



Review

Steak Out

Kevin Rathbun unleashes the power of red meat.
By CHRISTIANE LAUTERBACH

The New York Times recently ran a story about women who order red meat on a first date. The gist of the article was that gals now feel free to chow on cow. Apparently, it is okay to send a message by going for the big steak. ("I am woman. Hear me chew.")

I have never been shy about loving steak. If I took a man to Kevin Rathbun Steak and he ordered the chicken, I would definitely be annoyed. And if he wanted the filet rather than a more flavorful cut such as the New York strip, I'd tell him he might as well have ordered the chicken.

For me, there is only one reason to go to a steakhouse, and that reason is to eat a real steak. In his new restaurant overlooking the proposed BeltLine at the tail end of Inman Park, Chef Kevin Rathbun, a Kansas City native raised on beef, has tons of choices for those for whom a \$42 Delmonico is an unattainable dream. Yet his heart is clearly with the big meats he gets from the legendary Allen Brothers in Chicago, purveyors of the best USDA Prime beef in America.

Once you have tasted a top-grade Prime steak, dry-aged to a mellow and ripe tenderness, you can never go back. The best thing on the menu at Kevin Rathbun Steak is the Steak for Two, a porterhouse in anything but the name. The presentation, just like at the historic Peter Luger in Brooklyn, is with the meat already carved off the bone and served on a large plate propped at an angle to collect the juices. The mouthfeel is heavenly, and each person gets a satisfactory eleven ounces of meat.

You can get a massive sirloin or rib eye in his restaurant, but the particular genius of Kevin Rathbun is in the way his smaller steaks are cut in half "on the vertical," a process that shapes them almost like a filet and prevents them from looking like breakfast steaks. He and I fully agree that filet tastes best rare, sirloin medium rare, and rib eye medium because of their respective fat content.

It strikes me as funny that 70 percent of the customers order Rathbun's filet mignon, which is a lesser Top Choice grade (it almost always is at any comparable restaurant), while the hamburger is a much more flavorful Prime rib eye ground to order. Of course by the time you pay \$5.95 for a side of french fries, that \$14 burger ends up costing you a small fortune.

One thing that distinguishes this new restaurant from the competition is the unusual quality of its sides and appetizers. Instead of a baked potato, one can enjoy zucchini piccata touched with parsley and lemon, scalloped sweet potatoes topped with Gruyère, and a mac and cheese tart with truffled bread crumbs.

If you want to experience the restaurant on a budget, sit at the bar and make a meal out of small plates, which include steak tartare, sweet corn risotto, asparagus wrapped in Serrano ham, and

an unusual combination of lightly fried oysters and okra with a rich Creole remoulade.

It can't be good if your date looks at his dessert and says, as mine did, "I think I'd like to write a horror movie with raspberry coulis instead of blood." Skip the heavily decorated chocolate bombe and the fussy peach sorbet between phyllo crisps. The blackstrap rum cake is the only dessert item I'd recommend, but you may be better off putting more money toward a decent bottle of red wine from a list backed by an all-out reserve section.

The old cotton warehouse Kevin Rathbun Steak calls home is a bit like a deluxe Finnish sauna, only darker, with many of the walls clad in natural wood stacked like stones. A gigantic branch used as a light fixture brings in the magic of the forest, and scurrying servers in bumblebee-yellow shirts brighten the space. The patio, carved out of backyard industrial space, serves as an atmospheric outdoor cigar lounge. Sitting there recently, I had to laugh as I watched a happy guy on a nearby condo terrace doing his own urban grilling while I had just spent \$64 for a porterhouse.

You can't tell by looking at him, but Kevin Rathbun has his own streak of simplicity. Once, when we were talking in front of his library of personal cookbooks, we agreed on one as a masterpiece: The Greens Cookbook by Deborah Madison and Edward Espe Brown, a compendium of meatless seasonal recipes. If a chef who orders \$20,000 worth of steak a week can feel a kinship with vegetarians, there is hope for world harmony.

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WEBSITE kevinrathbunsteak.com

HOURS Dinner Mon.–Thurs. 5:30–10:30 p.m.; Fri. & Sat. 5:30–11:30 p.m.

Photograph by Alex Martinez