

# Dining

## A star is reborn

Stephan Pyles makes a five-star return to the Dallas scene

By **DOTTY GRIFFITH**  
Restaurant Critic



### Stephan Pyles ★★★★★

**Food** ★★★★★  
**Service** ★★★★★  
**Atmosphere** ★★★★★

**Price:** \$\$-\$\$\$\$ (dinner entrees \$24 to \$36, tapas and ceviches \$6 to \$19, desserts \$4 to \$16)

**Address:** 1807 Ross Ave., Suite 200 (between Akard and St. Paul)

**Phone:** 214-580-7000

**Hours:** Monday-Friday 11:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.; Monday-Thursday 5 p.m. (tapas) or 6 p.m. (full service) to 11 p.m.; Friday-Saturday 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. (tapas), 6 p.m. to midnight (full service)

**Credit cards:** AE, D, DC, MC, V

**Wheelchair accessible:** Yes

**Smoking area:** Terrace only

**Alcohol:** Full bar

Photos by  
**MILTON HINNANT**  
Staff Photographer

Treatment for a screenplay tentatively titled *Comeback Mountain*.

### Synopsis

Dinner at Stephan Pyles, the new restaurant by the famed Dallas chef who's been pretty much resting on his laurels for

five years.

Those who remember his last big solo production will find this venue to be the un-Star Canyon. Mr. Pyles' 1994 take on Texas cowboy cuisine was loud,

swaggering and totally duded out. The new Stephan Pyles is urban-cool. It is as low-lit as now-defunct Star Canyon was hot. It is as multifaceted as Star Canyon was a one-trick pony.

Mr. Pyles cashed out of the restaurant biz in 2000, when he

parted ways with Carlson Restaurants Worldwide, by then Star Canyon's corporate owner. In the meantime, he's been consulting and traveling extensively in Spain and Latin America, researching foods and flavors.

Here's the result. ▶

## Scene I

**POINT OF VIEW:** Valet park. Enter restaurant via wooden footbridge inset with blue minilights. Cross over water feature in foyer. Doors open to low-light bustling scene.

**PAN:** Hostess stand to the right, long communal dining table directly in front of door. At left, the bar with large TV set tuned to ... Food Network? Nope, that's a closed-circuit view of the restaurant's open kitchen.

**ZOOM:** To window-walled kitchen peopled by many intense, animated chefs dressed in white. The scene looks like a lab in a nuclear power plant.

**FADE IN:** Front-of-the-house guy greets restaurant critic and party like old friends. Offers a table immediately. OK, since there seem to be plenty of open tables on this Wednesday evening. A surprise nonetheless, since the 8:30 p.m. reservation made in another's name was supposedly the only thing available besides 6:30 p.m. Time now: about 7:30 p.m.

**MASTER SHOT:** From a table to the right of entry, we see bare-brick inside walls, flagstone detailing and red wooden ceiling panels to dull the din. They make for a stark yet stunning decor softened by flattering, cottony soft lighting. A round tangle of vines the color of bleached bones hangs from the ceiling to draw attention like a chandelier, though it is lightless.

There are a round table with a gauze curtain for private dining, a separate wine room for private parties and a copper mesh curtain hanging from the ceiling to, as the press release states, further privatize the room, or break up the space.

**DEEP FOCUS:** Wines are as imagina-



### Chile-braised pork *osso buco* with butternut squash polenta and braised winter greens

tive and varied as settings. You can drink reserve-quality or value wines and find excellent vintages to go with the global cuisine that draws on Spanish, Latin American, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern flavors. There's plenty of representation from California and the West Coast, also France. Watch for deals among Argentine, Chilean and other wines. Talk to the waiters about what you want in a wine and your budget, since they know the wines as well as the food. The dinner menu includes some of Mr. Pyles' greatest hits, such as tamale tart, Southwestern Caesar and the bone-in cowboy rib eye. The slightly revised Caesar as well as the signature blue corn muffins are typical of the New Pyles Cuisine. For example, the salad is more refined in presentation (hearts of romaine) and spicier with jalapeño corn-bread croutons and crispy fried nuggets of Parmigiano-Reggiano.

**CLOSE-UP:** Red chunks of lobster

lolling in a pale coconut broth laced with serrano chile heat on a bed of mashed black beans. Vibrant flavors, subtle yet earthy. One of many masterpieces of flavor nuance.

From the sod, pork *osso buco* with a creamy butternut squash polenta and braised winter greens is a more straightforward example of style and substance.

**FADE OUT, FADE IN TO CLOSE-UP:** Another blockbuster dish, wood-fired catch of the day. Bronzini (Mediterranean sea bass) sticks in the palate memory because of the elusive character of the vanilla-roasted crosscut of fennel that gently leaches flavor into the whole baked fish and the bed of Israeli couscous it rests on. Of course, the waiter bones it for you.

