



PAN SEARED DUCK BREAST AND LEG CONFIT



GRILLED SALMON



LOCAL MUSHROOM NAPOLEON



POT PIE

# Pepper Sprout

By Danny Fairchild

Every year around this time I start to wonder when Pepper Sprout will have their fall menu. That's not to say I get to try it every year. I have a toddler and a 12 year old along with all the responsibilities and activities that connote. Some years I just go online and drool over the menu like Charlie gazing longingly at Wonka's factory. BUT! My partner and I suddenly found ourselves with childcare and a reservation at Pepper Sprout for Friday night.

Damn, do I love Pepper Sprout on a Friday night. The bar is lively and feels familiar even if you don't know a soul there. Just give it a few minutes and you will. The dining room is intimate, but you don't feel like you're stacked up on top of each other. I've had experiences where an older couple would have drinks sent over to our table cuz we just look so cute. This time, someone saw us taking all these food pictures and offered to take our picture. I felt compelled to explain that the photos were journalistic in nature and not for the gram. But no explanation was needed. Good dude. I'm not saying it feels like a bunch of strangers are eating together. Yeesh, that's my nightmare. You're eating

separately and privately, but it feels like we're all in this thing together. It's... it's very Midwest. And Chef Kim Wolff's Pepper Sprout is proudly Midwest cuisine. No, seriously. "Midwest Cuisine" is on the signage, the website, socials, everywhere.

Now... I've lived in the Midwest all my life. Hell, I've lived in Iowa all my life. Never, in all my life, have I been particularly proud of our cuisine. What does "Midwest cuisine" even mean? Jell-O salad? I mean... I wouldn't put it past Chef Kim. She doesn't have anything like that on the menu right now, but I'm sure she could make us an aspic that would give us wet dreams. Dubuque might not be ready for that, though. Does it mean casseroles? It certainly could. One of the biggest reasons I look forward to Chef Kim's fall menu is because she always has the greatest pot pies I've ever had.

Here's the thing about (fill in the blank) cuisine. It is ALWAYS, at its heart, comfort food. Italian cuisine, Mexican cuisine, Chinese cuisine, Indian cuisine, Ethiopian cuisine, Cajun cuisine, and on and on and on. ALL food is comfort food. Except, sometimes, French cuisine. But only sometimes. And so here comes Midwest cuisine. And holy crap do we know comfort food around here.

I don't know Chef Kim that well. I've talked to her some when she's come around to tables. I approached her to do Baconfest back when I worked for Area Residential Care. (Yes, I was one of the many people who organized Dubuque

Baconfest. You're welcome.) I've been trying to define what sets Chef Kim apart from other chefs in the area. She knows her flavors, that's for sure. She knows what complements what well enough to break the rules effectively. Like a true artist. But she's not the only one 'round here who can do that. She knows her ingredients both intuitively and through experience. But that's not unheard of around here. She respects her guests.

I think I've figured out what makes Chef Kim so special. One of the things, anyway, and it's one of those things I'm hesitant to point out because it's something where if you're using it right, nobody knows you're using it at all. Chef Kim, probably more than any chef in the area, has an absolute mastery of acid.

"Acid" is a bit of a culinary buzzword these days. *Salt Fat Acid Heat* by Samin Nosrat is a best seller that inspired an equally interesting Netflix series. You hear characters in popular shows like *The Bear* say things like, "Your dish needs some acid." And now, suddenly, my favorite chocolate chip cookie recipe is a King Arthur Flour recipe that calls for a teaspoon of cider vinegar. It adds brightness to flavor. A taste of freshness, too. That's why salad dressing tastes good on salads. And it balances and marries other flavors. It might be overstating to say that acid brings a dish to life, but it certainly gives that dish a life worth living.

And now I hear all the GERD boys and girls with their Prilosec prescriptions

saying, "Acid? No, Fairchild. Not for me." Yes. For you. Like I said, if used correctly, you don't know it's being used at all. Look, you might come out of Pepper Sprout suffering because you ate too much, but that's on you.

Enough crushing hard on Chef Kim. Let's crush hard on her food.

