

# Diaspora Can Help Revive the Greek Economy: One Olive Oil Bottle at a Time

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**NEW YORK** – With time energy and imagination, every Greek-American can discover ways to help his or her family and friends, and Greece as a whole, during the crisis. Among the positive stories that have sprung up is that of Kastania Olive Oil, a brand of extra virgin olive oil, which was told to The National Herald by Vanessa Geaneotes.

Kastania is an endeavor of the Lagakos family which includes Patricia (Patty) Lagakos Huffman, David Lagakos, Michael and Christina Huffman Baptista, and Tommy and Nikki Agriodimas. They demonstrate the power of modest investments by Diaspora Greeks to boost Greece's exports, which are critical to national recovery.

Patty, who is Geaneotes' mother's koumbara, has roots in the village of Kastania in Mani province, the home of wonderful olive groves.

The two women met in Philadelphia, and the families remain close, even though Patty and her husband Larry Huffman, a retired pharmaceutical executive, now divide their time between the Poconos where they can garden, and New York, where their children live.

Their friendship shows how ties between Greeks who are not blood relatives can help build the new Greece.

Geaneotes told TNH that when she was in Greece for the wedding of her daughter, Nikki, Patty, whom she calls Nona, told her "if you want to help, let me know" and she signed on, helping with marketing and sales.

Patty was born in America



**ABOVE:** Every Diaspora gathering around the table during the holidays, like that of the family of Patty Lagakos Huffman (2nd from L, next to Vanessa Geaneotes far R) at New York's Periyali restaurant, can be a brainstorming session for how Hellene's abroad can help Greece. **LEFT:** Quality Greek agricultural products like Kastania olive oil that are well-packaged and marketed and supported by the Diaspora can be the leading edge of the Greek recovery.

retirement is just a word. "She is full of energy and tons and tons of ideas – we can't keep up with her," Geaneotes said.

Patty has been bottling oil from her family's groves for years. When she began to give out bottles as favors at her daughters' weddings, people liked it and asked for more, so she and her nephew David Legakos began bottling it and selling it privately in America to friends and family.

David is a professor of economics and oversees the technical and scientific elements of the operation.

"It is his passion – he helps

his relatives, it's good for his village and Greece...he can talk about it for hours," Geaneotes told TNH.

Kastania has undertaken lab testing that certifies that it produces premium and very healthy olive oil.

The oil comes from a mix of olives, 80 percent consists of koroneiki olives, the main variety in the family groves. The blend ensures the right amount of

polyphenols and the best taste. The olives are cold pressed – they are not heated – adding to the high quality.

The company has secured all the permits and proper shipping and storage arrangements, and draws on an extensive network of talented people powered by 21st century communications technology. Their website is [kastaniaoliveoil.com](http://kastaniaoliveoil.com).

Things are possible in 2015 to help Greece that the people who got the country into its mess never dreamed of – and few ever gave the power of the Diaspora a second thought.

Michael Baptista, who married Patty's daughter Christina, handles sales and operations. His family roots are from Columbia, however, he fell in love with all things Greek, and the village of Kastania after meeting his wife, and, like David, he has poured his high energy into the project. The two of them, along with their brother-in-law Tommy Agriodimas, who also has roots Gythio, had the vision and also invested the money in the operation.

Cousin Jeanne Arfanis, who signed on in New York, has family roots on the same mountain, and is a cousin of the grower, Kostas Arfanis.

Penelope Lagakos Constantini and her husband, Andrei, along with Matina Lagakos are cousins in Philadelphia and handle sales there and presentations at the Artisan Exchange. A family friend, Mary Jean Fitzpatrick

works out of Westchester, NY.

After establishing the operations, Kastania had just started selling the oil outside the family – sales and marketing is now critical – and they are researching bringing other edibles to the United States.

Geaneotes, who grew up in a typical Greek family – her dad began as an engineer and ended up in the restaurant business – studied business at Villanova.

She now lives in Astoria and has gotten the product into gourmet and specialty markets – vegetarians and vegans love it – in Queens, Brooklyn, and Manhattan, including the Brooklyn Kitchen, Euromarket, Food Cellar and Green Bay Organic Market, Ceriellos in Grand Central Terminal, and the Health Nuts on the Upper East Side.

They've expanded into wedding favors, and have shown at vegetarian festivals throughout the city.

She coordinates sales, marketing of the product, tastings in stores, recipe development, and distributes the marketing brochures, which are very attractive, with breathtaking pictures mountainside olive groves.

The artwork of the bottling and promotional materials is all done by graphic designers in Greece. "No matter how difficult it is, David wants everything to be done in Greece to help the local economy," Geaneotes said, "and the more people buy it, the more money the village gets."