

BOSTON AREA NEWS

The Family Businesses That Fed a City

The Greeks who built Boston's pizza scene. *By Theodora Tsevas*

Long before Boston fell for sour-dough crusts and artisan toppings, the backbone of its pizza scene was laid by Greek hands: flour-dusted, sun-worn, and unshakably determined. Men who came to America in search of work and found it behind a hot oven.

In neighborhoods like Dedham, Brighton, and Roslindale, Greek immigrants bought corner shops and turned them into something lasting. Pizza was simple and profitable. For thousands arriving in the late 20th century, these businesses were a foothold into the American dream.

Over time, these shops became more than takeout joints. They paid mortgages. They put kids through school. Fathers passed them to sons. Mothers ran the kitchens. Kids grew up behind the counter, slicing peppers, taking orders, and learning to hustle before they learned to drive.

George Panagopoulos was one of those kids. He was eight when he started helping at Dedham House of Pizza, folding boxes, prepping salads, and sweeping floors after school, along with his sisters. His father, Andreas Panagopoulos, had come from a small farming village in Greece, where life revolved around agriculture.

When Andreas arrived in Boston in 1981, he had no English, no money, and just a fourth-grade education. He worked whatever jobs he could find, but it was the pizza shop that stuck. He loved the pace and the food. By 1983, he was behind the counter at Dedham House of Pizza. In 1996, he and his wife Maria purchased it.

"My father learned everything from scratch," Panagopoulos says. "Pizza wasn't in his blood, but service was. In Greece, it was about serving the land

and the family. Here, it became service to the community."

At first, business was slow. Cold winters passed with hours between customers. There were no credit cards, no delivery, just word-of-mouth and hope. Dedham Square was struggling too, with empty storefronts, construction detours, and a forgotten downtown. But the shop stayed open, waiting to serve its next customer.

By high school, Panagopoulos was doing everything—cooking, running the register, and making deliveries. He was shadow-running the business by the time he was 15. But it wasn't until years later, when his father's health declined, that he officially took the reins.

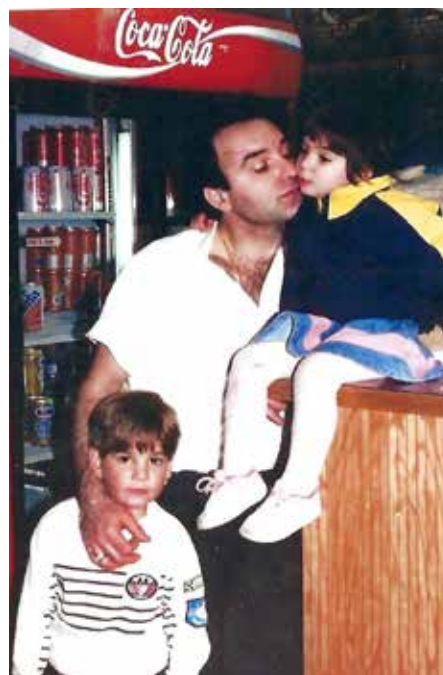
"You think your parents are immortal, that they will do the same job until they are 90," he says. "But eventually, you see they need help, and you step in."

For him, taking over was about honoring what his father built. "I didn't want to let his dream collapse," Panagopoulos says. "It was my duty to continue his legacy."

That's when the changes began. He introduced point-of-sale systems, online ordering, credit card processing, and a mobile app. He rebranded the business and leaned into digital marketing. While other pizzerias in town stayed old-school, Dedham House of Pizza became a modern operation.

"We went from two employees to 27," Panagopoulos says. "My dad could cook. But I brought in the business side. That's how we survived."

He now follows up with unsatisfied customers through applications and adjusts the menu based on community feedback. "My parents didn't want to use these tools," he says. "They'd say,



Andreas Panagopoulos at Dedham House of Pizza (top); Andreas and two of his three kids, George and Effie

“Why spend more money?” But that extra cost makes a difference.”

