

# Historic North Carolina mountain lodge reborn

Published July 16, 2012

Associated Press



Feb. 25, 2012: A picture of actress Marilyn Monroe, one of the hotel's many famous guests, hangs on a wall in the lobby of the Green Park Inn in Blowing Rock, N.C. (AP)

Not long after he and his brother bought the derelict Green Park Inn at auction, Steve Irace learned something that astonished him.

"If you looked in the lobby or the dining room or the bar, you saw the columns," the Long Island, N.Y., native says. "Those columns are single pieces of solid American chestnut that run from floor to ceiling and beyond."

With American chestnut selling for \$12 a board foot on the collector lumber market, he realized the hotel "was worth more dead than alive."

Luckily for the community, and for history buffs, that's not why the brothers bought this "Grande Dame of the High Country."

"We feel that we're caretakers of a national treasure," Irace said during a recent visit to this Victorian jewel, perched atop the Blue Ridge Mountains in western North Carolina. "We resurrected this property. We brought it back. We wouldn't let it die."

The property started as a boarding house in 1882. The bulk of the grand lodge you see today was constructed in 1891. When it opened, each room came equipped with an electric bell to summon attendants and running water — albeit, just a small spigot with which guests could fill their washbasins.

The lobby walls are lined with photographs of famous guests — Presidents Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover slept there, as did first lady Eleanor Roosevelt, Marilyn Monroe and oil tycoon John D. Rockefeller, America's first billionaire. Annie Oakley gave shooting lessons on what is now the inn's parking lot, and Margaret Mitchell wrote a portion of "Gone With the Wind" during a sojourn there, Irace says with pride.

But there was a time, not so long ago, when the Green Park appeared headed for the scrap market.

By the May 2010 auction, the hotel was boarded up and bankrupt. Its spindle-railing Queen Anne balconies were rotten and sagging, the steam heating system cold and leaking.

A man from nearby Deep Gap who had done painting for the Iraces told them it was up for sale. They were the only bidders.

The brothers call themselves hotel "affection-ados." This is the fourth historic hotel property they've rehabilitated (the others are in Florida and Vermont).

The hotel reopened in October 2010 with just 15 of the more than 80 rooms available for guests. That number has since more than tripled to 53 — 22 of them with balconies.

With their high ceilings and large windows, the rooms are classic and airy. The luxuriously comfortable beds and other tasteful furnishings were all manufactured right here in the Tar Heel state, Irace says proudly.

The rooms no longer come with buzzers, but each is equipped with a large flat-screen television and complementary Wi-Fi. Vintage iron lighting fixtures use energy-efficient compact fluorescent bulbs.

"We could have made this like a bed and breakfast, you know, and frou-frou and cutesy and put, you know, 24 pillows in every room and put chintz on chintz, and cute little knickknacks and gewgaws all over," Irace says. "If we did that, we would have to charge more for the rooms. And I wanted, if a working man wanted to come here and show his kids how Grandma used to vacation, I wanted him to have that option."

The inn sits at 3,620 feet (1,100 meters) above sea level, across U.S. 321 from North Carolina's first commercial tourist attraction — the Blowing Rock. The bar is called The Divide — because the Eastern Continental Divide runs literally right through it.

"If you were to spill a drink on one half of the building, it would flow to the Mississippi River, in theory," Irace says. "And if you spilled a drink on the other half of the room, it would flow to the Atlantic Ocean."

A history room off the lobby contains a collection of chamber pots, vintage photographs, hardware from the original doors and even the old service window from the days when the Green Park housed the area's only post office.

Like most historic properties, the Green Park is not without its tales of tragedy. Laura Green, a member of the family that founded the place in the 19th century, hanged herself in Room 318, allegedly because her fiancée didn't show up for her wedding day, Irace says.

"Haunted Watauga County, North Carolina" has a chapter on the inn, although author Tim Bullard declares at the outset, "It is not haunted — repeat, not haunted. But it sure looks like it is."

Executive chef, James Welch, had stayed at the Green Park under its old management and "never, ever" thought he would someday be working there. "Oh, it was disgusting," says Welch, who got his start at 12, filleting chicken in his mother's and grandmother's Greensboro diner. "To be honest with you, I didn't even want to take my clothes off to sleep in the bed."

Welch, 47, a James Beard-nominated chef, had done kitchen stints at Sheraton hotels in nearby Greensboro and Miami before coming to Blowing Rock 18 years ago to help open a restaurant. He was looking for a new challenge when the Iraces recruited him to run the inn's Laurel Room Restaurant. They gutted the old kitchen, spent \$500,000 to bring it up to code and opened it a year ago.

Welch and his staff turn out delicate appetizers — like mixed baby greens with raspberries, goat cheese and shaved chocolate — and hearty entrees such as braised lamb shank with wild mushroom risotto and gremolata. And then there is his signature dish: Espresso-crusted, bittersweet chocolate-stuffed beef tenderloin with goat cheese pistachio au gratin, French beans and Bailey's Irish Cream sauce. This dish came to him when, while drafting the next day's menu, he discovered two Hershey's kisses his daughters had given him that morning melting in his shirt pocket.

Irace realized that he'd committed to Welch — and bankrolled his kitchen upgrades — without ever having tasted his cooking. After the first bite, he breathed a huge sigh of relief. "I grew up in New York and I've traveled a lot in my life, and I've eaten in the finest restaurants in the world," he says. "It knocked my socks off."

Despite the good food and first-class renovation, things at the inn have gotten off to a slow start. Irace admits that opening a hotel during the worst recession in generations wasn't ideal. "We all went through different phases, different moments when we said, 'We can't do this. It's not going to work,'" Irace says.

But they already have devoted fans. Judy and Scott Champney of Johnson City, Tenn., have stayed there a half-dozen times on trips to the area for concerts at Appalachian State University in nearby Boone. They love the atmosphere, especially the pianist and jazz trio who alternate playing outside the dining room. Scott Champney, who teaches biochemistry at the East Tennessee State University medical school, sometimes sits in on drums.

"Our three sons call it 'our hotel' ... like we own it," says Judy Champney, a retired high school English teacher who would get points if she stayed at the Holiday Inn Express just down the road. "I'm just thrilled that they've restored it, rather than tearing down a beautiful old building like that."

The Green Park was recently accepted as a member of Historic Hotels of America, a project of the National Trust for Historic Preservation for hotels that have "faithfully maintained their historic integrity, architecture and ambiance."

Irace and his brother are confident that, as the economy turns around, that same rising tide will lift their boat.

"A lot of our guests buy into what our employees buy into, and what Gene and I bought into," he says. "Which is: We're building something. We're saving something. We're saving something that's worth saving."

Read more: <http://www.foxnews.com/travel/2012/07/16/historic-north-carolina-mountain-lodge-reborn/#ixzz2HtaB9T00>