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Stephan Pyles' Flora Street Cafe is a work of art



Texas Akaushi Wagyu rib eye, bone-marrow custard, brisket in kale, sweet pepper relleno at Flora Street Cafe in Dallas **Kevin Marple**

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Among his many talents, chef Stephan Pyles has an intuitive sense of time and place, and that's evident at Flora Street Cafe, his grand new restaurant in Dallas' Arts District.

Pyles was on the front line of the revival of Dallas' central business district when he opened his eponymous restaurant on Ross Avenue in 2005. By the time that closed in April 2016, downtown Dallas had become a happening place to be.

His new restaurant is only a few blocks away but sits in the Hall Arts complex in the center of the Arts District, across the street from the Morton H. Meyerson Symphony Center and the AT&T Performing Arts Center, with floor-to-ceiling windows looking out onto the street. If you're seated by a window, there's something exciting about seeing crowds of arts patrons streaming in and out of the venues, and the restaurant provides an obvious and convenient stopping point, before or after, for anyone catching a show.

Inside the restaurant, there are performances galore, beginning with the whimsical, eye-catching Shylight, an art installation that hangs near the bar. It's an enchanting white, fluttery object that pulls up and drops from the ceiling, over and over, looking like a billowy little skirt made of parachute silk.

If you get excited by things like napkins and silverware — as well you should — there's drama on the table, too. The flatware is plated sterling, the stemware is crystal and the linens are by Rivolta Carmignani, a luxury brand from Italy. When food is brought to your table, it is done with great flair via a parade of staffers.

For now, Flora Street is staffed to the nines, from dapper general manager Victor Rojas to a large cast of chefs that include chef de cuisine Peter Barlow, pastry chef Ricardo Sanchez and Dallas chef Ryan Barnett. The open kitchen teems with helpers, to execute a menu filled with labor-intensive touches.

Flora Street is a throwback to a more sophisticated era, with high prices to match, with an embrace of the various modern foodie bells and whistles. One dish that summarized that perfectly was the scallops appetizer (\$26), a dish with lots of smoke and theater.

The scallops were raw like sashimi, soft in texture, sweet in flavor. They were partnered with an intriguing array of toppers including diced pineapple and pineapple-flavored foam; crunchy little buckwheat groats; and a frozen squiggle of coconut.

The presentation was splashy, with the plate set on another plate holding seaweed. The server poured water to create a mist, which he said was designed to evoke the ocean. It was certainly entertaining, even if it was also a bit silly and distracting.

A regular old salad won't do at Flora Street Cafe. Instead, you get "embered living lettuces" (\$18), in which greens — on this night, a small head of Romaine — were submerged in ash until their edges turned brown and soft. Preserved lemon added a concentrated hit of citrus. The salad came with a shot glass of gazpacho soda, an interactive item which you're meant to sip intermittently, injecting a note of freshness and fizz.

One of Pyles' longtime signature dishes is his tamale tart with crab, which was served at Stephan Pyles and is on the menu at Stampede 66, his Western-themed restaurant in Uptown. But Flora Street has a modernized spinoff in the lobster tamale pie (\$28).

Served in a large martini-shaped glass, this was a luxurious dish, a rich, adult pudding made of creamy corn custard and spiked with decadent, tender chunks of lobster, so soft and yielding, you wanted to devour it in seconds.

When it was served, the martini glass came topped with a hard disc made from isomalt sugar, a fun ingredient used by pastry chefs and molecular-gastronomy types. Reminiscent of the hardened top of a crème brûlée, the disc was dusted with ancho chile powder, edible flowers and kernels of fresh corn. You're instructed to break it and let it fall into the custard, to add some crunch.

Entrees included game and unusual steaks such as roast pheasant and a \$52 Wagyu rib-eye. One of the most creative was the lamb (\$38), with lamb loin wrapped in sweet hoja santa leaves partnered with an ultra-tender lamb neck in a sweet barbecue-sauce glaze.

The dish is a creation of chef Barlow's, who had a vision of a dark dish, which explains the black rice that served as a starch base and an arresting presence against the stark white plate.

The lamb loin was cooked sous-vide style, resulting in thick medallions with a red center and a balance of tenderness and chew. Bruleed chunks of banana and dark, tender baby beets gave the dish another unexpected dimension.

The wine list is a massive thing with lots of special bottles to explore. The sparkling category, for example, skips common options in favor of labels such as Reichsrat von Buhl, a sparkling riesling from Germany (\$75).

Desserts were pretty, but insubstantial. Both the chocolate sponge cake (\$14) and hibiscus sorbet (\$14) boasted precise compositions on the plate, with thin wafers of chocolate placed just so; but eating them was like eating sweet air.

You also get an array of apres-dinner mignardises, including a plate of confections such as baby macarons, as well as an offering of chocolates made by former Stephan Pyles pastry chef Katherine Clapner.

We also got a package of spicy candied pecans. Combined, it sends you out on a high note of pampered indulgence. If Pyles is once again on the cusp of something with this return to fine dining, then we're all in.

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