

# The Little Coyote That Could

BY HANNA BROWN

**T**he hospitality industry is a unique—and often misunderstood—animal. It spans everything from fast-casual counter service to white-tablecloth fine dining, with new accolades and awards surfacing each year. And yet, it's ironic that an institution so deeply woven into our daily lives can thrive or collapse based solely on how the public feels about a single experience.

Behind the scenes, it requires focus, flexibility, ferocity, and, above all else, forgiveness. A great deal of forgiveness. And Ibuprofen. The hours are long, the preparation is unending, and the turnover rate is over 80 percent, outranking all other industries, including construction. Those working the traditional hours of 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. ain't seen nothin' quite like the 4 p.m. to 1 a.m. shift. That line cook with the chiseled jaw and fitted chef's coat, huddled over the sauté station of your favorite local open kitchen? He's just emerged from the weeds of a 300-cover dinner service—burned, bruised, and cut—and is counting the minutes until he can rip a drag with the rest of the back-of-house staff. His brooding is the result of re-makes and no one answering the call of “hands” in a timely manner.

For some, restaurant employment is a temporary gig to make ends meet, to see the world, to get through school. For others, it is a way of life—one where an inexplicable passion for food and beverage flows through your veins like a second bloodstream.

So what is the key to preserving passionate people in an industry built for burnout? It starts with valuing people over product—with paying livable wages, offering benefits, and fostering a culture where staff are seen, not just scheduled. It's not rocket science, but it is rare. And in Chattanooga, one restaurant group has managed to make it happen—not by reinventing hospitality, but by honoring the people who make it possible while also serving truly flavorful dishes.

Located in the St. Elmo neighborhood of Chattanooga—and nestled atop a hill, as if a beacon of light for those looking to imbibe—is Little Coyote, a mezcal restaurant that specializes in smoked meats and tortillas. This is just one of three successful concepts from two-time James Beard Award nominee Chef Erik Niel, who has been shaking up Chattanooga's dining scene since 2005, when he opened Easy Bistro & Bar—a modern-day staple offering small plates inspired by the flavors of the Tennessee River Valley. And while opening one concept is often enough to dissuade anyone from repeating such chaos, Niel launched Main Street Meats in 2015—a restaurant and butcher shop rooted in whole-animal butchery and built on close-knit partnerships with Chattanooga's surrounding farms—all with the help of his wife, Amanda. In 2023, the Niels decided to, once again, change the dining narrative with Little Coyote.

“Every chef has this moment where they think, ‘I want to make fancy stuff, I want to smoke meat, or I want a taco bar.’ I just took all three and smashed ‘em together,” Niel says laughingly. His demeanor is not at all what I expected for such a seasoned chef—pun intended. His responses are intentional, unhurried, and convey a deep sense of appreciation for his team.

“I'd been ruminating on this concept for 10 or 12 years, and Little Coyote was the end result of that process,” Niel says. “I felt it could be cool and different, while combining two things that I really love from my Texas upbringing, which are Texas barbecue and Tex-Mex.” Although he was born in Fort Worth and raised in Dallas, Niel quickly fell in love with Chattanooga's landscape and community.

From the outside, it appears the Niels have done exactly what they set out to accomplish. Little Coyote captivates you from the moment you walk in. Pendant lights cast a warm, ambient glow, while a canopy of greenery softens the industrial ceiling. The space is open and airy, with an elevated Western flair, setting an ideal tone to saddle up and unwind. And while I know the food is sure to be spectacular, it's their audacious take on cult cocktails that convinced me to hop in my car and make the four-hour trek to experience Little Coyote firsthand.

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*Warm pendant lights, a canopy of greenery, and Western flair set the stage for a visit to Little Coyote bar.*



I snag a seat at the bar and am greeted by Garth Poe, the beverage director for Easy Bistro, Main Street Meats, and Little Coyote, who has been working alongside Niel for nine years. (And still not as long a time on payroll as some of his colleagues, who have been with the company for up to 13 years.) Poe cut his teeth at Easy Bistro, where he managed a whiskey catalog stacked with over 450 bottles—a lineup that would intimidate even the most seasoned spirit snob. While his background was initially in brown liquor, it was a mezcal-loving mentor who helped broaden his perspective, guiding him into the world of craft cocktails.

“We knew that, by having tortillas in here, everyone who walked in the door was going to expect Little Coyote to be a Mexican restaurant,” Poe says. “We offer pretty much any cocktail you’d expect in that environment, but we do them with our own twist. For example, our margarita is a really cool version of the classic, but has Elote Reyes Chili Liqueur instead of triple sec.”

