

# Kitchen Brigade

By Kristina Nesteby

Let's take a step back in time for a moment. The scene opens near a barn—or more specifically, a barn that has been converted into one of the coolest music venues in the area. On this drizzly September afternoon, Chad Cushman aka “The Crepe Guy” to me and probably the entirety of the Quad Cities, was in a fire engine red truck, selling codfish tacos, an aptly chosen menu item considering the venue: Codfish Hollow. Coming from a girl who practically has gills, I have no hesitation when saying they were the best fish tacos I've ever had. EVER. I have been chasing that high since 2018.

I knew Chad was operating Kitchen Brigade out of Stompbox Brewing in Davenport, IA, but I never took the opportunity to check it out. Lucky for me, laziness won this round! The European pub-inspired eatery is now open in downtown Dubuque, sharing a space with Fox Den Motel (a music venue, not a refuge for furry, dog-like creatures) at 920 Main St.



THE BURGER—½ POUND BLACK ANGUS BURGER



TOM JONES—½ POUND CHEF MARTIN POLISH SAUSAGE

“I had the opportunity to open [Kitchen Brigade in Davenport], so I sold the truck,” said Chad. “It had to be one or the other, it couldn't be both. The food truck was the hardest thing I've ever done... It was hard to let go, but I was excited to open the restaurant and finally checked that box.”

Fox Den Motel co-owner John McDermott is a big supporter of Cushman and a fan of Kitchen Brigade. When he opened Raccoon Motel in Davenport, IA,

he approached Chad about opening up a second location with a kitchen.

“He found a place in Dubuque, and that's how that all started,” explains Cushman. “When he said it had a turn-key kitchen, I didn't even hesitate.”

“I'm very passionate about food, and I love music, and I think that was the biggest thing that drew me to opening up with Fox Den.”

I first tried the Kitchen Brigade menu during a popup event last year. To no one's surprise, I was the first one in the door, menu in hand, ready to devour some wings. First off, Fox Den Motel and Kitchen Brigade are separate entities. So, you order your drinks from Fox Den, and you order your meal, separately, from Kitchen Brigade. It's a full-service kitchen, so the staff will come to you. Just pick a spot to eat, order a drink and some grub, and enjoy. Again, because they are separate businesses, you will also pay for each bill separately. It may seem a little confusing, but rest assured, it's actually quite simple!

My Wings & Cakes were sweet and sticky and satisfying in all the ways you want a breakfast-for-dinner meal to be. You get four full wings here—that's the drummy, flat, AND tip—plated with lattice corn cakes and a sticky honey chow chow and Alabama white sauce. The double-fried wings are all natural and come from an Amish farm outside Chicago.

“I feel like when you go that route, that's when you separate yourself from your competition,” notes Cushman.

After eating his way through Paris, Copenhagen, and Italy and returning home, Cushman realized how different the food in American bars and restaurants was compared to the pubs in Europe.

“You could tell everything was sourced really well,” said Cushman. “That's who I am. It's not how I've always been. As I've matured

as a chef, I've found the importance of sourcing quality ingredients.”

“I had great memories of Italy, sitting down and eating things I'm familiar with, but it's 100 times better because everything was sourced and grown locally... I felt like I was tasting tomatoes for the first time.”

Bryce and I went to Italy in February, and I wholeheartedly agree with Chad's experience. Everything just tasted better (with the exception of the salt-free bread in Florence. No thanks.) These are producers who are focusing on quality, not quantity, and it shows.

Now, as for the handhelds, both the sausage and the burger come with a half pound of meat and a side.

When I hear “Tom Jones,” I immediately think of Granny Malone in the movie *Flushed Away*. But instead of talking rats, Kitchen Brigade probably wants you to think of a half-pound tube of meaty sausage. Chef Martin's Polish sausage, that is. It's nestled into a milk bun with mustard yogurt sauce, blistered tomato, and fried onion.

Then there's the matter of The Burger. Cushman is sourcing his 70/30 blend of grass-fed and corn-finished Black Angus beef from a small farm outside of Rockford, IL. Kitchen Brigade is one of three of their customers, the other two being upscale restaurants in Chicago. Imported butterkase cheese from Germany has the kind of melting factor that is perfect for the flagship burger. Also of note, non-meat eaters can order a veggie burger with all the fixins.

