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Routh Street Cafe Opens

At a time when most folks were happy eating steak, Routh Street Cafe was home to a new and exciting culinary trend that had diners swooning.



Who knows what would have happened to the Dallas culinary scene if Stephan Pyles had taken a postcollege adventure trip to Cancún instead of France. Thankfully, after studying music at East Texas State University, he headed to Paris, where he was infected by the spirit of French cuisine. He returned to Dallas and was chef at the Bronx, still a popular spot on Oak Lawn. But his travels continued and the influences of the great culinary minds of the '70s and '80s—Alice Waters, Julia Child, Paul Bocuse—fueled

his passion. On November 27, 1983, Pyles rocked the Dallas dining scene by opening Routh Street Cafe, home to a new and exciting culinary trend sweeping the nation—New American cuisine, which eventually morphed into Southwestern cuisine. At a time when most folks were happy eating steak, Pyles soon had the same diners swooning over catfish mousse with crayfish sauce. A gastronomic miracle.

As a fifth-generation West Texan born to a family in the restaurant business, I should have known that I wouldn't stray too far from my roots. Temporarily sidetracked from my culinary destiny with a stint at East Texas State University studying music, I reconnected with my gastronomic fate during a fortuitous trip to Europe after college. The seeds for La Grande Cuisine were planted as I strolled through the markets of Paris and dined in (inexpensive) bistros and brasseries.

Upon return from my "maiden voyage" to France, I took a job at a restaurant called Jimmy and Eddy's, which houses the present-day Shinsei. I did an apprenticeship with a French chef named Françoise, who would teach me basic technique and instill even more French spirit into me. It was there I perfected beef bourguignon and coq au vin and learned "kitchen French." She was later hired at a little neighborhood cafe called the Bronx, which at the time was in a seedy part of town (some would say it still is). I followed her there and worked as her assistant. I was also a waiter and part-time pastry chef.

Françoise eventually left, and I became the executive chef. During this time, an old college roommate who had also become a chef helped me land a prize job as chef's assistant at the Great Chefs of France Cooking School at the Mondavi Winery. The owner of the Bronx was kind enough to let me be gone for two-week intervals, four times a year. At the Mondavi Winery, I was immersed in gastronomic nirvana with the culinary giants of the day: Jean

and Pierre Troisgros, Michel Guerard, Paul Bocuse, and the inimitable Julia Child.

These chefs, with the exception of Julia, were the masters of the hottest style of cooking on the planet at the time. They were the revered masters of French Nouvelle cuisine and were indeed the rock stars of their day, both in France and in growing food circles in the United States. What I was witnessing in the Napa Valley and Bay Area in the early '80s was history in the making and would end up changing my world forever. With Alice Waters bringing her freshly foraged mushrooms into the kitchens at Mondavi, and Marion Cunningham and Julia Child preparing red flannel hash for the Troisgros brothers, I was observing the early stages of the renaissance of American cooking.

While at the Bronx, a good friend of mine, Sharron Sadacca, introduced me to friends of hers, John and Arlene Dayton, who became clients in my budding catering business. After doing several parties for the Daytons at their home, John asked if I might be interested in owning my own restaurant someday. I said I would, but was currently content working on my own as a caterer.

It soon became clear that John, an attorney at the prestigious Thompson & Knight law firm, was eager to "retire" from the legal world and begin a new profession. What John lacked in actual restaurant experience, he made up for in intuition, creativity, foresight, business acumen, and wine palate. Routh Street Cafe would have never happened without the brilliant guidance of John Dayton. We were a perfect complement to each other. Though I chose the modern style of the design, it was his dazzling pieces of art by Jasper Johns and David Hockney that adorned the walls. It was my insistence on having a wine list with only American wines and his love of the grape and dizzying pursuit of excellence that led to the many awards the list won.

