

Prairie Prize

by Lisa Waterman Gray -- *Sante* - March 2008 cover story

When Co-Owners Colby and Megan Garrelts opened the doors to bluestem restaurant and wine lounge in Kansas City, Missouri, four years ago, in came a steady stream of customers—and a rush of kudos. In 2005, *Food & Wine* magazine named Colby among the Best 10 New Chefs, and soon after the restaurant received *Wine Spectator's* Award of Excellence in 2005 and 2006. Four stars from the Zagat Survey followed in 2005, 2006, and 2007, and then bluestem was named Restaurant of the Year at the 2007 Santé Restaurant Awards. Commenting on the immediate success of their venture, Colby simply states, "There is craftsmanship in everything we do."

Where to Begin

The Garrelts are both trained chefs—Colby on the savory side of the kitchen, Megan taking on the sweets. As restaurant owners, they also wear many other hats. Colby is the plumber, electrician, and staff disciplinarian. In addition to directing desserts, Megan is the bookkeeper, reservationist, florist, interior designer, and cleaning person. She has a pastry sous chef, Joe West, and Colby receives backup from bluestem's sous chef, Robbie Padilla. Jeremy Lamb is general manager.

Megan and Colby previously worked at top restaurants in Kansas City, Chicago, Las Vegas, and Southern California, but choose to return to Kansas City for their first opening. "Colby knew KC very well," Megan explains, "along with having good contacts for business-related needs, like a good insurance agent, food vendors, financial advisors, and so on." Living in California at the time that they were planning their concept, the Garrelts visited Kansas City to discuss buying the business from the current tenant. A deal was made in mid-October 2003, and the couple took over the space in early November. Receiving some start-up money from Colby's father, they were able to borrow the balance from a local bank. "Saving for such a large and costly business would have taken us too long," Megan remarks, adding, "but if we do another restaurant we would like to have some money saved and finance part of it or use investors."

The 43-seat restaurant operates beside what was once The Stolen Grill, where Colby previously worked. He knew the neighborhood had high traffic and would bring a good mix of clientele. "We're in a leased space, but we own all the business-related parts," Megan says. The restaurant's name, bluestem, was chosen to honor native Midwestern prairie grasses.

Managing Manpower

"Employees are probably the hardest part about having a business," Colby admits. "I try to have a firm but fun working environment, but during service I become a dictator . . . that's the way it is. But there's an innate sense of responsibility [for our employees], and that's a good feeling." Megan and Colby host a catered employee Christmas party, and sometimes take employees out for lunch or dinner as well as reward them with meals after "cleaning parties." Many of those on staff have been with the Garrelts since the restaurant opened.

In the kitchen, they employ five cooks. "We need a good mix of young professional cooks — people who can mesh well with what we do and learn our style of cooking," Megan states. "Sometimes well-seasoned cooks have too many habits from other places that can hinder the kitchen's goal if they cannot be retrained properly to work with our needs and style. Since we have such a small staff, it's important that everyone gets along and we all have the same goal."

Table service at bluestem falls somewhere between "bistro" and a more formal style. "We wanted a relaxed dining room where the food can be featured without getting

overshadowed by pretentious service,” Megan says. “We want our guests to be comfortable yet well taken care of.”

Mandy Perrigan has been a server in fine dining for seven years - nearly three of them at bluestem. “We all work very well together, and Megan and Colby are very good at compensating us for our time,” she says. “They’re very involved in what goes on day-to-day, and very good at keeping us informed about food and beverage. It’s probably the most food-intensive experience I’ve ever had.” Servers at bluestem taste food and wine—and appropriate pairings of each—on a weekly basis.

Fine Fare

Open for dinner and brunch, bluestem offers a range of multi-course menu choices with three-, five-, seven-, and 12-course dinner packages, priced from \$55 to \$100 (excluding wine). “People from out-of-town tend to think it’s a good deal,” Colby remarks, referring especially to those who have dined in culinary hotspots such as New York City, Chicago, and California.

