



Creative streak blooms in many ways

Korean-born Susan Cho is a woman of fortitude and vision. Most people see only her public face – that of smiling owner and host at Annabelle's Restaurant in St Heliers Bay. Others have witnessed her determination to make a new life in New Zealand despite obstacles.

It is eight years since Susan bought Annabelle's and began a successful career as a restaurateur – a far cry from her training as a horticulturist and ikebana expert.

Regular patrons of her waterfront venue will have followed its many transformations. Originally a narrow eatery seating about 20, it evolved into a dual operation for about 65 people when Susan purchased the neighbouring site. With further alterations, which saw the wall opened between the two sites, Annabelle's reverted to a single restaurant, its design making it very suitable for private functions.

Throughout, Susan's architect husband skilfully carried out interior changes to create stylish decor and an ambience in keeping with the seaside location.

Susan's culinary success is partly due to her own creative genes and partly due to a desire to succeed in what was almost a spur of the moment decision – she was out walking, saw that the restaurant was for sale and decided to make a bid for it – but that story comes later.

Long before she could expertly turn out a soufflé Susan was right at home creating beautiful floral arrangements, particularly ikebana. "As a young child I loved flowers so my father encouraged me to study for a horticulture degree at university in South Korea," she says.

"While there I also became interested in the Japanese art of ikebana and joined a hobby class run by one of my lecturers. Eventually I became a flower arrangement teacher and later ran my own school for 10 years. I also taught flower arranging at university."

During that time Susan visited Japan on many occasions to exhibit her work and that of her students. She also met and married her husband and gave birth to son, however, marriage and motherhood didn't slow her ambition.

Having visited New Zealand where she was utterly captivated by the flowers she was eager to extend her horticulture studies with the view of starting a new life here.

"When I saw agapanthus growing almost wild – they are so expensive in my country – and the easy availability of other flowers

Susan Cho



such as calla lilies, I wanted to come back so I planned to study at Lincoln University but first had to complete some preliminary papers in Auckland."

Susan soon found her limited English a real drawback so she attended academic English classes, but then a severe illness brought a halt to her studies.

After a long break she was just deciding what to do, when she came across Annabelle's and bought it, some might say bravely. Able as she was in the kitchen her culinary skills were limited to domestic and hobby cooking. Undaunted she enrolled in a two-year professional chef's course at Auckland Unitec.

Then began a routine involving long days of study and running a restaurant during which Susan managed, front of house duties and cooking too, probably with the same unruffled manner she has maintained while settling into a new country, learning a new language and finding her business feet.

Of that time she says, "It was very difficult" – somewhat of an understatement!

However, Susan strikes one as a woman of determination and it doesn't take much to realise she is not the sort of person to own a café and not be a cook so it is no surprise that she set about learning to do so, professionally. Once qualified she initially assisted in the kitchen but now employs a chef, leaving her free to run front of house.

While "Annabelle's" has become a full time career in every sense, Susan has not given away her love of horticulture and ikebana. Customers are accustomed to seeing beautiful floral displays in the restaurant even if they don't know it is her work and Susan laughingly says, "when our new home is built I really am going to get back into the garden and grow some flowers!"

In the meantime, she has her hands full but is proud that now, eight years down the track she can mark up another Annabelle's birthday, and feel confident she'll still be there next year. No doubt she will.