

## It's Greek to them

**At Dio Deka, five friends pay homage to the cuisine of their homeland.**

**By Josh Sens**

As the Fab Five of local Greek restaurateuring, Nikos Kalouris, Vagelis Papazisis, Yiani Dulles, Julian Abbott, and Petros Kato-podis have 120 years in the business among them—the same number as syllables in their names. All were raised in Greece and traveled different roads to the Bay Area, where they worked the front rooms at Euvia in Palo Alto and Kokkari in San Francisco. At both, they brought a sense of familial welcome to restaurants that might otherwise have felt sprawling and standoffish. The Greeks call this *filoxenia*, which only sounds like something treatable with antibiotics. It means hospitality. This Mediterranean-style warmth has the power to inspire odd acts and emotions. It can move a divorcée to buy a Tuscan farmhouse or a stingy host to put out olives for an uninvited guest. In its rarest form, it can make us think kind thoughts about a big, generic space on the ground floor of a spendy South Bay hotel.

Late last year, with backing from Stratton Scavos, a Silicon Valley titan and Euvia regular, the five friends opened Dio Deka in the Hotel Los Gatos, in the shell of what used to be a Kuleto's. Dio deka means "210" in Greek. That number is the address of the hotel and, by a coincidence contrived on Olympus, the area code for Athens. Homer could hardly have scripted it so well.



At first blush, the restaurant could belong to almost any expensive area code. The space might house a bistro or a trattoria. The white-tablecloth-and-banquette blandness of the room represents the anti-style seen in so many hotel restaurants—interior design intended not to call too much attention to itself. Personal touches are put forth discreetly. A small display of photos stands near the entrance, along with a recipe handwritten by Dio Deka chef Salvatore Calisi, a native New Yorker who also cooked at Aureole and Veritas in Manhattan. The pictures are of Scavos's parents in traditional Greek attire; the recipe is for a fried cheese dish called *saganaki*. Baskets and artistic reimaginings of fishing nets hang on a far wall, though there's nothing particularly Hellenic about them. The clearest clues to the restaurant's intentions are the sprigs of rosemary folded into every white cloth napkin. They offer fragrant foreshadowing of the food.

Like Euvia and Kokkari, Dio Deka takes itself well beyond the realm of the Greek fast food enjoyed by millions: mystery meat stripped from a spit and stuffed along with iceberg lettuce into a store-bought pita. No gyros here. Familiar appetizers like *dolmas* and *spanakopita* do appear, but Calisi takes them for an upscale spin. The spinach pies, for instance, are rendered sleek and cone-shaped, their stuffing enhanced by scallions and leeks. The grape leaves, filled with cinnamon-scented short ribs, come lightly blanketed with a foam of truffled wild mushrooms and Meyer lemon.

The appeal of Greek cuisine often lies in its apparent unadornedness, in its courage to rely on a quick scattering of seasonings, a squeeze of lemon or a splash of olive oil. Reading the menu, one might fairly worry about overcomplication. Does *moussaka* truly benefit from the substitution of beef cheeks for ground beef? (Yes, it turns out.) Does *taramasalata*, the salty spread of pureed bread, lemon, olive oil, and mullet roe, really require chunks of Maine lobster? (No, but the texture and sweetness they add don't hurt.)

Dio Deka does well with these dashes of adventure. And yet the menu is still strongest at its simplest. As an appetizer, Calisi delivers a delightful octopus's garden: the octopus is cut thin into tender *carpaccio*, overlaid with a tangle of shaved fennel, and then drizzled with a piquant *aleppo* pepper and lemon vinaigrette. His mesquite-grilled lamb chops, rubbed with oregano, lemon, and rosemary, are a sterling example of less as more. His flaky, light *branzino*, seasoned with lemon, sage, salt, and olive oil, is the stuff of epics—it's a fish that could launch a thousand ships. Among the rare misses was a starter of seared scallops stacked on pureed *celeriac*, crowned with carrot foam and served with a side of apple compote. Ill-conceived and poorly executed (the scallops were overcooked), the supersugary dish was like a scurvy sailor—desperately in need of some citrus.

Calisi's generally spot-on cooking is complemented by a smartly chosen wine list, highlighted by solid-value Greek whites and reds. On any given evening, co-owner Nikos Kalouris, who, like his partners, works the floor with the waitstaff, may stop to introduce diners to, say, *xinomavro*, a varietal similar to *sangiovese*. Or he may pause to recount a recent trip to the islands on the hunt for new spices and olive oils. He and his colleagues are personable, professional, and clearly proud.

The result is a restaurant overflowing with good feeling, the kind of sincere welcome readers of this column have sensed before but can now diagnose as *filoxenia*. Dessert arrives: lovely *baklava*, bolstered by a scoop of banana ice cream, or fresh yogurt capped with sliced fruit. The yogurt, it turns out, was flown in from Greece. But you're the one who feels as if you've come home.