



# Birds. Serious Chicken

## A fried chicken sandwich food truck

By Bryce Parks

What do you get when Dubuque's most celebrated fine dining chef opens up a fried chicken sandwich food truck? You get proof that chickens can fly after all!

Owner Kevin Scharpf was born and raised in Galena, IL, and spent most of his culinary career, following culinary school at Le Cordon Bleu, at the Diamond Jo Casino. He then followed his dreams and opened Brazen Open Kitchen in 2015. It instantly became one of Dubuque's most talked-about and frequented high-end restaurants. Since then, he's competed on Bravo TV's *Top Chef*, co-founded Project Rooted, and continually looked for ways to expand his presence and participate in the community around him. Dubuque has some great chefs, but if one might be our most famous, Kevin would be that guy, even if he would shy away from the title.

So, one might ask: What on earth would a celebrated chef, known for complex dishes and delicate flavors, be doing opening up a fried chicken food truck? We're glad you asked!

"Birds. is what we call our pandemic baby," says Scharpf. "It's something that we learned very, very early on from the pandemic, paying attention to people's ordering habits and the things they were gravitating towards. Our normal fried chicken at Brazen skyrocketed. It went crazy. [Note: there's nothing normal about the fried chicken at Brazen.] So from there, we tried to open a brick-and-mortar location on Rhomberg Ave., and once again, the pandemic made it difficult and created challenges that we didn't foresee, so we could not follow through with that project. So I thought it would be a really cool idea to put it into a food truck concept first and see how it would be perceived by the public. I just really wanted to get this concept into people's hands [and bellies]. We worked on the concept for about a year straight, trying to get it off the ground, and jumping through the hoops."

Before the truck, you could find the Brazen crew at select area public events offering up their gourmet chicken sandwich creations as they dialed in their masterpiece. We're talking serious chicken. And then Kevin and Brazen bar manager, John Roling, went to Florida to drive the big, gray beast (a seriously big food truck) 26 hours straight through back to Dubuque to take things to a new level.

"We're continuing to dial it in," Scharpf says. "I would say the Birds. sandwich and concept are ever-evolving, and we're in stride right now, which is a good feeling. And as long as we're in a stride, we're going to let it keep going and push it as far as we can."

"I think we've all grown up with preconceived notions of what 'fast casual' is and what we think of fast-food restaurants. We have it already built into us





BIRDS. FALL SALAD



FRESH-CUT POTATO PEDALS



A FUTURE BIRDS. CHICKEN SANDWICH

that it's kind of taboo or we get to feeling a little guilty as we're driving through. My approach is that I don't think it needs to feel like that. What better way than to take a career in fine dining and use it to create a proud product that is in the world of fast-casual and approachable from all angles? You don't need to be fancy to eat at Birds. It's an awesome, welcoming thing that can become a huge part of a community from top to bottom."

Kevin looks at building his sandwich completely differently than a lot of people would. They often don't even think much about the bun, for example. They think they're mastering the chicken. Even Kevin will admit that a chicken breast is a chicken breast, for the most part, if you're doing all the right things. He says he can't out-science Chick-Fil-A on the chicken itself with their millions of dollars in development, though we would beg to differ. But what they can do is put some care into the bun, in this case, a Japanese milk bread called a Hokkaido bun. It's very special to Kevin. He can also put a culinary flair to the pickles, and put a little bit of his background flair into the sauces and augmentations that his other gourmet sandwiches will offer.

"And we can create a brand that makes you feel good, that is happy, and makes you want to come back and be holding that container," he says. "Sometimes that's the message we miss when we create these fast-casual places. Why can't we put a little more culinary backbone to it and make it just a little bit more special than just feeding people and that's it?"

So, to start, it's not about being all things to everyone. The Birds. crew is 100 percent focused on wanting to make sure they can make the products they are offering consistently and get them out quickly. That's the name of the game on a food truck.

The mainstay is the O.G. Sandwich (\$10), a basic fried sandwich with pickles and honey on it that is far from basic. This juicy, crunchy delight could feed two people, but why? It's my precious, and I want it all to myself.

There is also the Spicy Bird. Sandwich (\$12), which highlights Cry Baby Craig's hot sauce out of St.

Paul, MN. Kevin says it is "probably one of the best hot sauces I've ever had in my life." "Nuff said.

"As we figure out our system, we will look to expand to some more gourmet-style chicken sandwiches," he explains. "So we have the O.G., but to be accurate, if we go back to the beginning of the pandemic, we featured a gourmet chicken sandwich at Brazen that had sort of a deviled egg spread called a sauce gribiche with white cheddar and pickled cabbage. I'm excited to bring that sandwich to the Birds. menu soon."

The chicken tenders are drizzled with honey like the O.G. Spoil your kids with these golden delights.

Depending on the location of the truck and time of day, for example, during lunch in a business district, they sometimes feature the Birds. Fall Salad with grilled or fried chicken.

We had the homemade chips with our meals, but they are now switching up to their fresh-cut and fried potato pedals to accompany their sandwiches. Oh, goodie, an excuse to go right back again!

There is currently some kind of "gourmet" chicken sandwich battle going on in fast-food chains across the country; Birds. isn't playing that game. The truck is new, but they were doing this long before that fad kicked in, and they will be here after it fades away for the next big fast-food fad. Expect these flavors to continually evolve and expand and solidify themselves in the menu that is Dubuque.

When asked what to add, Kevin was quick to say that he was humbled by the immediate and overwhelming support that Birds. has received in its first weeks of operation. He went on to give huge props to the Brazen crew who came along with him on this journey and made it so rewarding while also being the engine that allows it to hit their glide path so fast.

So, now... the big question. How do you get your mitts and mouths on one of these amazing sandwiches? The best way to find out where the truck will be and when is to follow them on Facebook and Instagram @birds.friedchicken. They plan to announce on each Sunday or Monday where they will be each day that week so

you can plan accordingly. If you would like to see about getting the Birds. truck to set up shop in front of your workplace or to cater your event, you can email [coop@birdschicken.com](mailto:coop@birdschicken.com). The other way to find them is to go outside and smell the air for the most amazing chicken sandwich you ever had and walk toward that smell. ■



BIRDS. OWNER KEVIN SCHARPF



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