, who stopped for break-

fast on their way to work.

"You get up in the morning and you look forward to the customers," he said. "That makes me happy."

In his heyday, Mr. Spyrocoulous was in the diner from 8 a.m. to 11 p.m., and none of his three children want to emulate that incessant responsibility. Diner owners say that while the business can gross \$25,000 a week or more, it involves countless headaches, starting with the challenges of supplying dictionary-size menus that might include matzo ball soup and Hungarian goulash and sustaining a reliable, polyglot staff.

"Every day you're going to have somebody not show up," said Aristides Garganourakis, 57, owner of the Dobbs Diner in Dobbs Ferry. "You have to have emergency workers, and that's your family."

Nick Karkambasis predicts that diners will increasingly be taken over by immigrants from other countries now toiling as waiters and cooks. "What happened with Greeks is happening right now with South Americans," he said.

Still, pessimists feel that the flavor Greeks have brought to diners will one day pass into memory. Mr. Garganourakis puts it bluntly: "When Greeks get out of diners, there will no more be diners."

