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STEPHAN PYLES

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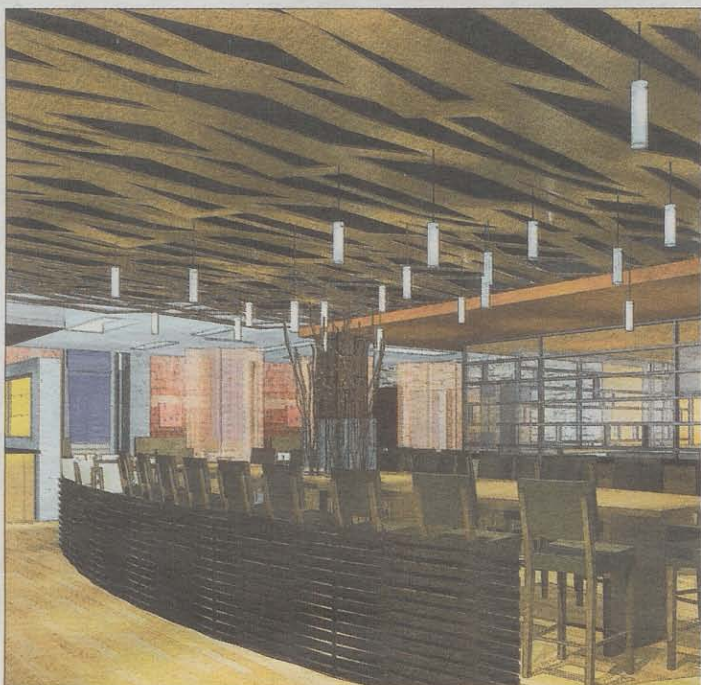


STEPHAN PYLES





The Beck Group



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STEPHAN PYLES, THE MAN, ON STEPHAN PYLES, THE RESTAURANT

Southwest visionary will soon be back in the kitchen

By **JOYCE SAENZ HARRIS**
Staff Writer



KYE R. LEE/Staff Photographer

Stephan Pyles calls the food at his namesake restaurant New Millennium Southwestern. For example: Coriander Lamb Chops With Smoked Vegetable Cardamom Sauce, shown on the cover. At left are sketches of the interior and exterior of the restaurant.

Even when Stephan Pyles didn't have a restaurant kitchen to call his own, he enjoyed the sort of life most mortals can only dream about.

He was among the most famous Southwestern chefs, with numerous awards, four cookbooks and a TV series. He had a comfortable consulting gig, developing concepts for upscale new restaurants such as Hotel ZaZa's Dragonfly and the Gaylord Texan's Ama Lur. (He's still involved with the latter.)

Chef Pyles also had a cool new home and a couple of Shih Tzus to keep him company. He had his friends, and he traveled for business and pleasure. It was, in short, all good.

Yet somehow, it wasn't quite enough.

"I've had successes in the past," chef Pyles says. "But you're only as good as your current deal."

At 53, with his Gang of Five days decades behind him, chef Pyles goes with his instincts: "I'm a big believer in letting life flow." His heart was telling him to turn up the heat and get back in the kitchen. So in late November, he'll do just that.

"I was very surprised that I'd miss this business so much," chef Pyles admits. "After I left Star Canyon in 2000, I had the opportunity to travel and do what I liked ... and it was great, for a while. But it turned out something was missing.

"And if the restaurant business is in your blood, it's hard to let it go."

From truck stop to big time

Chef Pyles, a fifth-generation Texan, grew up working at his family's truck-stop café in Big Spring. A largely self-taught chef, he exploded onto the 1980s food scene with Routh Street Café and its standard-setting Southwestern cuisine. He triumphed in the 1990s with Star Canyon, which inspired the 1998-99 PBS series *New Tastes From Texas*, produced by KERA-TV (Channel 13).

Both places brought international attention to Dallas and put the modest young chef in a galaxy of

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Pyles targets a new generation of foodies

American culinary superstars. Other restaurants brought more attention, most notably Baby Routh and AquaKnox.

But this time, his name is on the building. He jokes that “at my age, I needed to give it a name I could remember.” More seriously, he concedes, “It’s scary, and I’ve given it more than a second thought, believe me.”

