

Musicians win Grammys; actors get Oscars. The food world has the James Beard Awards. And Kansas City has had its share of winners, including Celina Tio (2007), now the chef-owner of Julian, and Debbie Gold and Michael Smith (1999).



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Colby Garrelts, chef and co-owner of Bluestem (and finalist for this year's James Beard Awards in the Best Chef: Midwest category), concentrates on preparing roast pork tenderloin and braised jowl garnished with broccoli rabe, fava beans and served atop a *piquillo* pepper sauce (detailed at right).

This past May, Kansas City had two nominees at the James Beard Awards in New York City: Michael Smith, chef-owner of Michael Smith and Extra Virgin (1900 Main St.), and Colby Garrelts, chef and co-owner of Bluestem (900 Westport Road) with his wife, pastry-chef Megan Schultz Garrelts. Though Smith wasn't a finalist, he attended the ceremonies and supported the home team.

For the Garrelts, composure alternated with excitement the night of the event; then the announcement finally came: The award for 2010 Best Chef: Midwest went to Alexander Roberts of Alma, in Minneapolis. Outside the auditorium, a commiserating Johnny Iuzzini, cookbook author and the award-winning executive pastry chef of New York's Jean-Georges, joined the Bluestem team. His sympathies for the Garrelts were honest: He'd tasted their food.

Let all of that be prologue. Kansas City's food story should not be written in the past tense.

A few days after the awards, Iuzzini, who served as guest chef at The American Restaurant this past spring, sat down to offer his opinion of Kansas City's culinary scene. (If you don't know Iuzzini, keep an eye on your television set. Later this year, he'll be a regular on a new program. Though no further details can be divulged quite yet, it just goes to show that he's the kind of guy who maintains very high standards.)

Worldwide, the best chefs balance tradition and new techniques. "Colby has a strong foundation and is open to modern cookery, and he understands the importance of tying the two together," Iuzzini notes.



At Extra Virgin, James Beard Award-winning Chef Michael Smith puts the gourmet touch on a tapas dish of wood-fired hangar steak with fava beans and morel mushrooms on a bed of romesco sauce (above). Opposite, Celina Tio, fellow award winner and chef-owner of Julian, starts the preparations for her house-smoked salmon with toasted brioche and Campo Lindo egg salad.

That’s a draw, and not only for Bluestem’s dining room. The lounge has regular customers, too. Bartender Van Zarr and sommelier/General Manager Jeremy Lamb keep drinks and conversation flowing. It’s sophisticated, relaxed and cutting-edge—all at the same time.

According to Manhattan’s finest, then, Kansas City offers excellence. What’s the opinion in California? Elizabeth Falkner, chef-owner of Orson and Citizen Cake in San Francisco, enjoyed a Sunday night dinner at Julian (6227 Brookside Plaza) not too long ago. Her review consisted of one word: great.

And the local view? “I think Kansas City is great because it’s underestimated, and it’s such a surprise for people,” Julian’s Celina Tio says. She pauses and laughs. “I don’t know whether that’s great or bad. People come from San Francisco or New York and say, ‘Oh, I can’t believe there’s a restaurant like this in Kansas City.’ You almost want to say ‘Why would you not think that?’”

Maybe it’s cultural. In edgier cities, dining out is a paraprofessional sport. People will try anything. Debbie Gold, the executive chef at The American Restaurant (200 E. 25th St.), says that Kansas City’s diners can be adventurous, too: “They travel all over the country. They travel all over the world. And they will eat adventurously.” Not at home, though. And that’s a pity because Kansas City can be thrilling—even for those on a budget.

Realtor Drew Hertel is enthusiastic about Blanc Burgers + Bottles (multiple locations, blancburgers.com): truffle fries, a boozy milkshake and a fabulous burger in comfort and decadence. This is one of Hertel’s favorite things to prove: In Kansas City, you really *can* afford to have it all.

Speaking of booze, bartending consultant Ryan Maybee says Kansas City reflects both the East Coast’s classic cocktail style and the West Coast’s farm-to-table approach. Modern bartenders are always in the kitchen: “We’re making our own syrups, making our own purées,” Maybee says. He’s



building the future

Kansas City's established chefs aren't the only ones capturing the attention of the James Beard Foundation. Throughout the school year, the Broadmoor Bistro (6701 W. 83rd St.)—a 4,700-square-foot bakery, kitchen and classroom—offers evening dining events created and served by high school-age culinary arts students enrolled at Shawnee Mission School District's Broadmoor Technical Center.

Junior and senior students from the district's high schools enroll in year-long elective classes at Broadmoor in their area of interest. As part of the culmination of their culinary arts instruction, the students apply their skills by creating menus for, cooking and serving in, and running the Broadmoor Bistro.

And they receive excellent guidance. In addition to an expert faculty, Broadmoor has partnered with the James Beard Foundation; Beard Award-winning guest chefs come to the center several times a year to mentor the students as they prepare a formal, five-course meal. Open to the public, proceeds from these events (\$50 per person) are put toward scholarships for Broadmoor students who plan to attend culinary universities or colleges.

even been known to smoke liquor, and that's as Heartland a taste as you'll find on a grill or in a glass.

Jason Burton has been working with liquids for more than a decade. Now the owner of KC-based beverage marketing and public relations firm LAB 5702, he notes that Kansas City's chefs proudly support local vineyards, breweries, distilleries and coffee roasters, tapping the regional market for a personal touch. Tio, for example, went to The Roasterie for Julian's house blend of coffee. "I wanted to support Danny [O'Neill, owner of The Roasterie] because [he has] always supported me," she says. With Guatemalan and Ethiopian beans, the coffee is bright, warm, floral, fair trade and organic.

So why do fine chefs settle in Kansas City? For Gold quality of life is a factor: Chefs leave here to work in big cities, and then they bring their knowledge home. "I think there's a lot more skill, a lot more talent than people realize here in Kansas City," she says.

Michael Smith, Julian, R Bar (1617 Genessee St.), Bluestem, Justus Drugstore (106 W. Main St., Smithville): Set any one of them down in Chicago, London or San Francisco, and they'd fit in flawlessly. But let's not do that. Kansas City's happy to keep the best at home. ■