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The Gyro's History Unfolds

By [DAVID SEGAL](#)

Chicago

SHOUTING over the hiss and screech of an assembly line, Chris Tomaras described the feat of food engineering that made him rich.

"The trick," he yelled in a heavy Greek accent, "is to use certain forces, like temperature and pressure, to preserve the product as a solid mass, so it doesn't deteriorate."

A dapper man with a rich baritone voice and a gray mustache, Mr. Tomaras, 73, was narrating a tour of Kronos Foods, the world's largest manufacturer of gyros (pronounced YEE-ros, Greek for "spin"), the don't-ask mystery meat that has been a Greek restaurant staple in the United States since the mid 1970s. Cones of gyro meat rotate on an estimated 50,000 vertical broilers across the country, to be carved a few slices at a time and folded in pita bread along with a dollop of yogurt sauce.

Kronos is the perfect place to pose a couple of questions that seem as if they should have been answered many hurried lunches ago: What are gyros anyway, and who made them a ubiquitous feature of Greek menus across the United States?

And now is an appropriate time to delve into this enigma wrapped in a flatbread. A cheap meal looks pretty appealing lately, and more people than ever seem to be succumbing to this \$5 temptation.

While almost all segments of the restaurant industry are suffering, the titans of the gyro — all of them based in Chicago — report that sales are either steady or way up.

These companies are private, so their word will have to do. But Kronos is preparing to move to a new plant that will enable it to crank out enough cones for 600,000 sandwiches a day, about twice the capacity in its current address. A few miles away, at Devanco Foods, Peter Bartzis, the president of the company, reports record sales. "I've been through a few recessions," Mr. Bartzis said, "and they're good times to be in the gyros business."

Mr. Tomaras opened Kronos in 1975 and sold it to a private equity firm in 1994. But he returned to the plant, on a dead-end industrial road in Chicago's southwest side, to explain how gyros are made. It's a show and tell that is not for the squeamish.

The process starts with boxes of raw beef and lamb trimmings, and ends with what looks like oversized Popsicles the shade of a Band-Aid. In between, the meat is run through a four-ton grinder, where bread

crumbs, water, oregano and other seasonings are added. A clumpy paste emerges and is squeezed into a machine that checks for metal and bone. (“You can never be too careful,” Mr. Tomaras said.) Hydraulic pressure — 60 pounds per square inch — is used to fuse the meat into cylinders, which are stacked on trays and then rolled into a flash freezer, where the temperature is 20 degrees below zero.

Gyros are believed to have originated in Greece. (They’re similar to the *döner* kebabs of Turkey and shawarma of the Middle East, which are slices of meat, rather than a minced loaf.) But they were never mass produced in Europe, according to the gyro magnates of this city. Until the early 1970s, the cones were made one at a time, in restaurant kitchens using family recipes.

Then someone thought, why not make gyro cones the same way you make cars?

The question is: Who is the [Henry Ford](#) of the gyro? It turns out there are a handful of contenders, all of whom know one another and have been friendly competitors for decades. They include George Apostolou, who says he served the first gyros in the United States, in the Parkview Restaurant in Chicago, in 1965, and nine years later opened a 3,000-square-foot manufacturing plant, Central Gyros Wholesale.

“The response to the product was tremendous,” Mr. Apostolou said. “My two brothers and I, we became millionaires in two years’ time.”

And what of Mr. Tomaras?

“Chris claims that he brought the product here,” Mr. Apostolou said, rather dryly. “This is a lie.”

But an engineer named Peter Parthenis says he beat Mr. Apostolou to mass production by a year, with Gyros Inc., in 1973. Mr. Parthenis started by building rotisseries, but soon realized the money was in the meat.

“We didn’t have a distribution deal in the early days,” said Mr. Parthenis, who like Mr. Apostolou is now retired. “So the first gyros ever shipped out of Chicago we put on a Greyhound bus, headed to Atlanta. Frozen in a double corrugated box, with the luggage.”

Case closed? Well, another contender, Andre Papantoniou, a founder and the president of Olympia Food Industries, says the gyro plant was actually the brainchild of the improbably named John Garlic.

This initially sounds like a joke, but Mr. Papantoniou swears that during the rotisserie-making phase of Mr. Parthenis’s career, one John Garlic showed up in Chicago in search of a partner in a gyro plant he’d started in Milwaukee.

It’s true, Mr. Parthenis said in a second call, though he remembers little about his former partner, except that the guy looked like a hippie. Who Mr. Garlic was and why he made gyros are questions that Mr. Parthenis can’t answer: “He was like a phantom. He came out of nowhere.”

There is little about John Garlic in news archives, aside from a 1978 story in The Milwaukee Sentinel, in which a John J. Garlic discusses his plans to keep trained dolphins in a former municipal pool he’d bought in the city and wanted to turn into a restaurant with a kind of Sea World sideshow.

Unfortunately, Mr. Garlic is no longer around to discuss matters; he died of kidney failure in 1994. But his wife, Margaret Garlic, can provide answers.

So, who was John Garlic?

"He was this big guy," she said, "like 6 foot 2 inches tall, dark curly hair, couple hundred pounds. A former Marine. A super intelligent, super entertaining man. My brother used to say, 'When John Garlic enters a room, you know you're going to have fun.'"

And he was Greek?

"No, no," she said. "He was Jewish."

As we digest the fact that the Father of the American Gyro was Jewish, we ask the obvious next question: Where did he get the idea?

"From me," Ms. Garlic said. "One afternoon, I was watching 'What's My Line?' and there was a Greek restaurant owner on the show, and he did this demonstration, carving meat off a gyro. I immediately called an operator and asked for the number of a Greek restaurant in New York. The owner I got on the phone said, 'Go to Chicago, there's a huge Greek community.' At the time, Mr. Garlic was a Cadillac salesman, in his late 30s, but he quickly saw his future in gyro cones. After finding a Chicago chef willing to share a recipe, the couple rented space in a sausage plant and cranked out history's first assembly-line gyro cones. They were a hit.

"We supplied summer festivals, universities, some restaurants," Ms. Garlic said. "John could sell anything."

Hoping to expand, he sought out Peter Parthenis. There were tensions from the start; Mr. Parthenis says his own buttoned-down style didn't jibe with the unbuttoned Mr. Garlic. According to Ms. Garlic, Mr. Parthenis wanted to run the company on his own. Mr. Parthenis paid the Garlices a modest buyout fee — nobody recalls how much — and the partnership dissolved.

Feeling somewhat burned but eager to move on, the couple eventually opened that restaurant with the dolphins, and two others, none of which sold gyros.

The Garlices moved to Orlando, Fla., in the early 1980s, where John sold subdivisions for a developer. He did well, but when he became sick, the family's savings were drained to pay for treatments not covered by insurance. After her husband died, Ms. Garlic waited tables to support her children.

As gyros went nationwide and earned millions for a handful of entrepreneurs, the sight of rotisseries broke Ms. Garlic's heart a little. "That was our idea," she would think. She's rarely discussed her and her husband's role in Greek-American food history, but only because the subject rarely comes up. When it does, people think she's kidding.

No hard feelings, though.

"What's done is done," she said. "We did other things with our lives, and we've got a lot of great memories."

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