

SANTÉ

FOR RESTAURANT PROFESSIONALS volume 16.1 Holiday/Winter 2011-2012



15th
Anniversary
ISSUE

isantemagazine.com

:: restaurant profile ::

LIVANOS RESTAURANT GROUP

200 Central Avenue
White Plains, New York 10606
www.livanosrestaurantgroup.com

Owners John, Bill, Nick, and Corina Livanos

President/Partner John Livanos

Secretary/Partner Nick Livanos

Vice President/Partner Bill Livanos

Partner Corina Livanos

Partner (Oceana)/General Manager Paul McLaughlin

Partner (Molyvos & Abboccato)/Executive Chef

Jim Botsacos

Partner (Burger DeLuxe)/General Manager

Zeki Yesilyurt

Restaurants

Oceana (Manhattan, New York)

Molyvos (Manhattan, New York)

Abboccato (Manhattan, New York)

Moderne Barn (Armonk, New York)

City Limits Diner (White Plains,

New York & Stamford, Connecticut)

Burger DeLuxe (Wayne, New Jersey)

Total number of employees 370

Average number of meals served daily 1,540

Total wines listed (all restaurants) 1,250

Total wines listed by-the-glass 72

Total wines cellared 21,600

Cases of wine sold per month 880

Gross annual Food Revenue \$24 million

Gross annual Wine Revenue \$5 million

Gross annual Spirits Revenue \$2.3 million

Total gross annual revenues \$31 million



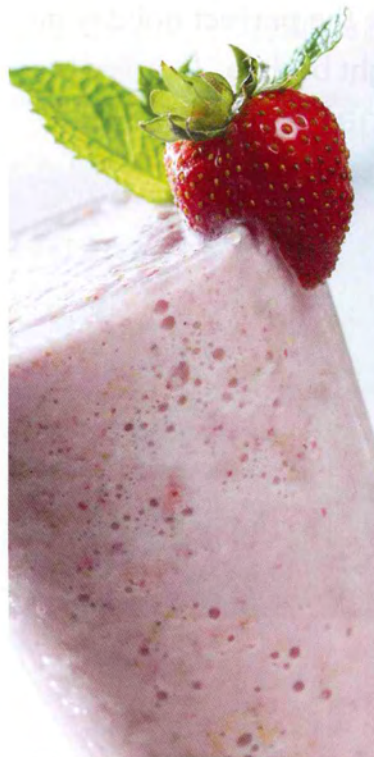
By Irvina Lew



THE Livanos Restaurant GROUP

The multigenerational American success story that reverberates throughout the restaurant industry is personified in Greek restaurateur John Livanos, who arrived in New York in 1958 from his family home in Molyvos, on the island of Lesvos. His path from dishwasher to luncheonette owner took three years. A Long Island diner followed; then, in 1974, he built The Arch, a Brooklyn diner, which he operated for 10 years.

Today, with John's children—Nick, Bill, and Corina—actively involved, The Livanos Restaurant Group (LRG) is a collection of seven dining venues with restaurants that can be categorized as: luxury (Oceana), premium (Molyvos and Abboccato), casually chic (Moderne Barn) and casual (City Limits Diners and Burger DeLuxe). Nick oversees the Manhattan restaurants; Bill handles Westchester, Connecticut, and New Jersey; and Corina serves as the public face of the organization.





Left, City Limits Diner chefs Tracy and Peter Assue; the bar at Moderne Barn. Above, Moderne Barn chef Ethan Kosbar.



A Tight Grip On the Reins

LRG's overall business model emphasizes basic commonalities, such as prime locations, quality ingredients, and a hands-on management style. "Everything we do is location, not concept, driven," claims Nick. "Real estate has been a priority since dad built the Brooklyn diner. It's why he first invested in land in White Plains. When Wendy's asked to buy that land, Bill and I figured it was a valuable location. We said, 'Dad, let's do a restaurant here.'" That restaurant eventually became City Limits Diner. Location also influenced the purchase of the former Yellow Barn Furniture Store in Armonk (the family's hometown), now home to Moderne Barn. "We weren't proactively looking for another restaurant venue, but the zoning allowed 'all uses,' there was ample parking, and it's near an IBM campus."

The location of outlets within the group is also paramount. "LRG is committed to the Danny Meyer model," says Nick, noting that Meyer can walk or taxi to all his venues. "Our outlets can all be reached easily either on foot in midtown, or by car in the suburbs."

