

Eric Velasco's

Birmingham Greek Restaurant Guide

Commissioned for Food Media South 2017

In the dawn of the 1900s, Greek immigrants became a dominant force in Birmingham-area restaurants by dishing familiar Southern food – fresh vegetables, barbecue, seafood and hot dogs. Gradually, these entrepreneurs added flavors from home. Birmingham's popular Greek food festival is now in its 45th year. But few metro restaurant menus focus on Hellenic fare. Instead, Greek restaurateurs interpret a wide range of cuisines:

Meat and Three/Southern

[Niki's West](#)

233 Finley Ave. West

Members of the Hontzas family have run Niki's West since it opened in 1957 near a year-round farmer's market. (The Hontzas family also started Niki's Downtown in 1951 and sold it in the late 1980s.) Many Greek immigrants got their first jobs at Niki's West from Gus Hontzas. His sons Pete and Teddy carry on the steamtable legacy, offering ten meats, some four-dozen vegetables and side dishes, and more than a dozen pies daily.

[Johnny's Restaurant](#)

2902 18th Ave. South

Homewood, AL

(second floor)

Tim Hontzas was raised in Mississippi and worked for several accomplished chefs, including John Currence at City Grocery in Oxford, before he opened Johnny's Restaurant. Hontzas gives the meat-and-three a facelift, tightening classics like squash casserole and adding new riffs like parmesan grit cakes and a fifteen-hour pot roast. The chalkboard menu, which includes Greek meatballs and spinach with chickpeas, also pays homage to his heritage.

Seafood

The Bright Star

304 19th St. North

Bessemer, AL

Recognized as an American Classic in 2010 by the James Beard Foundation, The Bright Star in Bessemer is the state's oldest continuously operating restaurant. Decorated with murals, the restaurant showcases two generations of the Koikos family that have run the restaurant for most of its 110-year history. Try the acclaimed snapper throats, seafood gumbo, and broiled seafood platter.

Fish Market

612 22nd St. South

George C. Sarris emigrated in 1969, and worked for relatives at Niki's. He eventually opened a sandwich stand in his uncle's seafood shop. Over the years, Sarris transformed it into a city institution. The Fish Market Southside sells fresh fish retail, but most patrons pack the restaurant for fried or grilled Gulf seafood, Greek-style fish dishes, and raw oysters. Sarris cooks Greek food here every Thursday for family, friends, and fellow Greeks.

Hot Dogs

Gus's Hot Dogs

1915 Fourth Ave. North

Gus Alexander, one of Birmingham's Greek hot dog kings, opened the original Gus's downtown in the early 1940s and ran it until he returned to Greece around 1970. George Nasiakos, the third Greek owner, greets regulars by name. The house special is an Alabama-made Zeigler hot dog with seasoned ground beef, Gus' signature sauce, onions, and sauerkraut. Cash only.

Sam's Super Sandwiches

2812 18th St. South

Homewood, AL

Sam Graphos helped build the Sneaky Pete's hot dog chain, founded by his brother Pete in 1966. When his family sold the chain, Sam kept his single location and rebranded it, focusing on sandwiches at breakfast and lunch. The menu still features hot dogs. Really delicious hot dogs. Sam ships them upon request to loyal customers who have moved far away from Birmingham.

Barbecue

Demetri's BBQ

1901 28th Ave. South

Homewood, AL

Demetri Nakos was an established restaurateur when he opened Demetri's BBQ in 1973. His son Sam now is at the helm, dishing smoked pork shoulder and ribs, brisket, chicken, farm-fresh vegetables, chicken chili, and pies. Breakfast, a standout meal, includes barbecue omelets, Greek omelets, and chicken chili omelets.

Jim 'N Nick's

1908 11th Ave. South

(closed location)

Started by a father-and-son team in 1985, Jim 'N Nick's Bar-B-Q—a smoked meat heaven—now runs locations in seven states, including eight in greater Birmingham. Nick Pihakis is also a partner in the Fresh Hospitality Group that owns or invests in restaurants and cafes (including Little Donkey and Saigon Noodle House.) He is a founder of the Fatback Collective of Southern restaurateurs, pitmasters, writers and scholars.

Greek

Pappas' Grill

1066 Montgomery Highway (U.S. 31)

Vestavia Hills, AL

Greg Pappas helped introduce the gyro sandwich to Birmingham when he worked for “Sneaky” Pete Graphos in the 1970s. About that time, Pappas also started making tzatziki by the gallon for Birmingham’s annual Greek Festival. After managing restaurants owned by other Greeks, Greg and his wife Pat opened Pappas’ Grill in 1992, serving gyros along with roast lamb, souvlaki, and pastisto.

Libations

The Collins Bar

2125 Second Ave. North

Andrew Collins opened the city’s premiere cocktail bar in 2013, the same year the Lyric, his family’s Greek hot dog stand, lost its lease after more than a half-century. The Collins Bar doesn’t have a cocktail menu; skilled bartenders quiz customers for preferences and make drinks based on those conversations. Collins recently added Lyric hot dogs to the bar food menu.