

What does 'sophisticated Texas' mean to Stephan Pyles? Grasshoppers, ant larvae and a world-class pastry chef

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Excitement in the Dallas dining world over Flora Street Cafe – which chef Stephan Pyles hopes to open the last week of May – is [reaching a fever pitch](#). The restaurant, which will be smaller than Pyles' last (namesake) restaurant and more elegant, will feature [modern Texas cuisine](#).

If we're not giddy enough already, here's something new to chew on: The executive pastry chef Pyles has just engaged – Ricardo "Ricchi" Sanchez – has a dazzling resume. A native of Beaumont, Texas, Sanchez has most recently been executive pastry chef at [Nobu Las Vegas](#), according to Pyles; prior to that he was executive pastry chef at [Twist by Pierre Gagnaire](#), also in Las Vegas.

Flora Street's chef de cuisine, Peter Barlow, comes to Dallas via Chattanooga, Tennessee, where he was chef de cuisine at [Easy Bistro and Bar](#) under Erik Niel, who was a [semifinalist for a James Beard Award](#) (for Best Chef Southeast) this year. Barlow's resume also includes stages at

a number of super-hot restaurants, including [Trois Mec](#) in Los Angeles and [Cyrus Restaurant](#) in Healdsburg, California, as well as nine months as line cook at [Grace](#) in Chicago. J Chastain, the talented executive chef from Stephan Pyles, is helping to open Flora Street, before moving on to new projects.

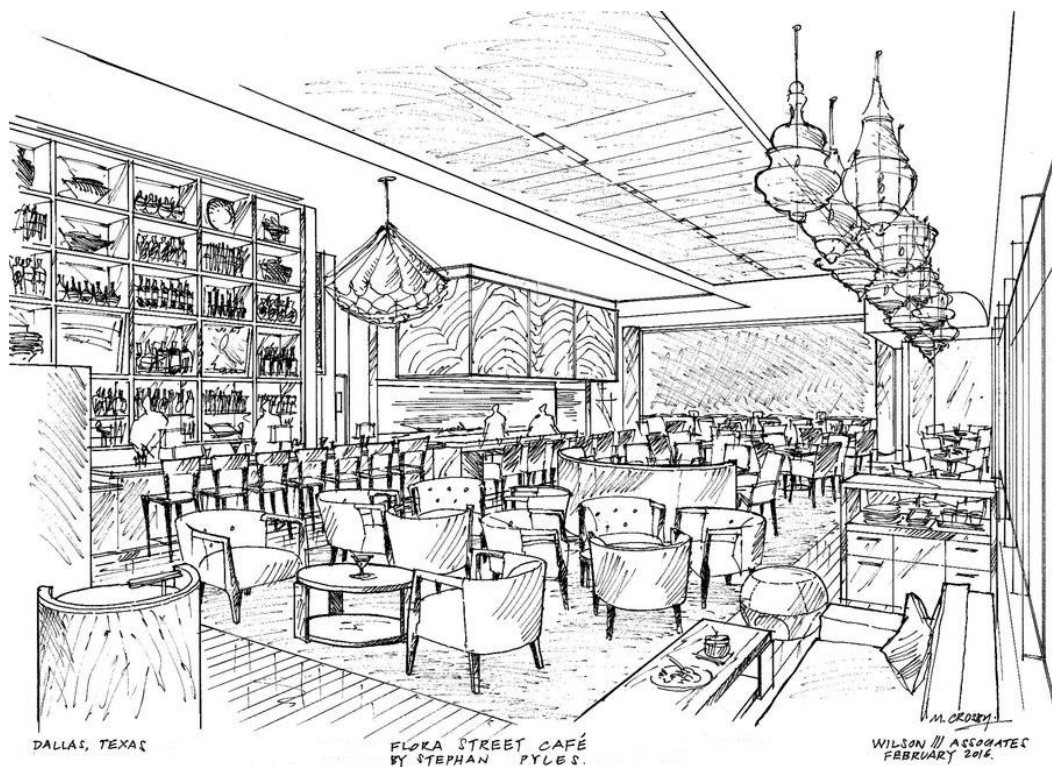
I chatted with Pyles on the phone about his plans for the restaurant.

