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Profiles

A Place At The Table

November 9th, 2010



Three Female Chefs Make Their Mark On The Triangle Restaurant Scene

By Pamela DeLoatch

Women may rule the roost when it comes to home cooking, but the restaurant world is a different story. As anyone who watches the Food Network can attest, most top chefs in the country — or world, for that matter — are men. So, in an industry where only 13 percent of the talent is female, the Triangle is lucky, indeed. Here, the spotlight is on three up-and-coming female chefs who own and operate upscale restaurants that please hungry locals and foodies alike, earning regional and national acclaim in the process.

There's Amy Tornquist, who brings new meaning to Southern cuisine, using the best produce the state has

to offer in her Durham restaurant.

Andrea Reusing has created a little piece of Asia in downtown Chapel Hill, marrying recipes from the Far East with ingredients from the Southeast.

And Ashley Christensen has revamped a former downtown Raleigh pie shop into a hip but comfortable diner featuring French-influenced comfort food.



Watts Grocery

Sustaining Southern Cooking

Amy Tornquist's Watts Grocery may be an unintentional reflection of her own personality. "It's quirky," she says of her restaurant. "It's casual and convivial." And maybe most important, it's Southern.

Don't be mistaken by her unassuming demeanor, however. Tornquist's restaurant is considered one of the Triangle's best. *Bon Appétit* magazine says Watts Grocery is one of Durham's hottest restaurants. *Food & Wine* magazine praised the "amazing" food and "talented" chef. The restaurant, which combines a sophisticated twist on downhome Southern cuisine, is known for its seasonal foods made from local produce.

Hometown Girl

A native of Durham, Tornquist grew up in a family that loved cooking. "My grandmother was an excellent, excellent cook," she recalls. By the time Tornquist was in high school, she began baking on her own, following recipes from Julia Child's *Mastering the Art of French Cooking*.

Despite her affinity for cooking, Tornquist didn't initially consider a career as a chef. Instead, she went to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, studying Russian and American history. During that time, she got a job at Crook's Corner Restaurant in Chapel Hill, where she began to cook under legendary chef Bill Neal, who influenced numerous young chefs with his brand of Southern cuisine, including his famous take on shrimp and grits.

“It was a great time to be at Crook’s,” Tornquist says. Although she still had school to finish, the desire to become a chef started to take root. After Tornquist graduated, she made the life-changing decision to go to cooking school. In her typical understated fashion, she downplays the magnitude of the decision.

“It was that, or take the LSAT!” she says, laughing.

Deciding to study in France, Tornquist learned classic French technique at *La Varenne Ecole de Cuisine* before becoming a private chef at the British Embassy. Eventually, after working at the highly rated Duquesnoy restaurant in Paris, Tornquist longed to come back home. “It got to the point where I didn’t want to be a foreigner,” she explains. “I’m a real North Carolinian. I like the seasons.”

Her dilemma, however, was what to do once she returned home. She decided to operate her own catering business, called Sage and Swift Gourmet Catering, then helped open and operate the Nasher Museum Café at Duke University. In 2007, she opened her own place, Watts Grocery.

A Place Of Her Own

Named after a favorite candy store in her childhood neighborhood, Tornquist’s restaurant embodies her love of Southern cooking. With offerings such as Banana Caramel Stuffed French Toast for brunch, Lilybet’s Toasted Pimento Cheese Sandwich for lunch, and James’ Fried Catfish with Pecan Butter for dinner, anyone eating there is likely to suddenly adopt a hint of a Southern drawl.

“It’s a neighborhood place, where you go and you’ll see someone you know,” Tornquist says. While making her place feel like a home away from home is a goal, Tornquist is not willing to take all the credit for the achievement. “It’s an equal reflection of who I hire,” she says of her staff. And though she naturally wants to deliver high-quality service to her patrons, she admits that, sometimes, assembling just the right team is luck.

One aspect of Tornquist’s business that isn’t luck is her ability to incorporate local produce and foods into her menu, helping the chef maintain fresh seasonal selections. But she makes sure she’s working with farms that share her commitment for sustainable agriculture. The fried eggs for the Grits Bowl, for example, come from free-range chickens. Ingredients for the warm cabbage slaw come from local farm stands.

“I buy local for a few reasons,” Tornquist says. “It supports local farmers and it helps our local economy. But the basic truth is that local tastes so much better for most things!”