We started with the Local Mushroom Napoleon. Folks, I think I've said before that I have a hobbit-like affinity for mushrooms. So when I read this description: "Local mushrooms, sautéed onion, pancetta, and arugula in a bleu cheese blend, layered in a puff pastry. Served warm and finished with balsamic vinegar reduction," I just about went there and back again. And you see that last part, right? The balsamic vinegar reduction? Yeah, that's some acid right there. A lot of sweetness in balsamic, too. But the acidity marries the sweetness with the sharpness of the blue cheese and the bitterness of the arugula... look, I know that's more than two things getting married in this metaphor, but do not object to this union. Apparently polyamory is delicious. Knowing we were going to be trying several things on the menu, we only ate half of it during our seating. But it didn't last the night. Nom.

I ordered the Pan-Seared Duck Breast with Duck Leg Confit because if you put duck on your menu, I will order it. And "confit" is such a fun word I can't resist. So, I was made to order this dish. I like it because it tastes wild without tasting gamey. I've had Chef Kim's duck several

times, and every time it's like the first. I'm in safe hands with Chef Kim's duck. Remember the whole ALL-food-is-comfort-food thing? Case in point. In fact, I could write about Chef Kim's duck completely from memory and ordered a different dish to tell you about. But I didn't. I couldn't help myself. Had to get the duck. It is served over rice with a cranberry-apple chutney. It's like Thanksgiving came early. Guess what that cranberry-apple chutney adds? Acidy brightness, that's right.

My duck came with soup. This night featured a vegetarian chili. Now... I already hear you. "But Fairchild! Chili is a stew! Maybe you CAN have a stew without meat... but SHOULD you?" Yes. If by "you" you mean Chef Kim. And quit being so dogmatic about chili. And look. I'm a meat-and-potatoes-fed Iowa boy. If there's no meat where there should be meat, I'm suspicious. But damned if it wasn't hearty and delicious with a brightness to the veggies that comes from... say it with me... ACID! This chili was perhaps the most effective use of acid. It took a vegetarian chili and made it eat like chili con carne.

Annie ordered the grilled salmon. Maybe it's a stupid litmus test, but I think you can't really know how good a chef is until they serve you fish. It's unforgiving, and you HAVE to pay attention. Or at least that's how mere mortals experience it. Chef Kim probably isn't mortal, though. Annie often orders salmon at restaurants, and she doesn't ask much. Just make sure it's not UNDER done. She's generally fine with overcooked fish, but if you can thread the needle and give her the perfectly prepared salmon... well... it was a good night for me, I'll say that much. Thanks, Chef Kim. And thank you for the tomato artichoke Kalamata olive dill relish the salmon was served with. It's brilliant in concept and flavor.

We went ahead and ordered a beef pot pie, too. I've been craving a Pepper Sprout pot pie for so long, even if I only had a few bites before taking it home, I'd be happy. And I was. You might be wondering what role acid has to play in something as hearty as a pot pie. Welcome to class, students. The components of a pot pie, when all is said, done, and baked, are delicious all by themselves. Spearing a piece of beef or a potato in that rich heartiness and popping it into your mouth? Hell yeah. Oh, what's that? A mushroom? Hell yeah, mushroom! Down it goes. All these ingredients bubbling together under a wonderful puff pastry crust making each other better in the process. Amazing. You know what can help that process? Acid. You know what can make it so the myriad deliciousness tastes even better all together instead of individually? Acid. Not a lot, mind you. But it's there. Because it belongs there.

We took dessert to go. No picture because clamshell containers ain't sexy. But that friggin' lemon tart was amazing. The sweetness and acidity of the lemon with the nutty sweetness of the brown butter crust? Holy crap, yo. More than once we've wished we had more.

It's weird to link Midwest cuisine with a fine dining experience like Pepper Sprout. Until you experience it, that is. Chef Kim kicks ass. You should let her kick yours. And the servers and bar staff are so knowledgeable and there to make everything better. If your server tells you the Caesar salad is very garlicky, believe them. Chef Kim's Caesar salad dares to ask the age-old question, "How much garlic is too much garlic?" Results are inconclusive because yeah, it's garlicky. But it's friggin' delicious. And if both you and your date eat it, then no harm no foul. If your server tells you the pot pie is very hot, temperature-wise, believe them. Don't try to be tough. If your server gives you some lottery numbers, believe them.

But don't do that stupid joke where you ask for the winning lottery numbers when your server asks if there's anything else they can get you. There's a special place in hell for those people. ■



**Pepper Sprout**  
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