The chef’s menus have ‘slots’ for particular dishes, depending on the season. There is always a slot for seafood, chicken, and beef on the entree side, and these are lighter offerings in the spring and summer. Regardless of the protein, Colby aims to create food that gives the guest new ingredient and flavor pairings, but also remains cleanly minimalist with the elements on a plate. One of Colby’s fish entrees, for example, is such a combination – Scallop and Prawn, Cauliflower, Sweet Onion, Truffle Crème, and a Whipped Fumet (\$28), and a cold appetizer is Tasmanian Sweet Crab, Green Apple, Endive, and Kalamansi (\$15). A popular entree, Campo Lindo Hen, Braised Wagyu, Matsutaki Mushroom, Black Radish (\$32), exemplifies the reaction that *San Francisco Chronicle* restaurant reviewer Michael Bauer had to bluestem’s menu: “It’s great to see the cutting edge shining in the Midwest, where barbecue and fried chicken reign supreme,” Bauer noted in his web log, *Between Meals*, where he also lauded the chef for creating dishes that have “hearty sensibilities but respected the ingredients.”

In the pastry kitchen, Megan provides the finishing touch for the bluestem experience with such dishes as seasonal fruit fritters or Raspberry Fennel Parfaits (\$9 each), or a three-course dessert tasting (\$19), which often features a fruit course, a custard offering, and a chocolate creation.

The Garrelts source the highest quality products, from sustainably raised fish to organic and local produce whenever possible. They generally use the same vendors throughout the year, but will make switches seasonally, such as using Atlantic fish suppliers during the winter and Pacific fish companies in summer as well as local farm harvests.

“We try to run a 23 to 26 percent food cost,” Colby claims. “I can charge less for higher-cost items because I charge more on lower price items; I’ll absorb the cost of Wagyu with the salad cost. And I’ll also change an item if the cost gets too high.”

To keep up with the bookkeeping, Megan reports, “We have costing forms we use to manage weekly/monthly inventory, daily purchases, and daily labor as well as to review monthly P&L statements.” To reduce waste, she adds, “We try to utilize items completely by incorporating them into bar specials and brunch specials.”

Bar Basics

In 2005, Megan and Colby added a wine lounge to bluestem, where customers can order wine flights, premium varietal beers, and cocktails. They stock a wide beverage selection, including many different kinds of gin and vodka. “We do try to keep up with beverage trends and incorporate them into our specialty drinks,” Megan says, “but we have wines to complement our food.”

Colby concurs: "We want to be comprehensive with our wine list, but also have an inventory we can manage, that moves well, and maintains consistency. We try to have 200 bottle selections, ranging from \$30 to \$400, but most are between \$50 and \$100."

The restaurant offers wine pairings with its multi-course menus as well as additional wine tastings and dinners, plus quarterly "teas" around select holidays. "We believe giving guests different dining options will not only give attention to the restaurant's versatility," Megan comments, "but also attract many different diners, reaching a broader demographic and, in the long run, more profit options."

Because of all the awards they have won, and their unique place in the growing Kansas City dining scene, the Garrelts are constantly under a microscope. The pressure is always on, but neither is complaining. Indeed, Megan concludes, "We see our dream come true when we walk in here every day."

Bluestem

900 Westport Road, Kansas City MO 64111

816-561-1101

www.bluestemkc.com

Owners Colby & Megan Garrelts

General Manager Jeremy Lamb

Seats 43 Dining Room, 50 Lounge

Employees 17

Management/Kitchen/Dining/Bar (owners plus G.M., sous chef and pastry sous chef/2/8 front of house employees includes two bartenders and three who work both dining/bar)

Gross Annual Restaurant Revenue \$1.2 million

Executive Chef Colby Garelts

Sous Chef David Crum

Pastry Chef Megan Garrelts

Food Style Progressive American

Average Dinner Check \$65 per person

Average Number of Dinner Covers 35

Gross Annual Food Revenue \$600,000

Beverage Manager Jeremy Lamb

Wine List Focus Old world and new world boutique wines; emphasis on pairings **Wines on List** (number of selections) 150

Wines by the Glass 12

Wine Cellar (number of bottles) 300

Average Bottle Price \$60

Cases Sold per Month 20

Gross Annual Wine Revenue \$250,000

Bar Manager Jeremy Lamb

Bar Focus Sophisticated yet comfortable lounge with interesting selections and seasonal beers that pair with Chef Colby's relaxed lounge menu

Signature Drink The Signature b (Kettle One Citron Vodka, Ice Wine, Moscato d' Asiti, Blueberry Granite, and a Lemon Twist)

Average Drink Price \$8

Gross Annual Spirits Revenue \$150,000

Previously a cook, caterer, professional baker, and restaurant reviewer, Lisa Waterman Gray now writes about food and restaurants in the Kansas City region.