

Far From the Big Cities, And Not Missing Them

By JOE DRAPE

COLBY GARRELTS never doubted that his hometown would appreciate his skill in the kitchen. He had climbed from busboy and steakhouse line cook to sous-chef at one of this city's most adventurous restaurants. Then he wandered the culinary horizon, but he always intended to return home.

He went to Chicago and into the kitchen of Tru, one of the Midwest's most acclaimed restaurants, and to Las Vegas and Jean Joho's Eiffel Tower restaurant in the Paris Hotel. He worked in Santa Monica under Hans Röckenwagner.

When Mr. Garrelts, 33, returned here in 2003, he had married Megan Schultz, who was a talented pastry chef with an equally accomplished résumé. They had a dream: to own a home, raise children and open a restaurant every bit as daring and recognized as the places where they had learned.

Here, in a short time, the Garreltses have started or realized all three tasks. Their first child, Madilyn, was born on June 24 and has a nursery in the family's three-bedroom home in Brookside, one of the city's oldest and most desirable neighborhoods. Their restaurant, Bluestem, has a large following devoted to its prix fixe menu that can run from 3 to 12 courses.

Better still, perhaps, the Garreltses found that Bluestem was hardly an odd fort on the fine-food frontier, but instead another pillar in a lively food scene. They are among a half-dozen or so chef-owned fine dining establishments becoming every-night destinations. They cater to a growing group of customers who know their way around both Dean & DeLuca and the local Price Chopper.

Excellent fine dining establishments are not new to the Midwest — or, for that matter, the rest of America. In recent years, however, smaller cities such as Kansas City, Minneapolis, Milwaukee and St. Louis have sustained not just good individual restaurants but packs of them, along with wine shops and stores selling the latest variety of sea salt.

This year the James Beard Foundation acknowledged the nation's bounty of noteworthy restaurants by giving awards for best chef in 10 regions of the United States, instead of the 8 it had recognized for many years. (The Midwest was split into two new regions, as was the Southeast.)

"The Midwest had like 16 states and was absurdly large," said Rick Nelson, a member of the foundation's restaurant and chef awards subcommittee, and the restaurant critic at The Minneapolis Star-Tribune. "There was a feeling we weren't recognizing the depth of restaurants in St. Louis, Cleveland, Indianapolis and across the region."

Mr. Garrelts was nominated for best chef in the Midwest this year. The award was won by another Kansas City chef, Celina Tio of the American Restaurant.

"There has always been great food outside New York and California but now it's getting recognized," said Ruth Reichl, editor of *Gourmet*. "Food has become part of our popular culture, and you have a whole generation that was raised to think food is interesting and exciting. We've become more confident eaters. We've become more interesting eaters."

Television, especially the Food Network, has made stars of chefs, as well as how-to instructors, which has created a more knowledgeable consumer. Food is no longer a pursuit of snobs but rather a pursuit of cool kids, which means everyone.

"The way people travel now, they see interesting food in other cities and expect it at home," Mr. Nelson said.

As a result of this and other changes in the way people eat, some of the nation's most celebrated chefs have recognized opportunity in the lands formerly known as flyover country. Lidia Bastianich has Lidia's here in Kansas City, and Wolfgang Puck and Jean-Georges Vongerichten have opened restaurants in Minneapolis.

"You know you're being taken seriously on the national level when those guys come to town," Tim McKee, 40, chef-owner of La Belle Vie in Minneapo-

lis. "They can open up anywhere. They do the research. They're choosing Minneapolis, which means it's a viable market."

Dean & DeLuca, based in New York, reached a similar conclusion about Kansas City a decade ago when it opened a store in Leawood, Kan., which is on the Missouri border and is part of Kansas City's metropolitan area. It sits in Johnson County — one of the 75 most affluent counties in the nation according to 2005 Census Bureau estimates based on per capita income — and is the headquarters of several corporations, most notably Sprint Nextel.

The bulk of Dean & DeLuca's sales here is in prepared food like lasagna Bolognese. In fact, the store sells more prepared food than the company's five other retail stores, said the general manager, Josh Hodapp.

"It's a sophisticated market that understands that there is not just white sugar or brown sugar but all kinds of sugar," Mr. Hodapp said. "They want to experience new things."

Whether it is steak or barbecue or fried chicken, people here have always been passionate about their food, Mr. Garrelts said, adding: "Now tastes are evolving and becoming more refined." His menu ranges from caviar with truffled egg and crème fraîche foam to hen accented with chard, grits and scallions.

Across the street from Dean & DeLuca at 40 Sardines, Debbie Gold, 43, has transplanted her classical training to a suburban strip mall to create one of the area's most popular restaurants. She is a Chicago native who studied in France before working in some of her hometown's top restaurants, including Everest and Charlie Trotter's.

