

From Sparta to Waukegan

The Story of a Fisherman

By Jim Zegar

Back in the late 1960s, Dino Kallianis used to hang out in the ponds at the Illinois Beach State Park in Zion, Illinois. He and his pal, Ronny Scott, would look for bluegills, largemouth bass, bullheads, catfish, northern pike, and what would become his favorite specie: crappie.

Rory taught Dino not only how to fish in the Midwest, but also how to speak better English.

You see, Kallianis was ten years old and had just immigrated to Waukegan from a small village in Sparta, Greece. His father was a revolutionary in the civil war and in 1967 was exiled from the country during the reign of George Papadopoulos. His family, including Dino, followed two years later along with thousands of other Greeks who settled in the Chicago area.

In Greece, at the age of six, young Kallianis would fish in small creeks for brook trout along with his brother. They used cane poles and worms which reminded me that when my brother and I learned how to perch fish off Waukegan's government pier, we used cane poles, too. The Kallianis brothers shared fishing tips back then and still do to this day, just like the Zegar brothers. It wasn't until he'd been in America for a while that he was able to obtain a rod and reel in addition to his cane pole.



Back then in Greece, times were difficult and the brothers fished for food, not sport. "It was all about the food," said Kallianis. But my take on this story is that it was as much fun for him as it was a family necessity. A born fisherman.

Good fishermen in the Midwest are resourceful and the best ones employ new ideas and creative thinking. The same for the Kallianis brothers. They fashioned nets out of women's hosiery and would use a bucket and rope to yank out the fish that lived near the bottom of wells. A plant called flomos, similar to our milkweed, would be stripped of its innards which were thrown into the creeks, causing the fish to rise to the surface for easy capture.

Dino told me that because the Greek soil is not too fertile, at times he would use dynamite to blow holes big enough in which to plant small orange trees. Sometimes, the blasts “accidentally” got too near a creek and what-do-you-know, there were more fish for the supper table.

In this day and age, shell fish are a premium for Americans. But it was different in Dino’s Greece: crabs were sold to the gypsies. The lobster and shrimp? Used for fertilizer. Go figure.

One of his favorite places to fish these days is Channel Lake on the Fox Chain. Dino doesn’t use a boat. Why would he? It’s back to his roots... fishing from shore for pan fish, especially his beloved crappies. He had to learn a lot about lake fishing on the Chain because back home, in Sparta, there are no lakes, just creeks, dikes, and one river named Eurotas, 51 miles long.

With his passion for fishing first in Greece then in Lake County, what do you think Kallianis does for a living? He, one son, and his daughter own and operate Captain Porky’s, a first-class seafood emporium and smokehouse in Wadsworth, Illinois just south of the state line. You can buy your fish cooked and eat it there, or purchase it raw and take it home for your own culinary touch.

If you’re a Lake Michigan salmon fisherman, he’ll smoke your catch to perfection.

The selections of the day depend on availability, but on a normal day, fresh water species include bluegill, lake perch, walleye, lake trout, and whitefish. Ocean fish vary more in availability but generally consist of grouper, snapper, halibut, mahi mahi, and tuna. The shellfish menu has delectable shrimp from the Gulf, along with crab, calamari, and all their cousins.

“I accept only the freshest, highest quality fish from my suppliers. My customers expect excellence in the products I have for sale,” Kalinanis noted. “I’ve been in business since 1984 and I love it. I work with fish, get to cook them, and love to please my customers.”

Dino started cooking when he was five years old, along with his two older siblings. “Our parents worked most of the time, so we had to pitch in with all the jobs around our house,” he said with great pride. “There weren’t many Greek restaurants like those on Halstead Street in Chicago. I had no opportunity to learn cooking except at home. Sure, I overcooked the eels a couple of times as a kid, but I figured it out.”

I asked whether he had any great fishing tips for us here in the Midwest. “I do. When you catch a fish, do not put it in a live well. Put it in an empty bucket and let it die right away so it firms up. Then put the fish on ice immediately.”

He’s cooked all his life so I figured he’d have a great fish recipe to share. He did. “I love crappie cooked whole in olive oil. Scale it and remove the guts and gills, leaving the head on. After cleaning, sprinkle with salt and pepper and then dust with flour. Heat the olive oil to about 320 degrees and cook the fish until both sides are crispy, about three minutes on the first

side and two minutes on the other. Sprinkle with Greek oregano. Crank up the heat a bit and then squeeze some cold fresh lemon juice on it, and cook for only five seconds more.”

And there is yet another similarity. When brother John and I would bring home perch from Waukegan harbor, our mother would cook them the same way. No filleting for my family. Cook it whole with the skin and head on but with the scales, gills, and guts removed. From Greece to Waukegan. Or is it Waukegan to Greece?

Dino’s other son owns a restaurant next door to Captain Porky’s called “The Shanty.” I wondered what drove him to be a successful businessman and father, an excellent fisherman, and a tireless worker at everything he does.

“My parents. My mother was the practical one. She taught me how to work and the value of hard work. My father was simply the most influential person in my life. He gave me a sense of history, nurtured my understanding of a nation’s politics, and showed me strength that I never forgot.”



As you know from reading my columns over the years, I try to end each one with some kind of wisdom, an understanding of some facet of life, or simply just something useful to take home.

I had to ask this Greek one of the most important questions that was ruminating in my head: “So do you like anchovies on your pizza?” And the learned man from Sparta replied, “I don’t eat much pizza. And for the record, I don’t use explosives anymore, either.”

So there you have it. From Greece to the Midwest, from anchovies to crappies. You read it here first.

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