

THESSALONIKI, GREECE Its identity fusing Roman and Ottoman

Often bypassed in favour of Athens or the islands, Thessaloniki is one of Greece's most rewarding destinations. The capital of the Central Macedonia region, and the country's second-largest city, it lies under the gaze of Mount Olympus – mountain of the Gods – on the Thermaic Gulf. This major port pairs a relaxed, Mediterranean rhythm with a creative spirit. Cafés spill on to pavements, and students and locals gather in Aristotelous Square, while the scent of grilled seafood, coffee and fresh bougatsa pastries drifts through neighbourhood streets.

Food lies at the heart of daily life. In 2021, Thessaloniki became the first Greek city to join Unesco's Creative Cities Network for Gastronomy, recognised for its centuries-old fusion of Balkan, Anatolian, Jewish and Greek influences. From the historic Kapani and Modiano markets to contemporary bistros and traditional tavernas, eating in Thessaloniki is a social ritual shaped by sharing plates, seasonal produce and time-honoured recipes. Street food, seafood, baked goods and meze all tell the story of a city with a strong culinary heritage.

THE HISTORY

Founded in 315BC and named after Alexander the Great's step-sister, Thessalonike, the city rose to prominence through trade and diplomacy. Under Roman rule it flourished along the Via Egnatia – the vital road linking the Adriatic to Byzantium – before becoming the Byzantine Empire's second city after Constantinople, and a major centre of faith, learning and commerce.

From 1430 to 1912, Ottoman rule shaped Thessaloniki's

Clockwise from top left: Octopus plate; ON Residence; MonAsty bar; from the restaurant; the 15th-century White Tower; penthouse suite; The Excelsior; their Mezzanine; and its lounge; cooked to perfection; Dimitris Tasioulas; Olympos Naoussa; preparing the morning bougatsa

influence, this Macedonian port city serves its multi-cultural history on a plate. By Rebecca Hall



Photos by Angela Dukes; Heinz Troll; Unsplash; Julie Pierens; Tsisos; Christos Drazos

multicultural identity as Jewish, Balkan and Anatolian communities settled here, leaving a lasting imprint on the city's architecture, traditions and cuisine. During this period, Kapani and the covered Modiano market evolved into vibrant meeting places, their narrow aisles overflowing with spices, olives, cheeses, seafood and cured meats.

After a devastating fire in 1917, the city was rebuilt along modern lines, yet it has retained its layered character, ensuring history, trade and gastronomy remain permanently linked.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Thessaloniki's cuisine is shaped by its history of migration and an insistence on market-fresh ingredients. Mussels from the Thematic Gulf, sheep's milk cheeses and spiced meze are staples. With the Michelin Guide set to arrive in 2026, local chefs are excited to sharpen their focus while remaining proudly authentic.

Olympos Naoussa at ON Residence marks the return of a storied Thessaloniki institution, first opened in 1927. Chef Dimitris Tasioulas, a former chef ambassador who toured Europe in 2016-17 alongside then-mayor Yiannis Boutaris, promoting the region's

gastronomy, is known for crafting dishes such as Mount Athos octopus with caramelised aubergine, seafood dolmades with crab, and stuffed mussels – all nodding to the city's meze culture. His slow-cooked lamb and seasonal vegetable plates highlight northern Greek producers. 'Cheese is important to our menu – it's a big tradition in northern Greece,' Dimitris notes, underscoring his commitment to local shepherds and growers. A seven-course tasting option is

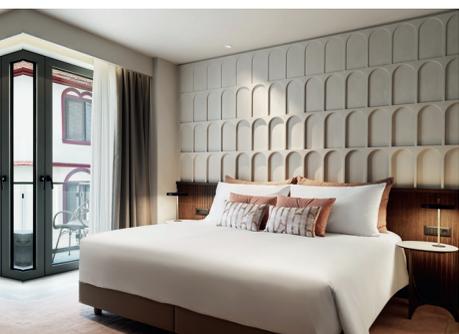
available, but the à la carte best reveals his creative, instinctive style. olymposnaoussa.gr Fifteen minutes uphill in Ano Poli, **Iliopetra** offers a homely approach. Chef Giorgos Zannakis creates a handwritten daily menu based on what he sources from trusted producers each morning. Dishes like white taramasalata with crab, Brussels sprouts with broccoli, steamed cod, or slow-cooked beef cheeks reflect the season. 'We don't need fancy food,' says host Vaso. 'People come for honesty.' The steady stream of repeat guests suggests they deliver exactly that. +30 231 405 5553

For the city's favourite breakfast, **Bougatsa Bantis** is a must. Since 1969, this family bakery has been famous for its hand-stretched pastry and fillings, from sweet semolina custard to savoury minced meat. Philippos Bantis, whose grandfather brought original recipes from Cappadocia in 1922, still makes bougatsa by hand. 'Now it's the most popular breakfast in the north, but very few people make it by hand,' he explains. 'We work eight to ten hours a day – but we're proud to keep this Thessalonian staple alive.' +30 231 051 0355

Close to Aristotelous Square, **Clochard** – currently in The Excelsior (see Where to stay, overleaf) – is a city institution, where Alexandros Vasiloglou continues a five-decade tradition, sourcing from local fishermen and artisans to shape a seasonal menu. The grouper *bianco* – tender fish with potatoes, onions and chives – is a highlight. 'We're proud to say over 50 years the same customers have patronised us – and now their children,' he says. clochard.gr

INSIDER'S GUIDE

Thessaloniki's best addresses are clustered within easy reach of Aristotelous Square, the seafront promenade and the city's key sights, making it effortless to bed down in style at the heart of the action



Clockwise from top left: Iliopetra serves up homely plates; the dining room; a view over the town; monastic calm at MonAsty

WHERE TO STAY

Compact and walkable – everything being within roughly 30 minutes' walking distance – Thessaloniki clusters its best addresses within easy reach of Aristotelous Square, the seafront promenade and the city's key sights, making it effortless to bed down in style at the heart of the action. Sea views, heritage facades and contemporary design sit side by side.

A standout is **MonAsty**, opened in 2022 near Aristotelous Square next to the site of a former Byzantine monastery. Its design channels monastic calm through domed ceilings, brushed wood, woven textures and framed samite silk scarves – a Silk Road-inspired Byzantine detail – creating a cocooned,

contemplative vibe. Dining focuses on seasonal Greek produce at their Botargo Restaurant, with dishes such as fillet of sea bream with chickpeas cooked with refinement. The ground-floor Samite Gastro Bar, complete with leafy 'secret' garden, draws a stylish local crowd. monastyhotel.com

Along the waterfront, **ON Residence** takes pride of place in a meticulously restored 1926 neoclassical landmark, blending belle époque elegance with contemporary polish. Reopened in 2022 after decades of disrepair, it remains one of the promenade's most striking facades, its symmetry and detail recalling Thessaloniki's cosmopolitan history. Inside, lofty ceilings, marble accents

and tailored furnishings create an atmosphere of understated grandeur, while many rooms frame sweeping views across the Thermaic Gulf to Mount Olympus. By day, creatives gather in the light-filled Tiger Loop café over good coffee; by night, it hums with conversation as cocktails and premium spirits flow. onresidence.gr

Just steps from Aristotelous Square, **The Excelsior** is another restored 1920s neoclassical beauty. Its preserved facade and wrought-iron balconies evoke old-world glamour, while a striking glass lift rises through a spiralling marble stairwell framed by stained-glass windows. With just 34 rooms and suites, it offers an intimate stay in a central location. excelsiorhotel.gr