

Jen Beirola, Grinn & Barrett




Tattooing You

By Augusta Olsen

Artist loves the competition for inking skin in the Big O

"I have the perfect job," says Jen Beirola, and she is perfectly suited for it. This tattooed vixen is one of the most in-demand tattoo artists in Omaha, with a remarkable repertoire and beautifully adorned client base that grows daily.

Beirola is the owner of Grinn & Barrett tattoos at 50th and Center Streets. This 35-year-old Rhode Island native first came to Omaha as a member of the United States Air Force in the late '90s. While serving our country, Beirola took as many art classes as she could at Bellevue University and Metro Community College. Ultimately, an internship at Crash Tattoo in Papillion set her career course. Then, after working at Grinn & Barrett for five years, she bought the shop in 2006. "I love being in Omaha," she says, "the city is developing and expanding so rapidly. Artistically, I feel people are appreciated for their work here, more than what art school they went to," she said. "There are many talented tattoo artists here, and there's a good amount of competition, so

it pushes me to grow."

Beirola puts in an average of three hours daily developing designs and artwork for her clients. "We draw almost every morning," says Beirola of herself and her fellow artists at Grinn & Barrett, Jeremiah Connor and Erik Anderson. "We have a good creative chemistry between us, we bounce things off one another and ask each other, how can this be better?"

Beirola is partial to neo-traditional designs, classic tattoo imagery worked with new colorways. "I'm really a big fan of taking traditional tattoo designs, from the WWII era, throwing color with them, working them in a different way," she said. "I like traditional tattoos crossed with realism, combining elements. I want to find the right style for the person I'm working with," she explained.

Beirola's art has sent her around the world and back to Omaha. In addition to traveling all over the U.S., Beirola has studied tattoo and piercing arts in Iceland, Scotland, and India. She attended a one-week conference in China in May, where she expanded her understanding of Asian styles of tattoo.

"They consider the full body as a canvas, rather than one piece or limb," she said of Chi-

nese and Japanese tattoo artists. "It's common to see a phoenix or a dragon on both the legs, or one tattoo over the whole body. They see the entire body as a canvas. They call our tattoo style single point tattooing," she said.

"I've been studying the imagery," Beirola said of Asian tattoos. "It all has a meaning, and their use of background to pull it all together is an art form in itself."

In November, Beirola will attend an intensive training with members of the Maori tribe in New Zealand for one month to learn traditional tribal tattooing. "The way that I travel, I like to be immersed in something," she said. "The Maoris are an ancient warrior culture. Their artwork is really cool, using negative space, in a tribal style. We're going to stay with the Maoris to be shown their sacred tattoo process," she said of the group visit to New Zealand. "They're going to let us in because we are tattoo artists."

Beirola is already very accomplished in several styles of tattooing, including portraiture. She downplays her talents in conversation, but the likenesses she tats are undeniable. Perhaps she was influenced by her experiences hanging out with Kent Bellows back in the day when she first arrived in Omaha.

"His daughter took me to his place," she divulged. "He was working on the gluttony painting, and it was so sick. He would paint with this little detail brush, and sand it down with black sandpaper for a glass finish," she described. "I told him, 'Tell me your secrets,' and he said, 'Don't buy cheap paints.'"

Beirola and the other artists at Grinn & Barrett also focus on hand-drawn script for custom tattoos. "We like to do names as art," she said. "A lot of people want to hide names in things, in wings, or somewhere, but we like to do handwriting as the focal point, beautifully drawn," she said.

Beirola says being open-minded is one of the most important aspects of being a successful tattoo artist. "Being able to talk to people openly, and think and communicate visually is very important," she said. "I really get to know my customers so I can get a sense of what they really want, and what will work best for them."

"I'm totally inspired you can constantly learn and practice and it's a life-long thing," said Beirola, it just takes "patience," she said. "I get tattooed in Massachusetts by a man I really admire, and he tells everybody, 'slow down.'" **SI**