

BY KATHY MARCKS HARDESTY

It's an art

Taste the new talent in Paso Robles

On a glorious, sunny afternoon in downtown Paso Robles, I discovered a new restaurant named Artisan that made me forget about the weather. As I dined on soulful foods that tasted even better than they looked, I realized chef Chris Kobayashi's taste transcends his artistic presentations—made clear in every delicious bite of his contemporary American cuisine, from the amuse bouche and appetizers to the entrées and desserts.

Artisan is the dream come true of brothers Chris and Michael "Mike" Kobayashi, who, at ages 11 and 14, respectively, envisioned opening a restaurant together. Just one week after the eatery's opening, I was pretty much amazed by the entire experience: outstanding food, a strong wine and beer program, and the professional service I'd expect in San Francisco's best restaurants. Artisan became a destination the moment the Kobayashis opened their doors to the public.

Answering my special request for a chef's sampler, Chris agreed (in an admirable show of self-confidence) to prepare small portions of numerous offerings. The amuse bouche, offered on the dinner menu, was a delicious sweet corn soup with chive oil and crunchy bits of bacon providing a wonderful contrast to the rich soup. His yellowfin tuna tartare with crunchy-fried green tomatoes and spicy remoulade was exceptional. And the decadent smoked gouda and Anchor Steam porter fondue with Andouille sausage, broccolini, and garlic toast is perfect for sharing over a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

Admittedly, I never review a restaurant so soon after its opening. Having cooked professionally, I've experienced the stress of opening a new restaurant at Wolfgang Puck's Postrio in San Francisco and trying to get everything flowing smoothly, from the menu to the cooks and the servers. But the Kobayashis' publicist, Starr Hall—a savvy marketer who knew the brothers could withstand critical review—asked me to visit right away.

Their sleek new eatery, so contemporary in its minimalist décor, is unlike any other restaurant in Paso Robles. The small bar features an aesthetic metal sculpture holding wine bottles and a separate dining area adjacent to the glass-fronted wine cabinet. Large windows give the bar and restaurant a bright, airy ambiance during the day. At night, candlelit tables and comfortable banquet seating make you feel like you're a guest in the Kobayashis' living room. That's exactly the image Mike said they had in mind when they designed it.

"We want people to feel comfortable coming in blue jeans and comfortable clothes," said the gregarious Mike. As front-of-the-house man, he has the dynamic that makes the dining experience as satisfying as Chris' food.

"My passion is welcoming people and making them feel at home," Mike said.

When he told me that locals say Artisan reminds them of the San Francisco dining scene, I nodded in agreement.

The siblings grew up in the small town of Bishop, where it became clear that Chris was destined to be a chef when he was just 11. A family friend was getting married, so Chris got out his mom's *Betty Crocker Cookbook* and found a recipe for petit fours. Preparing those morsels requires patience and determination—hardly the normal standards of a young boy. According to Mike, Chris (obviously a wunderkind) became "the toast of the town." The experience inspired a fantasy of owning a restaurant for the boys that never faded.

"We would always end up in the kitchen at family gatherings, discussing exactly how we wanted our restaurant to look, feel, and taste," Mike recalled. "Artisan is the true culmination of all those discussions."

A fellow alumnus of San Francisco's California Culinary Academy, Chris graduated in 2002. I must say, in my class of 1988 with 100 students, I only met one guy—Jeffrey Madura of John Ash

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Mike Kobayashi, Artisan

Restaurant in Santa Rosa—as determined as Chris to become a chef. Following graduation, Chris worked in San Francisco at Asia de Cuba and Roy's of Hawaii.

"Roy's was the training center for all their restaurants," the quiet chef explained. "It was a great influence."

He moved to Napa Valley to attend the



REALIZATION Chris and Mike Kobayashi said that opening Artisan in Paso Robles is an ambition 22 years in the making. One of the fruits of their labor is this pork tenderloin.

Culinary Institute of America, earning his baking and pastry certificate, then worked as both sous chef and pastry chef at Brix restaurant, where he stayed nearly four years.

But the Kobayashi brothers chose Paso Robles to build the restaurant they'd planned over the past 22 years. Not only more affordable than Napa Valley, Paso Robles wine country was a big incentive.

"We looked at the available space in the Clocktower building, but it was in the basement," Chris recalled. "With no windows."

When they found the building at the corner of Park and 14th, formerly home of a motorcycle dealer, the well-lit space with cheery open windows was just what they imagined.

The brothers say Paso Robles will dictate what sells, meaning their menu will reflect what locals want, including a really good

Kathy's Pick



**Qupe
2004
Grenache
Purisima
Mountain
Vineyard**

This tasty Grenache has the depth and richness you'd expect from this famed vineyard—while retaining elegance. Bright with ripe flavors of tangy red cherry, black cherry, and plums, it's weaved with a wonderful array of white pepper, spice, and smoke nuances. Blended with 10 percent Syrah,

this well-balanced wine made by co-winemaker Jim Adelman holds its higher alcohol level well. A great choice for Thanksgiving, it will also complement beef or lamb dishes. Just \$30 retail in wine shops or online at www.qupe.com.

hamburger. Chris buys all-natural meats, organically or at least sustainably farmed, and he plans to buy most of his foods from local farms. He says his menu will change twice each season to provide fresh ingredients at the peak of flavor. He plans to change the menu next month because the corn necessary for some menu offerings will no longer be in prime condition.

Chris' entrees are every bit as appealing as his wonderful appetizers (which, as any foodie will tell you, isn't true everywhere). The Alaskan halibut with crispy potato crust, white corn polenta, and perfectly al-dente sugar snap peas was irresistible. Although the decadent and delicious wild mushroom lasagna with house-made pasta was too rich for me to finish, somehow I found room to devour my favorite entrée, the perfectly rare, garlic-stuffed lamb loin with butter bean cassoulet.

The Kobayashis' very good wine list offers multiple selections by the glass—mostly Paso Robles wines with gems from Napa Valley and Sonoma. But I'd prefer seeing more focus on Central Coast appellations, including Pinots and Syrahs from Edna, Arroyo Grande, and Santa Maria valleys and Santa Lucia Highlands in Monterey County.

Now, I admit I've never found a restaurant anywhere that rivals Postrio's silky-textured crème brulee with an interior of fresh berries baked in a flaky pastry crust topped with a crackling, caramelized-sugar crust. But Chris' excellent praline brulee literally disappeared from its tiny espresso cup. And of the three various small portions on the plate, it rated third. A diehard chocoholic, I was seduced by his Scharffen Berger brownie, yet I was torn by the tender sour cream beignets with cinnamon sugar and lemon sabayon. Unfortunately, not a bite was left to argue over.

After that unforgettable experience, I couldn't help mimicking our governor when I told Mike, "I'll be back." And it won't be soon enough. Δ

Send comments or ideas to *New Times' Cuisine* columnist at Kathy@WestCoastWineInsider.com.

Dream come true

Artisan is at 1401 Park St., Paso Robles, open 11 a.m. to 9 p.m. daily. For more information, call 237-8084 or visit www.artisanpasorobles.com.