

BIG TIME AT BEARD HOUSE

Downstate chef Josh Adams warms kitchen at historic NYC spot

BY SEANAN FORBES

NEW YORK — February? In the Beard House kitchen, it was June.

Josh Adams' crew left Chicago before he did; they packed a truck with equipment and local ingredients, and took a road trip to Manhattan.

Adams, chef-owner of June in Peoria Heights, flew from Chicago to New York. By the high road or the higher road, Adams and his kitchen staff had one goal.

Destination: Beard House, 167 W. 12th.

For any chef, being asked to cook at the Beard House is a distant prize. Many work for decades without receiving an invitation.

For the chef of a restaurant almost three hours' drive from Chicago — a restaurant that's existed for just over a year — to get this honor, it's little short of remarkable. As anybody who ate at the Beard House on Feb. 1 would tell you, "remarkable" is an apt adjective for June and its 29-year-old chef.

Six hours before the first guest would appear, the Beard House kitchen was a packed, buzzing hive. People were setting up equipment, sorting food, stacking papers, checking notes, moving boxes, emptying containers and proofreading menus. More than a few were clutching telephones, exchanging telephone numbers and trying to get greens — "micro tatsoi or micro watercress," Adams said — that hadn't been in the delivery.

Upstairs, in the still-dim dining room, the chef chose paper for the menu. Beige or yellow? Beige. It looked earthier, he said, closer to the soil.

The past 18 months have been busy ones for the young chef: become a father, open a restaurant, get fantastic reviews, receive an invitation to cook at the Beard House.

Next, said Adams: "We're going to build a greenhouse." There will be farming, too. As he spoke, Adams shifted a stack of menus and started signing them.

"We have 80 acres of organic land," he said. May as well use it. That way, June will have year-round supplies — and be able to start a CSA. The community, he observed, needs good food.

Downstairs, there was good news — four ounces of it, in the shape of microgreens. Gramercy Tavern had come through. There also was bad news: One of the cooks was sick.

Adams is adaptable. A minute later, my name was being inked into the roster. Three minutes later, I had on a grey, button-down shirt with a June logo. Five minutes after that, I had a pair of long tweezers.

"You'll need them," Adams assured me.

Prep time came and the hours fled. Guests filed through the kitchen, looking at the cooks with admiration and the visible ingredients with proprietary lust.

It was time to plate the passed courses.

In the tiny kitchen, every inch of



ABOVE: June chef Josh Adams (left) in the midst of service at the James Beard House in New York. Adams was invited to cook there Feb. 1. BELOW: Beets and blood oranges make for a stunning bite. | COURTESY JEFFERY NOBLE



A slow-cooked egg atop brioche and house-made guanciale — a signature dish at Adams' Downstate restaurant — was the second course.

space was used: To the north, tuna was prepped; to the northeast, rabbit sausage pierogi were plated; to the east, precise nickel-diameter rounds of Hartz Produce beets were stacked on full-bellied spoons and topped with scarlet circles of blood orange. These beets had been schooled in seduction.

Square plates appeared, each diagonally bisected by a round-bellied fork spearing a thick half-slice of duck breast.

"Do this," Adams said, nesting a portion of salad against the slice and topping it with one minute, crisp leaf. If precision-plating were a winter sport, June's crew would be in Vancouver.

The first course featured seared diver scallops ("These are real divers," Adams assured me. "Their season's short — did you know?"), bamboo rice risotto, speck, Brussels sprout kimchi and caramelized pineapple puree. The scallops were almost the size of my palm. The risotto,

pale green, echoed the ocean.

One person cooked scallops, another plated, another produced risotto, another plated it, another handled the kimchi and somehow, in a vibrant production line, everything came together: plate after flawless plate shuttling down the line, out the door and up the stairs.

A quick wipe-down of the counters, a sorting of what was where, and we were on to the second course. There may have been a leisurely meal upstairs. In the kitchen, seconds raced around the clock.

The second course was one of June's signature dishes: Meadow Haven Farm's fresh egg, coffee-smoked shiitake mushrooms, house-made guanciale, brioche, fines herbes and hollandaise.

An intimidating amount of hollandaise — enough calories to fuel a family of four for a week — had been made. The enviable eggs had been resting quietly in a bath at 62.5 degrees Celsius. While rounds of brioche were buttered and browned, the eggs were lifted and immaculately shelled.

Set on a plate, circled with guanciale and coffee-smoked mushrooms and sheeted with hollandaise, they had, Adams observed, all of the components of a good breakfast.

June always has meatballs on the menu. For this meal: Organic Pastures 30-day-dry-aged lamb, served with

house-made ricotta gnocchi (as tender as warm butter), freeze-dried peas, harissa, pickled shallot and mentholated mint foam.

The mint has to be served as froth; a less diffuse form would be overwhelming. Delicate and aerated, the mentholated herb cuts through the fat of the aged lamb and balances the gnocchi's tender richness.

"They're loving it upstairs," the maître d' reported. Who wouldn't?

The last savory course was Six Points Farm's Berkshire pork belly, Casco Bay mussels, salsify, micro white celery and ham veloute. Each slab of pork belly was braced by two plump mussels, a cascade of microgreens tumbling over the cliff edge of meat. The salsify made Adams happy. Its briny taste bridged the molusks and the fall-apart pork.

Dessert was pummelo cake, brown sugar and oat ice cream, flame raisin puree and crisp candied oats. It was humongous. Half of the staff eyed it greedily. Ever ready to feed people, Adams plated extra and shoved plates and spoons across the counter.

Even the Beard House crew — surely, among the most plate-jaded people on the planet — cooed with pleasure.

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