Poe maneuvers around his colleagues behind the bar and approaches what appears to be a draft system. He pours a Guinness-like beverage and sets it down in front of me. The contents

of the glass cascade until they settle. Although this, my friends, is no Guinness. This is instead the Little Coyote Espresso Martini on draft, and is brimming with Los Vecinos Mezcal, Velo Cold Brew, Cafe Bueno Coffee Liqueur, Aztec Cacao, Mole, and Turbinado. Rather than the sugary-sweet staple that many drinkers have come to know, this version is on the smoky, earthy side, and it is one of five draft cocktails that Little Coyote offers. “We’ve built our own draft system so that we can produce that cocktail in exactly 10 seconds,” Poe says. “And its craft quality every time.” These words are not only magic to the ears of a thirsty guest, but also to a gummed-up bar staff on a Saturday night, who will not have to worry about cranking out seven of the same drinks back-to-back.

Next up is the Slightly Im”pear”ed, which I’ve heard will have you hollerin’ “yeehaw” by the end of the night. As I wait for

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*Little Coyote is the latest venture from two-time James Beard Award nominee Chef Erik Niel and his wife, Amanda, alongside longtime beverage director Garth Poe.*



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my beverage, I can't help but notice a shared sense of pride among the Little Coyote staff. From the host to the server assistant to the barback, every detail is executed with care, wrapped in a warm, genuine sense of hospitality. Somehow, Little Coyote has found the recipe for fostering, and more impressively, sustaining a refreshing and positive restaurant culture.

"We try to create a really nice environment for people to work in, and take care of everybody who works for us," Neil says. "There are many important parts to doing that. Obviously, making money and feeling appreciated are part of it, but respect is a huge element that spreads around. All of these restaurants are built on creativity, hospitality, and the relentless pursuit of perfection—the cheesy Lexus ad, as I call it—but it gives everyone a purpose. That purpose makes everyone feel needed, wanted, and valued. Myself included."

The Slightly Im'pear'ed arrives in a vintage-style glass. The cocktail itself has a soft, almost translucent golden hue, as if a nod to a glistening Texas sunset. Perched at the rim is the Pear Lemon Shrub, dusted with warming spices and cacao nibs. The overall effect is crisp, clean, and a blend of sweet 'n' spicy. After three or four of these, I can imagine that anyone would have the confidence of a real-life cowboy.

House-made tortillas hit the table with all the ideal accoutrements, including pickles, fresh salsa, and crema. The aforementioned attention to detail shines through, and I find myself questioning if I have peaked in my Tex-Mex experience. I am hit with an internal, resounding "yes" as I follow up with the Belgian endive salad with chimichurri roja and cotija, apples, the brisket-stuffed avocado, and the smoked beef brisket. Originally, the plan was to leave room for dessert, but that simply means a repeat visit is due sooner, rather than later.

Little Coyote is a hospitality enigma, or perhaps a Texan-esque mirage in the Southeast corner of Tennessee. Either way, it stands out as one of the most intentional restaurants I have ever experienced—emanating from the top down. From spirits to wine to cocktails on draft, it'll quench your thirst in a creative way and fill your stomach with a delightful twist on Tex-Mex. And perhaps, continue to change the narrative of the hospitality industry through such hardworking hearts and hands. ✚

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*Bold bites + cocktails with a kick. The Slightly Im'pear'ed cocktail is made with pear, spice, cacao, and just the right amount of sweet.*



### SLIGHTLY IM"PEAR"ED (75 BATCH)

1 ½ ounces Paladar Barrel Pick Reposado  
½ ounce St. George Spiced Pear Liqueur  
¾ ounce pear lemon shrub  
¾ ounce lemon juice  
¼ ounce honey syrup  
¼ ounce Hamilton Pimento Dram  
1 bar spoon St. George Absinthe  
3 drops saline solution

Combine all ingredients into shaker tin, shake, strain into Collins glass, add 2 ounces soda, mount with ice, and garnish with sliced pear with microplaned dark chocolate on it.

### PEAR LEMON SHRUB

400g cored and chopped pears  
One lemon  
128g ginger  
128g water  
200g sugar  
45g honey  
3g vanilla paste  
½g star anise  
2g cinnamon stick (roughly crushed)  
2g cardamom  
3g black pepper corn  
12g cacao nibs  
100g champagne vinegar

#### DAY ONE:

1. Zest the lemons over 200g sugar in a container; set aside.
2. Chop up 400g of pears, measure out 128g of water, peel and measure 128g of ginger. Juice the lemon. Place them all into separate containers.
3. Blend water, ginger, lemon juice, and pears together in a Vitamix.
4. Pour over the sugar and zest mixture.
5. Add in the honey, cacao nibs, and other spices. Stir to incorporate all ingredients completely.
6. Allow it to sit overnight.

#### DAY TWO:

1. Fine-strain the pear-ginger mixture, allowing it to slowly strain completely.
2. Add 100g of champagne vinegar.

