

The Culinary Odyssey of Chef George Kyrtatas

G by Nicole Pensiero

George Kyrtatas—executive chef and co-owner of Hathaway’s Diner Style Restaurant and the adjoining SweetWater Bar & Grill in Cinnaminson, NJ—is well-known in the South Jersey/Philadelphia restaurant scene for his distinctive style of cooking, which he describes as “American cuisine with Mediterranean flair.”

Within the next few months, Kyrtatas’ name—and his face—will be known by foodies far beyond this region when he debuts as the host of the PBS TV cooking show, *The Cooking Odyssey*.

“It’s incredibly exciting,” the affable 34-year-old Kyrtatas said of the upcoming nationally-syndicated show. “It’s a dream come true for me and for my entire family.”

The TV show, billed as a “virtual Mediterranean gastronomic culinary odyssey,” will have Kyrtatas traveling throughout his family’s homeland of Greece, seeking new regional recipes from local restaurants and regular people alike.

“Wherever the food takes me, that’s where I’ll be,” Kyrtatas says of the program, which he’ll begin filming in late August for the season’s 13 episodes. He landed the PBS gig after guesting on an episode of *The Cooking Odyssey* during its first season. The producers, he says, were taken by his energy and creativity in the kitchen; when the contract was up for the show’s original host, Kyrtatas got a call.

“I was worried about doing it because it will have me away from the restaurant for a total of one month, so everyone else will have to work harder. But my brother and my parents insisted—and my wife, who has been there through this whole journey—was totally supportive, too,” he said. “I couldn’t say ‘no.’”

The Cooking Odyssey series isn’t the only place where Kyrtatas will be seen on TV: he recently taped two “pretty intense” cooking competition shows, including one for The Food Network—the aptly named *Cutthroat Kitchen*, which will air this fall. (“It’s very fun and pretty wild,” he says of the show. “Wait ‘til you see what I went through.”)

Kyrtatas says he’s certainly seen his family business grow and evolve in the years since he was a young boy helping his parents out in the kitchen.

And, he says, he and his brother are proud to carry on a family tradition that began nearly 30 years ago when his parents, Angelo and Antonia, took over Hathaway’s Diner in the early 1980s. Angelo, a native of Greece, came to the States as a young man. He spent many years working in the restaurant business, as a chef and manager, before deciding to open his own place. Antonia, a second-generation Greek, also had plenty of restaurant experience; her dad was in the business.

From the start, the Kyrtatas-run Hathaway’s was hugely successful; so much so, that when an electrical fire destroyed the restaurant a few years into their tenure, they decided to tear it down and rebuild from scratch.

“It was their life,” George Kyrtatas recalled. “Everything they had, everything they worked for, was in the restaurant.”

Rebuilding Hathaway’s was a huge financial and emotional challenge for the family, George recalls, adding that “in the first five years after they reopened, my mom and dad never took a day off.”

