On Campus

Greek Aisles

George's Underground Bazaar settles in Morningside.

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|
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When George and Effie Soter wanted to open a shop, they had their sights set on a basement space a block from their home on West 113th Street. It was early 1963, and the owner of the space, at 2915 Broadway, offered the Soters a peach of a deal: $75 a month.

The Soters were new to selling; George was creative director at a Midtown advertising firm, and Effie had a master's in social work from Columbia. Sometimes the Soters took their small sons to the playground at 112th Street and Riverside Drive, and it was there that they met their eventual business partners, three young professional couples who, like the Soters, were looking to do something different. The Soters, both of Greek ancestry, had made numerous trips to Greece, and fell in love with the fabrics and dresses of the Greek islands. It was their idea to import these items and sell them in New York. The timing seemed right: Greece had come into vogue lately, with the success of the Jules Dassin film *Never on Sunday* (1960), starring Melina Mercouri. And with rent so low, how could they go wrong?

Full of optimism, the Soters went on their first buying trip to Greece in the summer of 1963. But when they returned with their crates of merchandise, they were dealt a blow: The landlord reneged on their deal. Desperate, the Soters hustled to find another space. Their search soon led them to a big empty storefront on East 49th Street. The property, which included five 19th- century buildings and a charming passageway-cum-garden, was owned by James Amster, a prominent interior designer whose commissions included Peacock Alley at the Waldorf-Astoria.

“Amster asked us what kind of store we wanted to open,” says George, an elegant and sociable man of 82 who speaks with the deep, polished intonations of a venerable stage actor. “We told him, and he said, ‘You’re just what I wanted: chic Greek.’” The rent was settled at $375 — not exactly the too-good-to-be-true bargain on Upper Broadway, but reasonable enough on a block whose residents included Katharine Hepburn and Stephen Sondheim. And so the Soters and their partners set up the store, called Greek Island Limited. The wives kept shop, alternating their days, while the husbands worked at their office jobs in Midtown. Sometimes George took over on weekends, bringing along a reel-to-reel tape player on which he’d play Greek folk music by artists like Mikis Theodorakis and Manos Hadjidakis.

“Katharine Hepburn would come in and say, ‘Turn down the music, I can’t concentrate,’” George says with a laugh. “But otherwise, she was very nice.” Hepburn wasn’t the only celebrity to visit Greek Island Limited. There was Marcello Mastroianni, Faye Dunaway, and the first Mrs. Rockefeller. Most memorable, though, was the day Jackie Kennedy Onassis dropped in. As First Lady, Jackie had famously sojourned in Greece in the early autumn of 1963 following the death of her infant son Patrick, and now, a few years later, she was married to the world’s most famous Greek shipping magnate. “When she came into the store, my wife, who was very cool, said, ‘What took you so long?’” George recalls. “And Jackie said, ‘I’ve been very busy.’”

As Greece developed economically in the 1970s and ’80s, the cost of importing Greek products became more expensive, and after some 20 years of business, Greek Island Limited was dissolved. Meanwhile, the Soter apartment had been filling up with the collected treasures of a life of foreign travel: art, jewelry, fabrics, posters — in addition to what was left over from the shop.

George retired from advertising in the early ’90s, and about 10 years ago, Effie developed Alzheimer’s. Much of George’s valued social life had disappeared.

In 2002, Peter Soter, George and Effie’s youngest son, took over as owner of Morningside Bookshop, formerly known as Papyrus. The store had a subterranean annex just around the corner on West 114th Street, where Peter stocked computer and business books. But the downstairs location made the annex difficult to see from the street, and the books just sat. That’s when Peter got an idea: Why not let George use the space to sell the stuff that had piled up in the apartment?

George jumped at the opportunity. The books were removed, replaced by tables and shelves that hold a good deal of the Soters' personal possessions: century-old Turkish embroideries, Greek jewelry, Chinese gaming chips, handmade shepherd's crooks, vintage European posters, original bird engravings by the 18th century artist Francois Martinet. The new shop, christened George's Underground Bazaar, opened in September 2006, at 2915 Broadway — the exact space the Soters had tried to rent in 1963.

And while the rent is now higher than $75, George is on decidedly better terms with the current landlord, Columbia University.

"The Columbia community has been very positive," says George, who benefits from the traffic upstairs at the bookshop, where Columbia and Barnard professors give readings. "It's just good to be back where I almost started."

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