

Brazen Reserve

Quality Time with a Culinary Artist

By Sunil Malapati

“Risk is what separates the artist from the artisan.” —T. Bone Burnett

Chef Kevin Scharpf is certainly an artist! When he named his restaurant Brazen and opened it in the Millwork District, back when the area was just waking up, he certainly was making a statement. When he decided to apply for and actually did compete on *Top Chef: Kentucky*, the first chef from Iowa to do so, he was declaring that starting and maintaining a restaurant had not dampened his artistic development. During the pandemic, he decided to start on a new venture, to push himself further with Brazen Reserve,



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and he created a unique experience you will be hard-pressed to find in many major cities. Indeed, one of his stated aims for Brazen Reserve is to provide a meal that would make patrons exclaim “I can’t believe this is in Dubuque!” The James Beard Foundation just named Kevin Scharpf as one of 20 semifinalists for Best Chef: Midwest, an honor mostly reserved for chefs in bigger cities like Minneapolis or Madison or Milwaukee. Yes, this is now happening in Dubuque!

So, what does Brazen Reserve offer that you do not get at Brazen, a well-loved and well-established restaurant in the Dubuque scene? Restaurants offer



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predictability, a reliable menu that helps you as a patron navigate and decide what you are in the mood for. You can choose the chef’s special, but you can always fall back on the dishes you know. A chef’s table requires a leap of faith, a level of trust that the chef will take care of you and give you an experience beyond your imagination. Brazen Reserve offers three kinds of experiences depending on how much control you are willing to give up: you could do a customized cocktail party, a family-style dinner with shared plates, or let the chef take over and give you a multi-course tasting menu with 4-, 6-, or 8-course menus. I was lucky enough to partake in 4- and 6-course tasting menus over successive weekends and could ascertain first-hand the keen food intelligence that informs Chef Kevin’s menus.

Before we go deeper into the tasting menus and the food, let me describe the ambiance and the experience itself. The space for Brazen Reserve is comfortably masculine, with an industrial chic, all stainless steel and clean lines with a few potted plants adding warmth. There are lots of modern cooking appliances, sous vide baths and induction stovetops, a pasta machine in the corner. The amuse-bouche is served when everyone in the party is there, and there is no sense of hurry. You feel like you have the chef’s full attention the whole couple of hours or so; he is engaging, will answer your questions readily, and will walk you through the experience. The two times I was there, Chef Miles Breed was helping Chef Kevin and was equally helpful (of course, I have known him for years!) The serving staff is attentive and will advise you about wines and cocktails—I was able to pair a couple of delightful wines with some dishes based on their recommendations. You can also order any cocktail from the Brazen menu next door—365’s Kristina, whose birthday was one of the occasions, introduced me to quite a few I plan to order in my next trips.

The care that the entire team at Brazen Reserve has put into the atmosphere expectedly shows up in the menu itself.



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Both meals started with an amuse-bouche of raw oysters. The first time, there was champagne vinaigrette with finely diced apple pickled with plum juice. The second time, there was basil oil in the vinaigrette and freshly made blood orange ice cream dippin’ dots with a hint of habanero. Chef walked us through the process of eating a raw oyster since some of us had never had one—I had some trepidation about the possible sliminess, but the textures were so expertly controlled, I really enjoyed the sweet and briny concoction. The vegetarian amongst us got their own special amuse-bouche.

