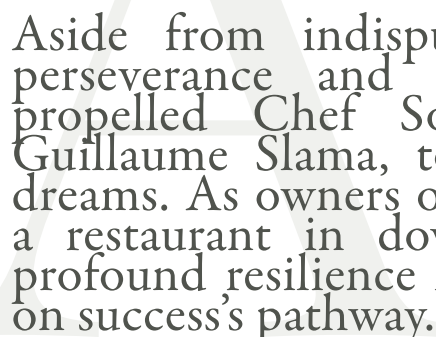


ON THE TABLE [ *The Chef & the Frog* ]

# SUCCESS IS NOT A DESTINATION, BUT A JOURNEY

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Aside from indisputable talent, it is truly perseverance and determination that have propelled Chef Sokun and her husband, Guillaume Slama, to continue realizing their dreams. As owners of The Chef and The Frog, a restaurant in downtown Whiteville, their profound resilience keeps this couple steadfast on success's pathway.

Chef Sokun is a Cambodian refugee, who along with a few family members, attempted to flee the onslaught of the Khmer Rouge back in the mid-1970's. They eventually fell prey to capture, and the family's survival ultimately hinged on the cunningness of her father, who offered his cooking skills to combatants in return for the safety of his family.

Guillaume also comes from a family who understands the plight of political and social upheaval. His family underwent similar turmoil by the atrocities committed during German occupation in the Netherlands and Poland. As exiles, with nothing in their pockets, each of the two families immigrated to France. It was in France that Sokun would eventually meet Guillaume, they would marry and together share dreams of a better life.

From a very young age, Sokun has always had a deep interest in creating and preparing food. Though she has no formal culinary training, she has an undying passion for the gastronomical arts, and can successfully mingle unlikely flavor profiles to create outstanding dishes. She learned much from her father while in Cambodia and continued cultivating her skills in France.

Inspired by the vast opportunities and economic advantages overseas, Guillaume and Sokun decided to immigrate to America and pursue their dream of owning a restaurant. They found their way to Georgia, and despite barriers, the two worked tirelessly for many years until they had the funds to open a bed and breakfast near Athens. Soon they followed up that success with their first restaurant. "We received Three Diamonds the first year we were open," says Guillaume. Their firm belief in the American Dream paid off—the bed and breakfast and restaurant were successful, and they were overjoyed.

When the recession hit, their establishments seemed to maintain buoyancy, but eventually things took a turn for the worse. Their

ability to sustain operations became difficult and the future looked bleak. Guillaume remembers one of their last customers proposing an idea. It involved relocating to North Carolina and reviving a restaurant space in downtown Whiteville. The couple were out of options, and decided to give it a go. They reinvigorated the restaurant space, formerly known as The Southern Kitchen, and renamed it, The New Southern Kitchen.

This intrigued the local community and began the resuscitation of downtown Whiteville. In many ways, this pair has almost singlehandedly changed the social fabric of the community. Prior to their restaurant opening, many of Whiteville's residents ventured outside the city to find suitable fine dining. That changed with The New Southern Kitchen. It began keeping those residents local and encouraged social interaction which fundamentally tightens a community's bond.

Chef Sokun's cooking style melds classical French, infuses Pan-Asian and adds a hint of Southern soul for good measure. Being conscientious of their community, they are proponents of the prevalent "buy local, shop local" movement. They focus on offering their patrons the best quality, local products available. "We do not come from culinary backgrounds, and our philosophy is to incorporate sustainable, local products into our dishes. We do not skimp on ingredients to keep our costs down, it is quality that really matters to us," says Guillaume.

