

Billy Hantzos

Athena Greek Restaurant

During the ancient times in Greece, the small town of Aigeio was used by the tribes of Athens for farming and raising animals, particularly its excellent goat meat. Although Chef Billy Hantzos doesn't prepare goat meat on the menu at Athena Greek Restaurant in St. Augustine, his passion for authentic Greek food does feature traditional dishes for his guest's taste. With the restaurant's 25th anniversary approaching, he's cooking something right. He's been a chef for more than half a century!

Billy (named Vasilios) was a passionate soccer player in his town near Athens. Growing up with parents whose cooking talents were homespun, his father focused on the roasting of meats and his mother on desserts. In his 20s, he emigrated to the USA and settled in the New York area of Hicksville, Long Island. He worked for many years in iconic Greek diners, learning the trade from all the cooks and owners that he had the fortune to work for. He was a mechanic by day ~ and filled every other time in the restaurant business. By the 1990s, he opened his own family restaurant, not unlike today's well-known Athena, steps from the Bridge of Lions.

Happily, Billy was hired to learn the bakery side of American kitchens. Give him flour, water, eggs, sugar, nuts and honey ~ and you'll see this scratch baker light up. With multi talents and years of experience, his life and career brought him south to Palm Coast where he landed in (coincidentally) Athena restaurant in Flagler Beach. Within a very short time, St. Augustine restaurateur George Chrysosaidis discovered his old friend from Greece was nearby and brought him immediately to his newly opened Athena Café where he has stayed for more than two decades.

Every chef has a secret weapon in their kitchen and Billy's is organization and cleanliness. "I still love this business. Cooking is a happy place for me and it's comforting to be in the kitchen preparing our authentic Greek dishes every day." Today's culinary legends are savvy about social media, food photos, marketing and promoting their specialties and busy careers. But not Billy. He still has a flip phone so that he doesn't have to concentrate on anything but cooking and maintaining Athena's kitchen in his own way.

So, if you're dreaming of a vacation to the Greek Isles, the salty breezes and flaky pastries, Billy's old-world dishes will take you there. His Spanakopita (Spinach and feta cheese in airy phyllo dough) is one of the most popular Greek dishes, suitable for any time of the day as a main dish, appetizer or snack. Traditional Moussaka uses lamb, but Billy's is made with ground beef, layers of eggplant and potato. It's a labor of love! So is Chef's Pastitsio, a baked pasta with layers of ground meat and bechamel sauce. The simplicity of Athena's Greek baked chicken with garlicky lemon sauce is easily too good to be true.

Chef Billy Hantzos might just be one of the culinary patriarchs in St. Augustine ~ a man who knows that cooking means energy, dexterity and craftsmanship ~ but he is far from complexities, creating dishes without exaggeration. Pull up a chair, let's meet for a cup of dark Greek coffee and dream about the sweet classic baklava that he will be baking soon for friends!

Leigh Cort

Billy Hantzos' Chef's Pastitsio, a delicious baked pasta with layers of ground meat and bechamel sauce.

