

FORK IN THE ROAD

Food innovation — in Kansas

Wichita, Manhattan restaking their foodie claims through culinary surprises

STORY AND PHOTOS
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MANHATTAN, Kansas — If the shape of Kansas were to pop up on a foodie Rorschach test, respondents probably would draw a blank or perhaps mention “steak” or “Kansas City Barbecue” (even though KC “Q” hails from the Missouri side of the states’ border.)

Although Kansas isn’t on today’s culinary hot-spot map, two of its cities, Wichita and Manhattan, have a deep history of pioneering food movements, and it looks like they may be poised to raise their culinary profiles again.

Did you know that Wichita is the cradle of the fast-food craze? The first White Castle opened there in 1921 as the brainchild of a cook and an insurance guy. Walter Anderson, also credited with inventing the hamburger bun and kitchen assembly line, partnered with insurance salesman Edgar “Billy” Ingram to sell beef patties with onion and pickles for 5 cents each out of a white porcelain-steel building based on the design of the Chicago Water Tower. White Castle operates in 12 markets, including Chicago, New York and Las Vegas, but, ironically, there hasn’t been a White Castle in Wichita since 1938, and none exists in Kansas.

Then there is Pizza Hut, which was started in Wichita in 1958 by Frank and Dan Carney, Wichita State University students who signed up a partner and got a \$600 loan from their mom to open their first restaurant. The Carneys’ original store is still standing but not operating. Today there are 11,000 Pizza Huts selling pies in 90 countries. The oldest continuously operating Pizza Hut is in Manhattan’s Aggieville neighborhood, near Kansas State University.

Wichita may be the birthplace of fast food, but Manhattan has a few culinary surprises up its sleeve too.

The acknowledged flag-bearer for the city’s food scene is Harry’s (www.harrysmanhattan.com), which opened in 1928 in the lavish-for-the-times, six-story Wareham Hotel, built by Manhattan scion Harry Pratt Wareham. Both hotel and Harry’s have persevered through several rough patches.

“For years we were the only restaurant around, and I could look at the cars outside and tell how many people were in the dining room,” said Harry’s executive chef Cadell Bynum, also the culinary director for Bourbon & Baker, a small-plate concept in town.

A 1951 flood devastated the Wareham, after which it was neglected. The Wareham then became a transient hotel in the 1970s, Bynum said. In the ‘80s, another renovation created apartments on the upper floors, but it wasn’t until 1998 that the hotel and Harry’s were restored to their former glory.

Bynum came to Manhattan to major in architecture at Kansas State University, but when the St. Louis native started working at Harry’s as a line cook in 1991, he put down roots. Two years later he was named executive chef and, except for a brief hiatus, he has been at Harry’s ever since.

“Every single job I’ve had since I was 16 has been working in a kitchen,” Bynum said. “I was doomed to do this, and I love it.”

Bynum said he didn’t go to culinary school, but when he started at Harry’s he read everything he could and picked the brains of local chefs. He is a life-long student of food and says that, for inspiration, he frequently travels around the country to see what other restaurants are doing. He often reinvents his recipes to keep them aligned with current tastes.

“The only dishes left on the menu from when I started here are prime rib and filet. My salmon dish is now in its fourth creation,” Bynum said. His secret to success? “I always go after the highest-quality ingredients. I learned to cook standing next to my mother. She cooked the right way.”

Apparently so. Harry’s has been on OpenTable’s top 100 American restaurants list from 2011 through 2015; Bynum was recognized by peer review in the annual listing of Best Chefs in America in 2013, 2014, and 2015; and Business Insider magazine named Harry’s the best restaur-



Radina’s Coffeeshouse & Roastery in Manhattan, Kan., bakes its whole-grain breads, scones and pastries from Kansas-milled flours and grains.



Cadell Bynum long has been executive chef at Harry’s in Manhattan.

rant in Kansas in 2015.

Harry’s doesn’t serve the only tasty plate in town. Manhattan’s restaurant niches are filled with a variety of places with fresh dining ideas and a dedication to home-grown, in-season ingredients.

Breakfast is a specialty of The Chef (www.thechefcafe.com), where people wait up to two hours to chow down on such creations as the Buenos Dias Frittata, a glorious mix of eggs, chorizo, pico de gallo and Jack cheese, with sour cream and chipotle sauce on the side. The cafe’s slogan is “Wakie, wakie, eggs and bakey.”

