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# MenuMasters 2017: Stephan Pyles

Stephan Pyles at Flora Street Cafe

Taking his 'modern Texas' cuisine into fine dining

*Presented by Nation's Restaurant News and sponsored by Ventura Foods, the MenuMasters Awards honor culinary excellence in menu development.*

Stephan Pyles is a fifth-generation Texan, a celebrated chef, a cookbook author, a philanthropist and an educator. He's also credited with dreaming up his own cooking genre, Southwestern cuisine.

Over the past three decades, Pyles has been the creative and culinary power behind 22 restaurants in five cities, including Routh Street Cafe, Baby Routh, Star Canyon, Stephan Pyles and Stampede 66.

While he cut his culinary chops and got his break in France, Pyles has always been true to his roots, resisting trends and hanging his hat on the cuisine of his native Texas.

With his newest restaurant, Flora Street Cafe in the Dallas Arts District, Pyles offers his latest iteration of Texas cooking in a fine-dining format. Although he calls Flora Street Cafe his "very long swan song," Pyles' career is far from finished. He recently began a five-year contract as a food and beverage consultant with Benchmark, a global hospitality group based in The Woodlands, Texas.



Stephan Pyles' Flora Street Cafe in Dallas features such dishes as Lobster Tamale Pie with wild paddlefish caviar in an ancho glass.

## **Why does Southwestern cuisine matter today?**

Southwest cuisine's most important influence is not that it's a regional cuisine, but that it's added to the repertoire of American cuisine. [It started] when there was a handful of us doing something regional, local. It's the only chef-created regional cuisine in America. That changed over the years. It trickled down to the masses and became a bit more generic. I don't really call my food Southwest anymore. Today, I call it modern Texas or elevated Texas. I've moved away from the brand 'Southwest cuisine' because I felt I've done something more specific.

## **You continue to rethink Texas cuisine and create innovative concepts. From where do you draw inspiration?**

From my travels. I'm really inspired by all things Peruvian. I spend a lot of time in Peru. It's not just seeing ... finding an ingredient in an esoteric market somewhere. I remember [finding] chapulines, grasshoppers. I never really thought I could have chapulines on the menu, but I do [at Flora Street Cafe].





Fleur De Sel Chocolate Mousse with goat's milk ice cream, kettle corn and parmesan "snow"

### **At a time when much of the fine-dining segment is struggling, why open a fine-dining restaurant?**

There will always be place for fine dining, a certain type of experience. In Dallas, I felt like that was what was missing. There's brilliant food here in Dallas. It's all very casual. It's for Millennials. It's good. It's not about a quiet, dignified experience in a beautiful setting with superb service and food. The trick is to be small. That's why [Flora Street Cafe is] only 70 seats.



Lobster Tamale Pie

### **To what do you credit your longevity in the restaurant industry?**

It's the ability to change, really evolve. Going into Stephan Pyles, I knew going in it would be a 10-year run. Routh Street, Baby Routh and Star Canyon were all 10 years. That seems to be my secret. I have a 10-year attention span. At year seven of Stephan Pyles, I was already wheels-turning for Flora Street Cafe. I knew where I wanted to go, and it was small, contemporary fine dining. It was how I came out. Routh Street was very refined, intimate. After all those years of doing big, noisy cafés, bistros, I wanted to go out the way I came in.