

# Tracing the History and Origins of The Gyro

4/23/05

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Special to The National Herald

The gyro, the spicy meat sandwich, is a recent addition to American fast-food traditions. As with the creation of the Greek Hot Dog or Greek-style chili (see last week's issue, page 1), the exact history of the gyros is not precisely known.

Still, enough key individuals involved with the famous Greek sandwich's history are still alive, and the beginnings of this multi-million-dollar industry have not faded completely from memory.

Having said that, I will only offer what is public record. Different individuals may dispute what others assert, but it's better to have a public debate on this topic, rather than let the history of the gyros (pronounced "yee-ros" in Greek, singular) fade, as have the precise events surrounding the creation of the Greek Hot Dog or Greek-style chili.

For reasons that remain unclear the origins of the gyro in Greece are themselves vague. Bordering in the extreme are the claims that gyros were eaten by classical Greeks – as if Plato or Socrates needed to eat this food to make it completely Greek. It is enough to say that the core ingredients found in a modern gyro sandwich today – lamb, pita bread, grilled vegetables and certain seasonings – were known to people throughout the Balkans and the Eastern Mediterranean.

Having said that, various writers seem to need to attribute the origins of the gyro to Arabs or Turks, and not to the Greeks. That no evidence is provided for these opinions is the trait they all have in common. The claim that, because medieval Arab cookbooks have many recipes for roasted meat, gyros must come from that tradition is especially witless.

Another claim is that the gyro is nothing but Turkish doner kebabs. A doner consists of thinly sliced lamb laid over warm flandenbrot,

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which is a flat loaf of bread similar to pita. The meat is covered with tzatsiki sauce, and tomatoes, onions, and lettuce are available on the side for the individual customer to add as he or she elects. But why the doner kebab can not be Greek in origin is never explained. It makes as much sense as saying it "must" come from the Turks, but no other evidence is provided other than Turks greatly enjoy eating doner kebabs.

In an American setting, a gyro sandwich is now composed of rotisserie-roasted, thinly sliced, seasoned meat served in pita bread with tzatsiki sauce, tomatoes and onions. I hesitate to say that the meat is strictly lamb. The meat is, more often than not, a mixture of ground meats and spices. By all accounts, ground lamb seems to have been the primary or original meat.

But where did the gyro come from? Given the degree of popularity the gyro now enjoys, many individuals have claimed to be the "first" to introduce this tasty sandwich to Americans.

Unfortunately, in the mid-1970's, a series of poorly researched and casually written articles from New York City are now most often cited when someone is seeking the origins of gyros in North America. Collectively, these articles do little more than ask the local lunchroom owner where he thinks gyros comes from (e.g., "The Gyro, a Greek Sandwich, Selling Like Hot Dogs, New York Times, 4 September 1971)."

The other more devious and essentially racist position is to cite Greek ignorance of gyros. "If Greeks don't know what a gyro is, it can't really be Greek" is the logic inherent in many of these early newspaper stories: "Gyro, that agglomeration of meat sold in booths all over New York, although its Greek provenance is questionable. 'We found that people are associating it with Greeks, so we included it,' said Harry Raptakis, chairman of the bazaar. 'Besides, it might even have some Greek background to it ('Joys of Greece at L.I. Fair' by Irvin Molotsky, New York Times, 9 June 1978: C21)."

The only rule for Greek cooking (as with dance, music and most customs) is that it is regional. If Mr. Raptakis never heard of gyros before his bazaar, so what? He wanted the bazaar to be a financial success, and I'm sure it was. What Mr. Molotsky failed to do, however, was survey other Greeks at the bazaar rather than just get the answer he wanted.

Another even more specious claim, this time found in the Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink, is that the gyro "is not a dish listed in... Greek cookbooks (Lebhar-Friedman, New York: 1999, page 147)." Wrong again. Vilma Liacouras Chantiles, in *The Food of Greece*, offers a variation on a gyro recipe (meant to serve 6-7 people) she found in Crete (Atheneum, New York: 1975, see pages 155-156).

Rather than focus on what select individuals know or don't know, however, let us turn our attention, instead to the manufacturing history of the gyro.

