

A SUCCESSFUL GARDEN BLOOMS for MORE THAN TWO DECADES

Koula Haltoupi is the owner of Grecian Garden, a Greek restaurant located in the food court of the Grand Avenue Mall in downtown Milwaukee. Grecian Garden has been at this location since the Mall's inception in 1982. Twenty-two years later, Grecian Garden is the only remaining original tenant in the food court. They must be doing something right!



Koula emigrated from Greece to Montreal, Canada in 1963 to join other family members. While in Canada, Koula worked 2 jobs. One was in a factory and the other was in a restaurant as a waitress. After awhile, Koula realized that she was making more money as a waitress so she quit working at the factory and went full-time as a waitress. After saving up \$2,000, Koula became a partner in Zapion, the restaurant she had been working in as a waitress.

By 1976, Koula's mother and brother had moved to Milwaukee and Koula decided to join them as she was now all alone in Montreal. Koula is a Canadian citizen as well as an American citizen. When Koula arrived in Milwaukee she got a job at the Milwaukee Athletic Club as a waitress and spent much of her time observing the customs of America, how people handled money, how they dealt in business relations, etc. In 1978, Koula moved on to become a waitress at the John Ernst Café and continued her observations.

By now, most of Koula's life work revolved around restaurants. When the Grand Avenue Mall was nearing completion in 1982, Koula heard that they were going to have a food court. A close American friend told Koula that Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance was one of the investors in the Mall and that they were a trustworthy company. After investigating the Mall and the food court, Koula decided to open a restaurant there. Koula did her homework and figured out the cost of the equipment she would need plus renting a space and all the other things that go into opening a restaurant. She didn't have enough of her own money to completely cover the start-up of the restaurant and approached a bank for the additional funding she needed only to be turned down. The same American friend mentioned above recommended that Koula talk to the SBA about obtaining the financing needed. Koula pursued this idea and soon got approved for a \$55,000 direct loan from SBA to start-up her business and Grecian Garden truly became a reality and was the first restaurant in the new Mall's food court.

Koula hired her brother Dimitri to help her and he has been with the restaurant ever since. Koula currently has two other employees. The food at Grecian Garden is made fresh daily by Koula who got her recipes and learned how to cook from her mother. Koula says "In Greece, girls were not allowed to stray far from home, go places by themselves or go on dates with boys without chaperones." Because of this, girls spent most of their time being taught by their mothers how to be good cooks, seamstresses, etc. Koula also is a talented experienced seamstress.

Koula attributes the success of her business to her constant vigilance of the business as she is on the premises all the time and can "watch the store." Having her brother working there is also a big plus for Koula as she can trust him completely. Mom worked in the business until she was 85 years old and now, at age 92, can still be seen at times in the back of the store. Koula has a wonderful rapport with her customers as she is very friendly, energetic and always puts the customer first. She does special orders for her customers and eagerly wants to know how to please them.

The SBA Wisconsin District office is just across the street from the Grand Avenue Mall so staff can attest to the quality of the food and service at the Grecian Garden. Once you have visited Grecian Garden a couple of times, it is easy to see why it has been a success all these years. Koula has seen many businesses come and go in the food court and one of her Greek sayings is, "Don't look for too much or you could lose everything you get."

In these days of fast paced everything, it is comforting to know that Grecian Garden, although in a "fast food" atmosphere, reminds this writer of days gone by when the world moved at a slower pace and restaurants served the same quality food year after year along with the comarade of the owners. This is a success story in the truest sense where Koula has taken her talents, experience and entrepreneurial spirit and turned Grecian Garden into a successful business for many years.

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