





# honors

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## kc's culinary stars

From concept to creation, Kansas City chefs and drink masters continue to raise the bar on culinary excellence. We tip our toques to our fourth annual batch of Honors awardees.

### CHEF OF THE YEAR

#### COLBY GARRELTS: BLUESTEM RESTAURANT

A multiple-time nominee for the James Beard Foundation's Best Chef Midwest, a member of *Food & Wine's* Top 10 Best New Chefs of 2005, and now our Chef of the Year honoree, Bluestem Chef Colby Garrelts has established himself as a star in the Kansas City food scene. Fittingly, his culinary career reads like a movie script.

**Scene 1:** Kansas City boy is inspired by his hometown's rich barbecue tradition.

Like many Kansas Citians, Garrelts can beckon food-induced nostalgia from the sizzle of burgers and steaks hot off the grill. "My father liked to cook," he recalls. "I remember being little, and my mom and sister would go to church or something, and he would cook, try something new. One time he threw beef tongue on the grill. If you know anything about beef tongue, you know you don't grill it. It was like eating a baseball bat. Now, knowing what I know, I think it was hilarious."

Despite the grilled tongue incident, Garrelts' fondness for the culture of barbecue moved him to follow a high school friend into culinary school. "I don't think I realized it would go where it has now," he says. "I know it sounds strange, but I started finding the art in it." Garrelts' growing flair for food soon led him to kitchens beyond his home turf.

**Scene 2:** Aspiring chef earns his stripes with big-city fine dining.

Having advanced from busboy to sous chef through a progression of area restaurants, Garrelts migrated to TRU in Chicago. "That restaurant was five-star dining, the hottest restaurant in the country at the time," he says. "I was terribly intimidated. I thought I knew what I was doing when I got there, but when you go into an environment like that, they're almost like the military. They bring you in, completely tear you down, and build you from scratch."

Gutsy enough to persevere, Garrelts was rewarded for his TRU tenure with the precision and technique that has shaped his career—as well as a more serendipitous takeaway.

**Scene 3:** Chef finds true love.

While at TRU, Garrelts met fellow chef Megan Schultz, who would later become his wife and partner in crime. The two followed their fine-dining initiation at TRU with positions in Las Vegas and Los Angeles, strengthening their partnership both in and out of the kitchen in the process.

**Scene 4:** Chef returns home to start his own highly acclaimed restaurant.

With an eye on the up-and-coming Kansas City foodscape, Garrelts saw an opportunity for the newlyweds to inject their culinary style into his hometown. The two relocated to Kansas City and in 2004 opened



Bluestem in Westport. Nine years later, Garrelts' progressive American cuisine, alongside his wife's pastry prowess and the staff hospitality, has earned the restaurant an array of local and national accolades.

"Everyone has their own thing," Garrelts says. "Ours is a level of detail and artistry that's unique to us." A taste of any one of Bluestem's refined, prix fixe menu items illustrates his point. "I think what defines us really is that we don't have any one defining dish. The menu constantly evolves. I've not done the same dish twice."

**Scene 5:** Chef starts a family, comes full circle.

In the midst of establishing a new Kansas City favorite, the couple also established a family. Now the proud parent of two, Garrelts opened his newest project, Rye, last month. The menu features comfort food such as brisket and fried chicken, which can be ordered in portions large enough to share. "When I was little, my dad's favorite restaurant was Boots & Coats, like a Stroud's. It was just family tradition to go there," he reminisces. "Now I'm married; I'm a father. I want to express what that means with food, the concept of family, but do it with some swank and style. I have no idea where it will go," he adds. "It's just been really special that Megan and I have been able to put our stamp on the city, hopefully for a long time to come."

## MIXOLOGIST OF THE YEAR SUSAN AVERY: CAFÉ EUROPA

Crestwood's Café Europa is the kind of place where the regulars know some of the best drinks aren't on the menu—they're in the mental repertoire of the eatery's renowned mixologist, Susan Avery. They call her The Zookeeper for her ability to tame the potpourri of personalities that frequent Europa. Her blend of quirkiness and geniality makes it seem effortless, but a stock of alcohol at her disposal doesn't hurt, either. Watch her work behind the bar with her homemade infusions, though, and you'll agree she's more of the mad-chemist type, in the most complimentary sense.

"I love the creativity of making new things, of making your own product," she says. Her enthusiasm for concocting drinks emerged at the tender age of 12, when Avery's college-age brother lent her his bartending expertise. "I started making drinks for my parents for happy hour," she says. "They got a kick out of it."

Once she reached university herself, Avery worked as a waitress in an all-you-can-eat spaghetti restaurant in Lincoln, Nebraska. "I begged to be a bartender," she says. She eventually landed a position assisting a bartender at a newly opened steakhouse. "She taught me the mechanics of it. She showed me you only need three formulas for most drinks."

The mathematical approach suited Avery, for whom mixing drinks is not an art but a science she has been developing relentlessly ever since. "I worked in pastry before," she says. "I'm a Virgo. I'm exact. I'm actually freaky about that, being exact."

So much so, in fact, that she recalls one client who, observing her meticulously measure out her liquid wares, suggested she ask her boss for permission to free-pour her drinks. "I just had to laugh," she says. "I like to know every cocktail I pour will taste the same, night after night."

Being such a stickler for consistency poses an intriguing juxtaposition for the otherwise easygoing Avery, for if it's not her relaxed charm she is revered for, it's her imagination. "I wasn't that inventive until I started at Zin (where Michael Smith is now located) in 2000," she explains. Long before Manifesto and Kansas City's other cocktail-centric hot spots came into being, Avery turned the bar into her own science lab. Soon, patrons were showing up for her martinis as much as the food. "We wrote a martini list with 12 drinks, and my life changed forever. I realized it was not so simple. I was shaking 100 martinis a night."

