

An Old World social club in Watertown

By Sheryl Julian

GLOBE STAFF

Aegean Restaurant sometimes operates as a club. Not an exclusive club, but a place where members of the Greek community can go to see one another, wave across tables, and socialize in a way that people did many years ago — and still do in small towns. The hostess seems to know most of the older women and treats them almost reverentially (there are lots here, and they're well turned out, having chosen outfits more suitable for a much fancier place).

This spot, across from Bugaboo Creek near the Arsenal Mall, has had a few incarnations in recent years. Formerly Dino's, a seafood restaurant, it emerged as Aegean Restaurant, owned by Chris Ntasios, who opened it in May.

It's based on a simple formula that works — tablecloths, lots of servers, large portions, reasonable prices, Greek-American fare, and doggie bags. And it must be what everyone wants right now: You can't get into the parking lot, and the wait on a recent Saturday night was 50 minutes.

The place has some of the same qualities as Demo's, the cafeteria-like Greek restaurant on Mt. Auburn Street near Watertown Square, where kebabs are turned out at an incredible rate and where it's cheaper to eat than at home. But there's no table-hopping at Demo's, and the place is bare-bones.

Aegean also reminds me of No Name, but with linen napkins. No Name is as pared down as restaurants get. Also owned by a large Greek family, it shares some of Aegean's philosophy. At No Name, you get very friendly service (my boy worked there for three summers, so I know the place), lots of food, and it comes to the table quickly and without fuss. You want water? Pour it yourself from the pitcher on the table. But they're looking after you. The manager is likely to remember you if you've ever eaten there — no matter what year.

Whereas No Name serves many locals from the Fish Pier, Seaport area workers, and police officers, Aegean serves their mothers. Similar to the Aegean Restaurant in Framingham,

Aegean Restaurant

WHERE 640 Arsenal St., Watertown.

TELEPHONE 617-923-7771

HOURS Mon.-Sat.: lunch 11 a.m.-4 p.m.; dinner 4-10.

Sun.: dinner noon-9 p.m.

GOOD CHOICES Tzatziki, saganaki, spinach pies, Greek salad, chicken kebab a la Aegean, lamb souvlaki a la Aegean, lamb ribs, broiled scrod, Aegean shrimp with broccoli over rice, rice pudding.

CREDIT CARDS All major.

ACCESS Fully accessible.

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whose owners are relatives, the Watertown Aegean has a fish menu like No Name's combined with a kebab menu like Demo's, with Greek specialties: saganaki, the oozy baked cheese appetizer; flaky spinach pies; and the ground beef and eggplant casserole mous-saka.

Saganaki (\$6.95), plain Greek cheese that is baked until it melts into a puddle, was irresistible, especially when sprinkled with lemon juice. Taramosalata (\$4.95), a puree of potato and salmon roe, had so much potato that the dish lost its characteristic smoky quality.

The house combination platter (\$10.95) offered a taste of some specialties, including moussaka, pastichio (like moussaka, but made with ground beef and macaroni), spinach pie, grape leaves, and Greek sausage. The sausage, called lakonika, was broiled, and it was wonderfully spicy and fatty. Both moussaka, the traditional ground beef and eggplant dish,

and pastichio were baked with a thick cream-cheese custard topping. These are heavy dishes, garnished with a light tomato sauce that is everywhere on the menu.

Aegean's kebabs (\$7.95 to \$10.95) are the stars. They came with the house salad, which is a Greek salad (you're asked if you want feta), on nice greens with cucumbers, peppers, and onions. The tomatoes, alas, even in tomato season, were grown nowhere near here. But it's a decent salad otherwise. Lamb kebab a la Aegean was broiled on a skewer threaded with peppers, onions, and mushrooms, and it came with pilaf, fries, or roast potatoes. Morsels of moist, tender lamb were on the skewer.

All the rice was blanketed with the ubiquitous tomato sauce, whatever dish the rice accompanied. Roast potatoes — long spears that are golden on one side — should have been crisper. Kebabs a la Aegean were threaded with vegetables, whereas the souvlaki was just clean lamb, beef, or chicken, no vegetables. The chicken was perfectly cooked and the whole meal quite satisfying.

Lamb ribs (\$7.95), which are marinated, were bony and meaty pieces of meat mixed together, good for the diner who likes to gnaw on something.

On the fish side of the menu, Aegean shrimp with broccoli (\$10.95), in which sauteed shrimp sit on a bed of red rice, had a paella-like presentation. The menu states that the shrimp are sauteed with margarine. A thick, flaky piece of scrod (\$8.95) was broiled with a light coating of bread crumbs brushed with margarine. In fact, all the fish dishes are sauteed or broiled with margarine, which is puzzling, since Greece produces such fine olive oil!

I wondered if the smartly dressed women sitting beside me prefer it that way.

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