

# BRAZEN AIMING FOR TOP CHEF FROM THE HEARTLAND

BY SUNIL MALAPATI

“There is a tide in the affairs of men,  
Which taken at the flood,  
leads on to fortune.”

Chef Kevin Scharpf seems to have taken that old Shakespearean adage to heart. He opened his Brazen restaurant some three and half years ago just as the Millwork District was finding its footing and helped usher in the Millwork renaissance.

Now, he aims to compete for nothing less than the prestigious *Top Chef* title, the first Iowa chef to be selected to be in the reality-show competition. Proud of representing good-old Midwestern cooking, Chef Kevin seeks to usher in a welcome spotlight on a regional cuisine that does not always get the credit it deserves.

So, what made Chef Kevin decide to even apply to be on a prestigious show like *Top Chef*, usually cast with big city chefs and Michelin star awardees? I asked this and many other questions in a wide-ranging interview sitting down in the warm interiors of Brazen Open Kitchen on a brisk fall morning.

Chef Kevin has a stolid Midwestern head on a lanky frame, confident in his abilities but not arrogant. His culinary training extends from an apprenticeship at La Fougasse in Minneapolis, MN during culinary school to working for world-renowned French chef Daniel Bouloud at Restaurant Daniel in New York, NY. So, when he moved back to the Midwest to first work at Diamond Jo as a sous chef and then open his own restaurant Brazen, he did wonder if moving back to the Midwest helped or hurt his culinary development.

Brazen is undoubtedly an extension of Kevin Scharpf, the Chef. There was a risk attached to being the first to open a restaurant in the Millwork district, what with the Co-Op struggling to make it and no other food venues nearby. There was a definite buzz and excitement surrounding the area, but it was not quite the bustling area it is today, and Brazen has been part of that development. Starting and maintaining a restaurant can and often does divert attention away from the food itself and could make a chef more cautious in their artistic development. Chef Kevin takes a lot of pride in Brazen (as well as he should), but now it was time to test himself against the big city chefs and validate the hard work.

The arduous process to get into *Top Chef* started with a lengthy online application form two years ago. Chef Kevin reached out to Chef Fabio Viviani, a fan favorite from the 2008 season, and was encouraged by the support. After a Skype interview, he made the final round of selection for last year’s Colorado season but did not make the actual cast. This might be a blessing since the Kentucky season might prove a better fit for the Iowan chef! *Top Chef* started as a reality competition more interested in contestant drama but quickly evolved into a legitimate

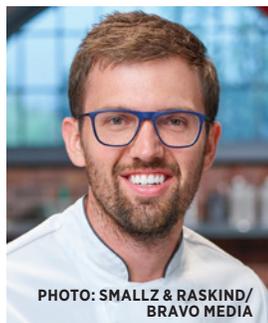


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BRAZEN CHEF AND OWNER  
KEVIN SCHARPF

chef competition that is highly regarded in the food community. But the locales have all been centers already known for special cuisines (New Orleans, Seattle, etc.). Kentucky promises to be different: bourbon is the only food I can associate with Kentucky. I asked Chef Kevin about the attitudes towards Midwestern food, often relegated to casseroles and pies. He believes that there is a certain simplicity and respect for ingredients that is back in vogue after years of flirtation with molecular gastronomy. He is proud to lead the charge of putting Iowa on the culinary map.

So, how exactly does a chef operating at an exceptional level look at food? The night before my interview, I had the pleasure of dining at Brazen with Bryce, Christy and Kristina and we shared all the daily specials between us. Since my illustrious predecessor has reviewed Brazen twice already, I decided to take a different approach and asked Chef Kevin to walk me through the development of a single dish. After all, every dish tells a story, and the menu at Brazen is a collection stories from the chef. What follows is the story of salmon tartare with some digressions from yours truly.

## SALMON TARTARE UTILIZES THE SCRAPS FROM WHOLE SALMON...

Chef Kevin believes in respecting the ingredients and a mouth-to-tail approach. They source whole fish to get the best quality possible and filet the fish themselves. The leftover scraps could be used to make stock or salmon cake. This time, he decided to use the scraps from the belly to make tartare: traditionally, they have the most fat and thus are suited for raw or lightly smoked preparations.

## CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE OR NEW EXPERIENCE? PART ONE...

As a restaurateur, a chef has to contend with customers who desire their favorites constantly versus those who crave new experiences. It is to Chef Kevin’s credit that he recognizes both groups want good food and he wants to satisfy both. The salmon fillets go on the entrée menu (Kristina ordered the dish and I had a heavenly bite!) and it is time for the chef to play a little. A tartare is already pushing boundaries in Dubuque, so the question is whether to go further or temper it with traditional accoutrements. In this case, he decide to push further into modernist techniques.