When we opened RSC on November 27, 1983, neither of us had any idea that the restaurant would become the icon that it did. It was an almost giddy time in Dallas, and we seemed poised to be the next great American city. Real estate was trading at an all-time high, and it seemed everyone was profiting from something. Our first summer after opening, we hosted Ronald Reagan's Republican National Convention and there was an immediate international spotlight on Dallas and its culture. Being featured in the *New York Times* was almost surreal.

Although I had been trained in French technique and philosophy, I wanted to be a part of an exciting new energy that I predicted was about to sweep the country—a style of cooking called New American. Emanating from California, it was beginning to take hold in a few other cities, most notably in New York as practiced by Larry Forgione at An American Place; Jasper White at Jasper's in Boston; and in New Orleans at Paul Prudhomme's K-Paul's Louisiana Kitchen.

When I told folks that the new restaurant I was opening would be serving New American cuisine, I usually got a blank stare. A few confused people would ask, "What is that, fancy meatloaf?" In reality, New American cuisine was actually nothing more than la nouvelle cuisine of France being prepared with American ingredients. Just as with our wine list, I wanted all the ingredients in my recipes to be grown and produced in America—not the easiest proposition considering the lack of quality in American food products at the time.

I was smitten with the perfect specialty produce and impeccable seafood I had been exposed to in California, but it was next to impossible to find such products in Texas. When I first opened Routh Street Cafe, I was flying in "exotic produce" such as baby carrots and yellow bell peppers from Southern California. It would be years before we would see a market in Texas

for these ingredients.

In 1983, the Dallas restaurant scene was controlled by the “French culinary mafia.” Every serious kitchen in town was headed by a Pierre, Jean-Claude, Guy, or Henri. Dean Fearing and I were the leaders of the American Culinary Brat Pack and not taken very seriously at all by the French elite of the day. But this was our time, and we were about to reclaim the cooking of our American heritage.

On my first menus at Routh Street, I featured such dishes as catfish mousse with crayfish sauce and Colorado lamb with Texas pecans and garlic. As I began to explore ingredients even closer to home, I began experimenting with recipes that were French in appearance but were laced with chiles, tomatillos, and all the other ingredients that I grew up eating—indeed the ingredients on the menu at my family’s truck stop cafe.

But this was not your father’s truck stop fare, as I was serving such dishes as Texas black buck antelope with pasilla-tamarind sauce and sweet potato tamales. Around 1984 or 1985, Anne Lindsay Greer, a cookbook author and devotee of Southwestern regional cooking, found that several of us chefs in town were cooking with Texas regional ingredients with a “certain style” and got us together for dinner. Dean Fearing (who was then at the Anatole), Avner Samuel of the Mansion on Turtle Creek, and Robert Del Grande from Houston began meeting and cooking together regularly with Anne and me, and before we knew it, our little Gang of Five had become the new darlings of the food press. We didn’t even have a name for our style of cooking, but the media soon named it: Southwestern cuisine.

Over the next five years, it seemed all culinary media eyes were on Dallas and this hot new culinary trend. Dallas had come from being a gastronomic wasteland to a city that was exporting food trends. Arizona 206, a

Southwestern cuisine restaurant with Brendan Walsh as its chef, was suddenly the hottest place in New York. About the same time, the now-famous Bobby Flay came to Dallas to work at Routh Street Cafe and Baby Routh for a while before opening his Mesa Grill.

During its run, Routh Street Cafe was on most lists for the top 25 restaurants in America. At one point, *Courvoisier's Book of the Best* named it the United States' fifth-best restaurant. In 1990, while at Routh Street Cafe, I received the first ever James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southwest. The month before we closed, *Food and Wine* magazine profiled us in a feature that listed their top 20 American restaurants, and a six-page feature in *Gourmet* magazine scheduled to run the month after we closed had to be scrapped.

Yes, even though we were a casualty of a recession (and substantial overhead), we went out in style. The 1980s were heady times in Dallas, and Routh Street Cafe was an exemplary symbol of that impetuous era.

Stephan Pyles is chef and owner of Stephan Pyles and Samar restaurants in downtown Dallas.