



Scenes from the Past...

photos, courtesy—Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress

Known today as Firenze House, this grand private estate, above, completed in 1927 at the intersection of Broad Branch Road and Albemarle Street in north Cleveland Park, boasts a total of 59 rooms, making it one of the largest homes in Washington.

One of the largest—if not the largest—former private homes in Washington is nestled behind a dense row of trees between north Cleveland Park and Forest Hills, at the intersection of Broad Branch Road and Albemarle Street, NW. Known as Firenze House since 1941, it was constructed between 1925 and 1927 for Mrs. Blanche Estebrook O'Brien, and had a total of 59 rooms.

O'Brien was the widow of Paul Roebling, a member of a New Jersey family that had been responsible for financing and building the Brooklyn Bridge, which opened in 1883. When the house was begun in 1925, O'Brien was married to Colonel Arthur O'Brien. She chose architect Russell O. Kluge for its design and former Army Corps of Engineers General Richard Marshall as the contractor. Upon its completion in 1927, the house was coined "Estebrook."

Like many homes of the era, the Tudor-styled residence featured rather dark interior rooms, furnished with Jacobean-style furniture. O'Brien purchased fine paneling and mantels that had been designed by noted mid-17th century architect Sir Christopher Wren in London, and had them incorporated into the house during its construction. The house itself, set among 22 acres, was constructed of gray fieldstone, quarried on the site, and limestone trim. A variegated slate roof, green shutters, and leaded glass windows completed the design.

Several outbuildings also graced the estate, including a large gatehouse on Broad Branch Road, garage with servant's quarters, 90-foot swimming pool, tennis courts, and an art studio. It was estimated that over 10,000 trees originally existed on the grounds.



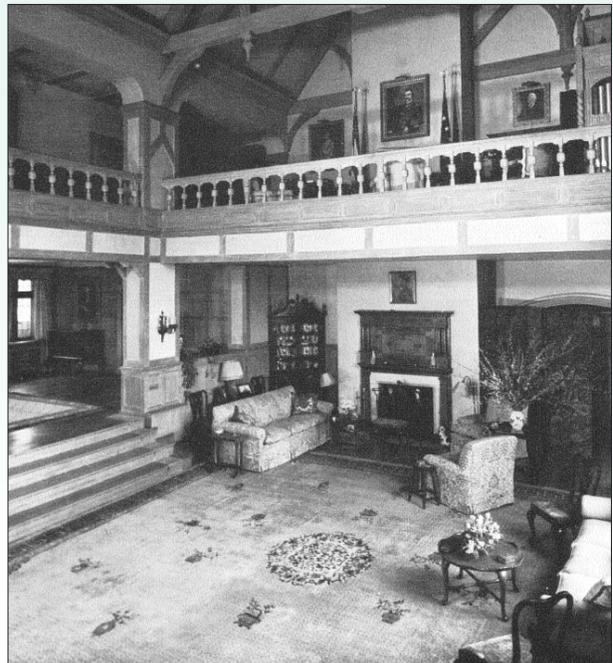
The grand library at Firenze, above, features exquisite wood paneling designed by Sir Christopher Wren for his own study in London; it was purchased and reinstalled when the house was under construction between 1926 and 1927.

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The Great hall at Firenze House is three stories high, and is seen here in 1969 when the house was owned by Mr. and Mrs. John A. Logan.

The enormity of the great hall can be deduced in this 1969 photograph, at right, in which the private residence looks more like a hotel lobby than entry hall. The estate is surrounded by 22 acres of lavishly landscaped lawns.



RESERVATIONS RECOMMENDED

By Alexandra Greeley*

MOURAYO Beyond Baklava

As someone who has equated Greek cooking with moussaka, squid, pita bread, and potent ouzo, I stand corrected. After a dinner at Mourayo (meaning “mooring,” as in safe harbor)—Dupont Circle’s instant Greek experience—I see boundless opportunities for basking in the Mediterranean sun without setting foot outside of DC.

A hyperbole? No. Eating around town teaches several things: Many restaurants serve lackluster food, some of it barely edible. Others can’t solve the service angle or they charge way too much for way too little. But management at Mourayo has it figured out: Offer phenomenal food, keep prices reasonable, and reward patrons with vigilant service. That may sound obvious, but there’s even more at Mourayo. Its kitchen solves the “what-do-we-serve-them-and-keep-it-interesting” dilemma.

