

*everything
but black pepper:*

A Day with Emmer & Rye

By Katie Friel
Photographs by Steven Visneau

*In a Rainey Street high-rise, **Chef Kevin Fink** is creating Austin's most progressive, and perhaps most interesting, restaurant.*



Over the past two decades, we have witnessed the rise of “farm-to-table” restaurants, a generalized term that has become so overused it can be easily dismissed. Emmer & Rye, the Rainey Street restaurant that opened in late 2015 is in every essence a farm-to-table operation. What it is not, however, is easily dismissed.

Housed in the first floor of SkyHouse, the restaurant, led by Executive Chef/owner Kevin Fink, Chef de Cuisine Page Pressley and Pastry Chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph, is creating an entire operation based around the idea of sustainability for ingredients, the city, the environment and the people they work with. It is an ethos that carries into every aspect of their business model. “You can compare us directly to a lot of other restaurants, but that’s not what we are trying to do,” explains Fink, whose impressive culinary chops include stints at restaurants like Noma and French Laundry. “So much of [our model is] based upon really

creating a restaurant around our ethos, which is how to support our [larger] community and the community within the people that work here.”

The ethos begins in the kitchen, where the passionate kitchen staff, comprised mainly of tattooed, handsome cooks, often show up an hour and a half before their scheduled start time. “We actually had to tell them to stop coming in so early,” laughs Fink. The space between prep and service is perhaps the most interesting time of the day at Emmer & Rye. While cooks are chopping, milling, peeling, sautéing and executing dishes for a menu that is tweaked constantly and changes completely every 11 days, front of house staff take in a wine tasting at the bar. Led by Emmer & Rye general manager Chris Dufau, the employees stare intently at a map of France, jotting down notes about the country’s different wine regions. “What I want here is an environment that is constantly propelling our team

forward. Not only in their careers, but in their progression of how they think about food, and the responsibility of how they [source] food,” says Fink.

Throughout all the hustle and bustle of the day, there is a constant parade of local farmers and vendors walking into the restaurant to deliver their wares. As each one enters, Pressley walks over to greet them, inspect the product and sign the invoice. When it comes to finding ingredients, the chefs stick close to home. “Our rule is that we start in Austin, then we go to Texas,” explains Pressley. “And we exhaust all of our resources.” Partnering with farmers, foragers and growers, Fink and his team source almost everything, save heritage grains and a few spices like black pepper, from Texas.

With ingredients for the night secured, Fink, Pressley and Bristol-Joseph grab a carafe of housemade cold brew and a couple of Topo Chicos, and sit down to brainstorm the



Above: (from left to right) Chef de Cuisine Page Pressley, Executive Chef Kevin Fink and Pastry Chef Tavel Bristol-Joseph and gather before heading into service.

Right: Stock is made from the lamb which was broken down earlier in the day.





Left: Vendors make their way in and out throughout the day, delivering their wares.



Right: The chefs meet to finalize the menu.



The dining room is prepared for guests while the kitchen enjoys the tradiional pre-service staff dinner.



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– Page Pressley

evening’s menu. They discuss what dishes were successful the night before, what has come in today, and what they are going to add to the menu and dim sum cart. “Where we are today, this should be the ... least thoughtful food that we ever produce,” says Fink. “We’re all constantly learning and growing and pushing and perceiving more of what, at least, we want to know more about.”

Though there is no doubt that Fink is the one around which the entire operation orbits, he’s created an almost academic like atmosphere at Emmer & Rye, one where food education is ingrained in the process, and there is a mission beyond just creating a good meal. It was Fink’s style of leadership that led Bristol-Joseph to pack up and move almost a thousand miles to open Emmer & Rye alongside him. Fink, who grew up in Arizona met Bristol-Joseph, a Guyana native

via New York City, while working in a Tucson restaurant. Bristol-Joseph says that when Fink asked him to move to Austin and help run the restaurant, it was a no brainer. “We worked together but we were friends,” says Bristol-Joseph. “When your friend is going to do something the first answer is yes and then you figure [it] out.”

Following their meeting, the three chefs return to the kitchen and set about explaining the changes to the rest of the staff. A few break off to begin creating dishes for the executive chef and chef de cuisine to critique later, while Fink sets about breaking down a lamb that has been delivered just hours earlier from IO Ranch in Lampasas County. He lays out his tools — chef’s knife, bone saw, cleaver — and begins the process. Twenty minutes later, he’s done. Every part of the animal is used, including the bones which will be used

to create stock, and the shank which will be turned into that evening’s lamb tartare.

One of the trickiest things about building a restaurant like Emmer & Rye is introducing diners to upscale seasonal eating. Compound that with the fact that the chefs are using Texas as their culinary muse, and it’s even more difficult. “Honestly, cooking in Texas defies all odds of seasonality,” says Pressley, who cut his chops at Uchi before becoming chef de cuisine at Uchiko in 2013. “Here we have these very strange swings ... We have these incredibly intense summers where we go to the farmers’ market and [there are] persimmons that have been harvested six weeks early and you can play baseball with, and you have eggplants and you have chiles, and that’s it. The summer here is ... the rest of the country’s winter.”

In order to maximize the bounty of these strange Texas seasons, the restaurant tasked



Following page: A day in the life of Emmer & Rye. Chief among Fink’s priorities is creating an environment of education.

The evening's dim sum cart includes a lamb tartare, and the restaurant's popular Johnny Cakes.

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Jason White with creating an extensive fermentation and preservation program. In a temperature-regulated closet near the dining room, there is a world of preserved produce for use in dishes off-season. Along with preservation and fermentation, Emmer & Rye also uses dried goods in a unique way. “That’s how we try to build our spice rack and season our food, with things that we’ve preserved and dried,” explains Pressley. “What we try to do with a lot of our spices is to ferment wheat tops or radish tops and then dry them and powderize them, and stuff like that. We still have chilis from summer that we’re using.”

As the afternoon leads into evening, Fink and Pressley stand in the center of the kitchen as the staff prepare to present the day’s new dishes. The process is much like an art school critique; each sous chef offers a new or updated dish, and Fink and Pressley give feedback. (“Too much sediment.” “Add more salt.”) With the critique done, and less than two hours until doors open, the evening’s

menu is finally complete. Servers will gather with Fink to get a detailed explanation of each dish, and the kitchen staff will clean the entire kitchen to mark the end of prep and the beginning of the dinner service (the process, which is done in exactly 12 minutes, is oddly captivating). By 5 pm, doors are open and the dim sum cart begins its first turn around the dining room.

When the restaurant closes later that night, Fink and Pressley sit together on the patio and stare into the brightly lit space. As they talk, the staff, who have already been working for more than 12 hours, begin to prep for tomorrow’s service. “You know what is a trend now is going to be what you have to do in 20 years to be a sustainable business,” says Pressley. “We can teach cooks now how to operate a sustainable business for their career ... because that is 100 percent the direction of this industry and this business. This kind of culture of plenty, it’s not going to exist forever — it really isn’t.” **T**