Not only was the gyro sandwich a totally new fast food, it also required a new type of cooking appliance. As everyone has seen, the gyro is a flat-bottomed cone of ground meat on a metal skewer. The exterior surface of the meat is cooked by a broiler which partially surrounds the turning cone. As the surface of the meat cone is cooked, it is cut off in thin slices. While we may not know where gyros were first created, we do know where, when and by whom the first gyro broilers in North America hailed from.

Peter Parthenis, the present-day owner of Grecian Delights, can trace his entrepreneurial origins back to the very beginnings of gyro production in North America.

Working with Greek-owned restaurants in Chicago during the late 1960's, Parthenis discovered that the very idea of the gyro was a hard sell at first. "Initially, I found tremendous resistance because of the negative connotation of gyros (in the minds of the Greek restaurateurs)... It took a long time to build momentum. After several years, I was having trouble making profits on the Auto-donor machines (the vertical meat broilers Parthenis designed and built) because I also

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had to teach the restaurateurs how to make the gyro meat, in addition to setting up, operating and maintaining their machines. I was at a crossroads. I either needed to drop the concept altogether, or take it one step further and produce the meat for the restaurant (Greek America Magazine, Nov/Dec 2004, page 38)." In 1970, Parthenis formed Gyros Incorporated. Today, Parthenis' Grecian Delights Foods is a multi-million dollar company with a 40-percent share of the gyro market.

It's interesting to note that, while Parthenis had difficulty convincing the Greek restaurants of Chicago's Halsted and Harrison Streets to serve gyros in the 1960's, the Parthenon Restaurant now proudly claims to have "introduced" gyros to the United States. On their website it is claimed that, when the Parthenon Restaurant opened its doors on 5 July 1968, the very first gyro sandwich was served to the public ([www.theparthenon.com](http://www.theparthenon.com)).

Yet Parthenis was not alone in meeting and helping to create the new demand for gyros. Kronos Foods was founded in 1975 by Chris Tomaras, another Greek immigrant businessman from Chicago. Tomaras' own considerable success and manufacturing innovations include the patented Kronomatic gyro broiler. Kronos doesn't just sell its equipment or gyros to restaurants, but also nationally to supermarket chains.

While the question of whom and when gyro sandwiches were first made in North America may still be open, questions about the patents on gyro broilers are not. By virtue of the mass marketing of those machines, we can then place the introduction of the gyro in North America between the very late 1960's and early 1970's. Still, we may well ask how this new fast food became a success so quickly.

After the international success of the films Never On Sunday and Zorba the Greek, it was chic to be Greek. The belly dancers and loud floor shows of the newly established restaurants in the revived Greek town of Halsted and Harrison Streets brought in the afternoon businessman and the evening crowd with equal vigor. Companies such as

Grecian Delights Foods and Kronos Products offered a whole new generation of Greek immigrants the means to move into an entirely new field of American fast food enterprises.

The newly arrived wave of Greek immigrants in the late 1960's was collectively ready for this innovation. One example from Chicago can serve us here for an entire generation.

The Sunday, November 6, 1977 edition of the Chicago Sun-Times ran the story, "Greek Village has one export - its sons," which appeared across three pages. This heavily illustrated story focused on the more than 100 restaurants throughout Chicago and northern Illinois owned and operated by Greek immigrants from the village of Nestani. Individual family names, the names and locations of restaurants, and even a full page of photographs document the strong presence of Greek restaurateurs from this one small village of the Arcadian province in the Peloponnese.

No specific mention is made in this article to the gyro, but rather to the fact that the vast majority of these "family restaurants" have no particularly Greek features, at all.

What this article helps us understand is the extent to which the Greek immigrants of the post-World War II generation dominated the middle-range of the restaurant business in Chicago and other major cities of the country. As gyros became a main stay of the American fast-food diet, they were a natural market for the equipment and food products available.

It is an undeniable fact of fast food history in North America that Greeks were first associated with the Greek Hot Dog and Greek-style chili long before the introduction of gyros.

While no special equipment was needed for Greek Hot Dog Sauce or Greek-style chili, the desire to work and excel was shared by two generations of Greek immigrants. And it is to that spirit and pride that America owes at least three of its most unique and delicious culinary creations.

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