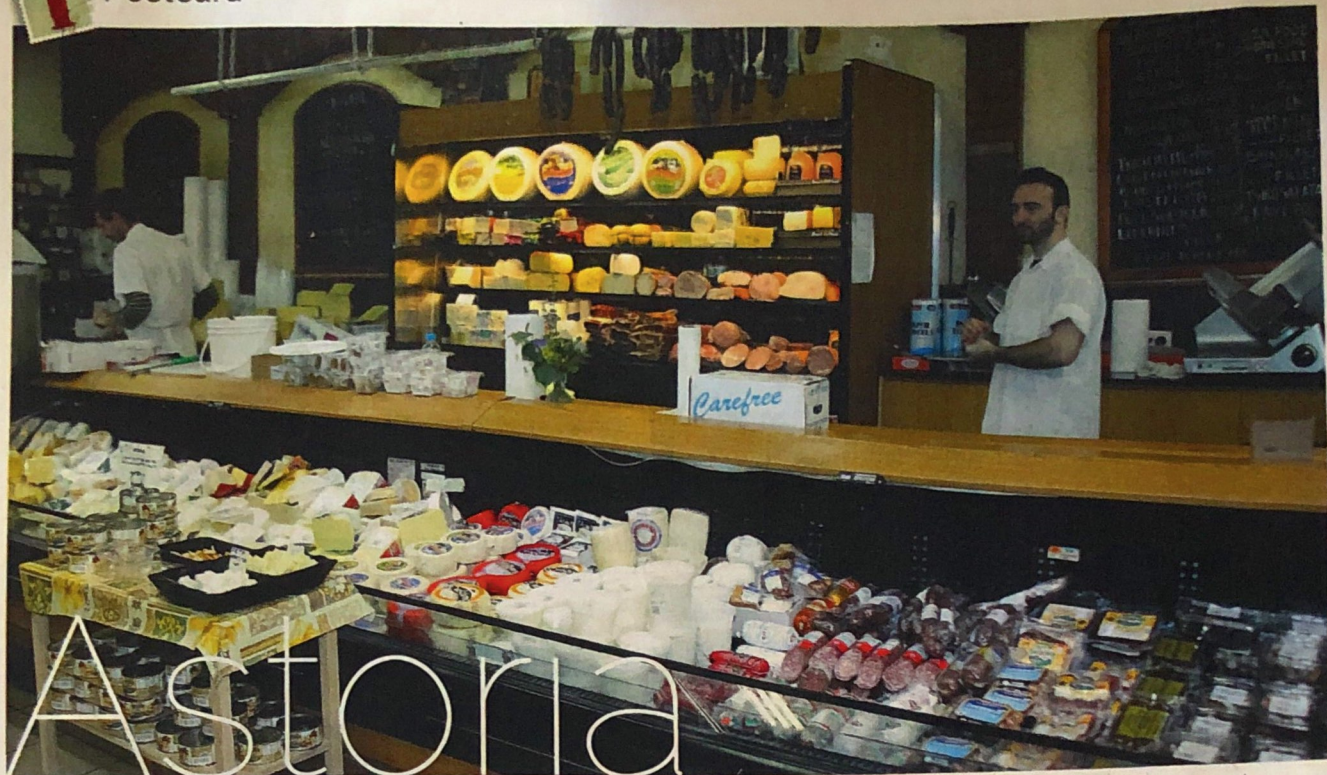




Astoria

New York's little horio

Sherri Moshman Paganos captures the vibrance of a Greek city miles away from home



It's a cold Saturday afternoon, the second day of the New Year. As the N train from Times Square passes over the Triborough Bridge, you immediately get the feeling that you're entering a Greek world. A couple is loudly arguing with each other in Greek and a subway rider is reading the *Ethnikos Kyrix* (National Herald), the 100 year old Greek American newspaper. As the train lumbers its way towards Ditmars Boulevard, the last stop, out the train you can see signs for Odyssey Optical and Zorba's Souvlaki.

After the jostling, bustle and noise of midtown Manhattan, Ditmars Boulevard with its red and beige brick row houses that lead down to the river, is peaceful and serene. Christmas decorations liven up the houses as dusk approaches and the sky fills with gold and pur-

ple sunset colors. As we reach the East River, the wind starts whipping around the leaves in Astoria Park. We stop and admire the view across of nearby Manhattan. The area is mostly quiet except for a few joggers and dogwalkers. Walking back up from the river, after a while, residential Ditmars becomes commercial Ditmars. «Thessaloniki Jewelers» and «Lefko Pirgos», a traditional zaharoplasteio stand across from each other in the heart of the commercial area.

