

Estiator

September 2022/\$5.00

Since 1987

THE NATIONAL MONTHLY FOR THE GREEK-AMERICAN FOOD INDUSTRY

GARC
RESTAURANT COOPERATIVE

THE POWER OF BEING CONNECTED

How Joining Your Restaurant
Co-Op Can Be a Key to Success

*Steve Theofanous, Chairman of
the Board (left), Christine Simms
Chief Operating Officer*



GARC hosts member events to encourage networking, shared ideas, and new perspectives. (Shown here: Sam Markos one of the GARA founding fathers, Chris Georges, Past Board member, and Steve Theofanous, Chairman of the Board.)

The Power of Being Connected

How joining your
restaurant co-op can be
a key to success.

Greek restaurants have long been acclaimed for their warm customer welcomes.

They know that being connected to their customers helps their businesses thrive. The Greek American Restaurant Cooperative, GARC, welcomes all types of independent restaurants in the Midwest—including Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin. GARC keeps its members connected by providing important advantages they need and value.

Building a Strong Foundation

In the early 1900s, Chicago became home for hundreds of thousands of Greek immigrants. Many found their first American jobs in a kaffion, a coffee shop. Hardworking and serious, many of those immigrants later opened their own restaurants. Though their businesses were growing, many of those owners felt isolated and began to think about how restaurant owners could work together to get better pricing and rebates.

In 1986, a large group of Greek immigrants who had started restaurant businesses in the Chicago area met and discussed their vision to form an association of independently owned restaurants. They wanted to leverage their purchasing power to gain favorable pricing and rebates from various purveyors and suppliers to compete against the large chain restaurants. In addition, they would use some of the vendor rebates to support the Hellenic community through philanthropic programs, donations, and eventually college scholarships.

GARC, the Greek American Restaurant Cooperative, was created in 2008 and is a for-profit entity. “The co-op is a win-win. We don’t just provide savings for members; we provide support for vendors, who love the opportunity to connect with restaurants in the community,” says Steve Theofanous, Chairman of the Board.

Today, there are over 1,800 GARC members in Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana. The corporate office is located in Des Plaines, Illinois.

GARC members’ combined purchases total over 100 million dollars, and include restaurants from QSR, midscale, casual, and fine-dining segments. Their three membership levels—associate, executive, and prime executive—deliver a variety of benefits to support their members. All are based on participation levels and com-

mitment to the program. Programs vary from off-invoice to bi-annual paid rebates.

GARC’s initial members were Greek American owners. The Greek community that taught others and shared their knowledge throughout the industry will always have a strong legacy in foodservice. But the cooperative values all of its members—who today come from a wide range of nationalities and backgrounds.

Being Connected Strengthens Purchasing Power

The purchasing department is an integral part of a successful business. Many independent restaurant operators don’t have the time and the resources necessary to get the best pricing and discounts on their purchases. GARC does a lot of negotiating on their behalf. At the end of the year, those rebates and off-invoice allowances add up to a lot of dollars, going right back to the members.

The challenges restaurants face today with razor-thin margins and labor shortages is forcing operators to look for ways to trim the budget—by optimizing labor and finding other cost-cutting measures. The power of purchasing as a co-operative offers operator members the benefit of making purchases as a group to keep costs down.

Shared suggestions and information can be exceptionally valuable since most restaurateurs are seeking ways to stay competitive against the increasing strength of aggressive chains. Limited product availability and price fluctuations have also presented challenges for smaller operators. GARC strives to bring together the independent restaurants and leverage that purchasing power to get better prices, incentives, and terms.

One of GARC’s objectives is to identify for members the potential significance of industry trends. The worldwide supply chain is developing and evolving. Consumer needs and tastes are changing. At the same time, technology is enabling new options for convenience and service at the speed of light. Operators are flooded with this industry information every day, but sometimes they can benefit from help determining what’s important for them.

Being Connected Benefits Members

“At GARC, we are the power of many working as one,” said Christine Simms, Chief Operating Officer. GARC members value favorable pricing and rebates on thousands of items. But the advantages of a GARC membership are far more extensive.

*Steve Theofanous
Chairman of the
Board GARC (left),
Christine Simms,
Chief Operating
Officer GARC*





GARC lobbied on behalf of independent restaurants during the pandemic.



Founded in 1983 as the Hellenic Museum and Cultural Center, the museum's current location just west of downtown Chicago was built in 2011. This museum has benefitted from GARA's philanthropic efforts.

Simms noted, "Our Membership Director is dedicated to building stronger connections among members and distributor partners. Increasing awareness of all programs available with GARC's manufacturing and distribution partners helps operator members control their food costs. A newer added benefit is help with culinary ideation for menu development."

Operator members can ask for industry-related information from the GARC resource team. For example, some ask for information on recently revised food-safety standards or personnel training. If answers aren't immediately available, a team member will research the issue and then contact the operator member. In some cases, the resource center team might suggest that one operator member contact another who has had experience with a similar issue.

During COVID, many members had questions when they were trying to understand the complex restrictions that were in place. GARC's resource center team focused on staying up with the latest industry news and sharing answers with concerned members. Not only were questions about government rules and regulations answered, but GARC helped businesses help one another. Business success is in so many ways about staying connected.

Philanthropic Roots

Over the course of the past 30 years, GARA has donated millions of dollars to various philanthropic projects. Both in the Chicago area and in Greece, recipients include: The Hellenic Museum in Chicago's Greektown; the Greek American Rehabilitation and Care Center; the Hippocratic Cancer Research Foundation, a 300-bed hospital in Tripoli, Greece; and scholarships for a wide range of students.

Co-Ops Are a Key to Success:

- ➔ **Co-ops save time.** Tracking and comparing prices, vendors, and services is overwhelming for most independently owned and operated restaurants. The owner/chef typically handles this responsibility. It is time-consuming and takes away from a restaurant's most important focus: customer satisfaction.
- ➔ **Co-ops fight for the "little guy."** Independent restaurants are often at a disadvantage compared to the larger chains, in both commanding a good price and getting the best quality. The big chains have more purchasing power, and better bargaining power for price, access, and quality. GPOs combine the resources and buying power of many independents to create a well-staffed and strong bargaining unit for their benefit on a par with the big guys.
- ➔ **Co-ops give restaurants a competitive edge.** GPOs should stay abreast of trends and new products and advise their members about them well ahead of the time of impact.
- ➔ **Co-ops give restaurants trust and safety.** GARC team kept operator members informed of COVID government programs, opening safely guides and added items to help with re-opening and staying open.

Member Advantages

It's a challenge to stay up to date on pricing, rebate opportunities, new products, food safety requirements, industry trends, and best practices. But all these factors can all help your business thrive. Joining the Chicago-based Greek American Restaurant Cooperative, GARC, keeps members connected while offering these advantages and more.

The Greek America Rehabilitation and Care Center, located in the Chicago area, is a recipient of GARA's philanthropic projects.