After all these years, the mission behind Dedham House of Pizza still hasn’t changed, and George Panagopoulos continues his father’s legacy. “It’s more than a business. It’s what got us here,” he says.

A few miles east, in Brighton, three brothers are writing their own chapter, this time, by bringing an old shop back to life.

For nearly two decades, the Hatzieleftheriadis family’s old pizza shop sat in someone else’s hands. Back in the 1980s, Harry, Stephen, and Nick’s Hatzieleftheriadis’ father had opened Oak Square Pizza in Brighton, running it for 20 years before eventually leasing it out. The shop remained under different ownership until the COVID-19 pandemic shut it down for good. That’s when the brothers saw their opportunity.

In 2021, they reclaimed the space and gave it new life, opening Ziggy’s Pizzeria, named after their grandfather Zisis Hatzieleftheriadis. They rolled up their sleeves, scrubbed the floors, reworked the dough, and picked up where their father had left off. “There was no good food around here for a long time,” Stephen Hatzieleftheriadis says. “So I told my brothers: Half the work’s done. Let’s bring it back.”

Stephen and his brothers, Harry and Nick, grew up in Brighton. Their father’s pizza place was a neighborhood fixture for years, and like many Greek kids in the trade, they learned young, washing dishes, prepping sauce, and helping after school.

When the grand reopening was about to happen, the brothers didn’t advertise it. “We just had people coming,” says Hatzieleftheriadis. Ziggy’s opened with little fanfare, but the neighborhood noticed. The food, the name, the story, it all clicked. What started quietly quickly became steady. “You want people to have a good first experience,” he says. “If you’re busy and you don’t do good, you might lose that customer forever.”

Ziggy’s has a menu, but it’s not rigid.

The brothers stay open to ideas. “Sometimes a customer comes in asking for something they saw online,” Hatzieleftheriadis says. “If it sounds good, we’ll try it.” That flexibility keeps the menu evolving.

Nothing here is rushed; their dough ferments for 72 hours. The wings, sauces, and even the tzatziki, made from their grandmother’s recipe, are prepared fresh. “It takes longer,” Hatzieleftheriadis says. “But it tastes better. And people can tell.”

Still, the work is relentless. Stephen and Harry are both firefighters; Nick works a day job. “Nick comes in early, makes the dough, then heads to work; we call him Mr. Doughman,” Hatzieleftheriadis says. The brothers coordinate firefighter shifts so that at least one of them can be at the shop. “But usually, we’re both here after our shifts anyway,” he adds. Their spouses, kids, and extended family help wherever they’re needed, at the register, in the kitchen, doing whatever it takes to keep the operation moving. “This isn’t a 40-hour-a-week kind of thing,” he says. “Some weeks it’s 100.”

Both Panagopoulos and Hatzieleftheriadis have their eyes open. The era of Greeks opening pizza shops, they say, is fading. A new wave of immigrants—Egyptians, Indians, and Albanians—filling the spaces that Greeks once occupied. And the new era of Greek-American kids? Well, they’re chasing different dreams.

“We’re educated now,” Panagopoulos says. “We go into law, tech, and finance. That’s a good thing. But I don’t think you’ll see many more of us getting into pizza.”

Hatzieleftheriadis is also not sure that the next generation will carry Ziggy’s forward. “I doubt it,” he says. “It’s a lot of work. I wouldn’t want my sons to do it. If they’re interested, yes, but I wouldn’t want them to feel they have to.”

The Greek pizza shop may not be the path for most younger generations, but its legacy is etched across Boston: in

the neighborhoods that grew up around these storefronts, in the families they supported, and in the values they passed down.

They say it takes a village to raise a child, but for many Greek families in Boston, it also took a pizza shop.



Stephen Hatzieleftheriadis and his cousin, Marianna (top); Zisis Hatzieleftheriadis in front of Oak Square Pizza