

ARTISANAL: SENSUAL DINING IN THE MOUNTAIN SOUTH

by Linda Kramer / photography by Randy Gentry, Fresh Air Photographics



Banner Elk's Artisanal is, for many, a destination restaurant for impressive dining and special occasions sporting the highest check-average per person in the area. The clientele is upscale but not pretentious. You will find distinguished visitors there rubbing elbows with loyal locals.

Artisanal, owned by Bill and Anita Greene, opened in September of 2005 and is making a dramatic impact with Bill as master chef and culinary artist.

Bill, although born in Korea, grew up in Avery County, and straight out of high school enrolled in the Culinary Institute of America. He graduated in 1993 and was mentored by some of the finest chefs in the country in a nomadic succession of high-end restaurants with coveted tables. The list is impressive and includes the Ocean Reef Club in Key Largo, Florida; Le Cirque, the largest private club in the United States; the Waldorf Astoria in New York City; the five-star Phoenician Resort in Scottsdale, Arizona; Bellagio in Las Vegas; and Grandfather Country Club and Linville Ridge in Avery County.

In 1999, while working in New York City, Bill realized that if he were to do the kind of cooking that was his alone, he must be independent and open his own restaurant. In 2001 he returned home to North Carolina with wife Anita, who is a first-generation Indian American and a mechanical engineer. The couple makes a perfect team, combining Bill's artistry and technique with Anita's business smarts as well as the people and managerial skills she learned from her family's service business.

In September of 2005 the 50-seat Artisanal opened its doors to serve an eclectic menu Bill calls "Modern American Cuisine," which is basically new adaptations of contemporary food. "There really are no new recipes, just ones that good chefs take from others and embellish with an individual twist," Bill says.

Loyal patrons dine at Artisanal for food that is fresh, consistent and made with quality ingredients. All fish is wild, not farm-raised, and is flown in daily. In the summer Bill personally chooses the fruits and vegetables that will be used that day from local growers at the Farmers' Market.

Bill says Artisanal is the only restaurant from Western North Carolina to East Tennessee that makes everything in-house from scratch, including the sauces, stocks, desserts, ice creams and breads. Making the French baguettes, alone, involves a two-day process and is well worth the wait. On the inside, Artisanal's 2,000-square-foot space is minimalist. Warm color palettes and white linen tablecloths reflect a sophisticated, uncluttered elegance. When you walk in the door you know you are in the presence of perfection.

Step up to a Perfect Table

My evening of scrumptious tasting included an appetizer of marinated Sweet-and-Sour Glazed Calamari with an Asian slaw tossed with rice wine vinaigrette. Another, Hawaiian Blue Prawns in tempura batter with a shitake mushroom compote and cucumber relish, and a Poached D'Anjou Pear Arugula Salad with prosciutto and blue cheese tossed in white truffle vinegar. The salad demonstrates Bill's ability to take a simple dish, combine a complexity of layers (the creaminess of cheese, the saltiness of prosciutto and the light sweetness of pears) in creative combinations of taste and texture that dazzle you.

Next, I indulged on an entrée of Wild Tasmanian Salmon on a bed of truffle and herb risotto with cherry tomatoes poached in olive oil; and another of White Peking Duck Breast on polenta with roasted parsnips and kumquat chutney and fresh baby green beans. An Arrowood Cabernet, which is a \$75 bottle on the wine list but sells for \$12 by the glass, was the perfect accompaniment. Desserts at Artisanal are also made from scratch and are a feast for the eye as well as the palate. I sampled the Chocolate Chambord Soufflé with vanilla sauce, Crème Brûlée with vanilla bean (a recipe from Le Cirque) and Almond Spoon Bread with blueberry compote and vanilla ice cream. Each was an exquisite balancing act of flavor and texture.

Assisted by a staff of four full-time cooks, Bill pays special attention to presentation, and each plate is a work of art. "People eat with their eyes first," Bill says, adding, "Food is very sensual. It's about feel. You have to have an instinct for it."

Wines by the glass begin at a reasonable \$7 and are all based on extensive research and tasted by Bill, who says, "We pour only top quality; no headache wines." While the focus is on California wines, high-end imported wines are also available for as much as \$900 a bottle. The restaurant's wine cellar is pending an Award of Excellence from Wine Spectator magazine.

High Expectations

Bill and Anita's plans for the future include perhaps opening another restaurant and creating an intern program that would offer aspiring young chefs the mentoring experience Bill has been privileged to experience over the years. "We don't want to be bored," says Bill. "When you conquer something, you go the next level. We want to keep going, attacking new challenges with competitiveness and always keeping in mind that it's not about the money, it's about pleasing others and demanding the best of yourself."

If you are looking for a simple dish served with restraint, you won't find it at Artisanal. What you will find is food cooked and served with a perfection that matches the expectations Bill has of himself in everything he does.

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