“Our burger sauce is a nod to the classic burger sauce but with gochujang added as an element of surprise,” adds Cushman. The spicy, fermented soybean paste from Korea has made its way into kitchens around America, used in Korean cooking and non-traditional ways like the engine sauce.

“Could we just take the onion and cook it in butter and oil and slap it on a burger?”

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asks Cushman. “Of course.” But that’s not what Kitchen Brigade is about. For the uninitiated, schmaltz is rendered chicken fat and an integral part of traditional Ashkenazi Jewish cuisine. Here, it’s used as a flavorful fatty base for cooking the onions in.

Finished with romaine and pickle on a Blue Spruce Bakery bun (based out of Davenport, IA), Kitchen Brigade’s flagship burger stands out next to the competitor.

“When you take our burger and put it next to one with a frozen beef patty, you’re definitely going to taste the difference,” assures Cushman. “That’s our goal. We want people to have that experience where they feel like, ‘Wow, I’ve never had something like this before.’”

If you’ve ever been to an In-N-Out, you may be familiar with the Animal Style fries. It’s an order of fries topped with their famous sauce, a slice of melted cheese, and chopped grilled onions. Kitchen Brigade tells In-N-Out to “hold my beer” as mornay cream, Hooks 4-year white cheddar, engine sauce, caramelized truffle onion, and arugula are piled on a plate of frites. We found the sauce to be a bit extra saucy, but you might find it’s the right amount.

As noted previously, The Burger and Tom Jones come with a side. We opted for frites for the sausage and a salad for the burger. The Brigade Salad is certainly the lightest of the options on the menu, but I certainly wouldn’t call it a light dish. Romaine, everything melba gremolata, bacon lardons, feta cheese, and baby tomato join the garlic dressing for a green food option for those who are looking for something less starchy.

Half-pound burgers and Polish sausage. Four full wings. An entire plate of frites. These portions are not for the faint of heart. If you’re the type who orders a cup of soup and half sandwich for lunch and takes the sandwich home for dinner, you’re probably gonna wanna split an entree with a friend.

When creating the original menu in Davenport, Cushman wanted to find items that fit the environment of the brewery while still following the guidelines of not being too traditional but also being approachable. With that, he’s working with Blue Spruce Bakery to create a dessert, especially for the Dubuque location. Fox Den Motel doesn’t have the same kind of vibe as Stompbox Brewing, so Cushman wants something that plays with the space.

He told Blue Spruce Bakery, “Start thinking nostalgic convenience store dessert.”

“Let’s have fun with it.” Think Little Debbie Zebra Cakes. Think Ho Hos. I know I’m thinking Nutty Bars (which are now called Nutty Buddy?), Star Crunch, and Caramel Cookie Bars.

“It probably wasn’t until I was exposed to working in a real kitchen with a real

chef that I was immediately inspired, and my eyes kind of lit up,” recalls Cushman. “I remember I was probably 22 when I approached the chef at the country club where I was working at. I was just a prep guy, and I remember walking up to him and asking, ‘How do I become you because I want to be you.’” That chef saw something in Chad and took him under his wing.

“He told me, ‘Well if you really want to go down this path, I’ll save you a lot of money. Don’t go to culinary school, and I will apprentice you.’” Chad set up his station next to the chef and learned something new every day.

Two years after he became an apprentice, he was offered his first executive chef position. He was 24 years old, underpaid, and overworked, but loving life.

Past the days of bussing tables, working in country clubs, managing Panera Bread in Chicago, and managing a steakhouse in a casino, Chad eventually found himself back in Davenport, itching to get back into the food side of things.

“I wanted to understand the full operation—front and back of the house.”

At that time, Chad’s mom was undergoing cancer treatments, and she was part of the Gilda’s Club. Their mission is to “ensure that all people impacted by cancer are empowered by knowledge, strengthened by action, and sustained by community.” He wanted to raise money to help support the club, and he came up with the crazy idea to sell crepes at the Freight House Farmers’ Market in Davenport.

“I thought it would be one summer of doing this, and it kind of blossomed before my eyes,” notes Cushman. “It ended up becoming a full-on business. Before I knew it, I was doing crepe pop-ups all over town... I did that for about 10 years.”

And that brings us full circle.

Take a break from the same ol’ same ol’ and check out Kitchen Brigade inside Fox Den Motel. Your wishes for an elevated pub meal have been granted. Tell ‘em 365 sent ya! ■

**Kitchen Brigade**  
**FOX DEN MOTEL**  
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