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It's a good idea to begin the week in the kitchen. Experimenting, gathering friends, discussing, tasting, sharing, communing.

So when the Culinary Cartel—a close-knit group of Johnson County and Kansas City chefs, foodies and friends—issues its monthly Sunday invitation to sip and sup, you clear the calendar.

The palate readies itself for inspired, delicious food brilliant in concept yet simple in execution; locally sourced ingredients transformed by a chef's effortless alchemic talent; extraordinary beverages carefully chosen to complement without evoking extravagance or pretentiousness.

The pulse races at the prospect of soul-enriching, authentic conversation—passionate, master craftspeople reliving moments, bites, revelations. You anticipate day-off chatter dosed liberally with plump kernels of truth about random bits of life in and out of the kitchen; clusters of guests talking over one another but hearing every word.

The Culinary Cartel's Sunday supper invitation is the seductive promise of an unforgettable dinner party...but not one with place cards and a stuffy canapé-filled cocktail hour followed by carefully choreographed courses.

This particular June Sunday evening in south Johnson County with the Culinary Cartel is indeed free-form. The hosts are a celebrated husband-and-wife team who recently moved from the urban core to the suburbs; tonight they're collaborating on an Americana menu that stars comfort foods—nostalgic dishes from hors d'oeuvres to entrée to dessert, juicy riffs that utter the simple truth about the provenance of these two visionary chefs. They're Midwesterners at heart.

As the evening progresses, platters make way for more platters, the table laden with a visually breathtaking buffet. There are glistening olives and artisan cheeses with chewy, grilled bread; splendid Tennessee smoked ham; deviled eggs with a non-regulation filling redolent of horseradish; fragrant crawfish tumbled with corn, clams and sausages; unforgettable pulled-pork sliders sided with homemade slaw; and perfectly grilled steaks with a neon-tinged chimichurri sauce.

The initial feast makes way for plump blue- and red-tinged cobblers bursting with summer stone fruit; miniature root beer floats with handcrafted ice cream in

whimsical flavors not-yet debuted to fans; and melt-away chocolate chip oatmeal cookies piled high on a cake stand.

The guest list is worthy of a guess-who's-coming-to-dinner moment. A legendary chef and his wife who juggle two acclaimed urban restaurants; a nationally revered chocolatier fresh from serving 680 customers at his new ice cream joint; an up-and-coming sommelier who uncorks, sniffs and swirls with a vengeance; an artist who designs for the when-you-care-enough-to-send-the-very-best company; an internationally acclaimed style guru who has helped elevate the American home aesthetic; a young woman who dreams of culinary school; a savvy buyer for the city's newest hip retail space; a chemist who travels the world as senior compliance director for a global conglomerate; and a local tastemaker whose pulse is at the creative beating core on both sides of State Line.

At the center of this magical roster is the passionately food-worshipping, multicultural woman who initiated the Culinary Cartel, daring to invite competitive chefs to sit down together, break bread and lift a glass with some of their fans.

Perhaps Sunday supper is just what the world needs to put it back on its axis.

The Hosts

Megan and Colby Garrelts met while working together at Chicago's renowned Tru; she's from Illinois and he's a Johnson County boy, growing up around 95th and Mission. Together they opened Bluestem on Westport Road in March 2004, the culmination of a dream where the couple performs rousing culinary theatre. Megan creates ethereal confections she terms "New Varieties of American Desserts" and Colby, a self-professed beer, blues and American food aficionado, dishes up "Progressive American Cuisine." Their efforts have yielded coveted fruit. Since its opening, Bluestem has received superior reviews and positive ink in national, regional and local publications, in addition to a recurring top Zagat rating in a fickle, impossibly competitive industry.

The Garrelts moved to Johnson County from Kansas City with young daughter, Maddy, in the spring; on top of the demands of running a five-star restaurant, they're expecting a second child in the fall and wrapping up their first book, tentatively titled "Perennial: a Bluestem Cookbook." The much-anticipated collection of the chefs' recipes and cuisine philosophy is due out in 2011.

Colby—dressed casually in a shirt and jeans, forgoing the crisp chef's whites tonight—gets frustrated when chefs try to hide their roots. "We're in the middle of the country. Americana-type food defines me," he says, stirring up a pot of macaroni and cheese spiked with bacon with one hand while holding a long-neck Schlitz with the other during the Culinary Cartel's June event at the couple's new home.