Astoria has become a very desirable area to live, since its rents are much lower and more affordable than Manhattan, and it's only a 20 minute subway ride to midtown. For this reason, many young professionals of all nationalities have moved in. Besides the rather young, you have the opposite end of the spectrum, the elderly, mostly Greeks and Italians in their 70's or 80's, who have lived in Astoria since the 1960's or so.

One such resident is Alkmini Megisopoulou who has lived on the same street off of Ditmars since 1968, having left Piraeus by ship and arriving 11 days later in Brooklyn. Alkmini and her husband Christos are typical of the aging population, watching over the years many of their friends leave, moving out further in Queens, such as Bayside, or moving further out to Long Island. Some Greeks upon retiring from working in places like the garment district in Manhattan, have returned to Greece, and of course a number of their generation have died. For this reason, the Greek population has greatly diminished in the last 20 years or so.

The walls of Alkmini's and Christos' row house are covered with framed pictures of their grandchildren. Over coffee and homemade meat and cheese pies, she tells us about some changes that have occurred. Steinway Street and Broadway, two of the main thoroughfares, are more likely to have signs in Arabic than Greek. Everywhere, restaurants have opened representing every kind of nationality. Greek grocery stores can still be found in the area, where she can get her feta, kefalograviera and tarama.

Although many different restaurants dot the landscape now, the Greek tavernas arguably draw the most faithful customers. One such restau-



rant is Kyklades on Ditmars. Under its blue awning with «SEAFOOD» in large letters, you can usually see a line of people waiting to eat the wonderfully fresh fish they have. And it is served the way it is in Greece, with the head on, not filet American-style.

Astoria has been known as one of the largest Greek cities outside of Greece, and it traditionally has been a Greek area, but this didn't happen until the 1960's. The first residents in the 17th century were mostly Dutch and Germans. Many Irish came in the 19th and early 20th century. In the 1920's, the Jewish population grew. The next large immigration there was Italians, and that influence remains today, in the many signs for shops that offer Italian specialties. Italians are proud to point out that Tony Bennett (real name: Anthony Dominick Benedetto) was born and raised in Astoria. The 1960's brought a large influx of Greeks, and then after the invasion of Cyprus in 1974, many Cypriots settled in the area.

Astoria was named for John Jacob Astor, at one time the wealthiest man in the United States. The reason for this naming is not that he had any connection with Astoria, but it was to persuade him to invest in the area. The naming obviously didn't move him much, as he gave a paltry \$500 out of his fortune of \$40 million. However, the name stuck and although he never set foot in the area, he could certainly watch from his home in what is now E. 87th near York Avenue, across the river to his land.

In the late 1970's and early 80's, my husband, a student then, fondly remembers working at popular catering hall Crystal Palace on Broadway. Used mainly for Greek weddings, baptisms and dances for various Greek associations, it was THE PLACE to go, along with «Spilia» (the Cave), the bouzoukia under Crystal Palace. There were also many bars where singers got their start. At one such bar, we heard Elly Paspala before she left for Greece to make her career. Ditmars also had movie theaters which showed popular Greek films.

Besides Ditmars and Broadway, one of the other main areas is Steinway Street, named for the Steinway family, famous worldwide for their pian-



os and the piano company Steinway and Sons, which dates from 1853.

The brick row houses in Astoria have been a popular locale for many films and TV programmes, such as the iconic series from the 1970's, 'All in the Family.' Robert de Niro's film «A Bronx Tale» was actually filmed on location in Astoria. And in «Serpico» with Al Pacino, the elevated N train is the backdrop for some chase scenes. Astoria boasts a fine museum as well: The Museum of the Moving Image.

Today, along with Greek, you are just as likely to hear Spanish, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, Hindi or Urdu. But Greek customs have always tended to flourish. In the early 1980's around Eastertime, a popular commercial on the Greek radio station for Greek travel organizations shouted «Pascha ton Ellinon!» urging you to go to Greece for Pascha for the real Greek experience. But if you couldn't get there, then you would surely see on Saturday night Anastasi, people walking home from the church after midnight with their lit candles, and on Easter Sunday, a walk around Astoria, this very urban area, would let you see, smell and taste the cocoretsi (lamb innards) roasting on the souvla. With a little imagination, you could imagine your horio and the whole lamb roasting. As Alkmini says, Astoria is the best place to be without living in Greece itself. ❶