There were practical reasons, however. His business partners in Stephan Pyles LLC, chief financial officer Michael Welch and

managing director George Majdalani, and the building’s owner, investor John Sughrue, all thought it prudent to “brand” the new venture.

Besides which, chef Pyles adds with a laugh, “TABC [Texas Alcoholic Beverage Commission] has a 60-day posting period for paperwork — so we had to come up with a name *fast*.”

The decision to open on the edge of downtown’s Arts District, instead of Oak Lawn or Uptown, might seem like a gamble. He

didn’t originally envision being downtown: “Oak Lawn, Maple, McKinney and Mockingbird: That was always my quadrant.

“But I liked how easy it was to get to, and how good the space felt. ... I can’t imagine being anywhere else, now.”

‘An extension of who I am’

The new restaurant is in the old Southwestern Life building, a George Dahl midcentury-modern

landmark on a Ross Avenue block between the Fairmont Hotel and the Dallas Museum of Art. At press time, it’s still in the finish-out stage; but previews promise a central glassed-in kitchen, a tapas bar, a communal table seating 20 and private dining for 10 in the wine room.

Chef Pyles’ creative influence doesn’t stop at the kitchen door. For him, “Creating a restaurant is just an extension of who I am.

“What I didn’t want it to be is an overtly Southwestern style,” chef Pyles says, “but to play on subtleties and stylistic reminders of the West ... the big skies and how much light plays into the landscape.”

He’s excited about the arty lighting designs that will slowly change color and intensity during the course of an evening, complementing each of several areas in the main dining rooms. He commissioned pieces from such local contemporary artists as Santiago Peña, who did most of the metal work for Star Canyon (and for the Pyles home, since sold). The Southwestern Life building’s original brick walls will stand exposed, and a side terrace overlooks the urban oasis of Beck Park. The interiors are at once sleek and organic, with wood, stone and water elements.

At 9,200 square feet on the ground floor, with a capacity of 160 (plus 40 terrace seats for seasonal dining), chef Pyles says, “It’s the biggest restaurant I’ve ever done, except for Star Canyon Las Vegas. And *everything’s* bigger there.”

The menus will draw upon “a fusion of all things Spanish. I’m calling it New Millennium Southwestern — whatever that happens to mean to you.”

He plans to explore Tejano, Southwestern, Mexican, South American and Mediterranean influences to create a whole new world of Latin tastes. It will be different from anything he’s done, but there’s a serene confidence when he says, “I think that Dallas is ready for this.”

So is he. “This time, I’m more in control of my destiny,” he says.

“What I’ve learned is not to make too many plans. ... I enjoy a challenge enough to be on the edge.” That’s good, because he well knows: “This has to live up to expectations.”

The new generation

Expectations for Stephan Pyles, this time around, could scarcely be higher.

For in 2005, there’s a new generation of Dallas diners under 35. Most are too young to have personally experienced the rarefied precincts of Routh Street or the celebrity-packed zenith of Star Canyon. They’ll be waiting to see what this guy Pyles can do.

“There’s that hype, and people say, ‘Prove it,’” the chef acknowledges. “And I have to have that crowd to be successful.”

Star Canyon steak fans will find their favorite bone-in cowboy rib-eye reincarnated on this menu. But don’t imagine that the new Stephan Pyles will be a mere retread of past glories.

“It’s a different day and age. There’s really nothing new under the sun, just new ways of putting things together. This food is me. It’s how I cook. This is food I’m comfortable with, food I’m known for.”

After his five-year hiatus, “I’m learning that there is no ultimate, and you never get it perfect,” chef Pyles muses. “But it certainly gets *better*.”

“Progress, not perfection.” That’s my motto.”

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WHEN?

Stephan Pyles, the restaurant, is scheduled to open Nov. 22, following several private events benefiting nonprofit organizations, including the Dallas Museum of Art, Nexus, DIFFA and Share Our Strength’s Hurricane Katrina relief program. The restaurant is at 1807 Ross Ave. in downtown Dallas, between Akard and St. Paul streets, with free valet parking at the front entrance. For recorded information on dinner reservations, call 214-580-7000.

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