

# TexasMonthly

## Texas Nexus

STEPHAN PYLES'S FLORA STREET MENU IS A COLLECTION OF WILDLY ECLECTIC DISHES, ALL OF WHICH HAVE ONE THING IN COMMON: HIS HOME STATE.

AUGUST 2016 BY PATRICIA SHARPE 0 COMMENTS



PHOTOGRAPH BY KELSEY FOSTER WILSON

Stephan Pyles couldn't do lowbrow if his life depended on it. In a career of more than three decades, the James Beard award-winning Dallas chef has developed or consulted on nearly twenty restaurants, half a dozen of them major. And almost every one has been a culinary tour de force. Even Stampede 66, his touristy dining emporium, is a stage set for original art and special effects (just order the smoking prickly-pear margarita). Pyles does not have "laid-back" or "seat of the pants" in his DNA.

Knowing this, I was prepared for something astonishing with the opening of his latest, [Flora Street Cafe](#), in the heart of the Dallas Arts District. It still caught me unawares. Three friends and I walked into the modest-sized dining room the other night, and I had to stop for a moment to take it all in: the lofty space, masses of white flowers, back-lit panels of alabaster, a shimmering tapestry of multicolored silk. Overhead, a piece of mobile art called a Shylight popped open and shut like a capricious parasol. The arresting effect reminded me of when Pyles, still wet behind the ears, opened posh, stark Routh Street Cafe, in 1983. That moment helped usher “New Southwestern Cuisine” into the world. At Flora Street Cafe—the similar name is no coincidence—the goal is not revolution but retrospection. At 33 years in the business and counting, Pyles is taking a look back at his first playbook to see how it jibes with the path he’s traveled since then.

Our foursome took a seat at a linen-clad table amid a forest of fine stemware and candles glowing from within teeny hurricane lamps. We smiled at the music—a mix of classical with some eighties rock tossed in as an homage to Routh Street. We caught up on the day’s gossip without having to shout. Did you catch that? No shouting, thanks to new acoustic materials that no longer resemble the ceiling of a school cafeteria.



PHOTOGRAPH BY KELSEY FOSTER WILSON

In a short while, a well-tutored waiter appeared, welcomed us to the restaurant, and distributed menus. We looked, and read, and read some more. The choices were all over the map, and the cryptic descriptions were hardly helpful. But after another minute, things began to fall into place. Yes, the menu was crazy eclectic (although less so than some Pyles has done), but a pattern was emerging with the likes of lobster tamale pie, Wagyu tartare, and antelope with a huitlacoche empanada and pickled peaches. It seemed that the pillars of Texas foodways—Mexican, Southern, and cowboy—were being examined through a modernist lens.

And with an order of that lobster tamale pie, we were off to the races in Pyles's own personal, highly idiosyncratic Texas. Served in a heavy goblet, it was spectacularly topped by what looked like a clear glass lid decorated with sprinkles of ancho powder, glistening black paddlefish caviar, and bright edible flowers. But wait! The lid was actually a large sugary wafer that you cracked with a spoon. Beneath it was a trove of butter-poached lobster, corn custard, and ancho-spiked masa. The triple sweetness of wafer, shellfish, and custard played so well together that the masa seemed the odd man out.

Also taking liberties with a Mexican classic was the so-called pozole. It was a soup, yes, and it did have hominy. There the similarities ended, though, because this broth was ebony-hued. Immersed in the sweet brew, strongly flavored by smoked corn cob and shishito peppers and somewhat reminiscent of French onion soup, were a beautiful small filet of black cod marinated in grapefruit and orange juice and several squiggles of its crisp fried skin.

Presentation is of the essence at any Stephan Pyles restaurant, and he and his chef de cuisine, Peter Barlow—late of Chattanooga's Easy Bistro and Bar—have outdone themselves with the sea scallops. We ordered them because we were so curious about the promised "honey-suckle sea essence." What arrived was a large bowl of kelp with the scallops in a dish on top. When the waiter poured a little pitcher of tea over the seaweed, clouds of steam and a subtle scent of honeysuckle arose from the dry ice hidden underneath. The honeysuckle essence was easily explained as an edible oil, but the effect was culinary witchcraft. The scallops were fantastic, accompanied by pineapple three ways: jelled, frozen, and pureed

Meat matters at Flora Street Cafe too, partly because this is, after all, Texas and partly because a portion of Pyles's loyal clientele is the steakhouse set. I managed to try all four of the carnal options, of which I had two favorites: the roast pork loin and jowl on a fava bean puree and a coffee-and-brown-sugar-marinated Akaushi ribeye sided by brisket wrapped in kale (which confirmed my opinion that the kale craze has definitely jumped the shark). But gorgeous as the sous-vide-cooked ribeye was, the best part was the delicate custard of creamy clarified bone marrow.



Ricardo Sanchez (left), with Stephan Pyles and Peter Barlow.  
PHOTOGRAPH BY KELSEY FOSTER WILSON

Desserts are under the direction of pastry chef Ricardo Sanchez, recently with Nobu Las Vegas. Some are designed for pure comfort, like the stylized chocolate sponge cake with hazelnut cream and grapefruit sorbet, while others are bright with fresh-fruit flavors, like the French-style cassis parfait perched on a dainty cookie with a garnish of berry-marinated jicama sticks .

As I walked out after my second visit, still mentally taking notes, I thought back over Pyles's place in the Texas dining scene. Some chefs seek to soothe, some to astound. Pyles is definitely in the second camp. The sources of his inspiration are international. At the same time, he's a Texan through and through. "When we were working the menu," he told me, "I would remind my chefs—and myself—that even if it's only a chile or a puff of smoke, every dish has to have a Texas element." Indeed, the restaurant's rubric, "elevated Texas cuisine," pretty much says it all. For Pyles, Texas is the gift that just keeps giving.

*Flora Street Cafe: 2330 Flora, Dallas (214-580-7000). D Mon–Sat. \$\$\$–\$\$\$\$  
Opened: May 31, 2016.*