Credit for this belongs to the owner, Natalina Koropoulos, and to her young Greek chef. As she notes, Greek food today in the U.S. parallels how Italian food was considered 25 years ago, when most Americans thought lasagna meant Italian cooking. But, says Koropoulos, she has thought about the gastronomic implications of introducing Greek cooking as we’ve never tasted it here before. That has meant digging around through Greek food history, and discovering the seasonings and spices—probably even ingredients—that the ancient Greeks used.

The challenge has come with applying that knowledge to today’s menu, and arriving at what I think may be “nouvelle” Greek cooking, a lighter, livelier compilation of dishes to showcase this Mediterranean way of eating. It’s original, contemporary, and may be a portent of things to come in this country’s cuisine.

Take the pork, for example. For one, who knew Greeks ever ate pork? Isn’t this the land of roast lamb and squid? Not so fast. What the kitchen has created is pork like no other, a roasted pork loin seasoned with a reduction of fig preserves and Greek wine, with an additional flavor boost from honey and manouri cheese. What you taste is flavor upon flavor with hints of sweet and savory in every mouthful. Not surprisingly,

this dish is a top seller, said our waiter.

Or consider another favorite, the lamb stew with orzo, a familiar Greek assembly of ingredients, but with one key difference. Instead of hacking up lamb shoulder and cooking bones and meat together, the chef here bones a leg of lamb, using only the most tender cubes for the dish.

Other entrée possibilities include a mixed seafood soup, sautéed quail with a lemon sauce, and assorted whole grilled fish. As one colleague exclaims, this was the best fish, head and all, he’d ever eaten.

Don’t assume you should simply bypass appetizers, for then you’d forego the sautéed shrimp with a traditional rendering of a Greek tomato sauce fortified with feta, or the very unusual Beggar’s Pouch, a twist of phyllo dough encasing a red pepper and cheese filling and baked until the manouri cheese is oozing. You may also receive a gratis sampler to whet appetites before appetizers. Ours was a squid ink soup, dark and murky tasting, the only jarring note of the meal.

I asked about the desserts, which go way beyond baklava. Yes, you’ll spy a galaktoboureko, the typical phyllo pastry filled with creamy custard. But the gods on Mount Olympus must sigh over the *Aspasia’s Ecstasy*, a fruit compote of strawberries poached in red wine, saffron, a hint of sweetener, and olives, and topped with vanilla ice cream. It sounds trivial, like a mediocre fruit cocktail perhaps. But the flavor combination is electrifying.

How often do you mourn the meal’s end? We did, remarking that this was one of those rare dining-out events. Everything worked well and worked together.

Mourayo, 1732 Conn. Ave.; 667-2100. Open for lunch Mon.-Fri. & dinner nightly. Entrée price range: \$18.95 to market price for the fish. All major credit cards.

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SCENES

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The home’s interiors reflected a variety of styles, dominated by an enormous three-story grand hall with carved oak beams and stairway. Following the Great Depression, the property was leased to the Minister of Hungary until it was sold in 1941. The buyers that year were Colonel and Mrs. Meyer Robert Guggenheim, who had been residing on their yacht “*Firenze*” before it was lent to the government for wartime use. They renamed their new estate “*Firenze*” in its honor, a name that has remained to this day.

The Guggenheim fortune stemmed from the M. Guggenheim and Son Mining and Smelting Company in 1925, and later from the Guggenheim Exploration Company. He retired from business in 1929.

The Guggenheims changed much of the dark interiors into a lighter appearance by utilizing a number of interior decorating ideas like pickling the oak staircase, for example. They installed two Waterford chandeliers in the drawing room and filled

the house with priceless art, including Jacomo Victor’s 1672 painting *Barnyard Scene*, Van Dyck’s *Earl of Arundel*, Murillo’s *Salvatori Mundi*, among others. They also furnished the mansion with period American and European furniture of the utmost quality, mostly in Queen Anne and Hepplewhite styles. They entertained up to 600 guests at a time!

Unfortunately, a fire in 1946, destroyed two Titian portraits and a large amount of original paneling. Interior decorator Michael Rosenaur was hired that year to restore the interiors of the house. M. Robert Guggenheim died in 1959 and his widow later married John A. Logan, and together they resided at the estate until the mid 1970s.

Since 1976, *Firenze House* has been owned by the government of Italy and used as its ambassador’s residence. Its anticipated 2005 tax assessment was recently posted at \$24.7 million, making it one of the most expensive home valuations in the District.

—Paul Kelsey Williams
Historic Preservation Specialist
Kelsey & Associates, Washington, DC

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