# Alexandros Greek Restaurant, Carlisle: ‘Somewhere that will see you right’ – restaurant review

This family-run Greek restaurant serves up so much more than just classic dishes

**[Alexandros Greek Restaurant & Deli](https://www.thegreek.co.uk/), 68 Warwick Road, Carlisle CA1 1DR  
(01228 592227). Starters £5.75-£9.95, mains £14.50-£28.50, desserts £7.50, wines from £21**

Lots of restaurants can be full on a Thursday and Friday night. Lots of restaurants can smash it on a Saturday. That’s not how you make a living. To make a living, you have to be full on a Wednesday lunchtime. This Wednesday lunchtime, Alexandros is doing trade of which others can only dream. “It was even busier yesterday,” says Aris Pathanoglou, who owns the place with his wife, Sarah, when I comment on the bustle and hum. It’s an older crowd, the sort who can find space on a weekday for a proper lunch, as long as it’s reliable, and yes, we will have a whole bottle, thanks. Alexandros, a venerable Greek restaurant, which has been feeding the good and greedy of Carlisle for more than two decades, is clearly very reliable.

What’s that, you say? A second review of a Greek restaurant in just three weeks? Yes, and without apology. If it had been two trattorias or two bistros in just three weeks, an eyebrow wouldn’t have twitched. Two reviews of Italian or French food? Sure. That’s fine. But Greek food? What’s that about? The fact is that the Greek repertoire is too often regarded as an also-ran, when it shouldn’t be. It should be celebrated for being gloriously bathed in sunlight; for being delightfully free of faff and ponce and prissiness. This is me celebrating it.

Recently, a well-known figure in London’s restaurant world made a plea on social media for more reviews of restaurants that had been around a bit. As someone who has revisited a fair number over the years, I get the point. Journalists do tend to fetishise anything boxfresh. The word “news” in “newspaper” is not a reference to old things. We are encouraged to record change. But the story of restaurants that have built up a loyal following over decades is also worth telling. Alexandros is one of those. It first opened in the Scottish borders in 1997, before relocating to this Carlisle terrace in 2000. This is a family affair. One son is front-of-house; another is in the basement baking their sesame-crusted breads and the oily, herb-flecked pitta, served in still-warm discs alongside the dips. The kitchen is headed up by another family member.

Clearly, they need the staff. To the right is the deli, its glass-fronted cabinet filled with syrup-drenched pastries, also baked on site, alongside glistening vats of olives. Order in advance from their list of gyros, salad boxes and casseroles and you won’t have to queue. On the left is the restaurant. The square rooms still hint at their former domestic life. There is, of course, a Parthenon frontage over the bar, hung with Greek Orthodox icons, and a few Hellenic patterns on the wipe-down tables and menus. Those come in laminated partwork. Here’s the main menu. And the specials. And the wine list. And the list of beers from the nearby [Carlisle Brewing Company](https://www.carlislerealale.com/). Expect every dish to be headed by a multisyllabic Greek name you almost certainly can’t pronounce. Take comfort in the descriptions underneath and the staff who are eager to offer assistance in the vital business of getting you fed.

Start with the spiced, grainy hummus, a cheery shade of pink courtesy of the gentle heat of chilli oil, alongside finger-sized breadsticks, heavy with toasted sesame. Follow that with a plate of sarmadakia, their soft, loosely stuffed vine leaves, served warm, so the aromatics of fresh green herbs rise up to meet you. Accompany that with a platter of fat butter beans in a tomatoey stew rich in more chilli and the hot summer burst of oregano.

Much of what’s on offer will be familiar. There’s tarama, tzatziki, souvlaki and the rest. But there is also a pleasing restlessness, as though the kitchen is actively working to keep both itself interested and its customers returning. We are encouraged sweetly to try the latest special, a starter of three large scallops complete with the fat orange comma of their roe for £10.95. It’s impossible to decline. They are seared and seasoned and laid with a slab of grilled [manouri](https://www.theguardian.com/food/2022/mar/12/lamb-cutlets-fritters-yotam-ottolenghi-tea-recipes-manouri-rooibos), a goat’s cheese not unlike a crumblier halloumi. In the middle is a spiced tian of chopped avocado with more of the cheese and the burst of chilli. The kitchen does like its chilli.

Among the mains is a brace of whole chargrilled squid, filled with dollops of melted cheese, on a heap of snowy white grains, lapped by a thick, orange and profoundly French seafood bisque. In isolation you might struggle to place this dish geographically. Is it something off the Marseille docks, or perhaps from an especially squid-happy corner of Italy’s boot? And yet, alongside everything else at Alexandros, it sits comfortably, because context is key. As does their kleftiko. It’s a Cumbrian-sized portion of gravy-drenched lamb shank tumbling away from the bone, dusted with oregano, and surrounded by feta-flecked couscous. Clearly it comes from that windswept bit of Greece, just to the west of Sedbergh. This is solid and reassuring cooking, attending to the essentials, but pushing at the edges of what we assume Greek food always has to be.

The dessert list is the promise of that deli counter, scooped up and plated. It is sweet filo pastry and nuts and syrup in various cheery combinations. Or you could have their homemade Greek yoghurt with fruit and honey. Courtesy of the unexpected scallop dish and the enthusiastic portions, we are pretty much defeated. But to show willing we share a walnut and cinnamon sponge, and it is a miracle of cake engineering. Somehow it holds together despite being saturated with syrup.

Our lunch is done, but every other table has a while to run. Interestingly, the relatively modest bill makes no reference to service or tip. It’s delightfully up to us and we respond appropriately. That evening, I dispatch a bunch of colleagues back there for dinner. They report that proceedings were stopped seven times for the singing of happy birthday. “Clearly everyone in Carlisle has a shag on the August bank holiday or thereabouts,” said one of them, who is good at maths. I think it speaks to a sweeter truth. When the key dates in life are to be celebrated, when the milestones are reached, you need somewhere that will see you right. For many in Carlisle that place is Alexandros.