

# The Heart of the Kitchen: An Ode to New Rivers' House Rolls

The restaurant's remarkable rolls set the tone for chef Beau Vestal's simple menu, which is exceptional in every way.

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by Michael Ruhlman



New Rivers rolls created by chef Beau Vestal. Photography by Angel Tucker

After a stressful Thanksgiving shopping trip in Providence at Whole Foods, Eastside Marketplace and Bottles, my wife, Ann Hood, and her cousin, Gloria-Jean Masciarotte, unwound at the bar of New Rivers with a cocktail and a bite to eat. Ann summed up the experience this way: “Oh, my God, I saw those Parker House rolls go by. I wanted them so badly.

She might have talked about the New York strip, the excellent burger, the slow-roasted pork belly, the brook trout, the charcuterie or cheese board, the raw bar. But no. What caught her eye were the dinner rolls — simple, yeasted, buttery and pillow-soft with a fluffy cloud of grated Parmigiano-Reggiano atop.

I know them well. I never dine at New Rivers without ordering them. Why Ann and her cousin failed to do so was simply a tactical error.

“We call them New Rivers rolls, because they’re not really Parker House rolls,” says chef Beau Vestal. “Parker House rolls have a seam in them, and they really belong to the Parker House in Boston. We never intended them to become a signature dish.”



Chef Beau Vestal prepares the dough for his New Rivers rolls in the Providence restaurant. Photography by Angel Tucker

The rolls began with the quest for a hamburger bun, which Vestal — after he and his wife Elizabeth bought the restaurant from Bruce Tillinghast in 2012 — wanted to make in-house. After a year of tinkering, they had a perfect soft roll for the bun, egg-washed, sprinkled with poppy and sesame seeds and baked.

But, Vestal thought, we've got this great dough — what else can we do with it?

"I love cheap American-Italian food," Vestal says as we sit at the New Rivers bar one recent morning, "and you go to these joints, and they have those garlic knots."

Deep fried balls of garlic bread. "And that was the concept," he says. It was as simple as that — one dough, two products.

Vestal or one of his cooks bakes the rolls at midday, every day. When an order comes in, they pop a small iron tray fitted with four rolls into the oven, give them a heavy dose of an herbed garlic butter and, once reheated, send a flurry of fluffy Parmesan down on top of them.

I've had the good fortune to have worked extensively with many of the country's most lauded chefs and eaten at many of the best restaurants in the world. But nowhere have I had better Parker House-style rolls than at New Rivers. They are arguably the best in the country.



The New Rivers farm-to-table menu includes spaghetti alla chitarra. Photography by Angel Tucker

Vestal is not one of my favorite chefs in the country; he's one of my favorite *cooks*. Everything that comes out of his kitchen simply tastes so good. Not one single item on the menu is fancy — it all sounds prosaic, in fact: half a chicken, a burger, scallops, a couple of salads, some pastas. But the taste — I never cease to marvel at the flavors Vestal pulls out of the food.

“There's no walk-in here,” Vestal says of his squeeze of a kitchen, 300 square feet mostly taken over with equipment and counters. “We have limited reach-in space, so we can't make salsa verde for the week; we're making it fresh every day. Which may be a pain for the cooks, but everything we do is as fresh and vibrant as possible.

“The food is very identifiable as New Rivers ... I am the kitchen. I've been here so long,” Vestal says. “I know that it's this many steps here, that it's a four-second reach here. Yes, it's my food, it's my mind, my stuff. But there's always a component that makes each restaurant's food taste like that restaurant's food.”

Vestal, forty-eight, was raised in Florida and headed to Johnson & Wales University after high school, knowing only that he liked to cook (he worked at fast-food joints in high school). He applied for a job at New Rivers while still at JWU, unsuccessfully. While still in school, he found work at Ocean Coffee Roasters. One May afternoon — the weekend of Brown University's graduation, perhaps the biggest restaurant weekend of the year — lying on his couch, Vestal got a call from a buddy from Johnson & Wales, Matthew Card, a cook at Tillinghast's New Rivers.

One of the restaurant's cooks had called off to join a graduation party. Tillinghast fired her. Card, shouting over the chaotic din of the New Rivers kitchen prepping for its biggest night of the year, said to Vestal, “If you can get in here in a half-hour, you've got a job.”

Vestal headed to the landmarked Steeple Street complex to begin the work that would become his livelihood, his business, and give him a wife and three children, though he could hardly imagine it at the time.