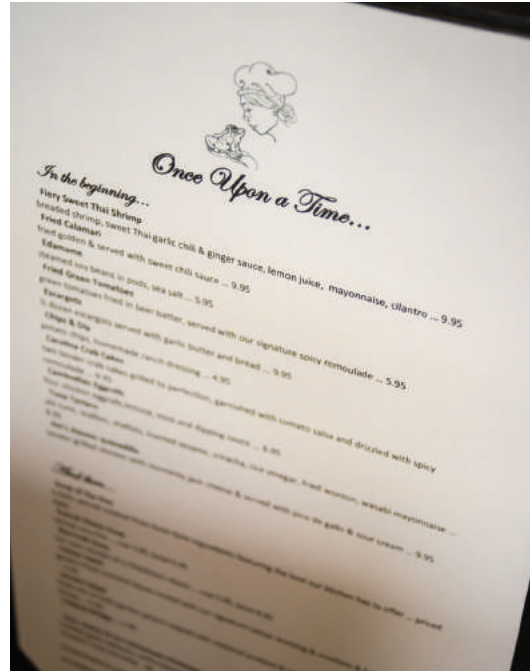
After years of success, The New Southern Kitchen closed its doors about a year ago to usher in their newest venture, located caty-corner on Madison Street. The new, 6,000 square-foot restaurant, The Chef and The Frog, offers the same high-quality fare that has become synonymous with Chef Sokun. The Chef and The Frog, a play on words, has a romantic spin. Contrary to the storybook version, this magical union has the princess transformed into an amaz-





*“Every day she sets out to do better than the day before,” says Guillaume.*





Opposite: Restaurant owners, Guillaume Slama and Chef Sokun Slama.  
 Clockwise: Entrance to Madison Lounge; Menu reflects the theme behind the restaurant;  
 Chef Sokun doing what she loves; Delicious scallop dish prepared by Chef Sokun.



ing chef after kissing her “frog”, a WWII-era descriptive, referencing Frenchmen.

The bigger restaurant boasts a comfortable dining area. Toward the back of the building is the Madison Lounge, a bar area devoted to cocktails and tapas. Adjoining the main dining room is additional seating for overflow dining, or a space that can be reserved for private parties, receptions and other events. Adjacent to that is another room which can accommodate diners, as well as a band or musical set-up.

Guillaume, an engineer by trade, put his personal touches on the design and décor of the restaurant. The feel is very warm and welcoming. He also designed the kitchen to be extremely functional and intuitive. This economy of space allows for continued, uninterrupted work flow. “The design helps the staff be contained in their respective stations and lessens the likelihood of incident such as cross-contamination, or disruption by them bumping into one another,” says Guillaume.

The walls of the restaurant are adorned with photos that capture the couple’s world travels. “My wife enjoys visiting different parts of the world, solely for the food. Museums are fine, but she is more interested in the culinary aspects of the regions,” admits Guillaume. Their travels have inspired her creativity in the kitchen. Chef Sokun is the recipient of many honors and awards, and is also a member of the prestigious Chaîne des Rôtisseurs, the oldest international gastronomic society honoring masters of the culinary arts.

She is humbled by these accolades and is not one to sit on her laurels or bask in the glow of her success. She is very modest, and eternally grateful for the opportunities to showcase her talent. Due

to her experiences from youth, she takes nothing for granted. “Every day she sets out to do better than the day before,” says Guillaume. Quality is paramount. She is passionate, focused, and no-nonsense. In fact, due to his celebrity antics, she once asked Bobby Flay to leave her kitchen.

Success is not measured by a destination, but rather the journey. Guillaume and Chef Sokun’s journey has been well seasoned with tenacity, persistence, and most of all, innate talent. They are living proof that hard work pays off. No matter how insurmountable situations appear, opportunity and applied perseverance can turn dreams into reality—more often than once in a lifetime. ¶



THE COUPLE ALSO OWN SOPHIE’S, A QUAIN BISTRO ACROSS FROM THE CHEF AND THE FROG, ON MADISON STREET. THIS ECLECTIC DINER OFFERS DELI SANDWICHES, HANDMADE ICE CREAM, SPECIALTY COFFEE AND CHEF SOKUN’S RENOWNED PASTRY CREATIONS (WHICH SHE ALSO SELLS IN WILMINGTON AT ZOLA’S COFFEE SHOP ON KERR AVE).