For a continental breakfast, go to one of four Radina’s Coffeeshouse & Roastery locations (www.radinas.com) in Manhattan. Radina’s bakes its own croissants and roasts its own coffee beans in four styles. Whole-grain breads, scones and other pastries also are made in-house from Kansas-milled flours and grains, and the croissants rival those I’ve sampled in Paris.

Varsity Donuts in the Aggieville neighborhood near the K-State campus makes its doughnuts in a food truck in the parking lot behind the store, a former apothecary. It also sells bikes and provides board games for patrons who linger. When the doughnut shop closes at 10 p.m. on week-ends, the food truck opens up

until 2 a.m. to serve grilled macaroni-and-cheese sandwiches to late-night patrons.

Many Manhattan restaurants are dedicated to local sourcing and on-site baking in a big way. The 4 Olives Wine Bar (www.fourolives.biz) is owned by a husband-wife team, one of whom makes inventive cupcakes for the restaurant’s desserts, while the other dishes up sophisticated plates filled with local meats like Duroc pork chops brined in cider and rosemary.

Bourbon & Baker (www.bourbonandbakermanhattan.com) is a combination bakery and small-plate restaurant with dishes that reflect “the Midwest- and Southern influences of our families.” The murals covering the walls are blowups of handwritten recipes from the staff’s family archives. Offerings include pickled shrimp, Creole catfish, braised pork belly and butterscotch pudding. Lots of bourbon choices, too, but the Pappy Van Winkle is in the cellar, though not on the menu.

One hundred and thirty miles to the south, Wichita’s food and wine scene runs the gamut from sophisticated steakhouses and inventive bars to a 24/7 doughnut shop with a giant chicken on the roof to an ever-expanding fleet of food trucks.

For a celebration meal, try



Fruity Pebbles-covered doughnuts from Donut Whole in Wichita, Kan.



Buenos Dias Frittata draws crowds to The Chef in Manhattan.



An adult milkshake dessert at Chester’s Chophouse in Wichita.

Chester’s Chophouse (www.chesterschophouse.com) in northeast Wichita. Chef-owner Bobby Lane hails from Florida, so besides lots of expertly prepared prime beef, pristinely fresh fish dishes like maple-mustard salmon and seared diver scallops are on the menu. Some of the more unusual offerings have a Vietnamese influence.

Public at the Brickyard (www.publicoldtown.com) is an indoor/outdoor spot in Old Town whose menu features craft beers and dishes made from local meat and produce. It occupies the bottom floor and courtyard of an old warehouse where live music often accompanies the meal. Try the Prairie Sliders, which are espresso- and porcini-seasoned bison-beef patties with onion marmalade. Public recently launched Boss Dawg, a food truck with Cuban and banh mi sandwiches on the menu.

After dinner, experience Old Town’s vibrant nightlife. Even on a Tuesday night Mort’s Martini and Cigar Bar (www.mortswichita.com) was full of people sipping one of Mort’s 160 crazy martini concoctions like the chocolate-peanut-butter-banana ‘tini and listening to live music while puffing on cigars on the patio in a block-party atmosphere.

If beer is more your style, order a flight of craft brews and a snack at Old Town’s River City Brewing Co. (www.rivercitybrewingco.com), where brewmaster Don Norton isn’t afraid to try new things. His dark Barrel Full of Donuts beer is a result of adding bananas and doughnuts from Wichita’s Donut Whole to the mash.

For a solid taste of the doughnuts that flavor River City’s beer, head to the place with the giant chicken on the roof. The Donut Whole (www.thedonutwhole.com) is a former meatpacking plant on the outskirts of Old Town. It uses all-Kansas ingredients to make its whimsical pastries from scratch. Among the shop’s 40-plus flavors are Fluffernutter (peanut butter and marshmallow) and Bumblebee (citrus glaze on chocolate). It makes vegan doughnuts on Wednesdays and has live music Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays.

It’s a nationwide chain, but there is something about learning to paint a sunflower while sipping Dandy Horse wine from Winfield, Kansas, that makes BYOB art-bar Pino’s Palette (www.pinospalette.com/wichita) seem like a unique local experience, but so does every-

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