Q. When you were searching for a pastry chef and you went to Las Vegas to see what Ricardo Sanchez was doing there, what did you taste that blew you away?

A. He did a mandarin orange mousse that was encapsulated in blown sugar so it was made to look like an orange. You cracked this crust that looked like an orange, and there was this foam inside. The best dessert I ever had was at [El Celler de Can Rocca](#) in Spain, where I had something similar to that; it was an apricot. You have to have incredible technical skill to do that.

Q. Is there something Sanchez is working on for Flora Street Cafe that you're really excited about?

A. No, because he just arrived yesterday. But he had an idea for a champurrado – the great Mexican hot chocolate: Maldon-salted chocolate mousse, caramelized chile-almond shards and a sour cream ice cream. That might be goat cheese ice cream. And kettle corn and Parmesan cheese. I'm going to let him do all this stuff and then we'll taste it and see. I know he's brilliant, so we'll see. Also one called Hibiscus: a cassis parfait with roasted brown flour sablé, blackberry-blueberry-jicama marmalade, hibiscus sorbet, cassis meringues, crystalized hibiscus and passion-fruit coulis.



Q. What about Peter Barlow – how did you come to hire him?

A. I had asked around, and was looking for someone with some Michelin star experience who is young and talented, and his name kept coming up in references. I knew he was chef de cuisine at a really simple but good restaurant in Chattanooga – Easy Bistro – and I called him. Usually the process is to fly the chef in and let them have a day or two to prep and do a tasting for me. But I thought if he's already ensconced there, I'd fly up there, and he did a 17-course tasting menu for me.

Q. And you were mightily impressed, I understand. What stood out for you?

A. He did several kinds of ceviche that were very nice; he did a tuna with coconut. But it was interesting little twists. He did a squid cracker – it's a process with tapioca flour, and it pops like a *chiccharón* – and put the ceviche on it. It was a beautiful texture and acidic and a little sweet from some kind of fruit. He's really strong with fish. And he did a play on duck with rhubarb. He's really skilled technically and the presentations were really nice.

Q. Are you worried that he's never lived in Texas?

A. He's from the south, and he's of Mexican heritage. His mother was Mexican, but he was born here, so at least he has that familiarity and interest culturally. He's interested that we're going to be taking so much inspiration from Mexican cuisine. What I keep telling everybody who's helping me – they have an idea, and I say: That's brilliant; I love it, so what makes it Texas?

Q. On the savory side, what's a dish that's likely to make it onto the menu that you're jazzed about?

A. The lobster tamale pie. It's going to be a beautiful glass terrarium-bowl that on the bottom has nixtamal that we've kind of tweaked and added a little stock to and added guajillo chiles, so it tastes like the chili. It's very smooth and refined and thick. On top of that will be a reduced corn custard – a very light, very fragile custard. And then we do the lobster that's been butter-poached, with caviar – currently paddlefish caviar from Tennessee. (I wish we could get it from Texas, but we're not there yet!) And then I'd love to get some elements that would bring it together, like a little more corn somehow; we haven't quite finished it. So you have the flavors of a tamale, but it's really refined. It's not subtle, but it's not big flavors – really elegant.

Q. Who's creating the dishes? Are you creating them together?

A. It's a real collaboration. Actually, to be honest with you, I thought – with the opening menu – I've got all this talent; I'm not going to let it go to waste. Sergio Aguirre and Ryan Barnett, two sous chefs – they've been with me for at least two years. And then J also, the five of us. We say "here are the parameters, here are the ingredients, here's what makes it Texas." We're going to use all the chiles we can. We're going to use *huitlacoche* [corn fungus]. We're going to use the *escamole*, the ant larvae (maybe only on the tasting menu). *Chapulines* [grasshoppers]. I'm kind of, I guess, the editor, so I'll make sure that the menu works together so that we can see we're in Texas. It's just sophisticated Texas.