



Thousands attend the Greek Food Festival to enjoy a taste of Greek culture and food.

## COMMUNITY PULLS TOGETHER FOR BIG GREEK FESTIVAL

# 'SMALL BUT MIGHTY'



Olbia Coumanis Drzewiecki kneads dough for Paximadia at the Holy Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church for last year's festival.

HALI TAUXE/DEMOCRAT FILE PHOTOS

**Amanda Sieradzki** Council on Culture & Arts

Many decades ago, Harriet Kanelidis was a new member of the Holy Mother of God Greek Orthodox Church. She was grateful to fellow parishioner Eva Kypreos who took Kanelidis under her wing. Kypreos was also the champion of turning the Tallahassee Greek Food Festival into the large-scale occasion it is today.



**Kanelidis**

Kanelidis worked alongside Kypreos, and was amazed by her boundless energy and flawless organization of the volunteers and recipes. Though Kypreos passed away a few years ago, Kanelidis was honored to continue implementing her vision for the annual event alongside the church leadership. "She's still in our hearts," says Kanelidis. "I know she would be so proud of how it has all come together and become a Tallahassee main event."

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### If you go

**What:**  
Tallahassee  
Greek Food  
Festival

**When:**  
10 a.m.-  
10 p.m.,  
Nov. 2-3

**Where:** Holy  
Mother of God  
Greek  
Orthodox  
Church, 1645  
Phillips Road

**Cost:** Free  
admission

**Contact:**  
For more  
information,  
call  
850-878-0747.

# Festival

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This year's Tallahassee Greek Food Festival on Nov. 2 and 3 will mark three decades of involvement for Kanelidis, who has worked her way up from volunteer to chairperson on the festival committee. Many decades ago, the festival began as a small bake sale. Kanelidis' mentor Kypreos was part of the original planning committee that decided to offer the community as much as they could in the way of Greek culture and expand into a two-day festival.

Growing up in the orthodoxy, Kanelidis always felt right at home in Tallahassee's local congregation. She explains how the Orthodox Church is part of a larger umbrella of worship that includes a diverse set of nationalities. As a second generation Greek whose grandparents immigrated to America in the early 1900s, she explains how the uniformity of church services and fellowship across the world can be comforting. Many also host their own local festivals.

"Where I grew up the church was so large that I just went to the festival," recalls Kanelidis. "In Tallahassee, we are small but mighty. We need everybody involved in the volunteering aspect, and then they get a break for dinner sometimes," she laughs.

The festival has grown exponentially over the years, bringing in thousands of attendees. Kanelidis explains that planning and scheduling for an event this size is no easy feat, and likens the process to a rolling stone. It begins slowly as she chips away at tasks —securing advertising, signing entertainment contracts, organizing volunteers — and quickly gathers speed as she brainstorms new ideas with parishioners.

"I've had one perfect festival that was totally sold out at closing time," says Kanelidis. "It can't always be that way and we hate to disappoint or run out of food. That's my joy though, that end challenge."

The weeks leading up to the festival are devoted to cooking and baking. Recipes for the food are named for their originators. Kanelidis describes one handwritten recipe from 1985 as having been "splashed with goodies," and remarks on how they continue to honor the memory of those who are no longer with the congregation, but whose families can be proud of their continued contribution to the festival.

There's a science in the order the foods are made as well, with some frozen for freshness, other desserts are left for the final days leading up to the festival. As far as baking and eating, Kanelidis is partial to the spanakopita, a spinach filled filo pastry. She loves to see the buzz of excitement amongst the parishioners during preparations as well, which is always a family affair.

"It's the most fun to see four generations baking together," says Kanelidis,



Volunteer Mike Wernker, works the grill at Greek Food Festival in 2014. ALVIN MCBEAN/DEMOCRAT FILES



Pastichio is one of the specialties at the annual Greek Food Festival set for Nov. 2-3 this year. VIC ADERHOLD

who adds that parishioners sometimes invite relatives from out of town to help cook and volunteer. "Eva used to always talk about the 'young people,' and as

time passes we try to continue bringing in the younger generations in to help."

The festival has persisted in all kinds of weather, including a re-scheduling

after Hurricane Hermine two years ago. When the new date fell on a Florida State football weekend, Kanelidis did quick troubleshooting. Large screen televisions were strategically placed throughout the booths and she was delighted to see a mass of hungry crowds.

Though lines can be long, Kanelidis' heart is warmed by hearing stories about couples who have met and entered life-long relationships at the festival while waiting for food. There are also church tours, Greek music, dancing, and imported goods for all attendees to enjoy. Kanelidis' favorite spot however is standing out by the road and seeing people walk up in droves.

Kanelidis feels the Greek people as a whole take great pride in their culture, thriving on company and taking every opportunity to share information about their culture.

This year, the church is working with Second Harvest of Big Bend to collect food for those in need. Attendees who donate non-perishable items will receive a free baklava pastry. Kanelidis says there is a Greek word for this "art of fellowship," *parea*, which embodies the festival's aims.

"I always say it's like we're having 20,000 people over for dinner, so let's get ready," says Kanelidis. "I think it's a really rich experience. We like our guests to enjoy themselves, absorb the experience and take home memories that they'll have forever."

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*