

THE SUNDAY PROFILE: RESTAURANT CHAIN OWNER PETER CHRISTOPOULOS

MR. BURGER



Flipping burgers: Peter Christopoulos takes a turn behind the grill in this 2003 photo at his Mr. Burger store on Lake Michigan Drive NW, one of seven restaurants he operates in the Grand Rapids area — six Mr. Burger eateries and The Filling Station.

BY CHRIS KNAPE
THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

Peter Christopoulos spells success with a W. Generations of Grand Rapidsians who regularly sink their teeth into a freshly cooked Mr. Burger will understand where he's coming from.

"Success, it doesn't start with S. It starts with W — as in work," Christopoulos explains in a lively voice tinged in a distinctive Greek accent.

The W word is one that has long driven Christopoulos — a self-made man with an all-American immigrant success story.

The 75-year-old started Mr. Burger in 1970 after buying the old Dog n Suds Drive-In on Lake Michigan Drive NW three years earlier.

He drew up the bow-tie-clad burger logo, adapted the menu and molded the concept to fit the local market.

He doesn't just own the place. He is Mr. Burger.

Christopoulos arrived for an interview at the latest addition to his family's 43-year-old restaurant empire, The Filling Station at 4750 Alpine Ave.

NW, offered a cup of coffee and introduced his wife and business partner, Maria. "Where should we sit? Here?" He

guides us to a booth not far from the cash register, and Maria nestles in next to him. It's immediately clear Christopoulos may drink coffee, but he doesn't need it.

It's also clear Mr. Burger and Mrs. Burger go together like a hamburger and a bun.

The couple talk about the trials of taking over this latest restaurant, a former Red Hot Inn that had been converted to the popular, but fatigued and money-losing Filling Station. The previous owner had some good ideas but little restaurant experience, the Christopouloses said, often completing one another's sentences.

On the advice of loyal customers, they didn't make many changes to the menu — at least not yet. But there are plenty of Mr. Burger touches here and there.

It works like a Mr. Burger (which works a lot like the old Red Hot Inn) with its cafeteria-style line that allows you to pick up a piece of pie, order, grab a drink and grab a seat while your meal is made.

The investments are in less-obvious places — there's a new hood in the kitchen, the new roof and the thorough cleaning the place received.

There's more discipline among employees, better management and Maria's homemade soup recipes.

Now, the place is making money.

Success — there's that W word again.

"Business is like a marriage," he said. "You've got to put your time in and be on top of it. You can't let go."

The path to the vinyl restaurant booth where they're talking wasn't an easy one.

Fleeing communism

Pete Christopoulos fled Greece in 1955. Communist revolutionaries had taken most of his family's possessions as part of a post World War II insurgency that nearly tore the country apart.

He arrived in America with "less than nothing," he likes to say. His only possessions were in a small suitcase his father made by hand — an item he has to this day.

Working the night shift behind the grill, behind the mop and behind the register at Red Lion, he learned the restaurant business from the bottom up, picking up fluent English along the way.

SEE CHRISTOPOULOS, H3

BIO BOX

Five things to know about Peter Christopoulos:



New in town: When Peter Christopoulos, center, arrived from Greece in 1955, he lived with relatives in Grand Rapids and shared a room with cousins Deno Fotio, left, and Themis Fotio.

- Christopoulos came to America in 1955 owing an uncle, Red Lion restaurants owner Sam Koukios, \$385 for the boat ticket from Greece.

- He changed the name and concept of his original Dog n Suds to Mr. Burger because, he says, "I knew more than they did."

- Homemade soups at Mr. Burger are from recipes of Christopoulos' wife, Maria.

- Christopoulos once taught his cousins the importance of drinking milk by flexing his arm muscles with a stick in his elbow joint and challenging them to pull it out.

- His favorite thing at Mr. Burger after all these years: A burger.

“Success, it doesn't start with S. It starts with W — as in work.”

