

PEPPER SPROUT

REVISITED
BY RICH BELMONT

On January 15, 2016 Kim Wolff, Proprietor and Executive Chef of Pepper Sprout will begin her 15th year serving what she modestly calls Midwest Cuisine. Of course, we all know by now Kim's creativity and expert application of flavorings and seasonings have elevated her culinary creations to world class status.



To be sure, Kim attributes much of her astounding success to her Midwest location. "We have locally raised meats and home grown fruits and vegetables all around us", she says. She buys produce from the Dubuque Farmer's Market and nearby farms and meats all come from local suppliers.

Kim always knew she had a talent for cooking. She grew up in a family that enjoyed preparing home cooked sit-down dinners. Her grandparents were always in the kitchen making sauces or canning tomatoes or corn. Kim discovered she really liked cooking and before long she was throwing dinner parties for friends and family. She began her cooking career at the Silver Dollar Cantina in Dubuque and went on to develop her cooking skills at Old Village Hall in Lanesboro, MN. This fine dining restaurant is a three hour drive from Dubuque and is located in a small town. However, it is known far and wide as a fine dining destination offering locally grown seasonal cuisine and specialty dinners.

After 4 years Kim returned to Dubuque thoroughly prepared to present the local citizenry with awesome tasting food. For many people Pepper Sprout is the place to go for Midwest Gourmet Cuisine. It is also known for spectacular vegetarian dishes and scrumptious meals prepared with a heavy Cajun influence. The latter is the result of the annual trips Kim takes to New Orleans to study Creole cooking.

Kim is appreciative of her skilled and talented staff. Luke Willis is the Sous Chef and the front of the house is managed by Russ Cole who is also an expert mixologist.



The menu changes with the seasons. The Fall season bill of fare is currently being served until the end of November. For starters you might like to try the Baked Brie. This creamy cheese is set in a puff pastry along with a homemade pear and raisin salsa with red onion and pepper. It is drizzled with a white wine and sesame oil dressing. The Brie is accompanied by roasted garlic and pita chips.

Just in case you are not familiar with eating roasted garlic this way here is how you do it: gently pull the garlic bulb apart, remove a clove from the bulb. The paper skin on the clove will come off. Then squeeze the clove onto a pita chip like you are applying toothpaste. When you taste it you will know roasted garlic paste is like a thousand times better than toothpaste!

The Peppered Piggy Dip is another awesome appetizer. Roasted peppered bacon, corn, red pepper, roasted garlic and spinach are mixed together. Then smoked Gouda cheese is blended in. It is topped with Panko bread crumbs and parmesan cheese and cooked until brown and bubbling. Tasty pretzel sticks are used to scoop up the dip.

Fresh mussels are shipped in every other day from the East Coast. This is the end of the season so if you have a craving for these delicacies you must visit Pepper Sprout before the end of this month.

My tasting team enjoyed the Stuffed Mushrooms. Large button mushrooms are stuffed with Kim's favorite flavors of the week. One night the stuffing will be andouille (an-DOO-ee) sausage the next night maybe crab and the next night perhaps chorizo. We had andouille sausage and we found the sausage complimented the savory mushrooms perfectly.

The soups are all made from scratch using fresh ingredients. I had a wonderful Spicy Black Bean soup. It was a creamy blend of black beans, cayenne pepper, red pepper flakes, homemade stock, peppers and onion. Over the week-end the soup was a Tomato and White Bean which was equally good.



The Fall season menu offers 5 pasta dishes. Whole chickens are roasted to provide meat for the Smoked Chicken Squash Ravioli. This dish has candied Brussels sprouts, bacon, cranberries and a brandy Marsala and heavy cream sauce. The Mac & Cheese is always on the Fall menu. This year's version contains pancetta, red onion, spinach and mushrooms baked with a white wine and smoked Gouda over penne pasta. The Seafood Spaghetti is a dish of sautéed shrimp, mussels, calamari, red onion, tomato and spinach in a homemade spicy basil garlic olive oil.

All the pastas are cooked al dente (to the tooth) meaning they are slightly firm and never mushy.



