# Tsiakkos & Charcoal, London: ‘It’s just so damn lovely’ – restaurant review

There’s nothing new about this wonderful Greek restaurant in west London, but that’s exactly the point

[**Tsiakkos & Charcoal**](http://tsiakkos.co.uk/)**, 5a Marylands Road, London W9 2DU (020 7286 7896). Starters and sides £4.50-£9.50, mains £13.50-£18, desserts £5.50, wines from £20**

It is a dark, damp night in London’s W9. Rear lights reflect off wet roads, a gash of red against the black, and occasionally the constant growl of traffic on the Harrow Road is cut through by the distant Doppler of a police siren. And yet there is something here on this mostly residential street that reminds me of my sun-kissed time Greek island hopping so many years ago. It is the heavy waft of charcoal smoke and the encouraging top note of rendering fat; it’s the aromas I recall from the tavernas that huddled close to each other along every island quay front. That’s the thing about [Tsiakkos & Charcoal](http://tsiakkos.co.uk/). You will smell it long before you find it and even when you find it you will doubt that you have.

There is no signage on the turquoise frontage. There are pale red curtains drawn across both the windows and the window in the door, denying you sight of what’s going on inside. If the door is ajar, you may see a cluttered desk against the wall just inside, a computer perched amid the paperwork. Tonight, a World Cup game is playing on the computer screen. Do not be put off. Go inside. Walk past the front room’s open kitchen with its charcoal grill, tended by a couple of bearded men, to the half wood-panelled dining room at the back. Or, if you’re feeling intrepid, go sit under the heaters in the covered garden space out back, strung with fairy lights.

But please, do go. Tsiakkos & Charcoal is a reminder that amid the fetishising of the new by people like me, great places carry on doing great things year after year, untroubled by any of that. The fact that, to my shame, I had not heard of it, does not mean it’s obscure. It has cropped up in various round-ups of London’s Greek Cypriot restaurants over the years. It has occasionally been reviewed in more detail. I heard about it because the London Evening Standard asked 25 chefs to name their favourite cheap restaurants. Some of them – [Padella](https://www.padella.co/), [Hoppers](https://www.hopperslondon.com/), [Kiln](https://kilnsoho.com/) – were recommendations of nice high-profile places, without taking us off anybody’s beaten track.

It was Josh Katz of [Berber and Q](https://www.berberandq.com/) who suggested Tsiakkos. “It feels like you’re eating inside somebody’s home,” he told the Standard. “The food is much like the restaurant: simple, rustic and packed full of charm and character.” Which makes me worry that I’ve subcontracted out this whole reviewing lark to Katz, because he’s not wrong. No wheels are reinvented, no envelopes pushed. The menu is short and built around a classic repertoire that speaks of another place of rocky hillsides and blue sky, a long way from here.

The closest thing to a revelation is their hummus, which is homely, as if the chickpeas have been broken up with a fork, rather than blitzed. It is hefty and grainy and can be spooned away neat, though you will get a basket of pitta for £1 served warm, and just crying out to be pressed into service. Use it, too, on the high whipped peaks of their taramasalata, which is barely on nodding terms with the astringent Day-Glo pink stuff flogged by the plastic potful on the high street. It is soothing and creamy and just right. Partner it with thick slabs of halloumi, charcoal grilled, then dribbled in olive oil and lemon juice. These platefuls will set you back a mighty fiver or so each. Throw in a crisp salad, heavy with pickled peppers and salty kalamata olives.

Wellness hucksters waste gushing Channel Tunnel’s-worth of digital bandwidth on perky videos full of white teeth and glossy hair and ideas for healthy eating that look like hope dying on a plate. Treat those videos with the disdain they deserve. Just come here and eat Greek Cypriot food and feel both better about yourself and properly looked after. The looking after is done tonight by one young woman who manages the constant flood of customers with a glorious ease as if she just happened to be passing through and might as well bring these plates of your dinner as she’s going that way. And yet nobody is left waiting. I ask her how long the restaurant has been here. She smiles and says: “At least as long as I’ve been alive.” She tells me she’s 27.

There are three charcoal grills and three oven-baked dishes on offer. The latter, all priced in the mid-teens, are a moussaka and a kleftiko, and what they call the slow-burnt pork. It’s a big pile of shoulder, which has loitered in the oven for most of the day until, as the menu says, “it melts”. The sweetly glazed skin is a sticky, chewy wonder. The grills are pork or chicken souvlaki, or a whole sea bream, the silvery skin blistered and blackened and then laid with chopped white onion and fresh green herbs. Both dishes come with a slightly sweet heap of rice, rendered a light earthy brown courtesy of cinnamon and other spice.

Dessert comes in the shape of rugged pieces of baklava, the thick layers of syrup-drenched baked filo enclosing the requisite fillings. While we are told that has been brought in from elsewhere, there is also a tiramisu, assembled on site from cheery slices of sponge and whipped cream. If you make it to these and finish them, well done. I salute you.

Like everything else, the wine list is a compact collection, just half a dozen whites and reds, with two-thirds of the list priced at £30 or less. There’s also a very short list of Greek wines, by which I mean three, some of which cost a little more. But it’s all relative isn’t it? For £28.50 a head you can simply order a meze, of starters and charcoal grills, delivered over five courses, and for parties of eight or more that’s all they’ll do. It strikes me as a very good option. It’s not as if you’ll miss out on anything.

Some people will now be rabidly screaming at this review, because they will feel I have given away their “secret”. They will think I have made it harder for them to get a table. In truth, it should be hard to get a table here, because it’s just so damn lovely. And anyway, journalists aren’t in the business of keeping secrets. We’re in the business of telling you things you ought to know. Tsiakkos & Charcoal is one of them.