This allows for daily monitoring of all operations. "I keep my eye on the money by constantly reviewing the POS numbers and costs in every restaurant," notes Nick. "If a table was comped \$100, there's a process in place to find out why and what we can do to correct the situation."

Patriarch John is intimately involved in daily operations and maintains the great relationships he has long had with purveyors. Farm to table has been a guiding philosophy since he first built a home on the North Fork of Long Island in 1985. He personally maintains relationships with such produce suppliers as Sep's Farm in East Marion, Latham Farms in Orient, and Sang Lee Farms in Peconic. A company-owned truck makes the rounds to the farms to pick up produce for all their outlets.

LRG also has a salaried fish buyer on staff, who maintains relations with 14 different fish wholesalers throughout the New York region. For meats, the company has maintained a

“Everything we do is location, not concept, driven. . .”

—Nick Livanos

long relationship with DeBragga and Spitler, one of Manhattan's original meat-packing district suppliers, which recently moved to New Jersey.

Star Strategy

Despite the corporate connections, John encourages his chefs to form supplier relationships and buy direct from farmers and other premium sources. This helps to maintain diversity among LRG's various kitchens, as well as broadening the company's supplier network. In fact, LRG's management style takes a dual track: provide strong and diligent corporate oversight, and give individual managers and chefs as much autonomy as possible to run their respective units as they see fit.

This strategy has created a constellation of star properties at all dining levels. The most luminous in terms of clientele, menu pricing, and style is Oceana, where entree prices average \$35 and the 500-plus wine selections range up to \$6,000 a bottle. Nick describes Oceana as "the center of the universe, where CEOs from important midtown corporations are regular clients. Of course, their dining experience must be perfect."

Manning Oceana's helm is Paul McLaughlin, LRG partner and investor, who opened the restaurant as general manager and wine director in 1995. Though wine management is now under the direction of Pedro Goncalves and Sommeliers Davis Anderson, Jonathan Ross, and John Loats, McLaughlin still keeps a sharp eye on wine trends and sales.

"People are still spending good money on wine," he notes, "though generally we sell fewer high-ticket





“Our goal is to be in the black with a new restaurant in four months, with a four-year ROI.” —Nick Livanos

Left, Molyvos wine director Kamal Kouiri; top, dining booths at Oceana, bottom, City Limits Diner.

bottles. Our by-the-glass prices are lower today, but the quality is higher. We can buy super wines and sell them for \$10 or —\$12 and make a friend.”

Executive Chef Ben Pollinger was hired in 2006 to freshen Oceana’s menu and contemporize plate presentation. A CIA graduate, Pollinger earned his stripes working for such superchefs as Alain Ducasse, Christian Delouvrier, and Michael Romano. Executive Pastry Chef Jason Chen, a UC Berkeley graduate who also holds a patisserie diploma from Le Cordon Bleu Paris, joined the team in 2007. His on-the-job training included stints at Kuleto’s, John Frank, and the Fifth Floor in San Francisco, and at Alain Ducasse New York. The passion for excellence that both Pollinger and Chen bring to the kitchen is a major ingredient in earning and maintaining Oceana’s Michelin star.

Though McLaughlin plays a role in managing LRG’s two other Manhattan operations, Molyvos (Greek) and Abboccato (Italian), the driving force in both restaurants is Executive Chef Jim Botsacos. Of Greek and Italian heritage, Botsacos earned his culinary degree at Johnson & Wales University and went on to work at The 21 Club, Park Avalon, and Blue Water Grill in New York City. He joined LRG in 1997 to help open Molyvos. In 2004, he was given the charge of developing and opening Abboccato.

Botsacos spends his days running from one restaurant to the other. “At Molyvos,” he notes, “we offer hand selected, fresh daily fish grilled to order, incredible Greek classics, and more progressive menu items.” A three course “quick lunch” is offered weekdays for \$25, and a pre- and post-theater prix fix dinner is available for \$38. Wine Director Kamal Kouiri’s list features all Greek wines, with prices starting at \$32.

Abbaccato, a stylish and reasonably priced Italian gem, serves pasta dishes in the low \$20s and entrees for around

\$30. What really excites the chef and most diners are the chiccetti, small plates to share that change daily and are mostly priced at \$7 or \$8. With about 140 selections, the all-Italian wine list is a treasure trove of unique, low-priced selections. Botsacos’ authentic and creative cuisine has earned Abbaccato a reputation as one of the best Italian restaurants in New York City.

