

Otto's by Kevin Scharpf

By Bryce Parks

Otto's Place originally opened in 2011 and quickly became a favorite breakfast hotspot, especially for locals. It was named after Galena, IL resident Otto Sallman, who built the building in 1899 and reportedly wanted to open a restaurant there but never did. In 2019, the eatery transitioned to new owner Megan Carter until earlier this month.

As we noted in this issue's cover story on Kevin Scharpf who is the new owner of the renamed Otto's by Kevin Scharpf and the well-known chef and owner of Brazen Open Kitchen | Bar restaurant in Dubuque, Megan approached Kevin about buying the restaurant and may not have known it was one of the few places in Galena that the veteran foodsmith would consider taking on in order to join the vast Galena dining fray.

"The fact that she dropped that question in my lap," said Scharpf, "and me knowing on the back end that my wife Lyndsi and I have always loved that place... we always talked about 'what if?'"

Born and raised in Galena, this acquisition is a very personal family-level purchase for Kevin. "Finally, this feels like that family vibe. Man, it's just a different approach, and it feels good so far."

As noted in the cover story, for a man known for Dubuque's highest-end dinner fare, at Otto's, it's all about simplicity.

"I wanted to strip it down, which makes you uncomfortable," explains Kevin. "It's funny. At the end of the day, it's breakfast food that's done in a simple manner. It seems fancy to some people, a little 'done up,' and it's not. That's just our brand of simplicity. Why do we need to give you 30 options when we can just give you 15 that are done really, really well? Let's just focus on that and not give you 30 options with the same five ingredients. Mind you, those ingredients are on our menu, they just aren't each done five different ways—just one way, hopefully really well." We think they're not just done really well in different ways but also in the best ways!

Kevin wanted to come in, be consistent, and offer something slightly unique because that's who they are within the Brazen organization while hopefully not offending the long-time locals who have their favorites.

"The only thing that's offensive right now is if you come in still wanting to read

the last chapter again," says Kevin. "So all I say is to just give the next chapter of the book a chance. Read it, and who knows, maybe it'll take you somewhere you didn't know the book was going to go that excites you. Maybe a little bit more or equal to what you read before."

Investing in Otto's also means investing in his own Brazen-trained talent.

"The only time we ever expand or want to is because someone is ready," says Scharpf. And Assistant General Manager Samantha (Sam) Jahagee was ready.

Starting her food career at Olive Garden, Sam went to culinary school at Kirkwood and worked at the nearby casino to hone her skills. Then 10 months of cooking on a cruise ship not only found her a new set of skills, but it also found her a future husband. They landed "home" in Dubuque which brought her to the best learning kitchen around at Brazen under Kevin Scharpf's direction.

"We wanted to keep the same special feeling of the place and add the Brazen touch to it," says Sam of Otto's offerings. "Approachable but tasty and well done."

Teaming with Kevin to take over the popular Galena eatery had a lot to do with trusting Kevin's track record of never doing anything halfway.

"He cares about everything that he does," explains Sam. "He wouldn't open a place or buy a place if he didn't feel like he could put the same care into it. Otto's was special to him before this, so I think the opportunity was even more special to him. He wants to make Galena proud."

Putting Sam at the helm says a lot about her skills as well as Kevin's faith in them as she embarks on running the show for the first time.

Clearly, in the first days, the crew came up against the harshest critics of all: the locals. These are the people who have been ordering the same breakfast for years and are not excited about change.

"All I ask is to just try the food first," Kevin emphasizes. "Have the full experience, and then you can circle back. We want to respect the past as much as possible, but there's no way that we, as a company, could have gone in and done the same old thing. It's not what we do. We've always prided ourselves on wanting to be innovators and leaders. It was inevitable that we would take this approach and have some flack. We take it to heart. We're already going to be making some small changes and showing that we're listening. We're not rebels. We're not renegades. It isn't going to be a take it or leave it deal."

On one visit, we brought a couple of Galena residents and Otto's regulars with us for the big taste test, and true to form, the first thing one noticed with a grumble was that their favorite item, the banana bread



TOP TO BOTTOM: TURKEY MELT, OTTO'S BREAKFAST SANDO, AND BISCUIT & GRAVY



HAM & CHEESE FRITTATA



SALMON LOX TOAST



CAKE SKILLET

french toast, was no longer on the menu. And just like Kevin said, after Amanda had the Cake Skillet (coffee cake with bourbon caramel and whip cream, served in the cast-iron pan it was cooked in), she said, “yeah, what I said about the French toast... nevermind.” So indeed, the proof is in the pudding, or in this case, the cast-iron pan.