## SMOKED ONION SOY VINAIGRETTE...

It is time to think about flavor. Chef Kevin wanted to play with earthy notes instead of the more traditional



SALMON TARTARE

citrus notes. He decided to smoke onions, dehydrate them and make a powder. Modernist techniques have made a difference to how chefs think about ingredients. While Chef Kevin is trained and usually sticks to classical French techniques, he is not afraid to experiment once in a while.

The powder then was added to the soy vinaigrette along with black garlic to accentuate the earthy and fermented notes. The soy sauce supplies the acidic notes essential to a tartare. Black garlic is made by subjecting garlic to low heat for an extended period of time, lending sweet, smoky earthy notes. A lot of effort for just the vinaigrette!

## SMOKED RADISHES AND FENNEL...

A tartare needs a different textural element and frequently an herbal component for contrast. Thinly shaved fennel works both texturally and adds an herbal anise quality. Smoked whole radishes are thinly sliced and add a peppery freshness to the dish. (Slicing after smoking tones down the smokiness significantly, making it more delicate.)

## CONSISTENT EXPERIENCE OR NEW EXPERIENCE? PART TWO...

Salmon tartare as assembled above is a thrilling experience. A good cook is content to give you a satisfying meal, while a chef working at a high level thinks through all the choices he or she makes and develops a dish so it tells a story and expresses a philosophy. The tartare provides a harmonious experience of taste, flavor and texture and is definitely an adventure. I am not a big salmon fan, but I had quite a few bites of the tartare when Kristina ordered it!

One of the impressive things about Brazen is that even the familiar dishes can tell surprising stories. Chef Kevin is passionate about pasta and it shows up as a significant part of the menu. I ordered the pasta



special, which was ravioli made with the aforementioned smoked onion powder served with brown butter, sweet potato and braised greens. The surprise was in the plating—it was purposefully difficult to get all flavors in one bite, and the dish offered surprising notes at different points. One of the intriguing details I learnt was that there were small dollops of savory apple butter at the bottom of the plate, lending a sour-sweet taste to some bites. Where the tartare was harmony, the pasta was a melody strung together with subtle grace notes. (This is a feature of many Asian cuisines, but harmony is typically prized in Western cuisine.)

Clearly, Brazen’s dishes tell well developed stories, and Chef Kevin, with his staff, takes the time to craft these stories. The dishes first have to “move” him before he decides to put them on the menu. A culinary competition demands the exact opposite, with severe time limits and other constraints. How do you then prepare for a competition where you constantly expect the unexpected? Chef Kevin told me that he went in with an open mind trusting in his adaptation skills. Over the course of many tasting menus and benefit dinners, he learnt to innovate on the fly. The “adrenalin rush” he often experiences when challenged

was one of the motivators for applying to *Top Chef*. Instead of fixating on “what needs to happen” based on a fixed dish, he learnt to listen to what the ingredients were trying to tell him. Ultimately, a dish only works if it has a genuine story to tell, and that only happens when you respect the ingredients.

While we will not know for a while how Chef Kevin Scharpf fared in his quest for the *Top Chef* title (the season premieres Dec. 6 on Bravo), I was able to ask what he took away from the competition. The first thing he got from the experience was the camaraderie among the chefs. As a chef in Dubuque, Kevin is not always able to bounce around cutting-edge culinary knowledge. Now he was with 14 other chefs with varied backgrounds and was able to create new friendships. The second big takeaway was confidence in himself and his abilities. He could operate way outside his comfort zone and not be scared.

Now, Chef Kevin Scharpf comes back to us with a new arsenal of techniques and culinary knowledge and renewed confidence in his abilities. He believes Dubuque is at the epicenter of great things and cannot wait to showcase the Midwestern cuisine and help it achieve the recognition it deserves. He is working towards more than his restaurant, acting as a catalyst for small farmer growth in our region. He partnered with renowned chef Rick Bayless, winner of *Top Chef Masters*, to raise money for small farmers including Sinsinawa Mound Collective. Their event sold out in four hours! Chef Kevin promises to use his new-found celebrity to further the cause of first time farmers and small farmer collaboratives.

Just as Voices in the Warehouse proved to be a game-changer for arts in Dubuque and revitalized the Millwork District, one can hope Brazen and Chef Kevin will help pioneer a culinary movement in our region. ■



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