

Artisanal Brings Touch Of Class To Hometown

Local Chef's Work Is A True Work Of Art

By Sherrie Norris

An artisan is someone skilled at a craft . . .that would be Bill Greene, exceptional chef and proprietor of the area's newest fine dining establishment at Tynecastle, appropriately named Artisanal.

Born in Korea, Greene came to America at the age of four with his adopted parents, Dalis and Sue Greene. He was raised in the Elk Park community and graduated from Avery County High School in 1991. After learning from world renown chefs, he returned to the area during his late mother's illness, worked at a couple of local country clubs and is now proprietor and chef of Artisanal, an opportunity of a life-time for one who describes himself as "blessed."

While working his way through high school at Grandfather Golf and Country Club,(eighty-plus hours a week during the summer) Greene's fascination with food was discovered. "I never thought of making it a career at that point, but I did think, 'It's not so bad . . .maybe I should pursue it.' And that, he did, with the encouragement of the club's Executive Chef, Doug Usko, now owner of Zuzda's, in Banner Elk.



Chef extraordinaire, Bill Green, studied under world-renown culinary experts and brings his own touch of class "back home" to the High Country. Photo by Sherrie Norris

"With a lot of help, I scrounged up enough money to go to the Culinary Institute of America in New York . . . a two-year program at the time." After graduation, Green returned to Grandfather Golf and Country Club for a short time, before heading south to the private club Ocean Reef in Largo, Florida. "The pay attracted my attention very quickly," he shares, "But it was old style European cuisine that didn't allow me to express my creative side. Four of my buddies and I packed up and moved to Arizona, and somehow, I landed a job at the Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale. It is one of the most prestigious places of its kind in the world . . . the cheapest rooms there go for \$450 per night and the Prince of Saudi Arabia stayed there for six months." Under the direction of the world-famous chef Alex Stratta, Greene found serious inspiration. "I had never seen such detail to food . . .his technique was unbelievable. Stratta had worked for Alain Ducasse, highly acclaimed around the world – from Paris to Monaco - for his culinary excellence."

Stratta encouraged Greene to take his interest and skill to another level, thus destination "le cirque," in Manhattan, New York, "the world's greatest restaurant," where he worked in the banquet and prep area; a year later, he was promoted to sous chef, an amazing feat for one so young. On to the famous Waldorf-Astoria, where some of his greatest culinary stimulation came from Laurent Gras, "one of the hardest working chefs I have ever been around." Gras has been described as "one of the most celebrated chefs in America, known for his imaginative French-based cuisine, one who helped renowned chef Alain Ducasse rack up Michelin stars in Europe and has earned his own share of stars after being lured here to the United States." The staff was constantly being sought out for television, newspaper and magazine reviews – from the Travel Channel, Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous . . . and beyond.

Greene describes his time in New York, as "amazing" . . . "To eat and work at the best restaurants was part of an educational experience for me that I will never forget. It's the greatest city . . . you can be who you want to be without being judged – there are no phony people in New York."

Greene came home due to the illness and subsequent death of his mother. Shortly thereafter, he was recruited to the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, where he stayed for just a brief time. "I just didn't care to live there – I missed home and decided to come back."

He arrived late in the season, he recalls, and filled his hours "helping out" at Linville Ridge and Esseola. Linville Ridge offered him the position of Chef de Cuisine for the fine dining room, where he enjoyed being "right hand man" to Chef Patty Strickland. With six months of the year "off-season," he was encouraged by his long-time friend, Joseph Banner of Newland, to go off the mountain where he could keep his creative juices flowing . . . so he did and found a spot at Charlotte's "Upstream," one of the top three restaurants in the city. While there, he became friends with an intern from Johnson and Wales, who introduced him to her sister, Anita. "That's how I met my wife."

He came back to fulfill his six-month obligation to Linville Ridge, then moved to Charlotte to be with Anita. Married and sharing the same dreams, the couple began waiting for the right opportunity for Bill to have his own establishment. An engineer for the Sarah Lee Corporation, Anita runs two distribution plants from the Kings Mountain office, but was standing by his side as that opportunity knocked on a door "back home."

The couple learned of a vacancy at the former Kojay's location, next door to Eckerd at the "Tynecastle" intersection of highways 105 and 183. Despite the need for renovations, Bill came in, envisioned what he wanted, and soon, but not without a lot of hard work, his dream became a reality.

On September 8, 2005, Artisanal opened its doors for the very first time, and the rest is history in the making. The fifty-seat fine dining facility has not seen a night so far that it wasn't "packed out." On a dreary mid-week morning as Bill shared his exciting journey with us, the phone rang five times in less than an hour for weekend reservations. "We've already seen numerous return customers . . . it is very gratifying to be able to say that so soon."

Many who have enjoyed Bill's expertise at former locations have gladly followed him to Artisanal . . . they come expecting the best and never leave disappointed. His eclectic menu is not typical High Country fare, but rather described as "Modern American Cuisine." The "Fall Menu" features everything from Duck Confit Springrolls, Tamari and Honey Glazed Salmon, to Pecan Crusted North Carolina Mountain Trout, Charleston Shrimp and "Maverick" Grits, Slow Braised Lamb Shank and Snake River Farms Kobe Beef. Hand-made desserts and an impressive wine list are also available, in addition to fresh, locally grown produce "It is all about quality . . . I want to take the extra steps to do things right. I try to do some things that others aren't doing . . . such as going out to the farmer in the morning and selecting the vegetables that I will be using for that day. We make fresh stocks and gravies everyday and we use no dry herbs. We use only the best cheeses . . . all my fish is wild – nothing farm-raised."

Greene recruited two of his "main guys" from Charlotte and says he probably could not run his restaurant without them. He has future plans to enlist from culinary schools and begin an intern program. "It's important to help young people . . . it gives them a chance to make some money, but more importantly, it gives them guidance. That's how I got my chance." He was in the male minority in Penny Voncanon's Home Economics class at Avery High, and even though that did not present as a "defining moment," he considered it a start to thinking about the future.

He is quick to express his appreciation to those who have supported him in his endeavor – the guests who have given him such a great start, his wife and staff, and the Joe Banner family of Newland who have been valuable friends, encouragers and supporters.

His introduced his friend, Joseph, to a fellow culinary arts student in New York, and they were later married. "You know Christina, she's the one who wins the Gingerbread House Contests at the Grove Park Inn."

Greene enters his restaurant every morning around 9:30 or 10:00 o'clock, and rarely leaves

before midnight. He spends time in the kitchen doing what he does with exceptional flair, but he also visits the dining room to ensure that his guests are content and comfortable. “I want people to leave here happy. If someone is not pleased with their meal, I tell my staff to let me know . . . I’ll take care of them the best I know how.”

Greene has been asked why he isn’t open for lunch. “I want to accomplish one thing at a time. It’s not about money for me . . . greed will eventually kill you –We have to be good at what we do, but not content to stay there. When one level is perfected, we will push to another. It’s all about quality . . . and I will take the extra steps to do things right.”

There is no doubt that Bill Greene will take those steps – he’s a master craftsman – a culinary artist . . .and he’s waiting to share his dream with you, one succulent bite at a time.

For more information and reservations for dinner, Tuesday – Saturday, or Sunday brunch, call Artisanal at (828) 898-5395.