

GRACIE'S 21ST CENTURY CAFÉ & CATERING

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Gracie's 21st Century Café & Catering, on a remote road in Berks County, seems like it's off the map. "We're out here in the middle of nowhere," says owner-chef Gracie Skiadas. Indeed, she reminds us we're still in civilization—but far from the familiar—by listing the location as "Manatawny Road, Pine Forge, Earth." Its whereabouts is just one way this hidden gem distinguishes itself.

Now in its 17th year, Gracie's is a perfect reflection of its well-traveled, free-spirited owner. Both cuisine and décor draw strongly from international influences. "I am inspired by foods that come from two different cultures meeting, or border cuisine," says Skiadas. She gives examples of Switzerland and Italy, the Caribbean, and Asia—"wherever flavors melt together." The restaurant itself is a hybrid of upscale establishment, homey taverna and hip hangout. Its interior has a Southwestern feel, with adobe-like fireplaces and white walls adorned with Native American artwork. The Santa Fe ambiance combines with eclectic touches like neon blips, serving trays with blinking lights and a "No Sniveling" sign above the bar.

Skiadas, 55, who lives on the premises, began in the food business as a server though, deep down, she was a frustrated artist. In her early 30s she started playing with food, "sponging up" cookbooks from around the planet. She also trained with an East Indian holy man, who taught her how to properly cook vegetables and "holy foods." She calls her culinary self-discovery "divine intervention." "I couldn't find myself with still-life painting or pottery," she says. "I really struggled through all that in my youth. Finally, when I started cooking, I think I really came into my own place of power."

Skiadas believes passionately that she is not just filling customers' stomachs but "fueling their containers."

"It's nourishing them on many levels," she says. Part of that nourishment includes atmosphere and service. "We try to make

sure that people are well served and cared for, that they feel they're in the comfort of my home, which in essence it is," says Skiadas. She aims to create a humane dining experience in a warm, intimate environment where people can relax and delight in the meal and each other. "The restaurant has always been aligned with a more European fashion," Skiadas says. "Spend time with your family, friends or business associates, and enjoy. Don't be so quick to pack the food down and run away."

It might be hard not to pack down these gourmet vittles, which have "just a hint of decadence," says Skiadas. Each recipe is original, and Skiadas is keen on fresh, natural ingredients such as wild-caught fish and organic meats. The menu changes seasonally, with the holidays counted as a fifth season. Signature dishes include Jamaican curried crab bisque (featured in *Gourmet Magazine*), Rasta pasta and Asian crispy duck. Other innovative creations are the celebration portabella, wok-fried blue corn ravioli, quail with rose petal sauce, and Montserrat coconut tart.

Besides its exotic fare, unique presentation and accommodations make Gracie's one of a kind. Food is displayed on ceramic pottery made by Michael Jones. Well water is available upon request. Fresh bread comes with star-shaped butter and a garlic clove. The check arrives in a colorful bejeweled box. Skiadas offers a vegetarian menu, full-service catering, cooking classes and "opulent dinners to go." The restaurant also hosts special events throughout the year, like the Queen's Day Tulip Festival in April.

Skiadas notes that her restaurant is "a very sensitive place," not necessarily suited for everyone. "It's kind of like the country of Jamaica," she says. "People either love it here or they just can't wait to leave." Clearly more people love it than not: Gracie's many faithful customers come from as far as Delaware. Skiadas has toyed around with the idea of moving to Philadelphia, but has decided to concentrate on where she is.

"I don't want to see any of the integrity or continuity lost on my menus," she says. "For right now I'm happy to be here."