

# NAPA VALLEY Marketplace

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## *A Pioneer in a Chef's Hat*

**...Greg Cole**

BY RONDA GIANGRECO

**I**n the 1970's, when Greg Cole was a small child, his parents would often enjoy family vacations in Napa. The beauty of the rolling vineyards and verdant hillsides gained a fond place in the heart of the boy who would one day be responsible for bringing an entirely different kind of splendor to the Napa Valley.

Greg always loved good food. So, it was no surprise to his parents when he went

off to New York to study at the Culinary Institute of America. His first job in the restaurant business was at Harrah's in Lake Tahoe. Being only a few hours away, he could once again spend time in his beloved Napa Valley. In fact, it was on just such a foray that Greg stopped for dinner at Domaine Chandon in Yountville. He was so impressed that for the next five weeks he came down the hill, every time he had a day off, to petition Chef Philippe to hire him. His persistence paid off and, in 1985, Greg Cole officially became

a member of the restaurant community of the Napa Valley. History shows that the community benefited immeasurably as a result.

In 1987, wanting to further showcase his rising talents as a chef, Greg gravitated to the small, but acclaimed, restaurant Pasta Prego. It was there, in the unlikely setting of a strip mall, that Greg first began to show signs of his second talent – that of culinary showman and kitchen cut-up. Those who have had the opportunity of working with Greg, or observing him in action, are well aware of his mischievous side. With that sly grin he's famous for, Greg makes it seem that, while he's serious about his craft, he's also having the time of his life. An open kitchen is his stage and it is no surprise that his concept has been a cornerstone at many of his successful restaurants.

After stints at Willett's brewing Company and Piati, Greg took a brief leave of the restaurant life when he joined the staff of Sinskey Vineyards as their resident chef. It was there that he furthered his knowledge of fine wine and learned the importance of a great wine list to a restaurant's offerings. But, it was also there that he first heard the siren call of Downtown Napa. "I was in my mid-thirties and I knew that if I didn't open my own restaurant soon, I would never do it. I believed that Napa was ready for a new, really good, chef-owned restaurant." With the high failure rate of restaurants in the back of his mind, Greg nonetheless took the plunge by taking out a small bank loan and prevailing upon his parents for the start-up funds necessary to open his first restaurant, Celadon. The location was a bit odd, but the rent was low. "I didn't have big goals at first. I knew that, at the time, if you wanted a good dinner you went up-valley or to San Francisco. All I felt I needed to do to succeed was to capture a small amount of that business. With the exception of the very talented Nicki and Pete Zeller, no one was doing much downtown. I was confident of my skills, but the whole thing was pretty darned iffy. Thank goodness my original business plan was extremely modest."

With these humble goals in mind, Greg proceeded to combine his enormous



talent and winning personality to produce a restaurant where visitors and locals alike could enjoy an excellent meal, prepared simply, with fresh ingredients and no small dash of wit. The love and support of a good woman didn't hurt either. As Greg fondly recalls, "Beth believed in me. When I wanted to open a second restaurant, she was nervous, but she supported me and that made all the difference. She put together a financial plan and we went forward with the plan for Cole's."

Greg had long thought that downtown Napa was ready for a great steakhouse. When his friend, Dick Williams, prevailed upon him to become a tenant in the historic building on Main Street that now houses Coles, Greg felt the time was right. "We had proved that Napa could support a fine dining establishment, but still, people thought that Cole's would be too big, too expensive. That was ten years ago and we are still going strong." Obviously, Greg's business plan had experienced a few upgrades.

In the decade that followed, Downtown Napa has seen many changes. "Napa today looks so different. I remember when, on Friday and Saturday nights, the place was a ghost town. I think that what we are seeing happening these days is so exciting, all of the new restaurants openings are changing the landscape of Down-

town Napa. It has been a bit of a domino effect. I think I was one of the first people to take a chance on Napa, then others looked at and me and thought, 'if he can do it so can I.' and, Napa is a better place as a result of that."

Craig Smith, executive Director of the Napa Downtown association couldn't agree more. Says Craig, "It's fair to say that Greg Cole set the direction for the dining scene in Downtown Napa and his vision continues to impact it today. We now have fifty restaurants in town, with over forty percent of them Zagat rated. a lot of people thought that Greg was crazy, but it turns out that he knew more than anyone else about what it took to make Downtown Napa great."

A title of "crazy" is one that Greg would not deny, but his insanity has been contagious. Ten new restaurants are in the works for Napa in 2010, many of which are large, high-profile establishments with famous names from Hollywood in their titles. None of that fazes Greg. "There is going to be more competition and we are going to have to work harder, but that's a good thing. I love what I do and I have a great feeling about the future."

So do we, Greg. and, no matter who comes to town, you will always be our favorite "celebrity chef".