Chef Mom

If Tornquist could do anything differently, she says, she’d work a little less. For many chef/owners, working 60-hour weeks is the norm. Tornquist says a 40-hour week schedule would allow her to spend more time with her husband and daughters, ages 6 and 9, and maybe even give her time to re-do her house.

And no, she doesn’t cook dinner for her family. She may “orchestrate” it, but since she is often the last one home in the evening, that task falls to her husband or her visiting in-laws. With the help of family and an occasional babysitter, Tornquist and her husband (who runs the catering business) juggle jobs, kids, and activities. In that way, she says, her life is similar to many women who balance careers and family. It helps that she likes what she does and enjoys her co-workers.

Tornquist says, “You do your best. You focus on what’s important, you balance what you can, and then you

try not to worry so much.” And when you need a place to recharge, with good food and friends, Tornquist knows just the place.



Lantern

East Meets West (Franklin Street, That Is)

Tucked away on West Franklin Street, the funky thoroughfare of UNC Chapel Hill, is a bit of Asia, a bit of New York, and a whole lot of North Carolina. There, you'll find Lantern, an Asian restaurant that skillfully blends tastes from West and East, North and South.

Since it opened in 2002, Lantern has received many accolades for its menu. *Gourmet* magazine pronounced it one of America's Top 50 restaurants. *Travel + Leisure* named it one of 25 American Hot Spots. And just

this past year, chef/owner Andrea Reusing was a finalist for the coveted James Beard award — the Oscar for the food world.

While creating a successful restaurant demands a great deal of creativity and flair, surprisingly, the decision to start Lantern was based on practicality.

Something Different

When Reusing first moved to North Carolina from New York in 1995, she was looking for something different. She had been working as a political consultant, but when she and her then-boyfriend moved to the area for his musical career, she found that she was ready for a change, and likewise decided to start a catering company.

Catering might have been a new gig, but Reusing was already familiar with meal preparation. Her interest in food took root when she was a child, and she began survival cooking when she attended college in New York. “I was always hungry,” she says. “It was a way to feed myself.” Still, it was just a hobby, she thought, as she continued to teach herself kitchen techniques.

While some may think there is a disadvantage to being self-taught, Reusing sees it differently. “People who are self-taught in the kitchen often have ways of solving problems practically,” she says. This outlook has helped her in and out of the kitchen.

After her catering business took off, Reusing helped open Enoteca Vin, the once-popular (but now closed) Raleigh wine bar and restaurant. Then, again, in 2002, Reusing was looking for something new. She discovered the answer when she considered the one cuisine she found she missed the most since moving to North Carolina.

“There was a real, practical need in the area for an Asian restaurant,” Reusing remembers. “I loved Asian food, and had spent a lot of time in Chinatown in New York.”

Betting that others would feel the same way, Reusing decided that opening an Asian restaurant would be a sound financial decision. At the same time, she knew she wanted to maintain her focus on using fresh, local ingredients. Once a leader of the North Carolina Slow Food movement, Reusing remains committed to teaming with local farms that practice sustainable agriculture. Many of her products come from nearby farms, and she collaborates with farmers to obtain certain products, such as specific cuts of meats and Asian vegetables.

A Friend Who Surprises You

Reusing hasn't forgotten that most people come to a restaurant not only to feed their stomachs, but also their soul and psyche. Lantern fulfills that need. With an intimate setting and an invitation to taste and linger, Lantern provides a welcoming environment. And that's just what Reusing had in mind.

“I like to think that (Lantern) is an old friend who surprises you,” she says. An attentive, team-oriented staff helps create the restaurant's friendly atmosphere.

Balancing Act

Just as there needs to be balance in a recipe, so that one ingredient does not overpower the other, there also needs to be a balance between working and the rest of life. As a married mom (yes, she married her musician) with two children, ages 7 and 3, Reusing struggles to strike the right balance between work and family.

“It’s hard to be a parent and somebody who loves her work, because there is a natural tension,” she says. Her trick? “Be present when you’re home and when you’re at work,” she says.

Reusing is taking that idea to heart with her cookbook, *Cooking in the Moment: A Year of Seasonal Recipes*, which comes out in April 2011. With over 100 recipes, the book shares stories of cooking and ideas for preparing everything from simple family meals to restaurant-quality, farm-to-table suppers.

