

Atmore casino offers guests a culinary education

By Robyn Bradley Litchfield

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Wind Creek Casino & Hotel in Atmore cooked up quite a grand opening recently for its state-of-the-art Cooking Studio, and celebrity chef Carla Hall of “Top Chef: New York” was a key ingredient.

Designed to enhance learning, the Cooking Studio comprises seating for 40 to 50 participants, a spacious open kitchen with five large flatscreen TVs overhead, three along the front and two on the sides. Then, to the right, there is another spacious kitchen and large dining table for smaller groups and hands-on experimentation.

Hall – who became a house-hold name as she made her way to the finals in the fifth season of Bravo’s popular culinary competition – joined Wind Creek’s corporate chef Stafford DeCambra in the teaching kitchen to share their love of food as well as offer tips on recreating the dishes at home.

DeCambra said, “These are simple items. We just went into the icebox, brought it out and said, ‘Let’s create some elegance with simplicity.’”

The table included Oysters Rockefeller; salmon mousse on endive; tiny glasses with a fresh blend of crabmeat, mango, red bell pepper and cilantro; watermelon cubes with aged balsamic vinegar and sprigs of micro-greens; and chocolate truffles.

Recreating such an impressive spread seemed daunting to grand-opening guests as they made their way around the table and sampled the goodies, but DeCambra and Hall quickly assured everybody that it was possible.

Hall said it’s all about making something your own, being flexible and realizing that a recipe isn’t always necessary.

It’s also about embracing regional, local and fresh ingredients.

“I truly believe that regional cooking is the heart and soul of a community,” said Hall, a Nashville, Tenn., native who now owns and operates Washington, D.C.-based Alchemy Caterers.

Known as the chef who puts love into everything she makes, Hall and her culinary skills took her all the way to “Top Chef” finals. And her life hasn’t been the same since.

Returning from the February finale, Hall said her life hasn’t slowed.

She now serves as the spokeswoman for several companies and her catering business “has just blown up,” but her goal is to find the right fit (for her company and her clients).

And the Cooking Studio at Wind Creek felt like the right fit. She said the Alabama resort’s facilities are incredible, and she was honored to be part of teaching the first hands-on classes earlier this month.

David Gehman spent part of the weekend on the “other” side of the kitchen counter, learning how to prepare some of the delicious foods.

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A council member of the Poarch Band of Creek Indians, which owns Wind Creek, Gehman was delighted to participate in the culinary experience. And he hopes that groups and individuals from across the state and the Southeast will add the Cooking Studio at Wind Creek to their calendars.

As with other council members, Gehman grew up in the area that now is home to Wind Creek. It looked far different back then, when his grandmother’s house was just down the way and the fields were full of cotton, corn and other crops.

“We never would have dreamed that this would be here,” he said, during the grand opening ceremony.

And the fact that council members came together in the Cooking Studio for a delicious experience made the celebration memorable.

DeCambra said response to the Cooking Studio has been incredible already.

“Wow – just wow,” said DeCambra, who is originally from Hawaii. “In greeting them (class participants), I make sure they understand that they will be going through an experience. We’ll be cooking, yes, but they can go home and produce what we made in class. Everything they do here, they can make on their own.”

But the most important thing is that everyone has fun along the way, he added.

During one class, Wind Creek chefs prepared a complete meal: bluefin tuna tartar with wasabi-dusted potato crisps for the appetizer; herb-cheese and spinach stuffed chicken breast, risotto with Parmesan and sun-dried tomatoes and tomato halves with herb stuffing; and chocolate-covered cream puffs.

Participants “oohed” and “aahed” as the chefs demonstrated how to prepare each dish, encouraging everyone to give it a try

at home. The best part, however, was the chance to sample each course.

Adjacent to the new Cooking Studio is Wind Creek's new spa, which is ideal for guests who crave some time to relax and be pampered once they have wrapped up their cooking classes.

Hall said she was so impressed with the Wind Creek facilities.

She couldn't believe how beautiful everything was and said that Wind Creek had certainly put itself on the map.

And that is inspiring.

"But you're always inspired – if you're still growing," she said. "Cooking is a loving, growing thing.

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