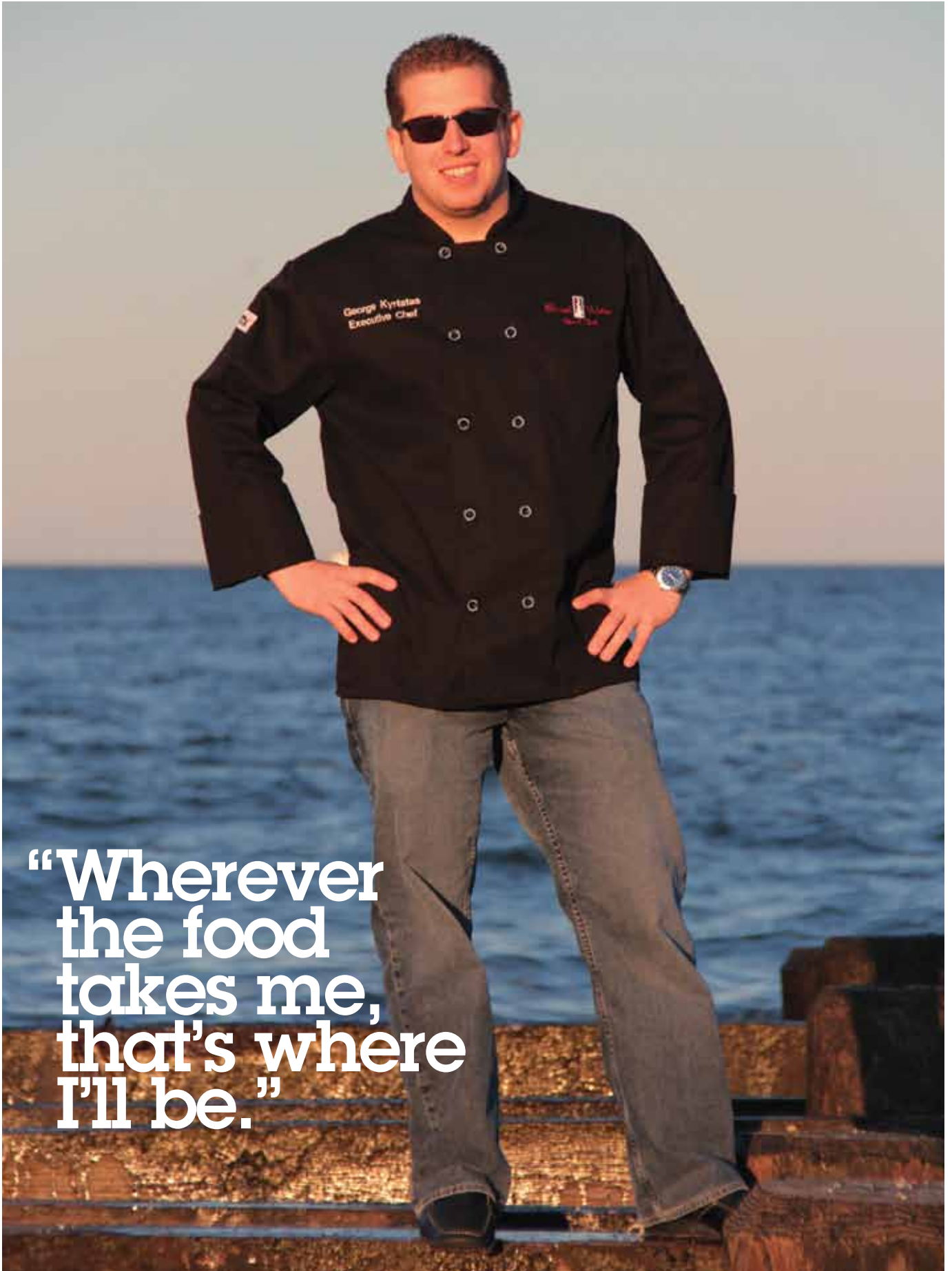
“They picked my brother and me up after school and we would do our homework in the office; we were always there.”

Before long, the Kyrtatas brothers were helping out in the kitchen: “I remember my mom standing me on milk crate to reach the counter and having me help peel potatoes. I was probably seven years old.”

As George and John got older, they took on more responsibilities; moving up from making salads, to busing tables, to helping out in the kitchen.

“We certainly had our friends and our activities, but our focus was always on the family business,” George recalled. “And because it was our family business, we took it seriously.”

By the time George Kyrtatas graduated from Cinnaminson High School in 1997, he’d developed an intense passion for food and cooking, inspired in part by his father’s work as Hathaway’s Executive Chef.



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George attended the Academy of Culinary Arts in Mays Landing, graduating from the program in December 1999 with a Gold Medal award. His decision to attend the culinary school was less motivated by a desire to learn to cook (“I already knew how to do that.”), than it was by a desire to refine his culinary technique and understand principles of food chemistry to perfect a dish.