She will continue balancing work and family, Eastern flavors with Western tastes, Northern experiences with Southern ingredients, practicality and dreams, all of which create the perfect recipe for her life.



Poole's Downtown Diner

Creative Comfort Food

You would think Raleigh's McDowell Street doesn't have much in common with the French countryside, but if you walk through the doorway of Poole's Downtown Diner, you just might change your mind.

When Ashley Christensen first opened Poole's in 2007, she had the idea of pulling together contrasting concepts and tastes and somehow making them meld together in a style described as French comfort food. Her restaurant combines old and new, simple and complex, foreign and familiar. How Christensen does it is testimony to her passion for cooking.

A Food Family

It's natural that Christensen would have a deep affinity for food. While neither of her parents were professional cooks, they both had a keen interest in food and its preparation, passing on their appreciation of simple, fresh ingredients to Christensen.

“Dad was a big organic gardener and beekeeper,” Christensen says. “Mom was born in Memphis, Tenn., and

my grandmother was an amazing Southern cook.” Christensen’s mother, an “Air Force brat,” moved around frequently as a kid, and likewise, her mother’s style of cooking began to show influences from the places she lived, developing into her own version of Southern cooking.

As a child growing up in Kernersville, Christensen didn’t often cook, but as a student at N.C. State University, she began to find her calling. It started with friends taking turns throwing small dinner parties. Before long, Christensen became the designated cook. With friends helping to buy ingredients, the parties soon grew from just a few people to a roomful.

“I found I had a passion for entertaining,” Christensen recalls. “I loved it.” Before long, Christensen began a small catering business, and soon was working as a young chef at Raleigh’s Humble Pie. Although she was self-taught, Christensen found that chefs and customers connected with her energy, passion, and desire to learn. Christensen worked with several top chefs along the way, including Scott Howell of Nana’s in Durham, and Andrea Reusing, then of Enoteca Vin in Raleigh.

After working at Enoteca Vin for seven and a half years, Christensen launched Poole’s in 2007.

Old And New

Poole’s Diner first opened as a pie shop in the 1940s. It went through several iterations and even closings until Christensen re-opened it with some particular goals. True to the term “diner,” the restaurant is intended to be casual, while the food is designed to be impressive yet approachable.

“There’s a lot of French influence,” she says of her menu. “There are often parallels between French and Southern cooking. French technique is often used in American cooking.” So, while a hamburger may be on the menu, that hamburger may be a 10-ounce patty, fried in duck fat, covered with Jarlsberg cheese, and served on a grilled brioche.

For more adventurous palates, Christensen offers calf’s liver or duck hearts. “The food here is meant to feel simple and honest. It may be intriguing as how it happened, but it should be clear, bright, and comforting,” Christensen says.

Most of the day’s offerings depend on what fresh ingredients are available. For that reason, Christensen keeps the menu handwritten on a blackboard in the restaurant, where it can change if inspiration strikes. Having the menu on the blackboard rather than on paper also gives the restaurant staff a chance to talk with patrons about the food, Christensen says, which suits the mood of the restaurant.

“Diner screams ‘everyman,’ ” Christensen says. “When people from all parts can sit next to each other, that’s a recipe for success.”

As Christensen is quick to point out, Poole’s is not a restaurant reserved for special occasions. Instead, she says, it should be a place people want to visit every time they go out. By changing the menu a little bit each day, Christensen tries to keep it exciting and entice people to return.

Passion For Food

Like her independent, self-taught parents, Christensen has found her own way to channel her love for food. Next on her list: opening three more Raleigh restaurants by the second quarter of 2011. These restaurants, which will share the same building at the corner of Wilmington and Martin Streets, will be open seven days

a week for both lunch and dinner.

As busy as she is preparing for these new businesses, while continuing to oversee the operations at Poole's, Christensen seems to thrive on opportunities to be creative. But no matter how many restaurants she opens, Christensen wants to ensure she creates places where people feel connected, where she can infuse her energy and creativity with her passion for food.

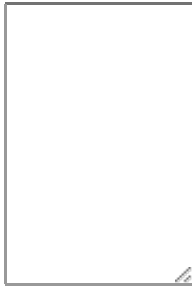
"The most important thing is to make people feel a part of it," she says. "I'm proud to be a part of it."

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