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Women at the Helm

Finding Her Voice: Greer Thornton of Atria

by Barbara Lehman Smith
photos by L.A. Brown



Greer Thornton works with an arrangement of flowers (picked from her own garden) in the foyer of Atria, the restaurant on Martha's Vineyard that she owns with her husband Christian who is pictured with Greer and two of their children, Wyatt and Penelope, on the facing page.

"There are some people who are leaders and some people who need to be led. I needed to learn how to be a leader."

—Greer Thornton

Greer Thornton, now in her mid-thirties, has been a restaurant owner for twelve years having taken over the restaurant helm at age twenty-five. Atria, the restaurant that she co-owns with her chef husband, Christian Thornton, was named for one of the fifty

main nautical navigational stars—befitting a restaurant located in the port town of Edgartown on the island of Martha's Vineyard. With an immediate, disarming, and vibrant smile, it's almost impossible to imagine anyone describing Greer—or anything connected to her—as "stuffy." But apparently it's true, and Greer says she understands why some people might have that misconception about the restaurant because of "the reputation of the location, not just of Atria, but the restaurant before it and the one before that, as having the most fine dining on the island." People

have the impression that it is "more exclusive than it is," she adds with a shrug.

Buying the restaurant, then called Andrea's, in 2000 from the family who had owned the property for years was a strange confluence of events for Greer. As a teenager and not being experienced enough to waitress, she'd worked at Andrea's as the "pepper girl," a sort of sous-waitress whose primary task was to follow servers around offering pepper to their customers as instructed. She eventually became a waitress and though it had been

many years since she'd worked there Greer says with a smile, she essentially "bought the restaurant from my boss, which was a trip." What's perhaps more surprising is that in 2000, when they decided to buy and run the restaurant together, she and her future husband had been dating for only six months. They met when they were working at a restaurant in Washington, D.C., called Asia Nora that is now known as a pioneer in locally grown cuisine. Christian, a graduate of the California Culinary Institute in San Francisco, was the chef and Greer ran the front of the

to know the value of your own experience, Greer says thoughtfully. When "you know your experience has meaning and you have something to teach people," she muses, it becomes "easier to pass your passion on." For Greer, it's a position that has required inner reflection: "There are some people who are leaders and some people who need to be led. I needed to learn how to be a leader. I'm a little soft-spoken, but that's also why I love the service industry. It has been a learning process to teach people what I do best." As a waitress, Greer was often asked, "What

and convey what you understand about the service industry, it can resonate." If she can transfer her passion to her staff she believes her guests will enjoy a better dining experience. "Otherwise it can be just another dinner," she says, and immediately retracts this with a laugh, "Of course, it wouldn't be with Christian's food."

Elegantly quaint, and not large at first glance, the restaurant can seat a surprising 190 customers in the combined space of its main dining room, small private upstairs din-



house. Of their leap to becoming restaurant owners together, she says, "We did things very backward. But we knew we worked really well together."

A native of Chevy Chase, Maryland, Greer attended Sidwell Friends School in nearby Washington D.C., and graduated from Wheaton College in Massachusetts. She fell in love with Martha's Vineyard when she was a child spending time at her grandfather's home in Edgartown. Years later, when she brought Christian to the Vineyard in the first months they were dating, they were both astounded at the number of bustling restaurants. "There were some great places to eat and some not-so-great places to eat," she remembers. It's obvious into which category they wanted their soon-to-be-acquired dream restaurant with its farm-to-table offerings to fall.

With her husband—they married in 2004—behind the scenes and running the kitchen, how did she adapt to being a restaurant owner in charge of the front of the house and a large staff at that young age? You have

is your favorite entrée on the menu?" And at every table, she says she'd offer a different answer. That led her to "really think about each dish, take a moment to visualize it, know it." One of her biggest gripes when she goes to other places to eat is when the waiter says he "doesn't know" his favorite dish. "I mean, come on!" Greer says with a tinge of exasperation. About half of Atria's menu is set, "because people get attached to a favorite, like the calamari or the duck, and we'd get in trouble if we took them off," Greer says. But the rest of the menu changes daily based on the availability of fresh, local, and organic ingredients. Wanting the wait staff to feel comfortable and knowledgeable—about the specials, ingredients, pairings, and any other details—when they hit the floor, Greer, Christian, the manager, and the wine steward meet with them every day just before opening.

Of her quiet leadership style, Greer says, "In the end, it works very well. You just need to find your voice because people respect not being yelled at.... If you find a middle ground

ing room, downstairs Brick Cellar bar, and outside patio. A traditional galvanized-bucket clambake is held outside every summer evening. "The lawn offers lots of room for kids to run around," Greer notes. Being a mother to two-year-old Penelope, three-year-old Wyatt, and thirteen-year-old stepson Miles has made having room to run around a definite perk. Though it's been open seasonally, from late spring to early fall, for most of its twelve years, Atria's calendar is not fixed in stone. "We've tried it all," Greer recalls. "Open year round, eleven months, and the short season." When the main restaurant closes in the fall of 2011, the downstairs Brick Cellar will remain open. "The winter scene here wants a cozy atmosphere and we look forward to staying open," Greer says. ❖

AVALON contributing writer Barbara Lehman Smith is the author of the biography *Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones: The Artist Who Lived Twice* (Outskirts Press, 2010) and writes freelance for various magazines and newspapers. A native of Massachusetts, Barbara lives in Maryland with her husband and three children, and is a frequent visitor to Martha's Vineyard.