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Fresh fish hooks patrons at Onasis

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Sunday, April 1, 2007

By ADAM ERACE
For the Courier-Post

"Would you like to see my fish?"

Thankfully, this question is posed not by a shark collector, but by a silver-haired gentleman at Cherry Hill's Greco-inspired seafood sanctuary, Onasis. He asks it with the swelling pride of an affectionate father, so I have to assume he's co-owner Eric Papougenis.

In the restaurant's airy foyer, a dozen varieties of whole fish rest on a bed of crushed ice. Papougenis goes through the cast of characters -- lethrini, Dover sole, branzino, sardines, etc. -- offering tasting notes and interesting factoids. Light shimmers across their iridescent scales, and their eyes are bright and clear. These guys are fresh, and Papougenis' desire to show them off is a testament to the quality at Onasis.

Whole fish is the signature at this breezy estiatorian reminiscent of the whitewashed fishing villages of the Greek isles -- and they can get expensive. More on that later.

Onasis is bustling on a Friday night -- a good sign for a place that's only been open a few months -- but the blond wood floors, white tablecloths, cobalt glasses and Santorini color scheme keep the multi-room space feeling fresh as a Mediterranean breeze.

A waitress leaves us studying the broad menu for 15 minutes, pearls of condensation sweating down the bottle of my rapidly warming vinho verde, leaving a wet halo on the white tablecloth. What service lacks in speed it makes up for in warmth and knowledge. When the three appetizers arrive together and my table overfloweth, the clairvoyant waitress slides over the fortuitously vacant table next door before I even ask her to do it.

Great hummus is a beautiful thing. The hummus (\$8) at Onasis is rich and inviting, a creamy dune that's earthy and rich with tahini and roasted garlic. On a triangle of warm pita bread, the chickpea puree is silky and luxurious as foie gras, and the confetti of toasted pine nuts offers a lovely contrast in texture I've not seen before.

Fresh and chewy in a good way, the octopus (\$12) is another winner. The applewood grill imparts a rustic smoke to the Mediterranean favorite, while spring-green bows of raw fennel offer the subtle essence of licorice and powerful crunch that balances the octopus's texture.

Only the Melitzanosalata (\$8) falls short. The cool,



DOUGLAS M. BOVITT/Courier-Post
Patrons dine on lunch as fish -- for decoration only -- go about their business at Onasis in Cherry Hill.

REVIEW

Onasis Estiatorian 800 Haddonfield Road Cherry Hill (856) 488-5888 www.onasis.com Cuisine: Greek-inspired seafood

Overall: (very good)

Food: 1/2

Ambience: 1/2

Value:

Service: 1/2

Value:

Cost: Moderate to expensive. Appetizers: \$5 to \$14; entrees: \$16 to \$45 plus; desserts: \$6

Accommodations: Reservations accepted. BYOB. Major credit cards accepted. Private parties accommodated.

Recommended dishes: Hummus, octopus, loup de mer, pageot, baklava.

Hours: Lunch: 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Monday to Friday. Dinner: 4 to 10 p.m. Sunday to Thursday; 4 to 11 p.m. Friday and Saturday.

What the stars mean: Five stars is excellent, four stars is very good, three stars is good, two stars is fair, one star is poor.



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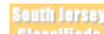
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chunky dip tastes fine on the same pita bread, but unlike the other dishes, its roasted eggplant flavor strikes a single chord instead of a multi-note symphony.

Now onto the fish. The chef (and with Papougenis, co-owner) is Tom Konidaris, of Zesty's in Manayunk, and the menu fish selection is very similar. Along with a smattering of meat dishes, out-of-place pastas (Gorgonzola gnocchi?), and standard seafood preparations like sesame-crusting tuna and brandied lobster salad, Onasis offers a school of whole grilled fish.

The list starts at black bass at \$16 per pound and caps at \$45 per pound for lobster and langoustines. This pricing system takes the arbitrariness out of the dreaded "market price," but still leaves some lingering questions, like whether or not you'll wind up with some mutant 4-pound bream or a waifish tilapia befitting the plate of Nicole Richie.

Fortunately, both whole fish I try on the menu arrive in the respectable pound-and-a-half range.

Loup de mer (\$22 a pound) is also known as branzino, a fish that's been having a moment lately (if by "moment" we mean three years). This "wolf of the sea" is snowy white, delicate and moist. The meat around the collar, just below the head, is especially flavorful, like the dark meat on a chicken. Pageot (\$24 a pound), a Greek snapper, is denser, meatier, with a sweet taste remarkably akin to lobster.

Both fish are filleted in the kitchen, which takes the can-my-server-do-this-or-am-I-going-to-choke-on-a-pin-bone guessing-game out of the equation. (Still, I swallow/spit out a few of the needlelike bones.) All whole fish are finished simply with lemon, butter, herbs and capers. Papougenis and Konidaris understand that when you begin with a great product -- especially seafood -- less is always more.

This light, fresh, airy dinner just begs for a decadent dessert, all of which, my waitress informs me, are made in-house. Love that. It's a shame the plate of chocolate truffles (\$6) are on the dry side, because it's a nice attempt at something different. A bitter white chocolate and green tea truffle is definitely better in theory than in practice.

The flaky walnut baklava (\$6) treads the too-sweet line but doesn't trespass and caps the bill around \$120 before tip. I expect a Greek place to do justice to this legendary pastry, and in regard to baklava and overall experience, Onasis doesn't disappoint.

South Philadelphia native Adam Erace was raised in a family of foodies, and has written about food most recently at "Philly Style Magazine." Having also worked extensively in the restaurant business, he brings to the table an inside perspective on local dining. He can be reached at AEraceCP@hotmail.com.

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DOUGLAS M. BOVITT/Courier-Post
Waitress Natalie Jordan takes dessert orders from George Kousoulis (left) and Anthony Terzakis, both of Haddon Township, at Onasis in Cherry Hill.

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