



EAT HERE NOW – KANSAS CITY

By Seánan Forbes



Photo courtesy of the Kansas City Convention and Visitors Association

Kansas City's not just about barbecue. There are restaurants, bars and coffee shops that would be mobbed were they in LA or New York, but the owners are happy in the Heartland. If you're into coffee, then share in KC's celebration of its independent roasters: The Roasterie (www.theroasterie.com) and Broadway Café and Roasting (www.broadwaycafeandroastery.com). Visit at the right hour, and you can catch one of Kansas City's chefs fuelling up for another successful day.

Three-time Beard nominee **Colby Garrelts** and his wife, **Megan**, are an unstoppable pair: as parents, chefs (Colby handles the savory side; Megan, the sweet), and co-owners of **Bluestem** (www.bluestemkc.com, 900 Westport Road). They're looking into opening a new restaurant, and are working on a cookbook – and their crew gets along so well that they hang out together when they have time off.



Photo by Bonjwing Lee

Where would they have you go in KC? In the great tradition of "eat dessert first," let's give Megan Garrelts the first word. "We go to **Room 39** a lot," she says. "It's homey. It's small . . . They have a great burger, great specials and soups . . . Ted [Ted Habinger, chef-restaurateur] is a great friend of ours." Habinger's worked for some of the best, including Danny Meyer. Room 39 is the ultimate in egalitarian treatment. Whether you spend hours drinking excellent cappuccinos and reading the newspaper, or order a five-course meal and a \$200 bottle of wine, you'll be shown honest grace and courtesy. Habinger wouldn't have it any other way.

R Bar (www.rbark.com, 1617 Genessee Street) is another of her favorites. There's "a great cocktail selection." Just as important, "The ambience is just really cool. It has that old Kansas City feel. It takes you back in time." Check the calendar for live music. R Bar's drinks pair well with jazz.

Laughing, Colby Garrelts says, "The boys and I eat out almost every single day. We go hit the holes in the wall with the good lunches. These are the places that are the heart and soul of what we eat on a normal basis. We eat tons of pho." For that, they go to **The Vietnam Café**. (522 Campbell Street) and **Kim Long Asian Market and Restaurant** (511 Cherry Street) "It's where the Vietnamese people go to eat, both of these places." Look for "noodles, vermicelli, tripe – which isn't really tripe – tendon, shank . . ." Garrelts' one-word review: "Fantastic.

El Camino Real (902 N 7th Street, Kansas City KS). "They serve real gorditas – they hand-make all the gorditas – and they have those big pork shoulders with pineapple that drip and roast in the rotisserie. This is the real deal."

El Pollo Rey (1101 Kansas Avenue, Kansas City KS) "All these people do is grill chickens." You can buy a whole or half-chicken. You get fresh, warm tortillas, pickled vegetables, Mexican sodas – and it's just spectacular."

Much of the time, bartender/restaurateur **Ryan Maybee** can be found behind the bar at his speakeasy, **Manifesto**, below the **Rieger Grill and Exchange** (1924 Main Street, www.theriegerkc.com).