The tasting menus both started with a raw fish dish, but I was amazed at the variations between the two. There were common elements; jalapeño, radish, an aioli, and a jalapeño cilantro lime jelly that popped with the brightness of cilantro and the heat of jalapeño without losing either flavor. I have experimented with various molecular gastronomy techniques, and one of my pet peeves is the muddiness of flavor when textures are manipulated (gels, thickeners, and so on). I had to know how Chef Kevin had retained the essential qualities of jalapeño and cilantro while changing their texture: he first made an essential oil and then incorporated it into the starch-based jelly. A small component of the dish, but nevertheless critical to its success. The two dishes had different fish: Hamachi and tuna. The Hamachi is a light white fish; the aioli provided the fatty unctuousness, and the green jelly the delicate flavor both helping the fish and not overwhelming it. Delicate micro-greens and caviar added crunch along with shaved jalapeño and finely julienned radish. The tuna is a heartier fish, closer to red meat, and the chef pushed it further by adding beef fat powder. Since the fat was distributed in maltodextrin, it did not feel heavy but helped to support the tuna almost making it a sly surf-and-turf dish. The crunchy textural balance came from tobiko (fish roe), thinly shaved radish, and jalapeño. If I spent a lot of time describing the dishes in such detail, it is to

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impress upon you, dear reader, the care that went into creating a dish that will probably not be replicated the same way again, a work of art that existed for a brief time and will be fondly remembered.

Cacio e pepe is an astonishingly simple pasta dish: pasta, parmesan, and pepper. But as with all great Italian dishes, it is all about the quality of the ingredients. Chef Kevin invested in a pasta machine with brass fittings, ideal for extruding fresh pasta made of semolina flour. Whether it was the soft, ribbony mafalde or toothy spaghetti, the texture of fresh pasta was enhanced by a cheese sauce that was both delicate and an umami bomb. Parmesan rinds boiled with lemon rinds to give a hint of bitterness, seasoned with just enough black pepper so as not to overwhelm. This was the second course in the 4-course menu and was quite perfect in getting us ready for the beef and the dessert.

In the 6-course menu, pasta was the third dish preceded by a hearty pancake made from twice-fermented batter, filled with serrano ham, topped with tomato jam and hollandaise. I could not imagine eating more food after the pancake and pasta, feeling pleasantly full, wondering how I could possibly enjoy three more courses. The fourth dish made me appreciate the genius of the menu design—a

progressive menu should lead the diner through a journey filled with surprise and delight. Smoked black cod with a light miso broth, broccoli stems cooked with lemon, a dish so light and citrus-forward it awakened our taste buds and got them ready for two more dishes. I am a theatre nerd, and I understand pacing—this was culinary pacing at its finest.

The beef course placed right before dessert is the flavor climax of the meal. The course on the menu is simply titled “zabuton.” It is American Wagyu beef steak cooked in a sous vide bath so the entire beef is medium-rare, seared before serving. In one meal, the zabuton was salt-cured and was served on a silky smooth sweet potato puree, mushroom-brussels sprouts sauté, and a blueberry compote. The sweetness of the puree and compote balanced the salt of the cure while the sauté balanced the tenderness of the beef. I did not think this dish could be improved upon, and yet Chef Kevin came at the zabuton from a different angle the next week and an equally impressive dish. This time, the zabuton was not salt-cured and was set upon a parsnip puree and parsley emulsion, topped with black truffle confit with parsnip chips for crunch. This was a more delicate preparation—the parsnip core was removed

before making the puree to remove any hint of bitterness, the core julienned and fried for texture. I cannot choose a favorite between the two, just grateful I had such heavenly morsels to taste.

The dessert was a lovely balance of tastes and textures with blood orange and chocolate used in different ways each time. After the drama of zabuton, it was the grace note that gently bid us goodbye. As we lingered over the last bite of chocolate, we were just grateful we could experience this in Dubuque. As someone who not only appreciates good food, but also understands and teaches a lot of the science behind food, the two tasting menus I had at Brazen Reserve satisfied every aspect of me: the intellectual rigor, the artistic expression, and sheer gustatory pleasure.

The last time I wrote about Chef Kevin back in 2018, I had hoped he would use his newfound celebrity to help pioneer a culinary movement in our region. Since then, he started Project Rooted with Whitney Sanger, and the organization has had a seismic impact within two years (I may be a tad biased being on the board). Now, with the Birds food truck, Brazen Reserve, and the James Beard nomination, Kevin has progressed further and higher in his journey as a culinary artist. I cannot wait to see how



Brazen Reserve

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