So yeah, food. We should talk about that because we ate a LOT of it and have some nice things to say.

As Kevin noted, the menu is not huge, but everything really is excellent. The menu is separated under the headings Toast, Sweets, House Favorites, Light, Sandwiches, and A La Cart with cocktails and coffee options also available.

From the Toast menu, which are all classic sourdough open-faced options that include Country Ham (whole grain mustard, eggs, Hook’s cheddar, arugula, and pickled shallot); and a Garden option with herbed goat cheese, eggs, and a variety of veggies; we chose the Salmon Lox with crème fraîche, eggs, chives, capers, and radish. It was as advertised: light and fresh with great smoked salmon and a beautiful color for \$15.

The sweets offer yogurt with fruit and granola, Otto’s Seasonal Tart with Nutella, plus a daily feature, but how could we resist that Cake Skillet? The bourbon caramel drizzle is everything you are dreaming of right now that it might be. Warm and soft in the middle and a bit of crisp on the edge. Good luck sharing this \$7 treasure.

We passed up the traditional buttermilk pancakes and brioche French toast (wait, this has honey butter and pecans...

maybe we screwed up), and we went straight to the Otto’s Breakfast Sando. A classic ciabatta roll with pork belly, egg, arugula, Hook’s cheddar, and mayo with a side of country potatoes for \$15. Was it good? Um, pork belly... HELLO!

We did not get the sweet potato hash with local Arnold Farms sausage, roasted red peppers, spinach, brown sugar, onion, and eggs, but we will next time. We did, however, get both the Biscuit & Gravy with homemade biscuits and a smooth, rich Arnold Farms sausage gravy as well as the Frittata, our friend and Galena native Jimmy’s new favorite. The add-ins vary, but the frittata during our visit had a wonderful mix of ham, veggies, and cheese. It’s like a crustless quiche, and it was heavenly. It came with a great little Otto’s salad with mixed greens, cranberries, walnuts, goat cheese, and a balsamic vinaigrette. Both entrees are \$12. I also took home some egg tacos to Dubuque for my wife, and the soft corn tortillas with eggs, mushrooms, onion, spinach, sriracha, and goat cheese with a side of potatoes were exactly what she was looking for as a gluten-free girl, also just \$12.

The sandwiches, if you just have to stray from breakfast, include a BLT, Turkey Melt, and Grilled Ham & Cheese all on sourdough. The Turkey Melt was Kristina’s favorite with caramelized onions, roasted red pepper, bacon, and Hook’s cheddar. We did not try the Otto’s Smash Burger which we already regret. Served on a Hokkaido roll (like Birds. food truck sandwiches), it features Arnold Farms beef and traditional lettuce, pickles, onion, and Otto’s mayo. For the vegetarians

or just those looking for some spicy flair, try the Black Bean Burger with iceberg lettuce, chipotle, avocado and carrot served on ciabatta. All sammys are \$14 to \$16.

The Otto’s Salad mentioned above is also in the Light section in small and large sizes as well as a daily rotating soup option and a Kale Caesar Salad. The A La Carts are the usuals you might want to add onto anything such as more eggs, Arnold Farms breakfast sausage, house-cured and roasted pork belly, locally smoked bacon, buttermilk biscuits with honey butter, potatoes, toast, and fruit.

Otto’s teamed up with Trolley Depot to create their own blend of coffee that you can only get at Otto’s. You can also get iced coffee and decaf. Or maybe you’d prefer a brunch cocktail like a Bloody Mary, mimosa, Irish coffee (Jameson, coffee, heavy cream, and sugar), or a Greyhound (grapefruit juice and vodka).

Then maybe a nap.

Stephanie Mihalakis-Persian, general manager at Otto’s, Birds., and Brazen said that Kevin was encouraging his crew to visit Otto’s Place long before he owned it, so she knew it was going to be special when they took over. Now that it’s theirs, she says once locals come in the first days, missing some staples and then trying the new offerings, it’s been going really well. So if you’ve always been an Otto’s fan, cool your jets and try the new stuff, and if you’ve not been there yet, for heaven’s sake, what more excuse do you need than this to get over to Galena and make this weekend’s breakfast something special? Simple, but special. ■



Otto’s by Kevin Scharp
 100 BOUTHILLIER ST, GALENA, IL
 815-776-0240
 OTTOSGALENA.COM
 FACEBOOK: @OTTOSPLACE
Hours: Thu–Mon: 8 AM–2 PM;
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