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# Veteran restaurateur 'Mister Pete' won't slow down

By Michael J. Solender

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For Charlotte natives and anyone who's lived here for more than a few years, it's almost a given you've dined in one of Pete Politis's restaurants. And if you've met Politis, a legendary Charlotte restaurateur for six decades, it's likely he'll remember your name.

Since he opened the Little White House Sandwich Shop in 1953, only three years after he immigrated to America from Greece when he spoke no English, Politis, now 83, has owned and operated no less than 10 restaurants in Charlotte. Most are historical touchstones, intimately tied with the city's cultural past, holding fond memories for many locals from construction workers to corporate chieftains.

Politis's success recipe consists of hard work, making the most of opportunities in the industry and strong values tied to the American dream.

For Mister Pete, as he's affectionately known, customers, coworkers and his extended family provide the fuel that inspires and motivates him to continue working well beyond his official retirement 17 years ago.

## Fleeing war, economic devastation

In telling his story, Politis begins with his birthplace: Agia Vlacherna, a tiny village in Greece's central region. His parents tended fruit orchards while Politis and his siblings enjoyed a rural life. But that tranquility was shattered when he was 9 at the outbreak of the Greco-Italian War in 1940.

Battered and beaten, Greece subsequently fell to Nazi occupation during World War II. The country was economically devastated, and the crippling poverty left a lasting impression on young Politis.

- More information:

Skyland Family Restaurant. 4544 South Blvd. Always open. 704-522-6522.

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“We had next to nothing,” Politis recalls. “I knew what it was like to be cold and hungry. When the Americans came in 1945, with aid under the Marshall Plan, I dreamed of what life would be like in America.”

Politis would find out six years later after a series of harrowing experiences that seem scripted from a Hollywood thriller.

Fueled by political instability after WWII, civil war broke out in Greece in 1946. At 16, Politis was accused of spying, and he was jailed by the Communists. He avoided execution, he said, after villagers intervened and successfully lobbied for his life. He remained in prison for several months before he escaped and found his way to the Greek Army, where he served for two years until he was honorably discharged in 1949.

Two years later, he sailed to America in search of a better life. Landing in New York Harbor near the the Statue of Liberty, Politis said he embarked upon a classic immigrant journey. And his determination and persistence paid handsomely as he realized a life that far exceeded his expectations.

## Washing dishes in Fayetteville

Politis got his start at a 14-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week job in an uncle’s restaurant in Fayetteville. He was paid \$7 a week.

“I was happy,” Politis said. “I was in America, the greatest country in the world. I knew where my next meal was coming from and had a roof over my head. Mostly I could sleep without fear. I was learning the restaurant business.”

An opportunity to double his salary brought him to Charlotte to work at a cousin’s restaurant. Charlotte became his adopted hometown, and he’s developed a legacy over 60 years that is a model of immigrant success.

Politis noted the conflicts in his homeland prevented him from receiving any formal education beyond the sixth grade. But he was able to learn how to run a restaurant through observation and by taking part in every aspect, from the back to the front of the house.

By treating every customer like they were old friends, longstanding patrons became exactly that.

“I’ve known Mister Pete for 40 years,” said Brad Woodie, owner of Woodie’s Auto Service. “I remember family meals at the Sandpiper and how welcome and at home we always felt and how personable Mister Pete is. I’ve eaten at his restaurants at least once a week for years.”

Simple, Greek-inspired home-style breakfasts, lunches, dinners and late-night snacks have been Politis’ signature. His menus feature souvlaki, baked chicken, broiled seafood, huge burgers and gyros.

The list of restaurants Politis has owned during his 63 year career include: The Little White House Sandwich Shop on South Boulevard, which Politis said he opened with a \$700 loan; Eat More Lunch on Central Avenue; Town and Country drive-in restaurant on Wilkinson Boulevard; Tanners on South Tryon Street, Matthews Family House Restaurant, Sandpiper Seafood Restaurant on East Independence Boulevard; Sandwich Construction Co. on University City Boulevard; the Plantation restaurant at Eastway Drive and The



Plaza; Mama Napoli's Italian Kitchen on South Boulevard; and Skyland Family Restaurant on South Boulevard.

## Meeting the president

When coaxed, Politis breaks out "family photos" featuring Charlotte's political power brokers past and present. Former mayors John Belk, Sue Myrick and Anthony Foxx are seen mugging with Politis, as is former Gov. Jim Martin.

Politis' special relationship with former police Chief J.C. Goodman led him to a special meeting and fulfillment of a lifelong dream.

"In 1960, President Kennedy campaigned in Charlotte, and his limousine passed right in front of me," Politis said. "From that time, I always dreamed of meeting the president of the United States, I thought how wonderful it would be for an immigrant and former dishwasher to meet a president. In 1976, President (Gerald) Ford visited Charlotte and Chief Goodman arranged for me to meet him. It was one of the best days of my life."

Politis has many special days of late. This year, he celebrates his 63rd wedding anniversary with his wife, Alice. They have three sons and seven grandchildren.

He's served as chair of Charlotte's annual Greek Festival and has helped many other immigrants get their start.

Skyland Family Restaurant owner Jimmy Kakavitsas, 62, is one of them. Politis took him under his wing when Kakavitsas came to Charlotte some 40 years ago. Ultimately, they partnered, and today he considers Politis a second father.

"Mister Pete is a great friend and mentor," Kakavitsas said. "He's always taken care of me."

But it's Politis' extended Charlotte family that keeps him at Skyland four days a week, where he can generally be found holding court from the host stand.

Stop by and say hello to Mister Pete. You're sure to make a new friend.



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