

"Her corkscrew curls rakishly swept off her forehead with a flowered hairclip, Madilyn Elizabeth Garrelts leaned across the bar at bluestem, twirling a cell phone, jibber-jabbering to anyone who'd listen. Dinner service hadn't yet begun, so award-winning chef Colby Garrelts was being dad, holding tight to his blue-eyed baby girl while mama, pastry chef Megan Garrelts, finished preparing the evening's desserts.



What a difference a few years and a child make. Just over four years ago, newlyweds Megan and Colby Garrelts opened bluestem in Westport. Their fine-dining establishment drew raves locally and nationally, from The Wall Street Journal to Wine Spectator. Colby was chosen one of Food & Wine's best new chefs in 2005. He has been a finalist for a James Beard Award for the Midwest twice, in 2007 and 2008. Megan's pastry recipes have been printed in several national food magazines. Santé Magazine selected bluestem the 2007 Culinary Hospitality Restaurant of the Year, while the Zagat Survey America's Top Restaurants has given it the top food ranking in Kansas City from 2005 through 2008. All that publicity -- and the obligations that go along with celebrity -- kept them on the road and out of the kitchen. Then baby was born. And no surprise to any parent around, priorities and obligations changed. Colby is back in the kitchen full time, Megan has assembled an able crew of assistants, and the current staff is polished without being stuffy. Most important, they've settled into their roles as successful chefs, restaurateurs and parents.

After two nights of dining, I found an artistry and maturity in their food and a vibe in the restaurant that I didn't detect when I reviewed it four years ago. Diners can order a la carte entrees or one of four prix-fixe menus -- three, five, seven or 12 courses. Wine pairings are optional. For the first night of dining, my companions and I chose the seven-course option, choosing four items each from salads and soups, cold and hot dishes. There was a glorious fava bean and pearl onion salad, with explosively green favas, tender and meaty, circling a poufy cloud of whipped ricotta. Three ice-cold, Thumbelina-sized Penn Cove oysters were nestled in their craggy shells, next to shimmering squares of lemon balm champagne gelee and dots of earthy beet essence. Even a simple-sounding mixed green salad with goat cheese truffles, spring herbs and croutons was harmoniously, delicately dressed with a dead-on sherry vinaigrette. And Colby's signature torchon of foie gras was exquisite: The supple slice of foie gras was brightened with a dab of quince and a spot of vanilla rhubarb sauce. Finely chopped peanuts added crunch.

Each of us chose a different pasta, including a fusilli tossed with craggy pieces of duck confit brightened with orange zest and bitty diced carrots and turnips. Gnocchi nuggets were seasoned with nutty browned butter, slips of ever-so-crunchy summer squash and flecks of fresh sage, while a veal Bolognese-style sauce made with soffrito, tomato, pine nuts and oregano was spooned over calamarata (shaped like calamari rings) pasta. The final courses were chosen from Sea and Land. We ordered the Roasted Halibut with clams, mussels, linguica and white beans in a bouillabaisse broth, roast "Kurobuta" pork loin with glazed cipolini onions and bourbon jus, the Campo Lindo hen with a ragout of spring carrots and radishes in a pistachio pistou, and the dry-aged Piedmontese striploin with asparagus and potato puree.

From beginning to end, every ingredient on the plates made sense, creating layers of textures, flavors, colors and aromas. But the dishes were sophisticated without being intimidating. It was the kind of presentation that put us at ease. For my second night, my dining companion and I chose a la

carte items, including some favorites from the first night and the chilled tomato gazpacho soup. A few sprigs of cilantro floated atop the clear, clarified tomato broth, which was dotted with blanched and peeled baby tomatoes, tiny onions and cucumber balls the size of vintage pearl buttons. It was as pretty as a Miro painting with vivid colors and bold shapes. We finished our meals with the cheese platter and the sorbet pairings, marveling over the bite of the Spanish Manchego cheese and the silkiness of the carrot-ginger sorbet. As we scraped up the last bits of sorbet like children wanting to get every drop of their ice cream, Megan waltzed through the dining room, baby Madi on her hip. She watched with a mama's pride as diners cooed at her daughter and not just her lovely desserts."

Expert wine pairings

Now here's a wine list to fall in love with. And if you need any help, simply ask general manager/sommelier Jeremy Lamb. He selected wine pairings for our prix-fixe menu, ingeniously serving a stony Leitz Dragonstone Riesling with the fava beans and whipped ricotta salad, a vin santo with the Wagyu beef tartar with olive caramel and the Francis Ford Coppola Director's Cut Zinfandel with the braised veal and pine nut tossed pasta. The Chateau Greysac was a classy pairing to the duck confit fusilli: The smoke and cherry notes and soft, worn-leather tannins made it just right for the sweet duck meat. For our evening of a la carte dining, we ordered the Spencer Rolofson Palaterre, a mystical blend of Syrah, Carignan and Valdiguie, also known as American Gamay. Even though it was a red wine, it was fabulous with the fava beans and even managed to hold its own with the chilled tomato gazpacho, a crisp, almost acidic cold soup with cucumber, onion, tomato and arugula.

High-value happy hour

One of the best values in town is happy hour at bluestem, where appetizers and entrees are half-price from 5 to 7 p.m. Tuesday through Thursday and the signature cocktails are just \$7. For a bite to eat, the truffled pomme frites with six dipping sauces (\$2.50 during happy hour) is enough to share. Long, fat and gloriously crunchy on the outside, velvety on the inside, they are drizzled with truffle oil and topped with shaved Parmesan. They are some of the best fries in town, especially when dunked in house-made garlic aioli or dredged through truffled grainy mustard. A spicy shrimp fricassee served over Parmesan grits (\$7 during happy hour) was as authentic as any served in the Carolinas. Topped with large, tender shrimp, the coarse, chewy grits were studded with teeny bits of smoky sausage and chopped scallions and had a warm, spicy bite. Bartender Van Zarr, one of the 12 finalists in this year's Greater Kansas City Bartending Competition, does exquisite drinks, including a white gazpacho martini and an amazing Moscow mojito.

Food: 4 stars

Service: 3 1/2 stars

Atmosphere: 3 1/2 stars

- Lauren Chapin
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