



After five years away from the kitchen, Dallas super chef **Stephan Pyles** returns to the dining stage with a brilliant new namesake restaurant.



# Command Performance

By **NANCY NICHOLS** Photography by **KEVIN HUNTER MARPLE**

**R**OCK STARS DO IT ALL THE TIME. They put out a great album, spin a few No. 1 hits, and then retreat to their mansions and count money.

Stephan Pyles did it, too. During a 22-year career, he banged out 14 restaurants, including smash singles such as Routh Street Cafe, Baby Routh, Star Canyon, and AquaKnox. He also jammed on menus for Dragonfly and Ama Lur. On the flip side, like many aging acts, he's made the occasional mistake of giving in to crass commercialization. When he sold Aqua-Knox and Star Canyon to Carlson Restaurants Worldwide, it offended our sensibilities as badly as hearing Bob Dylan warbling as a pitchman for Victoria's Secret.

With classic artists, though, you remember the hits, not the bombs. For every Taqueria Cañonita, Pyles has created dishes that are benchmarks for Dallas dining. Even the most casual

Pyles fans still crave the beloved tamale tart, the bone-in ribeye stacked with onion rings, and his signature Heaven and Hell cake.

Dallas, it's time to flick your Bics. Stephan Pyles is back on an oh-so-glamorous stage and ready for an encore. He's not only belting out his golden oldies, but he's also created a few new classics.

Most of Pyles' original band is intact. What would a Stephan Pyles restaurant be without his business partner George Majdalani? Majdalani's graciousness and charm—he greets every table—adds resonance to the production.

The service staff provides the perfect backup: many of them started out at Routh Street and have loyally followed Pyles during the years. As soon as they learned that Pyles was back in production in the Dallas Arts District, they quit their gigs and headed downtown to join the show.

**SHINY, HAPPY CHEF:** At his new restaurant, Stephan Pyles serves Dallas favorites, such as bone-in ribeye (above), as well as new classics.





STEPHAN P





**NO RESERVATIONS:** The communal table at Stephan Pyles seats 18. You take your chances on getting a chair.

## Pyles has long been known as a stickler for details, and, baby, this restaurant is fine-tuned right down to the hammered copper horny toads that adorn the walls.

Smartly, Pyles handpicked two new talents: Dan Landsberg, from Seventeen Seventeen, is the kitchen's executive chef, and Mark LaRocca, a most accommodating gent during his tenure at York Street, is the general manager. "We picked people who can work with the kind of intensity that Stephan and I like to get things done," Majdalani says.

Intense? Stephan Pyles? He is an accomplished chef who *could* sit back and rest on his lobster tacos. But no. Pyles has thrown himself into every aspect of his new restaurant. One night he piddled around with the computerized music program until it was exactly what he wanted. The fact that it took him until 4 AM was no big deal. "I had a blast," he says. "It's all part of the fun of being involved in a project like this. Plus, if this system breaks down, I want to be able to fix it."

Everything from the food, music, kitchen setup, lighting, menu writing, and décor are personal statements. Pyles has long been known as a stickler for details, and, baby, this restaurant is fine-tuned right down to the hammered copper horny toads that adorn the walls.

His collaborator on those fabulous features is Marco French, an interior designer who has worked with Pyles on most of his past productions. The result is a sophisticated visual homage to Texas: stacked flagstone and terra cotta bricked walls, stained oak doors, mesquite wood

floors, a woven paper Texas landscape by Dallas artist Rusty Scruby, and a backlit glass panel with desert cactus etched by Polly Gessell. Both artists also did work for Star Canyon and AquaKnox.

Pyles and French have created multiple dining choices, each with its own mood and price point. Once you pass the lighted waterfall cascading over a Santiago Peno sculpture by the front door, you can mosey over to the bar for drinking and noshing. If the weather is right, an outdoor dining terrace overlooks the landscaped grounds and water garden of Henry C. Beck Jr. Park. If you don't have a reservation, grab a stool front and center at the 18-seat communal table. Looking for a meal that is light on the plate and the pocketbook? The 20-seat tapas-ceviche bar has a lengthy list of flatbreads, pizzas, tapas, and meze, with prices that hover around \$10 a plate.

For fine dining, Pyles offers three unique dining spaces. All, of course, command a view of the 1,500-square-foot display kitchen equipped with a rotisserie and a wood-burning oven. It's a glass box, if you will, where the chefs face inward, line three sides, and work madly. If you didn't know it was a kitchen, you might think you'd stumbled upon a giant foosball tournament.

There is also an intimate 10-seat wine room and a 36-seat private din-



ing room that is accessed through three floor-to-ceiling pivoting door panels.