In the Burbs

Notwithstanding the success of their Manhattan restaurants, it is in the suburbs where LRG’s creative energy has truly taken flight. Banking on John’s casual dining roots, the company opened City Limits Diner in White Plains, New York, in 1994 and another in Stamford, Connecticut, in 1996. CIA-trained Chef Peter Assue, who previously worked for Charlie Palmer, was brought on to manage the City Limits food program. His wife, Pastry Chef Tracy Kamperdyk Assue, also a CIA graduate and former Charlie Palmer chef, was hired to manage the dessert and baking programs. City Limits Diner features a slick, contemporary take on traditional diner design, cuisine, and experience. The bar specializes in microbrews (currently offering 70 selections), but also features a range of reasonably priced wines and a full cocktail list. The menu, though, is the real star. Offering breakfast, lunch, and dinner, dishes range from such classics as bacon and eggs to Maryland lump crab and lobster cake Benedict. The City Limits Diner staff runs their own smoke house, bakes all of their own bread and pastries, and prepares all of their food from scratch.

When LRG veteran Zeki Yesilyurt wanted to open a restaurant near his home in New Jersey, he presented the Livanos with an idea for an upscale hamburger

joint. The company said yes, and Yesilyurt, who started as a server and worked at Molyvos as a manager for 12 years, became managing partner of Burger DeLuxe, which opened in 2008 in Wayne, New Jersey. As with the company's other venues, Burger DeLuxe is beautifully designed, has a menu that offers a contemporary take on traditional dishes, and has food of exceptional quality. "It's quality that separates us from all the other burger places," claims Yesilyurt.

Casual Chic

Moderne Barn, the latest star in LRG's constellation, opened in 2010 under Bill's management and quickly became a social hub, due to the family's extensive ties in Westchester and to its seductive appeal. Corina and Nick's wife, Lorena, work the front desk and personally know many of the local clientele, including such celebrity regulars as Regis Philbin, Michael Douglas, Catherine Zeta Jones, and Ron Howard. Even Bill and Hillary Clinton dine there occasionally.

The restaurant features a casual-chic atmosphere with appealing design, excellent food at moderate prices, and a lively, fun ambience. Commanding the kitchen is Ethan Kostbar, a CIA-trained chef who grew up in Israel and worked for John Doherty at the Waldorf Astoria, Robert Kinkade, and Tom Colicchio. His menu features fresh seafood and pastas, flatbreads, and a selection of lamb, beef, and fowl dishes that emphasizes Mediterranean simplicity and seasonality. Wine Director Matthew Christoff's list offers 25 by-the-glass and 530 bottle selections. Says Christoff, "We have a wine driven beverage program that reflects the flavors and diversity of Chef Kostbar's menu."

LRG's John Livanos and his children and partners, Corina, Bill, and Nick.

Dollars and Cents

LRG is primarily a self-financed business with only two nonfamily investors, McLaughlin and Yesilyurt. Though they do take out the occasional small loan to finance a renovation, Nick Livanos explains that they "avoid borrowing and taking on outside investors." LRG spends a minimum of \$200 a square foot on renovations and about \$500 a square foot on a new buildout. "Our goal is to be in the black with a new restaurant in four months and with an ROI in four years."

The company grosses \$31 million a year, with about 25 percent from wine and spirits sales. But for the Livanos, it is not all about the numbers—customer care comes first. "We take customer concerns very seriously," says Nick. "Either Bill and I or the general managers respond to each customer who contacts the restaurant with a problem. Invariably, that customer feels they have a responsibility to complain, and that deserves attention from a senior team member."

Despite the apparent Midas touch, LRG feels the pinch of the current economic environment. Nick speaks for the whole family when he says, "What keeps me awake at night is the general economic situation. A bad day on Wall Street will affect business that evening. A long-term business crisis, like 2001 and 2008, can affect our banquet business for a year or more."

Yet, LRG's location and deal-driven business model; its hands-on, practical approach; and its all-in-the-family-attitude—enhanced by a talented, devoted, and respected staff—appears to be a lesson in the alchemy that makes restaurants.



Irvina Lew is a New York-based food and travel writer. Her articles have appeared in many publications, including *Chocolatier*, *Culinary Trends*, *Pastry Art & Design*, *Pennsylvania Wine & Spirits*, and *Wine Enthusiast*.