Chef Beau Vestal and his wife, Elizabeth, at New Rivers in Providence. Photography by Angel Tucker

The space, within three structures built between 1827 and 1847, already had a grand culinary history. It was here that Johanne Killeen and her husband, George Germon, opened Al Forno in 1980. When Killeen and Germon found new digs ten years later, they called their friend Tillinghast, who had returned to the area with his wife Pat (Killeen and Tillinghast were both RISD graduates). Tillinghast had studied with the French chef and teacher Madeleine Kamman, who preached buying locally and cook-ing seasonally well before those ideas became mainstream. Bruce and Pat opened New Rivers, named for the new routings of Providence’s rivers, in 1990.



The New Rivers farm-to-table menu includes roasted scallops.  
Photography by Angel Tucker

Vestal had been promoted to executive chef by 2003. In 2009, he hired a young cook named Elizabeth La Mantia. Within the year, they were in love. (“Most people have no idea that she is a badass line cook,” Vestal says of Elizabeth.) They married in 2012, one month after taking over the restaurant. Vestal would stay in the kitchen; Elizabeth would move to the front of the house.

“I’ve always felt that this restaurant is its own thing,” Vestal says. “Bruce was the steward of this entity for the first part of its life. Now we’re the stewards of the place. But it’s its own living, breathing thing.”

Size and space restrictions, storage issues, the dirt floor of the cellar. “It’s given me a wonderful life and beautiful things. You’ve got to respect it. You’ve got to understand there’s a heartbeat to this place that is independent of me.”

A heart that’s the size and shape of an iron tray of four New Rivers rolls, doused with garlic butter and heaped with freshly grated Parmesan.

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## New Rivers Rolls

This is the exact recipe the restaurant uses. It's helpful to have a scale, not only for measuring the flour, but also for portioning the finished rolls, which should each weigh 2.5 ounces. They're shaped a little larger than golf balls, so that thirty will fill a quarter-sheet pan, six rolls by five rolls. They are egg-washed, dusted with Parmigiano-Reggiano, and then covered and proofed. Size is important: If they're too large, they will be too heavy and won't cook evenly. Also, if you want to halve the recipe, you can do so if you measure by weight. (This recipe makes two quarter-sheet pans of pull-apart rolls, or sixty rolls.)

Even if you don't have a scale, this is a terrific recipe to have in your repertoire. If you have leftover rolls, do what Vestal does: Slice them thinly and dry out in a 225-degree oven to use as toast points for cheese and charcuterie.

### Rolls

16 grams kosher salt (1 tbsp)

100 grams brown sugar (1/2 cup)

500 grams milk (2 cups)

250 grams butter (3 1/2 sticks)

1,250 grams bread flour

(about 7 1/2 cups)

4 eggs

14 grams active dry yeast (1 tbsp)

2 egg yolks mixed with 2 tbsp water

(for egg wash)

Parmigiano-Reggiano for grating

### Herbed Garlic Butter

1 lb softened butter

2 oz (roughly) garlic chives or regular chives

1 oz (roughly) parsley

2 garlic cloves, smashed

Combine the salt, sugar, milk and butter in a pan over medium heat. Stir to dissolve the sugar. When the butter has melted, remove the pan from the heat and allow to cool room temperature (yeast dies at 140 degrees, so it's prudent to make sure the milk mixture is at least below 120 degrees).

Combine the flour, four eggs and yeast in the bowl of a stand mixer fitted with a paddle attachment. Mix on low until the eggs are incorporated. With the machine running, pour in the milk mixture. Mix for 8 to 10 minutes. The dough will be sticky but will eventually pull away from the sides of the bowl. Cover the bowl with plastic wrap and let the dough double in size (about 2 hours).

Turn the dough out onto a floured surface and knead it to redistribute the yeast. Divide the dough into sixty 2.5-ounce portions and roll them into tight little boules.

Spray two quarter-sheet pans with cooking spray. Fill each pan with 6 rows of 5 rolls. Brush with egg wash and then dust with grated Parmesan. Cover the pan with plastic wrap and let proof for 1 hour.

Heat the oven to 375 degrees.

Bake the rolls for 18 to 20 minutes or until hot in the center.

herbed garlic butter, combine all the ingredients in a food processor and pulse until combined in a uniform green spread.

To serve, slather hot rolls with soft garlic herb butter and more Parmesan. If cooling and reheating that day, slather with the butter, then reheat for 5 to 7 minutes in a 375-degree oven.