Colby grew up eating fried chicken at the former Boots and Coates in KC; today he chows down on Stroud's. Just before Maddy was born several years ago, the young dad-to-be made a stop at Go Chicken Go on Troost to grab a chicken sandwich prior to taking Megan to the hospital.

"I knew I was going to need strength," he laughs.

The diminutive CIA-trained Megan, who packs a major punch with her much-loved petite sweets, applauds the Culinary Cartel gatherings. "It's a chance for

us to leave the tension of the food world behind, offer support to one another and laugh," she says. "We grow from helping one another out in this industry."

The Garrelts are no strangers to accolades. Colby has been nominated for the prestigious James Beard Foundation "Best Chef Midwest" in 2007, 2008, 2009 and 2010; and in 2005 "Food & Wine Magazine" named him as one of "America's Best New Chefs."

The Guests

At tonight's convivial Culinary Cartel soiree, guests like Darren Mark, former TV personality, writer, food warrior and owner of Scenic Road Productions and fashionista girlfriend Leslie Goldhahn, retail manager for Studio Dan Meiners, circle the buffet, sampling every tasty morsel Colby and Megan have prepared.

The smile on Mark's face says it all as he savors smoked Tennessee ham on crusty grilled bread.

This, my friend, is serious food heaven.

Arlette Torres, freelance writer, self-proclaimed food worshiper and a woman who rarely takes "no" for an answer, is the founder of the Culinary Cartel pack. Torres exercised her well-known moxie when she floated the "Culi Cartel" idea to the Garrelts and James Beard award-winning chef Michael Smith and his attentive and talented wife and general manager, Nancy.

"My partner, Mary Davis, and I eat at Bluestem, Michael Smith and Extra Virgin and consume massive quantities of Elbow chocolates," says Torres, who is the unofficial photographer of the group, snapping pics of candid moments, empty bottles and plates as evidence of a good time. "I also love these people, their generosity and their devotion. I simply wanted everyone to come together and enrich one another; that's the spirit behind the Culinary Cartel."

Michael, chef-owner of his eponymous restaurant in the Crossroads and its hipster sibling, Extra Virgin, jumped at the opportunity to get to know colleagues and creative professionals on a different level.

"Hosting a laid-back evening in our homes is wonderful," says Michael, who recently snagged an enviable reservation at Spain's über-exalted El Bulli, a restaurant widely considered a mecca for food lovers.

Fellow Culinary Cartelero Jeremy Lamb, general manager and sommelier at Bluestem, says the rotating dinners offer a different perspective from the chefs' restaurant personas.

"We're all relaxed," says Lamb, who has been nominated as one of the city's best sommeliers.

Lamb's girlfriend, Tiffany Fay, hails from Louisiana and has always fantasized about life in the kitchen. The striking blonde is the newest member of the group.

Christopher Elbow, KC's award-winning, famed chocolate chef, and wife, Jen, a designer at Hallmark (the elegant Elbow logo and the bouncy visuals for her husband's new ice cream venture, Glacé, are her creations), thrive on the Culinary Cartel dates for the joie de vivre ambiance and the chance to share his latest personal culinary adventure.

"When we hosted I cooked pizzas in my wood-burning oven," says Elbow, known for his attention to detail and his sweet tooth. "I am obsessed with developing the perfect Neapolitan-style pie."

Tonight the Elbows have toted a half-dozen or so Glacé flavors to add to Megan's dessert offerings. The Culinary Cartel members madly scoop bites from each container, ignoring decorum—never mind the double-dipping.

David Jimenez, vice president of visual merchandising at Hallmark, is a KC creative powerhouse and when in town, joins the group; he's fascinated with the personalities behind the restaurants he adores.

"I've helped people create soulful spaces in their homes through my work at Restoration Hardware and Pottery Barn," comments Jimenez. "It's an honor to be in the presence of incredible talent that creates theatre in their work every day."

Jimenez, a self-described weekend cook smack in the middle of renovating his new home on the Country Club Plaza, looks forward to perhaps whipping up Sunday brunch for the Culinary Cartel.

"Lovely cocktails with a twist will be served, of course," smiles Jimenez.

And so goes the understated thread of respect, admiration and camaraderie amongst the Sunday supper club.

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