— Peter Christopoulos

CHRISTOPOULOS

'I'M ALWAYS CAPTAINING THE SHIP'

CONTINUED FROM H1

For eight years or so, he shared a small room with the boys of the Fotio family, relatives who took the young man into their home and treated him like a son.

Grand Rapids attorney Themis Fotio says he remembers the day Christopoulos showed up, not speaking a word of English.

"I was 4 years old and I remember I came downstairs, and there was this young man sitting in my kitchen with my mother, and we, my brother and I, were introduced to him as my cousin, and he hugged us," said Fotio, who considers Pete Christopoulos more of an older brother than a cousin.

Young love

A few years later, Christopoulos caught word that a girl from his village in Greece, an orphan named Maria, had arrived in Grand Rapids. She came to the United States with help of her uncle and began attending Aquinas College.

By 1963 they married, spending the early days of their partnership laying the groundwork to start a family and to control their own destiny.

In 1967, the couple bought the old Dog n Suds. Pete finally got out of endless late-night shifts at Red Lion.

In 1970, the dropped the Dog n Suds name — they would have to pay no royalties and could run the place the way they saw fit.

The changes worked, and Mr. Burger's reputation grew — so did Mrs. Burger's.

"Maria remembers going shopping at Herpolsheimer's (a long-time downtown department store) and everybody says, 'Hello, Mrs. Burger,'" Christopoulos said.

Through it all, they raised three children — Helene, Jim

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• PHOTOS: View a gallery of photos of Peter Christopoulos, aka Mr. Burger, at <http://bit.ly/sundayprofile>.

and Andrew — who grew up in the restaurants' back rooms doing homework, drawing, playing Lego's and, yes, washing dishes.

Fundamentals

Where storied names in the local restaurant business, including longtime competitor Mr. Fables, disappeared, Mr. Burger persevered by focusing on fundamentals.

Jim Christopoulos has those fundamentals hard-wired into his psyche.

"You focus on the basics, quality service, cleanliness and value — you build on those," he explained. "How you deliver that may change. But the basics don't really change."

An attorney with an MBA and a resume that includes 14 years working at The White House and on Capitol Hill as a budget analyst, "Jimmy" Christopoulos returned to Grand Rapids three years ago and now serves as general manager of the company.

He and his wife, Vas, former chief of staff for New Hampshire Sen. Judd Gregg, gave up the high-profile world of Washington politics for the chance to start a family and help out the family business.

"I worked for the Republicans. I worked for the Democrats. Now, it's a time to work for myself. That's basically what it boils down to," Jim Christopoulos said.

Andrew, who is in culinary school at Grand Rapids Community College, also hopes to have a role in the company.



Family photo: Andrew, left, Jim, Pete and Maria Christopoulos pose for a photo inside The Filling Station, 4750 Alpine Ave. NW, the family's most recent acquisition. The Christopouloses, who also own six Mr. Burger restaurants, also have a daughter, Helene.

Today, there are six Mr. Burger locations (the latest opened in Hudsonville in 2007), plus The Filling Station.

An electronic board outside The Filling Station proudly proclaims it to be "part of the Mr. Burger family," although the place maintained the automotive motif and many other items not typically found on Mr. Burger's menu.

There's even a "Mr. Fabulous Burger" held over from previous owners that is based on the former Mr. Fables burger.

"It's not broke, don't fix it," Christopoulos said. "It works for us."

Willingness to adapt

Pete Christopoulos' willingness to look at new ideas and adapt to what works is a big reason for the restaurants' longevity, Fotio said.

Fotio, who had worked at a variety of restaurants in his younger years, recalled looking at the blueprints when Christopoulos made plans to rebuild the Lake Michigan Drive Mr. Burger in the early '70s.

"He sat me down, opened up the blueprints and wanted me to look at the service line for any ideas I had. Who was I? Just a teenage kid," Fotio recalled. "He didn't care who I was. He wanted to see what I thought. That's why he got ahead."