**CUT-AWAY:** The dining room behind the bar makes everyone look and feel beautiful with sunset lighting that changes in nuanced shades of pink, orange and purple.

## Scene II

**POINT OF VIEW:** Sitting at the communal table (as space available, no reservations required), where as many as 20 diners may order off the dinner menu or ceviche and tapas menus. Note: The communal table may be reserved by large parties. In that case, nonreserved seating is limited to the separate marble-top ceviche-tapas bar directly in front of the open kitchen.

Think you aren't into sushi? Mr. Pyles' small dishes of marinated, uncooked seafood can totally alter your perspective. Any and all of his South American-inspired ceviches amaze and delight with in-your-face flavor, yin-yang textures and impeccably fresh-tasting, bite-size pieces of fish and shellfish.

**PAN:** Long, communal dining table about three-quarters occupied with diners having a good time, like Thanksgiving with friends.

**DEEP FOCUS:** Tasting all eight cev-



### Poblano-Asiago soup with smoked tomato foam and sea scallops

iches makes a light meal for two, and a heck of a deal at approximately \$50. *Hamachi* (yellowtail) with *guanabana* (a.k.a. cherimoya) juice delights with a light vanilla flavor and lovely pink-fleshed fish. Salmon Veraacruz-style has green olives and capers. Munch the popcorn between flavors as a palate cleanser. It's an Ecuadorian tradition, analogous to pickled ginger between bites of sashimi.

Tapas and mezes — small plates that nod to the Middle East and Mediterranean as well as Spain — offer lovely tastes such as paper-thin

Serrano ham, dried black figs soaked in lavender and chile-flavored honey or *bacalao pil pil*, a mashed potato dish with salt cod.

**CLOSE-UP:** Although it sounds simple, the salad of artichoke, crispy duck bacon and fava beans with garlic toast exemplifies Mr. Pyles' simple complexity. Flavors are bolstered by the right touch of acid; each dish sparkles like a tree strung with twinkle lights.

A bowl of soothing poblano-Asiago soup with a bull's-eye garnish of tart tomato foam and scallops is another dish where contrasts complement.

## Scene III

**POINT OF VIEW:** From a stool at the tapas-ceviche bar, watch the open kitchen action.

**ESTABLISHING SHOT:** 12 seats, but avoid the two directly in front of the wood-burning oven or you may wish you'd worn a cap and sun block. This is also where you'll find cactus lamps with bulbous leaves of blown glass.

**MEDIUM SHOT:** The best view of the kitchen, but less interaction with fellow guests than at the communal table. This is where ceviches are assembled, and you can talk to chefs here just like at a sushi bar. That includes Mr. Pyles, who was plating one night.

**CLOSE-UP:** Chef's hands place ultrathin slice of caramelized orange as a finishing touch on Ecuadorian shrimp with orange marinade in a bowl embedded in ice.

**MONTAGE:** Experience dessert tapas, six small parfaits of sweets such as coconut tapioca pudding, berries and *cava* (Spanish sparkling wine), or three chocolate mousses. The kitchen also puts out a variety of tropical desserts. From the oldie-but-goodie department: pastry chef Katherine Clapner's updated Heaven and Hell Cake with chocolate-stuffed raspberries. Another Star Canyon



### A selection of tropical desserts

holdover: sky-high slice of cake in multiple layers of devil's food and angel food, as well as peanut butter mousse, all wrapped up in chocolate ganache. First try, this dish was overchilled and harder to crack than an old candy bar. Next time it was perfect, soft and gooey.

**REACTION SHOT:** Faces of happy eaters.

## Cut to the chase

**VOICE-OVER:** Stephan Pyles' comeback effort is an enormous success. There's so much to experience. Only the caste system that governs reservations detracts. Seats are always reserved for those considered VIPs. Others have to call ahead. Way ahead. But walk-ins can usually find a seat at the communal table or the tapas-ceviche bar, perhaps with a minor wait. Except on weekends, persistent or demanding diners might even wangle a table.

On several visits, pizzas showed the only serious flaws. One was cold. Flavor and ingredient combinations on the other just didn't meet the astronomical standards set by everything else.

Known for his cookbooks and television work as well as hands-on cooking ability, Mr. Pyles is a gastronomic Renaissance man. His years of foodie tourism are reflected all through the menu, along with his astonishing ability to combine exotic flavors and ingredients. He breaks new ground while keeping many of the dishes that have brought him fame. Mr. Pyles has mounted a tour de force encore performance.

**FADE OUT:** The End