The most stunning feature of the restaurant is the lighting, and everyone looks stunning because of it. A computerized system slowly changes the color as the evening progresses, affecting the glow of a Texas sunset. It's subtle and refined.

However, the name of the cuisine—New Millennium Southwestern Cuisine—is confusing. Pyles, who has spent the last few years traveling and studying the cuisines of Spain, Morocco, South America, and the Mediterranean, seems to have stretched for a term to incorporate his new ideas with his Southwestern roots. But what's in a name? In the end, it's the resulting tastes that tell the story.

Don't let the words "New Millennium" scare you into thinking you might be ordering Cryovaced spaceman food and a Tang margarita. The main menu is mostly a compilation of Pyles' classics: the aforementioned tamale tart with roasted garlic custard from Baby Routh, the bone-in ribeye from Star Canyon, and the tres ceviches from AquaKnox anchor the lineup. Pyles has "crossdressed" a few new dishes successfully, particularly the foie gras, which he prepares Tacu Tacu-style—a colonial Peruvian dish that combines rice, beans, and fruit. Pyles sears the foie gras, then makes a little cake out of rice and lentils and finishes off the dish with caramelized bananas. The finicky foie gras lover in our group, who just returned from his third gastronomic tour de France, ordered it twice.

Each night Pyles offers a different whole fish cooked over the wood-



**PRIVATE CORNERS:** Pyles' space offers several different dining experiences.

burning grill. One evening an 18-inch, mesquite-scented red snapper with vanilla-roasted fennel, warm couscous, and pine nut salad melted in my mouth like whipped butter. The kitchen staff makes eating a cumbersome big fish easy by filleting the backside, turning it over, and setting the fillet on top of the pretty side. You still have the thrill of eating off the bone, but you don't have to flip the fish over and ruin your French manicure to get to the good stuff.

However, a simple garden green salad is anything but. It's a gimmicky make-your-own, mix-and-match mess and would certainly chip your nails if you attempted to hand toss it. A plate piled high with greens comes with two salt-

filled shot glasses with plastic pipettes of various oils and vinegars protruding like hairpins. (Could this be what he means by New Millennium?) The accompanying designer salts—fleur de sel, hickory-smoked sea salt, and Hawaiian lava salt—make the taste task impossible. Dressing a salad becomes a mad scientist's experiment. If I'm dressed up for dinner, I prefer to have my salad dressed up for me.

But, a dramatic drum roll, please: the bone-in cowboy ribeye with red chile onion rings and pinto wild mushroom ragout is exactly the same as it was at Star Canyon. But now, try something completely different. Our 16-year-old salmon junkie, born with a silver fish fork in her mouth, downed a huge portion of salmon wrapped in spicy *hojo santa* leaves that was served on golden, creamy paella laced with crabmeat. Let us not forget the raw bar and ceviche menu, where AquaKnox fans can get their shellfish fix with build-your-own oyster, shrimp, clam, and lobster platters. The ceviche menu offers six varieties, including Chilean sea bass with avocado, tomatillo, and serrano.

But the heart of "New Millennium Stephan" lies in his tapas, or small plates, menu. Here the fusion isn't forced; geography plays a part in his creations. It's logical for the vibrant tastes of Spain to blend with exotic Moroccan flavors. Killer dishes include *pappas con huevos estrellado y foie gras*, which is just a fancy way of saying fried potatoes and foie gras with a smashed egg on top—a deal of a meal at \$10. Spiced almonds with marinated olives and manchego cheese or freshly baked pitas with three dipping sauces—baba ghanoush, portobello-goat cheese hummus, and cucumber yogurt with mint—are perfect pre-theater, post-New Millennium noshes.

These dishes are indicative of the new Stephan Pyles: a more relaxed, mature chef with a toned-down approach. "I'm tired of writing poetry and using all those adjectives," he says, referring to the simple entrée descriptors like "really good olive oil" and "coffee and donuts." Yes, you read that correctly, for after Heaven and Hell cake you can have three small powdered-sugar donuts and a cup of coffee.

Pyles at his prime still has a healthy sense of adventure about food. He has absorbed the flavors of many places. But he also has a traveler's appreciation of coming home. Pyles' soul is Southwestern, and, in the end, that's what his food is—bold, even risky sometimes, but always with a welcome taste of Texas roots. He's kind of like Willie Nelson. He can sing a duet with just about any flavor and have another hit on the charts. 1807 Ross Ave. 214-580-7000. **D**

**CHIC TREATS:** (left to right)

The mini Latin American dessert sampler features an apple stack with tamarillo ice cream, panna cotta with coconut-vanilla sauce, and Venezuelan chocolate cake with gianduja foam.