She came here in 1994 with Michael Smith, then her husband, to rejuvenate the American Restaurant, for more than 30 years a local institution and nationally regarded restaurant founded by Donald Hall Sr., the chairman of Hallmark.

While at the American, the couple saw the market research concluding that much of the restaurant's clientele were the highly educated and upwardly mobile residents of Johnson County. So in 2002, Ms. Gold and Mr. Smith opened 40 Sardines in what amounted to their customers' backyard. They also created a comfortable ambience for the dining room, setting 40 Sardines apart from the dress-up, special-occasion feel of the American.

Between the casual setting and a menu accenting hearty Midwest food (short ribs with shitake mushrooms and snow peas on wasabi noodles), Ms. Gold aims to attract the widest demographic possible: families from the neighborhood, out-of-town executives doing business at Sprint Nextel and couples celebrating anniversaries.

"When I decided to go to the American I thought I would be here for only a few years," said Ms. Gold, who is divorced from Mr. Smith and owns 40 Sardines solely. "But I'm as busy here as I've ever been, but the stress level is not the same. I like the quality of life here. And the bar for what is expected of a restaurant has been raised, so it is very fulfilling."

The restaurant business is challenging, and a knowledgeable and enthusiastic customer base combined with a talented chef is hardly a foolproof recipe for success.

In 1989, when Sanford D'Amato turned a family grocery store in his native Milwaukee into a modern dining room with a small business loan and his own and his wife's life savings, he did not know what to expect. Nearly 20 years later, with reams of accolades, he still does not know. In the past six months, he said, he has watched as three upscale restaurants have closed.

"There is better food and a more passionate community," Mr. D'Amato said. "But this is a tough business. When you do not have the density in population of New York or Chicago — where 40 percent or more of your business can be local — and you do not have steady tourist or convention trade, it's really tough."

The new parents, Colby and Megan Garrelts, are careful not to celebrate too heartily what has been a honeymoon as restaurateurs. They have expanded into



A FOOD TOWN GETS FOODIER Megan and Colby Garrelts, above, own bluestem restaurant in Kansas City's Westport district.

adjacent space and added a lounge and a menu for its 45 seats. It has helped increase revenues from \$800,000 in 2003 to \$1.2 million last year.

Mr. Garrelts knows they will never do a fraction of the business restaurants similar to theirs do in New York or Chicago or any big city. Yet, he sees the potential for market growth. He cites his father, Greg, as a case study: He is a retired Sprint Nextel executive and an investor in Bluestem.

"When he first came in to eat, he had me set him up because he said he cannot understand the menu," Colby Garrelts said. "Well, he still acts like that, but he knows what is going on. I tell you, we're seeing more people from all walks, all generations coming in who know about food. They're coming back, too. As long as we can be the best that we can be, it's going to work out."

Recipe: Torchio Pasta With Oyster Mushrooms, Braised Chicken and San Marzano Tomatoes

Adapted from Bluestem, Kansas City, Mo.

Time: 1 hour 45 minutes

- 2 chicken drumsticks and 2 thighs
- Salt and freshly ground black pepper
- ¼ cup olive oil
- 4 cloves garlic, thinly sliced
- 2 carrots, peeled and diced
- 1 onion, peeled and diced
- 8 ounces oyster mushrooms, cleaned and coarsely chopped
- 1 10-ounce can San Marzano tomatoes (and juices), crushed by hand
- 1 bay leaf
- ½ cup chicken stock or water
- 1 pound torchio, campanelle or other torch or bell-shaped pasta
- Grated pecorino Sardo, for garnish
- Chopped fresh oregano, for garnish.

1. Preheat oven to 350 degrees. Pat chicken dry with paper towels, season liberally with salt and pepper, and set aside. Place a Dutch oven over medium heat and add olive oil. When oil shimmers, add chicken and brown well on both sides.
2. Remove chicken from pan and set aside. Add garlic and allow to brown slightly (15 to 30 seconds) then add carrots, onion and mushrooms. Sauté until onions are lightly browned, 10 to 15 minutes.
3. Add tomatoes, bay leaf and chicken stock. Bring back to a simmer and nestle chicken leg quarters into tomato sauce, spooning some sauce on top. Cover and transfer to oven to braise until chicken pulls easily away from bone, 45 minutes to 1 hour.
4. Transfer chicken to a plate and allow to cool; keep tomato sauce warm. Meanwhile bring 6 quarts of lightly salted water to a boil. Pick cooled chicken meat from bone and return to tomato sauce. 5. Cook torchio in salted boiling water until al dente, about 10 minutes. Drain well and add to chicken mixture. Serve garnished with grated pecorino Sardo and fresh oregano.

Yield: 8 appetizer servings or 4 main servings.