

# MOBILE BAY

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# APPETITE AND ARCHITECTURE.

## A MATCH MADE IN CULINARY HEAVEN



Aubergine owner Ann Bridgeman toasts her award-winning restaurant with architects Lea Verneuille (left) and Mac Wolcott.

Learn how aesthetics can influence a restaurant's atmosphere and attitude, as owners and architects present their views on the working partnership at the heart of it all.

**Text and photos by  
Laura Worsham**

Good food and friendly service are keys to any restaurant's success. But another crucial element—the way the place looks and feels—often can make or break a restaurant's image.

Mobile and Fairhope are home to several award-winning buildings that hold wonderful dining establishments, including Aubergine, the Bakery Cafe, Almost Six Cafe, and Gus's Azalea Manor Restaurant and Courtyard. Listening to the owners and designers talk about their experience in planning and executing their ideas is like hearing an old married couple reflect on the secrets of a lasting marriage.

"I spent a lot of time listening," says Lea Verneuille, who worked with Ann Bridgeman to create a look for Aubergine in Fairhope.

"They were great at giving substance to my dreams," Ann Bridgeman says of Lea Verneuille and Mac Wolcott.

"We've known each other for years

and really knew what each other liked," says Tonnie Oswell of his friend Gus Ravanos, for whom he designed Gus's Azalea Manor Restaurant and Courtyard on Dauphin Street downtown.

"I told them the kind of food we'd create, and the kind of kitchen I wanted to prepare it in, and they designed an interior to match it," says Cortlandt Inge, chef and co-owner of the Bakery Cafe on Dauphin Street in the Old Dauphin Way area. "I said this is what I want to do and Tony Atchison provided the form to match the function."

In each of the four restaurants, those who dreamed of creating good food and those who worked to build an atmosphere to complement the chef's creations seemed to be united by one desire: Each wanted the other to look good. Perhaps the wish to make the other happy is the essential raw material of all successful partnerships, and the presence of that desire is what best explains why each of these restaurants does so well.

## TARTS BEAT TORTS

In a letter sent to the Fairhope architectural firm of Wolcott Adams Verneuille, Ann Bridgeman wrote, "I have told everyone I met on several continents what a wonderful experience it has been to work with you all on designing and building Aubergine. I can't imagine any other architects on their hands and knees finishing floors or worrying about the smallest detail and light bulb."

Ann owns, runs, and serves as pastry chef extraordinaire for Aubergine in downtown Fairhope. She chose the French word for eggplant as the name for her restaurant because she liked the open, elegant way the syllables rolled off the tongue.

"Simple yet elegant" became the guiding theme weaving together every aspect of the building. "The most difficult thing is doing less rather than more," explains



David White-Spinner, Hayley Maulsby, and Vic Stanton transformed an abandoned downtown building into the bustling Almost Six Cafe.

Owner Ann Bridgeman explains her career move from attorney to restaurateur by saying that “tarts are better than torts.” After eight years of practicing law, she decided to work on her lifelong dream of running her own restaurant. Her earliest interests were solidly anchored in the arts of music and fine cuisine. A pianist with the Birmingham Symphony, she taught music in the Birmingham public schools while raising her children. Later, she attended Cordon Bleu in Paris, then she returned to Mobile and opened La Chaumiere, a French cooking school.

Ann fashions designs out of spun sugar so artfully that her creations would fool Mother Nature herself. Colorful, intricately shaped seashells decorating one of her wedding cakes are so natural looking that she is forced to reiterate again and again that they are actually edible—and to insist that the knife wielder may go ahead and cut into the cake because the lace draped over its layers is sugar, not fabric.

Anyone capable of creating such perfection is going to expect a lot from the architects who design her restaurant. Mac and Lea jumped at the opportunity to exercise the full range of their knowledge and skills. Every brick and each paint stroke displays true pride of authorship. It’s fitting that the trio’s collaboration is recognized and rewarded by other professionals who know all too well how difficult and rare an accomplishment like Aubergine really is.

Lea Verneuille, who, along with partner Mac Walcott, designed Aubergine.

The designers created a warm atmosphere by painting the restaurant’s walls a weathered mustard color, evoking an old Italianate feel that is reflected in the mustard and ochre-accented quarry-tile floors.

During the day, the interior warmth is enhanced with generous rays of sunlight that stream through rows of French doors lining the east and south walls of the largest dining area. Eugenia Foster’s sunlit Gulf Coast impressionist acrylic paintings add energy and bright colors to every room.

Aubergine’s menu is as elegant as the setting itself: Pheasant medallions with a raspberry glaze, followed by Ann’s artfully crafted desserts that include heavenly crème brûlée.

When you build a restaurant like this, says Lea Verneuille, you have to think about the people you’re building for. “We wanted a place where people felt comfortable in all sorts of situations—where business people could talk next to vacationers in blue jeans. We wanted it to be a place where you could come on the spur of the moment or you could bring your girlfriend to propose,” he says.

As a result, Aubergine seems to give its customers the luxury of time—the feeling that you’re welcome to linger over dessert and coffee, free to join in hours of unhurried conversation.

The architects recently won two state-wide awards from the Alabama Council of the American Institute of Architects: the Honor Award, the AIA’s highest, and the Membership Award, a coveted peer recognition voted on by state members of the AIA. The judges noted that, at first, they assumed it was the restoration of an old building, but Aubergine is a totally new construction designed to look old. This accomplishment impressed the judges so much that they mentioned it prominently when they presented the award.



Michele Manzer, Pat Looney, Tony Atchison, and Cortlandt Inge are the creative team that makes the Bakery Cafe one of the city’s most popular historic renovations.