Throughout college, he continued to work at Hathaway’s, now on the “line” as a cook. By age 20, George Kyrtatas had become the youngest person ever to become a Certified Chef de Cuisine through the American Culinary Federation, an achievement reached only after reaching a mandatory level of hours working as a chef, and through taking a written and hands-on test.

“It was a thrill,” he said. “Especially when they announced it at graduation.”

After finishing at the Culinary Academy, George was back full-time at Hathaway’s, where he took over the reigns as Executive Chef when his dad decided to go part-time in 2003.

“I had always tried to do what I could to relieve the pressure on him,” George recalled. “When he was ready to step back, he felt confident that I could take over in the kitchen.”

John, meanwhile, took over the business end of things—the “front of the house”—while George, in the kitchen, had “the back of the house.”

“We make a fantastic team and always have,” George says of his partnership with his brother.

In 2004, George Kyrtatas penned a well-received cookbook, “My Big Fat Greek Feast,” which focused on what he called “Old World cooking, with a New World kick,” and offered up recipes ranging from stuffed grape leaves to Spanakopita.

Over the years, Hathaway’s, which George describes as a “more upscale kind of a diner,” continued to do a great breakfast and lunch business. But with the economic downturn, coupled with an influx of franchise restaurants specializing in reasonably-priced dinners, its evening business began to drop off. A few years ago, George and John decided it was “time to step back and think about our next move.”

In 2012, they decided to recreate Hathaway’s into something unique for the community: they subdivided the restaurant, keeping one-third (100 seats) of it for the diner and turning the remaining two-thirds of space into SweetWater Bar & Grill (along with an outdoor dining patio). While the two restaurants have completely different menus and separate entrances, they share a kitchen and an Executive Chef, George.

“Hathaway’s is now open for breakfast and lunch only—from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m.—and is doing great. SweetWater is open for lunch and dinner, and is also doing great,” he said. “We get a real mix of people—businessmen, families, couples on dates. I think the way it’s set up now is very welcoming to everyone.”

Indeed, any visitor to SweetWater will be impressed with its elegant, hip, earth-toned

décor, but even more wowed by the quality of the food—and the generous portions offered. From daily seafood specials to popular favorites like baby back ribs and a Thanksgiving-style sandwich (complete with stuffing and cranberry sauce), the meal options are plentiful. Desserts are reasonably priced, with George’s signature bread pudding—sometimes supplemented with fruits and other flavors—a crowd favorite.

“Every day, more people find out about us and what’s here,” he said. “It’s been exciting to watch the business grow.” Seeing he and his brother’s dream of SweetWater come to fruition has been “a thrilling adventure.”



“My brother and I are best friends and great business partners. We picked out all the colors together, the décor, the concept—along with some input from our folks, of course,” George Kyrtatas said. As a chef, he is especially pleased that the new restaurant “defines what I do and what I like to do—creating American cuisine with Mediterranean flair.”

“I was able to put a lot of things on this menu that wouldn’t work at Hathaway’s, so it’s given me the opportunity to do some wild and fun things, especially with seafood,” George said.

For the past year, George Kyrtatas has also regularly contributed food stories and recipes to *JerseyMan Magazine*, something he says “is fun to do and hopefully interesting for the reader.” With topics ranging from “Food & Sex” to how to be a better grill master, George says his articles—while geared toward male readers—can be of interest to women as well: “I try to be broad-reaching in whatever topic I focus on.”

While his relatively small stature earned him the nickname of the “Little Greek Chef” years ago, it’s clear that George Kyrtatas is a guy with a big smile, a big personality, and even bigger dreams.

“There’s a lot happening with me and with the restaurant right now,” Kyrtatas says. “And it’s all good.” ■

For more information, visit www.SweetWaterNJ.com, or stop by their location at: 10 Route 130 North, Cinnaminson, NJ, 08077.