

RESTAURANTS

Pyles cooks up a twist on his Texas roots



David Woo/Staff Photographer

Inspired by memories of his parents' Big Spring-Phillips 66 Truck Stop Cafe, Stephan Pyles is going back to his childhood for his latest venture: Stampede 66. The restaurant is slated to open in early October at the juncture of Uptown and the Arts District.

For chef, refining dishes to serve at Stampede 66 is like 'coming home'

Amid the construction chaos, it's hard to imagine what Stephan Pyles has in mind for his latest restaurant, at the juncture of Uptown and the Arts District. But when the celebrity chef talks about Stampede 66, his vision begins to take shape.

It's decidedly Texas — West Texas, truck-stop Texas.

Pyles, the guy who helped change Lone Star grub into Southwestern cuisine, is going back to his childhood, creating Stampede 66 from memories of his parents' Big Spring-Phillips 66 Truck Stop Cafe.

"For a while, I was promoting this as a re-creation of Star Canyon," Pyles says, referring to his beloved Oak Lawn restaurant, which closed in 2003. "But it's not that at all. This is going to be all things Texan. It's really simple: I'm coming home."

Stampede 66 is slated to open in early October in Park Seventeen, a multi-use complex at the corner of Akard Street and McKinney Avenue.

Pyles, 60, says 20 pairs of longhorn horns suspended above the bar will greet guests sidling up for margaritas and tacos. There will be table seating for 120 plus the bar and a

screened-in porch, and the kitchen will be exhibition-style.

Video screens will stream wild horses and cattle stampeding and serve up Texas wisdom such as this quote from George W. Bush: "Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger, which in Texas is called walking."

And the food, ah yes, the food: Texas red chili (no beans, of course), cheese fritters, huevos rancheros and honey-fried chicken. Dinner prices will be in the \$40 to \$45 range, including alcohol.

"The cuisine will be rooted in Texas classics but done in a refined way that we haven't seen before," says Pyles, who has no formal culinary training but is acclaimed worldwide for his imaginative taste twists.

His life took an abrupt turn into food in 1974, when he went



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abroad with a buddy during his senior year at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M-Commerce) for what was supposed to be a three-week trip. He discovered the world of cuisine and never went back to finish his bachelor's degree in music.

These days, his research and development marries his two favorite activities, eating and traveling. He's visited 51 countries, including 51 trips to Spain, which is where he's picked up many of his flavor sensations. He'll use some of those Spanish hints to modernize his Tex-Mex at Stampede 66.

"I'm having more fun with this than anything I've done since Canyon," says Pyles, who sold that restaurant and AquaKnox to Carlson Restau-

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AT A GLANCE Stephan Pyles

Age: 60
Born: Big Spring
Resides: Uptown Dallas
Education: Big Spring High School, 1970; chose a music scholarship at East Texas State University over one at Texas Tech University in Lubbock because Commerce had trees. "In West Texas, if we have a tree we call it a state park." He was one semester shy of earning a bachelor's degree in music.
Culinary training: No formal training, but he was mentored early on by renowned American chefs, including Julia Child.
Restaurants: 18 since 1983, including Dallas restaurants Routh Street Cafe, Baby Routh, Star Canyon, AquaKnox (all closed), Stephan Pyles, Samar by Stephan Pyles, and the soon-to-open Sky Canyon Wine Bar by Stephan Pyles at D/FW, Sky Canyon by Stephan Pyles at Love Field and Stampede 66.
Companies: Pyles (chef/owner) and his business partner, George Majdalani (managing partner), have Stephan Pyles Concepts LLC, which owns Stephan Pyles, the flagship restaurant on Ross Avenue; Stephan Pyles 2 LLC, which owns Samar by Stephan Pyles; and Stephan Pyles 3 LLC, which owns Stampede 66. They also own Stephan Pyles Management LLC, the management company for their license-agreement operations.
Favorite meal: Free-range honey-fried chicken and mashed potatoes.
Favorite country artist: Patsy Cline

Yahoo move is new CEO's next big thing

She'll need the same meticulous engineering savvy seen at Google to rescue struggling Internet

FROM WIRE REPORTS

SAN JOSE, Calif. — She was accepted at all 10 colleges she applied to. After graduation, with 14 job offers in hand, she had a ta-crunching economist help her vet them down. And when she went house hunting, Marissa Mayer settled on a Palo Alto, Calif., craftsman after looking at more than 100 properties.

Then there's her thing with cupcakes. The former Google Inc. superstar and now Yahoo Inc. CEO once deconstructed them right down to the paper linings: "You've got to go with the classic paper" vs. "the silver ones," she told a viewer. It "allows the cupcake to breathe." Mayer, an intensely focused 37-year engineer, started her new job Tues-



MARISSA MAYER
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ENTREPRENEURSHIP

FedEx route? Nope, small business

Former DeSoto firefighter has found success as an independent contractor with the company

of pace from his job as the assistant chief of the DeSoto Fire Department.

When Mike heard about FedEx Ground's route ownership

death," Mike said. "The contractor who had it before me wanted to be done by noon every day. That's not the way you grow a business. I told FedEx, 'You got



CHERYL HALL

Pyles puts a twist on Texas classics

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rants Worldwide in 1998 for millions of dollars.

Pyles and George Majdalani have been partners for seven years and have worked together since the Star Canyon days.

"We talked about this concept at the same time we talked about opening Stephan Pyles," says the 48-year-old Majdalani. "But we waited for the right time and the right person to present the right opportunity."

