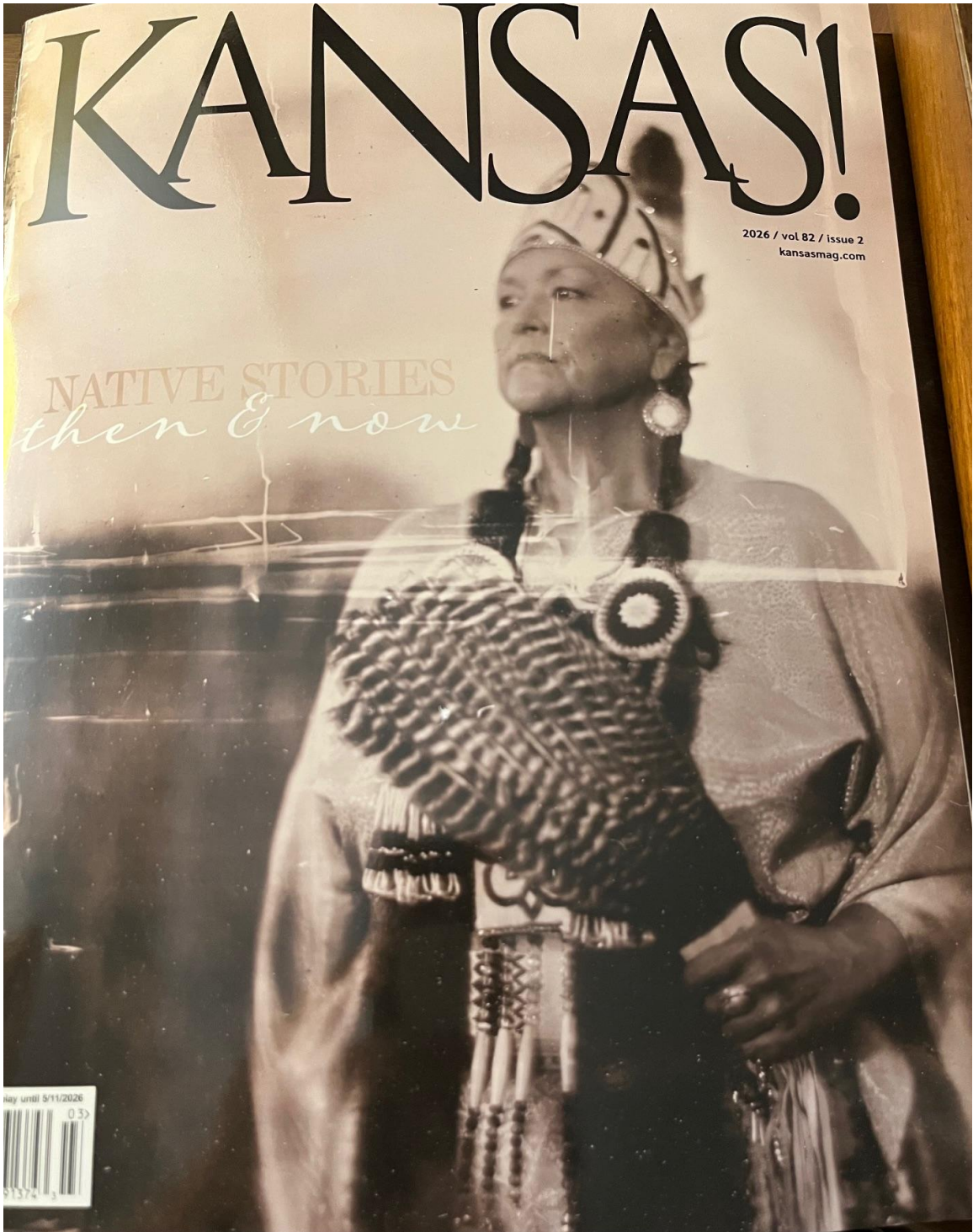


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'Little Restaurant on the Prairie'

For three hours a week, Chef Stan's Place becomes a culinary destination with a devoted following

Story by Lisa Waterman Gray Photography by Dave Leiker

In the heart of the Flint Hills, just beyond a gravel driveway in Strong City, sits Chef Stan's Place. This charming restaurant is housed in a renovated white church built in 1905. Since opening in 2021, this once-a-week lunch spot, dubbed the "Little Restaurant on the Prairie," has become a popular culinary destination.

Inside, vintage wood tables and chairs seat up to 30 guests. The original wood floors, beautifully restored, complement the crisp white walls. A small wood stove and bar with a corrugated-metal facade punctuate the serene dining space, where sunlight pours in from the broad windows, offering tranquil views of fields and train tracks.

Chef Stan Lerner, owner, chef and self-proclaimed dishwasher, cooks his Sunday brunches entirely from scratch.

