



WRITTEN BY: KIMBERLY A. SUTA

# Chef Stephan Pyles:

»»»»»»»»»» *the king of* **TEXAS CUISINE**

Chef Stephan Pyles is virtually synonymous with Southwestern cuisine, as he is considered one of the founding fathers of the cooking scene in Texas, and known to be instrumental in changing it. A renowned chef, consultant, cookbook author, host of an Emmy-award winning television series, educator, and philanthropist, Chef Pyles has opened 22 restaurants in the span of 30 years. He was also the first person to win a James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southwest. However, at heart, Stephan is still just a Texas boy with a love for the land and its bountiful ingredients.

Stephan is a fifth-generation Texan from Big Spring with roots in the farming community. “My great-grandparents were farmers, theirs were farmers. My parents were the first that were not farmers,” Pyles shared. His parents did not stray far from their own upbringing, though, and owned a restaurant called Phillips 66 that Pyles described as a truck stop café. “The last thing they, or me, wanted me to do was cook. Back then, there were certainly no celebrity chefs. The idea was a fry cook with a floppy hat and a cigarette hanging out of his mouth,” Pyles joked.

So Stephan studied music in college. It was not until he took a trip to Europe, specifically France, that his perspective shifted. “It was the fact that suddenly I was in this place where you didn’t go to a shopping center. You go here to buy bread; go here where you buy nothing but spectacular charcuterie; here for pastries. I related because I sort of had hospitality in my

blood. I really was just transformed. It was my epiphany – it changed everything.”

The experience reconnected him to his past and the time he spent growing up in the restaurant. “It was a nurturing sort of atmosphere with my mother and father and guests, so there was always something about food that seemed to be missing once I left home, and I sort of reconnected to that in France on a much different level, of course. We had a summer garden growing up, and I liked to eat more in the summer but didn’t know quite why - but it’s because we got great stuff from the garden or a farmer we knew. It was the seasonality. There’s much more of that in France, and so much formulated there in terms of my philosophy today,” he said.

When Stephan returned from Europe, he knew he wanted to cook but he couldn’t afford culinary school after just attaining his degree in music. Instead, he started apprenticing at restaurants in Dallas and bought all of the cookbooks he could afford, but his real break came when he was asked to be a chef’s assistant at a French cooking school, Great Chefs of French Cooking, that was, at the time, a forerunner in the country for food and wine pairings and culinary education.

It was here he had the opportunity to mentor under icon Julia Child, who in later years became a close friend with whom he traveled. “She had a great sense of humor, but the things she told you usually came with a story so you’d remember,” said Pyles, fondly.

## Chef Pyles Brings in a New Era: »»» American Nouvelle Cuisine «««

After his days at cooking school, Stephan was ready to open up his first restaurant, Routh Street Cafe, which focused on new American cuisine. “You could tell there was something about to take hold in the United States – the birth of American cuisine. People around the country in major cities were making American nouvelle cuisine, but it was really French nouvelle but using American products. The focus was on all things American,” Stephan remembered.

Within the year, Stephan’s cuisine became known as Southwestern cuisine. “Most journalists will tell you it was ground zero for the Southwest cuisine movement. Most people didn’t know what that was. I didn’t even know if I did, but I had a dogged dedication to American products,” he added. Stephan was taking familiar ingredients like jalapeños, smoked meats, even tortillas and putting his own unique, elevated spin on it. “I learned to ‘dance with the one that brung you,’” Pyles explained. When word got around that Pyles was “doing moles and salsas, spice, smoke, cilantro and lime” many were impressed. As Pyles described it, the cuisine was “something you would get in a very sophisticated French restaurant, that was how the style developed.”

More restaurants, many more, all around the country were soon to follow. His restaurant Star Canyon, which opened in 1994, is considered the restaurant which truly launched his career; the James Beard Foundation honored him at the time by naming it one of the top five new restaurants in America.

Stephan recalled some of his classic recipes that helped put his name on the map and that can still be found as signature dishes at Stampede 66: a tamale tart with a garlic custard and gulf crab meat; black buck antelope with a sweet potato tamale and ancho-tamarind sauce; and the original Southwestern Caesar salad made with jalapeño polenta croutons.

## »»» Flora Street Café «««

Flora Street Café, located at the entrance to the HALL Texas Sculpture Walk in the Dallas Arts District across from Meyerson Symphony Center and Winspear Opera House, is Chef Pyles’s newest and most exemplary restaurant to date.

Stephan feels like he has finally come full circle with this elegant restaurant that caters to the over-40 crowd and showcases elevated Texas cuisine in an open kitchen with a panache that is quintessentially Pyles. “I wanted to fill a missing niche here in Dallas which was what I call an adult restaurant. As in most other major Texas cities, there’s a proliferation of really creative, hot and trendy food that’s seasonal but increasingly more casual, and I wanted something that bucked the trend and was not casual.”

Flora Street Café offers guests a formal (and yes, rare) fine dining experience in an atmosphere described by many as sleek and



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glamorous. The restaurant uses crystal and real silver, and surprisingly, there is a self-imposed code of old-world niceties, such as eating dinner without the use of cell phones.

Here, you will find some French influence as well as the use of more modern techniques, such as sous-vide cooking, liquid nitrogen, and dehydration. They serve a sea scallop dish that is similar to ceviche but with textures of pineapple jelly and coconut mousse. “A bowl filled with seaweed sits on top of dried ice, so that when they pour the jasmine tea over it, tableside, you get this big, smoky aroma of jasmine tea essence. It’s a little interactive – you get this smell before eating the scallops,” Stephan explained.

## »»» The Future of a Food Guru «««

Although Stephan spends most of his day at Flora Street Café, he has also in recent months been working on his other new project, located at DFW International Airport Terminal D called Stampede 66 Express as well as a new cookbook. When he is not busy with his own restaurants, Stephan spends his time consulting and donating his efforts to charity, specifically to non-profits that are dedicated to solving the problem of world hunger. He is a founding board member of [shareourstrength.org](http://shareourstrength.org) which focuses on ending child hunger in America.

“After a successful effort in providing hunger relief in response to the Ethiopian famine in the mid-1980s, we realized that there was indeed hunger in this country. Food banks are a modern day invention; they didn’t exist a generation ago ... In the state of Texas, one in every four children is at risk of hunger ... So I do whatever I can to raise funds and awareness for that,” shared Stephan.

Stephan also finds time to meditate every day or, “be quiet and empty my head of any thoughts.” He focuses on merely the next 24 hours, letting whatever opportunities are next to simply come knocking at his door. When asked if there was anything else new on the horizon, he responded teasingly, “I hope not – I’m tired.” Then added, “Something will come up. These are things that I never pursued. They always come to me. I just accept offers or entertain conversations.”

Stephan is a man, a chef, a food guru if you will, who has had the opportunity to travel the world over, sampling every cuisine imaginable except for, interestingly, Sri-Lankan food. He has wowed heads of state such as Former President Jimmy Carter, Queen Elizabeth II, Mikhail Gorbachev, and celebrities like Mick Jagger and Sharon Stone. He has influenced cultures and entire nations with his innovative mind and warm, engaging wit. No doubt, the horizon will be filled with more delicious inceptions from this culinary king of Texas, and locals will happily greet whatever it is with open arms and a ready fork!