Christopoulos readily concedes building the business took a lot of time away from his family and personal life.

When asked about hobbies outside of work, he doesn't come up with any.

Jimmy Christopoulos said his dad has long enjoyed deer hunting, but that's about it.

Pete and Maria now have a place in Clearwater Beach, Fla., where they spend portions of the winter. They enjoy eating out, but have no interest in golf.

Business is never far away.

He had just finished a phone call with the manager of one of his restaurants when The Press reached him in Florida for a follow-up interview.

"As I told you before, there are no co-pilots in the restaurant



A new name: The first Mr. Burger was converted from an old Dog n Suds drive-in on Lake Michigan Drive NW. Christopoulos changed the name — and designed the logo himself — to avoid paying royalties. The restaurant was later replaced with a new building.

business. I'm always captaining the ship. You depend on your people, but nothing runs by itself."

The Christopouloses have been back to visit Greece and connect with family members, but America is home.

"It's always nice to come back here to the old USA; you can't beat it."

That's the attitude that always struck Fotio about his "big brother," Pete.

"Whenever anybody is talking about Pete, they would comment about how successful he seems to be," Fotio said. "He just seems to look up in the sky and say, 'God bless America.'"

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His right-hand woman: Maria Christopoulos, left, talks with counter person Kelsey Gould at The Filling Station.

Grand Opening
... OF THE NEW BIGGER MR. BURGER

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Where it all began: Mr. Burger's formula for success, good food at affordable prices, hasn't changed since this 1970 ad ran announcing the opening of the first location.



In the kitchen: The early days of Mr. Burger were lean and Christopoulos rarely took a day off. Only a handful of items on the original menu sold for more than \$1.

Participating in public prayer is a natural



ALBERT LEWIS
COLUMNIST

Until we moved to Grand Rapids in 1972, I had never seen people publicly pray in a restaurant, and I was disturbed by it. I thought of prayer, verbal or otherwise, as a private matter (except in the synagogue, church or mosque). As I prepared to bite into my sandwich, I felt uncomfortable watching others pray.

Within a few months, I noticed lots of people publicly praying in every conceivable arena — even in an arena. And I began to like it and to accept the invitation of my lunch or dinner partner to "offer words of prayer" before we ate.

Glad to be invited

Today, participating in public (and inclusive) prayer feels good and natural for me. After much reading about the positive effects of prayer and healing, I feel appreciative to be invited into the process.

It creates a necessary pause, expression of gratitude and recognition that eating is much more than the act of sustaining the physical body. I have read and appreciated

studies that have shown the positive effects of prayers by people who were simply given the name of an individual recovering from major cardiac surgery. They were praying for people they did not know — they had only the patient's first name, and the patients could be anywhere in the world.

Dr. Larry Dossey ("Prayer is Good Medicine") demonstrated that people for whom prayers were offered healed sooner, required less pain medication and lived longer.

I enjoy imagining what message and meaning might be conveyed if thousands of people decided to stop and pray, not only at meals but at other times during the day (and without a tragedy as the motivation).

This idea is not novel and has long been part of Jewish, Christian and Islamic

teaching, but those who actually observe it in the U.S. are few.

It is easy for me to pray in the morning and at night, but it's a discipline for me at other times. Yet, each time I stop, ground myself and pray — I experience a renewed energy and perspective as well as gratitude (sometimes even in the midst of an unpleasant task or difficult situation).

A calming force

This form of prayer becomes a centering and calming practice.

Sometimes my prayers are worded in a traditional Jewish formula and, at other times, I may begin with the phrase: "O universe in which I live and which lives in me, I ..."

I have learned much from the many different peoples and beliefs that have greeted me in West Michigan, and I pray I will always remain open to this rich diversity.

Rabbi Albert M. Lewis is the author of "Soul Sounds: Reflections on Life," available at soulsoundsbook.com.