The landlord, Granite Properties Inc., wooed Pyles for two years, ultimately agreeing to \$2 million in finish-out as part of the lease agreement.

"The idea of having another Stephan Pyles restaurant here was fabulous," says Robert Jimenez, director of leasing. "He's bringing back that Texas flair."

At home in Uptown

Stampede 66 is in Pyles' stomping grounds. He lives in Uptown, and his two other restaurants are within walking distance.

Pyles and Majdalani opened the 160-seat Stephan Pyles restaurant on Ross Avenue near the Arts District in November 2005. Samar by Stephan Pyles opened just down Ross three years later.

While he'll never replicate his Arts District namesake, Pyles hopes Stampede 66 might work in other neighborhoods and markets.

He and Majdalani are also working on new Stephan Pyles-branded interests through their management company.

Wynnwood Catering is now Stephan Pyles Caters, a partnership with Dean and Susan McSherry, who will oversee operations while Pyles oversees the food.

"This gives us many levels," Pyles says. "It can be a high-end, unique, seven-course tasting menu or it can be something as simple as a basic lunch."

Pyles expects revenue of about \$2 million in the first year of the joint venture partnership, and profits will be split, with Pyles Concepts' share slightly larger than the McSherrys'.

"Here's a little truth about celebrity chefs," Pyles says. "It's great to have a concept that does well, but anytime you're going to make money in this business, it's from diversifying and finding a way to brand yourself. How do you think Wolfgang Puck makes money? From Spago? Uh-uh."

Airport endeavors

Pyles is also working with airport concessionaire Gina Puente, transforming her



GINA PUENTE has airport ambitions.

Bodega Winery at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport into Sky Canyon Wine Bar by Stephan Pyles and building a Sky Canyon by Stephan Pyles at Love Field.

The D/FW restaurant at Terminal D could open as early as September.

"I'm doing a whole new menu at D/FW because we can't have fryers and we don't have an oven," he says. "We're going to cook in *sous-vide* — this new technology that will allow us to do things that appear to be fried."

The Love Field restaurant Puente and Pyles are building will be a "mini Star Canyon" without the wine bar that's slated to open next April.

"How much greater could it get than to work with Stephan Pyles?" says Puente, chief executive of Puente Enterprises. "I crave working with creative people, and Stephan definitely fills that bill."

All five restaurants, the catering company and the management company have separate ownership and a licensing agreement with Pyles, who maintains a controlling interest in each. "That's a way to protect my name."

Pyles expects revenue from all of these businesses to be about \$8.5 million this year and double that next year once everything is up and running.

Are the businesses profitable at that point?

"We damn well better be," Pyles says.

Sudden setback

One thing Pyles and Majdalani have learned is not to plan too far out.

They opened Stephan Pyles in 2005 to critical acclaim and packed houses. The restaurant cost nearly \$3.5 million. Most of that was paid by the landlord in finish-out, along with \$1.5 million invested by 15 partnership groups.

It seemed like a good plan, and it was for three years. Then the recession thundered into town.

"Oh my God, it was terrible," Pyles says. "Fourth quarter 2008, when the recession hit, our revolving line of credit for working capital was pulled, and we had to convert it to a high-interest loan. That was coupled with an instant 20 percent drop in sales, like that," he says, snapping his fingers.

Was this when Pyles wished he didn't have investors?

"I wished I didn't have a restaurant," he says with no hint of humor. "Sales stayed flat-line through the end of last year. We're just now starting to



File/Staff Photo

From left: Real estate developer John Sughrue of Brook Partners, Stephan Pyles' business partner George Majdalani, Pyles and Brook Partners investor Daniel D. Boeckman worked together to open Stephan Pyles restaurant in 2005.



File 1983/Carlos Osorio

Though Pyles had no formal training, he's shown his creativity at many restaurants, including Routh Street Cafe.



File/Staff Photo

From left: Geof Drummond, Julia Child, Pyles and Paula Lambert rubbed elbows in 1996. Pyles has been mentored by famous chefs, including Child.

see upward movement."

The investor groups haven't been paid dividends since late 2008.

Real estate developer John Sughrue is part of a group that holds a 10 percent stake in the flagship restaurant. Sughrue, who is also one of the developers of nearby Museum Tower, hopes the financials will continue to improve so that dividends will resume.

But he shrugs off the hiatus. "That Pyles survived given all the challenges of fine dining without a dent to his five-star brand is testimony to Stephan's and George's professionalism and perseverance.

"Under the right circumstances, I would absolutely invest in them again."

Another investor, Paula Lambert, chief executive of the Mozzarella Co., says better financial times will play to Pyles' forte. "He is an innovator and constantly pushing his restaurants to new levels."

Pyles and Majdalani are also breathing easier because Chad Willis, the 30-something co-founder of Texas Energy Holdings, has become a minority owner of Stampede 66 and is working to restructure the troublesome high-interest loan taken out when their line of credit was yanked in return for some shares in Stephan

Pyles.

It wasn't a shotgun wedding, Pyles says.

"At this point in my life, there is no amount of money in the world that would make me go into a partnership with somebody who I didn't know

well, appreciate, trust and couldn't have fun with."

His mind shifts back to why Stampede 66 and why now.

"I never realized how ingrained that whole sense of hospitality was in me," Pyles says. "Looking back, it's hard to

separate what it felt like at the truck stop with the locals and the truck drivers who were there three times a week with what it felt like in my home on the weekends with all the church people coming over. "Hospitality is in my blood."