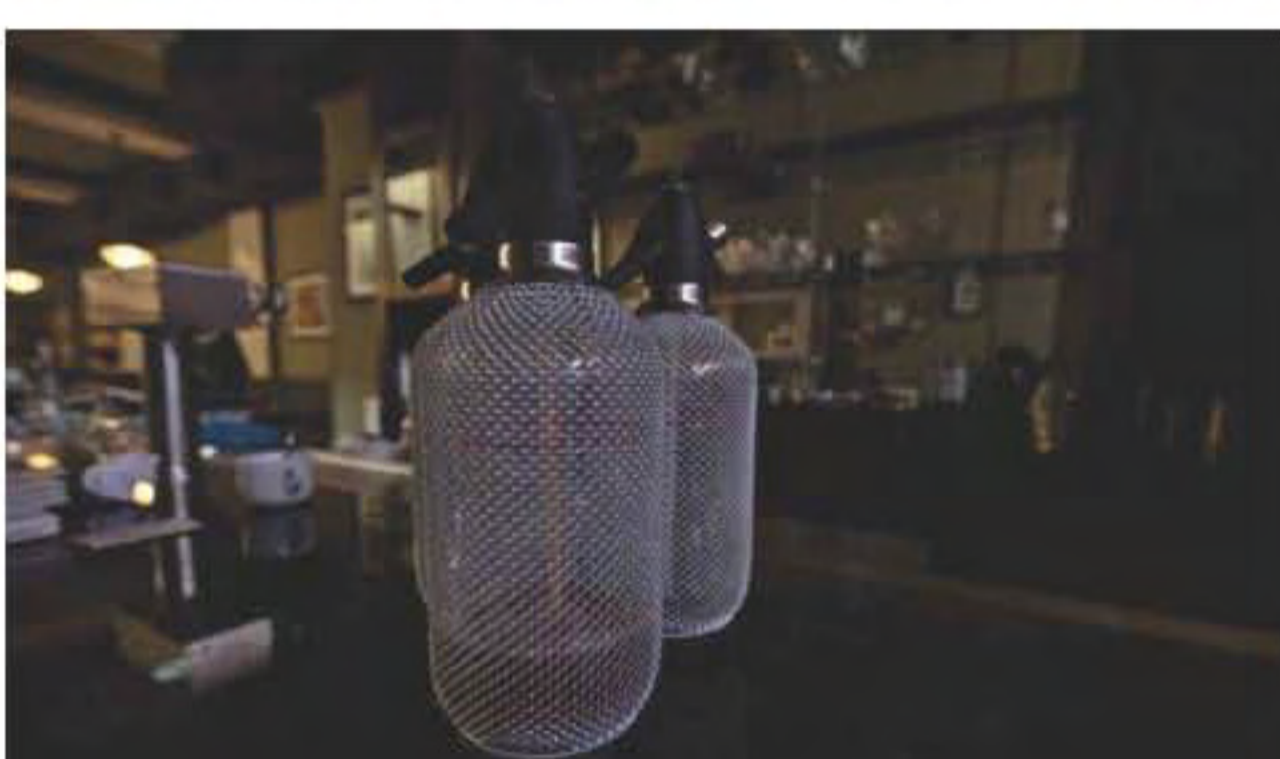


Photo by Brandon Cummins

When he's not there, he's out exploring and enjoying his world. Some of his top tips follow: **Westport Café and Bar** (www.westportcafeandbar.com, 419 Westport Road) and **Grunauer** (www.grunauerkc.com, 101 West 22nd Street) are very warm and hospitable. "You're going to get expert service from knowledgeable people, in a very hospitable way. I think that's what makes places great: having employees who take pride in what they do, who are really talented and knowledgeable and take their jobs seriously but love every minute of it – love to serve people. I think that's what we in the industry look for. It's what strive to be and the way we want to be treated when we go out . . . You can feel the hospitality and see the quality in everything that they do."

"I don't think you can come to Kansas City and not go to **Bluestem**. (www.bluestemkc.com) "Go to the lounge. Happy hour has half-price appetizers. You can get a sous vide hanger steak for \$7 that will blow your mind." With wine, cocktails and a comfortable bar, "that place has it going on, on every level. You go to the dining room and you have a world-class menu."

Harry's Bar (501 Westport Road) is "the quintessential industry hangout" in KC. "I wouldn't say that they're pushing the envelope or cutting edge . . . It's a very comfortable, social spot where you know everybody and the bartenders know you. They're as professional as it gets behind the bar . . . I love the service that they provide. They have a great whisky selection. It's our version of Cheers."

Justus Drugstore (www.drugstorerestaurant.com, 106 West Main Street, Smithville MO). "The bar is like an apothecary. They make everything in house." **Chef Jonathan Justus** does a tremendous job. "He's about as true to the locavore thing as you can get. He's really hard-core about that local stance, and it shows . . . He goes foraging." Maybee has a lot of respect for owners who are true hosts. "I think Jonathan Justus is one of those old-school guys. He comes out and he touches every table."

Celina Tio's Julian (www.juliankc.com/, 6227 Brookside Plaza) is "in a really good spot. Got a beautiful patio. Food is good. It's very approachable, reasonably priced. Warm neighborhood spot."



Photo by Gabe Hopkins

Tio just finished a lengthy stint on *Iron Chef*. "I was so proud to have her representing Kansas City on that show," Maybee says. "Even being a James Beard Award winner, she was kind of unknown. People were like, 'Who is this girl from Kansas City?' Her personality really came across. She was fun to watch. It made me proud to be part of the Kansas City restaurant scene."

Go to Beard-winner **Michael Smith's Extra Virgin** (www.extravirginkc.com, 1900 Main Street) "If you want to sample some food items that you don't usually see anywhere else. . . . The menu is world-travel; he does duck-tongue tacos, crispy big ear salad, and they're really, really good . . . Unpretentious atmosphere. It's fun." Megan Garrelts agrees. She and Colby "go there a lot. It's fun and easy and small plates are neat, and he [Michael Smith] has a great bar – really good energy there."

Donald Ray is the head of corporate sales at the **Q Hotel and Spa** (www.theqhote.com, 560 Westport Road). He's been in the hospitality business "forever." When it comes to making guests comfortable, Ray knows his stuff – and that influences his choice of restaurants.

"**The American** (978 Broadway Blvd, www.theamericankc.com) is my favorite. I think it's one – beside Bluestem – where you have a beautiful presentation." The food, he says, is excellent, as is the ambience, and there's "top-notch service. It makes it memorable, and that's what food is about." With **Jamie Jamison**, the GM and Wine Director, on the floor and Beard winner **Debbie Gold** in the kitchen, that's no surprise. Ask Jamison to tell you the history of the place. He knows every detail, and there are some great stories.

Another hotelier favorite: **The Plaza III Steakhouse** (4749 Pennsylvania Avenue, www.plazaiiiksteakhouse.com). "You're going to get top-notch service and the type of product that you expect from Kansas City. You expect a good grade of beef in Kansas City." That said, if you ask Ray what to order, he'll tell you that "the lambchops are the best."

The Majestic (200 East 25th Street, www.majestickc.com) "You get this blues, jazz feeling, and then you get this great cut of meat." Ray chuckles. "Okay, the stockyards were here. We get the best beef in the Midwest." It's **The Rieger Grill and Exchange** (1924 Main Street, www.theriegerkc.com) is also in Ray's list. "It talks about our history. That's why I live in Kansas City, because I get the feeling of 'That's what it's all about.'" **Chef Howard Hanna** has created a menu that's as earthy and elegant as Kansas City, and Ryan Maybee has built cocktails to match. If your thirst's bigger than your appetite, then go downstairs to Manifesto; with more than 30 drinks on the menu, you're sure to find the glass you want to raise to a town that can feed you better than America dreams.



Photo by Brandon Cummins