



## Rick Badie: The secret isn't in the sauce

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By Rick Badie

KFC has its special herbs and spices.

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Any pit master worth his smoke has concocted a dry rub or sauce with secret ingredients that provide the wow factor and are kept close to the vest.

So it is with Nick Koulouris, founder of the Grecian Gyro restaurants, and his secret sauce. Ingredients call for mayonnaise, vinegar, whole milk, and spices, but that's about all Pano Koulouris, the patriarch's son, divulged on a visit to the Tucker location.

You can buy bottles of it as well as Nick's Grecian salad dressing and spice blend. The family sauce is applied to all the gyros, including the beef and lamb one, which typically are served with tzatziki sauce.

The story of the first Grecian Gyro meshes ingenuity with American opportunity. A Greek immigrant who, as a teen, told his mother that he'd have electricity in his house now owns three Grecian Gyros.

Nick Koulouris started the first restaurant with \$50 in his pocket, a sauce recipe in his head, and a dream. What he's accomplished in America wasn't even a remote possibility in

his native Greece.

"Back then, people didn't eat out," Pano Koulouris told me.

So his father came to Atlanta and worked a few jobs before he opened the Hapeville eatery in 1982. His dishes garnered appeal. Being located close to [Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport](#) didn't hurt.

Today, sons George and Pano have expanded the operation to Tucker and Forest Park. The company website asks customers where they'd like to see the next franchise.

"I've had interest from Canada," Pano told me, "but we're just not equipped."

As we talk, the employees prep for that day's business. Pano praises the staff.

He explained that the only edge this family business has over competitors revolves around the respect and appreciation that's shown the workers. Bernice Geter, a 12-year employee, started at the flagship store.

And while Pano kept mum on what, exactly, gave the secret sauce its appeal, he spoke openly about a desire to spread his father's imprint, to make his story more than an immigrant's tale.

"We want to help our employees get their own restaurants, give them a chance at business success," he told me. "We want them to grow with us, regardless of education, color or their past. I hope I fulfill that. That's the way I'll feel that I have been successful."

This year marks the third anniversary of the Tucker operation. A marquee thanks the community for its patronage. The building, at the intersection of Fellowship Road and Lawrenceville Highway, has been home to several restaurants, including a KFC.

Before I leave, another attempt is made to learn more about the makeup of the Grecian sauce.

Apparently, vagueness serves a purpose. It deters copycats.

"People have tried to figure out what's in it and there are a few sauces that have come close," Pano said. "But you can tell they are leaving out something."

And only the Koulourises know what that is.

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