

Starters: Nisi Estiatorio in Englewood

Starters is a first look at recently opened restaurants. It is meant to be a descriptive glimpse, not a critical review.

By **BILL PITCHER**

STAFF WRITER

In these days of penny-pinching, portion shrinkage and restaurant cutbacks, it's unusual to find owners like Orthon and Peter Mourkakos, who this week opened Nisi Estiatorio, a Mediterranean fish house in Englewood.

The brothers from Alpine considered turning the former Ocean Palm and Ninety Grand Grille restaurant into an office building, then thought better of it. They invested millions into the expansive space, gutting dining rooms that had been renovated just two years earlier, buying more space for parking and bringing in a chef and sommelier from respected Manhattan restaurants, while all around them the economy showed troubling signs.

"You can't create a restaurant with a budget," Orthon Mourkakos said. "If the budget is the

Nisi Estiatorio

■ 90 Grand Ave., Englewood; 201-567-4700; nisirestaurant.com.

■ Greek seafood; entrées \$22 to \$35, whole fish \$25 to \$35 per pound.

■ Open 5 to 10:30 p.m. Monday to Thursday, 5 to 11:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 4 to 9 p.m. Sunday.

■ Credit cards: AE, D, DC, MC, V.

■ Wine/liquor: full bar with 130 wines.

■ Parking: lot, valet.

priority, you shouldn't be in the restaurant business."

In the lounge and dining room, the owners turned to Steven Lazarus of Axis Architectural Studio in Englewood, who set out to build a romantic Greek palace atop a floor of black walnut, complete with a hushed indoor waterfall and a glassed-in wine cellar for the most prized bottles in sommelier Sterling Roig's 130-bottle selection (about half are from Greece).

The dining room is open, with half of the tables on an elevated portion of the floor, and the other half in the center of the room, where a banquette stretches down the center. French doors line two walls, and the unique artwork throughout the restaurant is composed of imprints of whole fish, which had been rolled in paint and pressed against satin. The rounded ceiling is sapphire blue streaked with ribbons of white – "almost like being on a beach," said general manager Michael Liristis. "On the island of Santorini, drinking your ouzo, eating your fish."

The fish are in the dining room, too – Dover sole, lavraki, black sea bass, pom-



DAVID BERGELAND/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Lavraki is one of the fish items served at Nisi Estiatorio in Englewood.

pano and others, sitting atop ice in a large display where customers can hand-pick their dinner, which is grilled to order. That's the centerpiece of the menu, which also includes limited chicken, lamb and beef, designed by John Piliouras, the longtime chef de cuisine at Molyvos in Manhattan.

"There aren't a lot of bells and whistles," Piliouras said. "It's about clean flavors and uncluttered presentation."

Appetizers – or mezedes – include ouzo-cured Scottish salmon, grilled octopus with sweet and sour onions and scallops wrapped in kataifi, a pastry that looks like shredded wheat. A Mediterranean dessert menu features karidopita – an olive oil and walnut cake – baklava and Greek yogurt topped with quince preserves and chopped walnuts.

To suggest a new restaurant to be featured, e-mail pitcher@northjersey.com.

Coming Wednesday: more on the vision of Nisi Estiatorio executive chef John Piliouras.