"In four years, our basic Sunday menu has not changed, and neither have the waitress and chef," Lerner says. "I try to add seasonal specials, but people drive hours to eat the same food they had last time and come back because we don't change anything."

Customer favorites include super-chunky Tuscan tomato soup; crunchy, herbed sourdough bread; and enormous, decadent Magic Cookie Bars, which are drenched in chocolate sauce and topped with shredded coconut and chopped walnuts. The lunch menu also includes a hearty quiche with feta, gruyere and spinach; a savory bowl of three-cheese ravioli; and classic grilled cheese sandwiches. Plenty of fresh herbs garnish each dish.

Opening a restaurant in a city of 400 people was a

Above Chef Stan's Place in Strong City is open only on Sundays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m.

dramatic shift from Lerner's early years in Los Angeles as an artist, art dealer, film producer, author and chef. Lerner grew up in California, where he frequently visited his aunt and uncle, two socialites in Los Angeles who enjoyed taking their nephew to up-and-coming restaurants.

On one such occasion, when Lerner was just 12, he met Wolfgang Puck, who was preparing food for a party thrown by Lerner's aunt. Lerner had always enjoyed cooking, but it wasn't until he met Puck that he realized he could turn his hobby into a career.

Puck showed the young Lerner a few tricks of the trade, including how to make his signature garlic chicken from his days running Spago in Beverly Hills. The trick, Lerner explains, is stuffing a handful of garlic cloves under the skin of the chicken breast before baking it, then delicately removing them without breaking the skin before searing the chicken on the grill.

Lerner first visited Kansas when checking on the production process for his book *Criminal*. "I had become fascinated with the idea of living a more normal life. I wanted to see what life was like outside of the [California] bubble I lived in," he says. "The only small town I had a connection with was Winfield."

In 2013, he moved to Winfield and opened the first of his three restaurants, Chef's Table. In 2020, he opened Chef's Table Roadhouse in Wichita. It closed in 2021, and Chef's Table closed in 2022.

Before 225 Church Street was home to Chef Stan's Place, the building served many purposes: it was a church, an American Legion post and even a youth tech center. Once Lerner purchased it, he spent three years restoring it.

"I realized I really liked renovating," he says. Lerner still spends about 40 hours per week renovating abandoned homes, leaving just enough time to create his exceptional once-a-week menu.

The restaurant is open only on Sundays, 11 a.m.-2 p.m. This schedule first took shape to accommodate Lerner's busy schedule operating his other restaurants.

"I used to prepare food at Chef's Table and bring it with me," he says. "About 40 hours of cooking go into

these three [open] restaurant hours. I'm also the florist and the arborist ... I grow some ingredients in our raised beds."

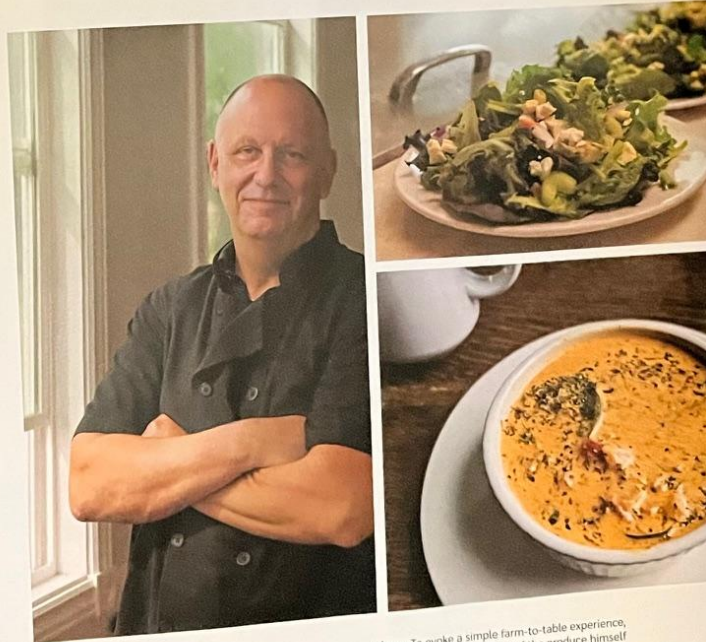
Lerner grows most of the produce himself and locally sources whatever else he can. He even makes his sweet corn chowder with corn from the surrounding fields, thanks to an arrangement with the farmers.

"I want Chef Stan's Place to be a unique, real, and very simple farm-to-table experience ... like going back in time," he adds. "I want my customers to leave the world behind when they are here." KS

Facebook: Chef Stan's Place
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- STAN LERNER



Above To evoke a simple farm-to-table experience, Chef Stan Lerner grows most of the produce himself and locally sources whatever else he can.