

Stephan Pyles' Flora Street Cafe earns Leslie Brenner's only current 5-star rating

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Chicken fried soft-shell crab tacos at Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe (Ryan Michalesko/The Dallas Morning News)

From the moment it opened its doors in the summer of 2016, it was easy to see that Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe had extraordinary ambitions.

Exuberantly, sometimes thrillingly, the cooking blurred the lines between modern Texan and modern Mexican (the two have much in common, after all). If the plates were sometimes overwrought and execution uneven, the experience was certainly impressive, and the Arts District restaurant earned

four stars in its [first Dallas Morning News review](#).

Since then, the chefs – Pyles, chef de cuisine Peter Barlow and executive pastry chef Ricardo "Ricchi" Sanchez – have reined in and focused their aesthetic, unleashing unfettered brilliance. A small slab of lamb belly – crispy-edged, rich, meltingly tender, absurdly flavorful – finds its soul mate in an achingly beautiful huarache piped with avocado crema and strewn with peas, shaved fresh and pickled rhubarb, and blossoms of crimson and violet. With nothing more than pea dust adorning the plate, there's nary an extraneous note. It's visually stunning – and stunningly delicious.



Crispy Colorado lamb belly with avocado-rhubarb pea huarache at Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe (Ryan Michalesko/The Dallas Morning News)

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That level of radiant, delectable virtuosity expresses itself all across Flora

Street's dinner menu, from its inspired ceviches and gorgeous crudos to wood-grilled king salmon with clams and *mole* verde to a presa (shoulder steak) of Ibérico pork to Sanchez's extraordinary desserts.

The execution glitches that sneaked onto some plates in the early months have melted away. The service, skillful from the start, has hit its stride and found its pitch-perfect tone: formal, confident, warm and relaxed.

The tasting menu – seven courses plus chefs' surprises – is a captivating adventure, led off recently by a bowl of shaved, cured foie gras ganache that communed exquisitely with ripe, shaved peaches. That wasn't even one of the official courses – just one part of a three-part amuse.

Not ready for such a serious commitment? Consider sinking into a comfy seat in the lounge and ordering from the bar menu, beginning with one of head bartender Lauren Festa's stupendous drinks. Her Elotes cocktail, which tastes like smoked cornsilk, tequila and magic, deserves some kind of hall-of-fame award. If you dream of heading to Mexico City to experience the taco omakase bar at Pujol, ordering two or three things from Flora Street's lounge menu could well blow you away, no passport required. Perhaps a pair of chicken-fried soft-shell crab tacos, with *mole* verde, red cabbage and nopales. Or insanely good wood-grilled octopus tostadas with black bean mousse, pickled radish and dabs of *mole* negro. At \$10 to \$28 per plate, a light lounge dinner is a good deal more affordable than the \$125-per-person tasting menu (which is actually a good value, considering all that goes into the many courses).

Madeleine Thompson, the gifted sommelier who has built Flora Street Cafe's wine list into one of the city's two most thoughtful, original and forward-looking (the other is FT33's), recently departed; she's headed to SingleThread in Sonoma, one of the country's most talked-about restaurants. I love that her Flora Street list, which is still in place as of this writing, features a thrilling selection of the natural wines that are shaking things up at tables from Paris to New York to Mexico City and San Francisco, but just starting to show up in

Dallas.

It's a lot to ask for Thompson's replacement, Vincent McGrath, to exhibit as much talent, imagination and verve with Flora Street's wine program right off the bat. (McGrath's résumé includes stints at Pappas Bros. Steakhouse, Nana and Cafe Pacific.) But even if he doesn't (and I hope he does), we are clearly and solidly in a dazzling five-star world at Flora Street.

Watch how 5 Star dishes are prepared at Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe

Watch as Chef de Cuisine Peter Barlow and Pastry Chef Ricardo "Ricchi" Sanchez put together several dish...

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Last but certainly not least, pastry chef Sanchez is creating desserts that are as delicious as they are dramatic, such as a creamy, custardy, blackberry-juicy composition called "milk and honey" (with a delightful honeycomb-like crunch), or a luscious cup of fleur-de-sel chocolate mousse topped with goats-milk ice cream and Parmesan snow. And then a flurry of enchanting little mignardises.

At a time in his career when many a successful chef would be phoning it in, or raking it in, or resting on his laurels, 63-year-old Stephan Pyles – who may well be Texas' greatest native-born chef – is creating at the top of his game; he is absolutely one of the most outstanding chefs in the United States. I've had the privilege of following his career for the past eight years and always admired his boundless creative energy and willingness to take risks.

Flora Street Cafe, where chef de cuisine Barlow no doubt deserves a good deal of the credit, is a breathtaking restaurant, a singular achievement. It is not only the most exciting restaurant in Dallas at the moment, it is also one of the most impressive new restaurants in the country.

Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe at Hall Arts (5 stars)

Price: \$\$\$\$ (Lunch starters \$11 to \$14; sandwiches \$15 to \$20; main courses \$13 to \$22; desserts \$8 to \$12. Dinner starters \$18 to \$28; main courses \$39 to \$52; desserts \$12 to \$14. Lounge menu \$14 to \$28. Seven-course-plus-surprises tasting menu \$125 per person, or \$225 per person with wine pairings. Three-course pre-theater dinner \$45 per person, or \$60 per person with wine pairings.)

Service: Formal and confident, yet warm and relaxed

Ambience: An opulent, elegant dining room with comfortable cocoonlike booths, sumptuous linens, gorgeous tableware and plenty of room between tables. An eight-seat chef's counter affords fabulous views into the gleaming display kitchen.

Noise level: Quiet enough for easy conversation

Location: [Stephan Pyles Flora Street Cafe at Hall Arts](#), 2330 Flora St., Dallas; 214-580-7000

Hours: Lunch Monday-Friday 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.; dinner Monday-Thursday 5:30 to 10:30 p.m., Friday-Saturday 5:30 to 11 p.m.

Reservations: Accepted

Credit cards: All major

Wheelchair accessible: Yes

Most recent health department inspection score: 87 (June 1, 2017)

Alcohol: Full bar, with exquisite cocktails and an outstanding, adventuresome wine list that's one of Dallas' most exciting

Ratings Legend

5 stars: Extraordinary (Defines fine dining in the region)

4 stars: Excellent (One of the finest restaurants in Dallas-Fort Worth)

3 stars: Very good (A destination restaurant for this type of dining)

2 stars: Good (Commendable effort, but experience can be uneven)

1 star: Fair (Experience is generally disappointing)

No stars: Poor

Price Key

Average dinner per person

\$ -- \$14 and under

\$\$ -- \$15 to \$30

\$\$\$ -- \$31 to \$50

\$\$\$\$ -- More than \$50