You will have a difficult time trying to decide what entrées to order. The menu has thirteen to choose from. This year's Iowa raised Grilled Bison Tenderloin is served with a horse radish cream sauce. My favorite entrée is the Pork Shanky. This impressive pork shank is slowly roasted for 8 hours in a pan of sauerkraut and is topped with homemade mustard sauce.



On one of my visits I enjoyed the Blackened New York Strip immensely. All of the steaks are hand cut in-house every day. They are brushed with oil and grilled on a char-broiler. My strip was blackened with blackening seasoning made in-house with butter and Cajun spices. It was accompanied by a Creamed Spinach containing onion, chunks of garlic, fresh spinach and a béchamel (bay-shah-mell). This sauce is made by thickening milk with a white roux (roo) of flour, white wine and in this case smoked Gouda cheese.



Many of Kim's regular customers visit often for their favorites. One of these is the Shrimp Creole. Sautéed shrimp, red onion, mushrooms and collard greens are mixed in an excellent creole sauce: seafood stock, butter, Sriracha hot chili sauce, seasonings, pepper and garlic. This dish can be ordered very spicy or mild. Another seafood favorite is the Wild King Salmon crusted with Lay's potato chips and served with a homemade aioli made with dill, capers and red onions over a fall rice blend. Another one is the Fresh Fish of the Day which was a very flavorful seared cod. These seafood specialties are air-freighted into Dubuque straight from Hawaii twice a week by Honolulu Fish Company.

Then there are all the people who are members of the Meatloaf of the Week Club. The chefs make 20 pounds of meatloaf every other day! It might be ground turkey, beef, duck, lamb or sirloin. This week's offering was a huge slice of ground beef stuffed with corn bread and sage.



And of course there is the Pan Seared Duck Breast and Leg Confit, one of Kim's most popular scrumptious specialties. All of the duck is utilized so this dish includes a breast and leg confit, meaning the leg is cooked in its own fat. The ducks are hand carved in the kitchen and the legs are simmered for 4 to 5 hours. The duck is served with an onion, mushroom, cranberry brandy cream sauce.

There is always at least one special that is not on the menu. During our visit the special was a most impressive Roasted Half Chicken. It was covered with a creamy roasted garlic white wine sauce.



Don't forget to save room for dessert! Most are made fresh in house and some are from East Mill Bakery.

Oh yes, about that January 15th Anniversary! To celebrate the start of their 15th year Pepper Sprout will be serving special Wine Tasting Dinners on Friday, January 15th and Saturday, January 16, 2016. There will be a fabulous 5 course meal with 5 wine pairings guaranteed to please the most discerning food and wine connoisseurs. Guests will arrive at 6:00 pm and dinner will commence at 6:30 pm. Tickets will be on sale beginning December 15th and are limited to 60 seats for each night.

PEPPER SPROUT

378 Main Street, Dubuque, IA 52001

563-556-2167 • PepperSprout.com

Hours: Dinner: Tue-Thu 5-9 PM; Fri-Sat 5-10 PM;

Closed: Sunday and Monday

Atmosphere: Dress Casual

Noise Level: Loud

Recommendations: Baked Brie, Peppered Piggy Dip, Mussels, Stuffed Mushrooms, Chef's Choice Soup, Squash Ravioli, Soup of the Day, Blackened NY Strip, Beef Bourguignon, Meatloaf, Pork Shanky, Shrimp Creole, Catch of the Day, Pan Seared Duck Breast, Wild King Salmon, Chocolate Cake, All Pies, Kim's Bread Pudding (when available)

Liquor Service: Full Bar; Select Wines; Seasonal Specialty Martinis, now featuring Pumpkin Pie and Grasshopper

Prices: Appetizers: \$7.95-\$12.95, Entrées: \$17.95-\$36.95

Pay Options: Cash, Check, Debit, All Major Credit Cards

Accessibility: Dining Room and Restroom

Kids Policy: No Menu; High Chair Available

Reservations: Highly Recommended; 2 to 80

Take Out: Yes • **Delivery:** No

Parking: On Street and Dubuque Parking Ramp