

# Flora Street Café Is the New Standard-Setter in Fine Dallas Dining

May 8, 2017 | 1:39 pm By Andrew Chalk, Contributor

## DFW can now compete on a national level

In my wrap-up of the [Dallas restaurant scene in 2016](#), I lamented the lack of world-class restaurants in the city. That may have just changed with a journey through the tasting menu at [Flora Street Café](#), Stephan Pyles' new marquee venture in the Dallas Arts District.

The restaurant's pitch for greatness is clear the moment you walk through the door into its extravagant upscale décor. I think it would be tough to find almost any artifact not customized to the site. Even after a disastrous venture into cylindrical-handled cutlery at the late, and much missed, Samar (that led to many a knife rolling into a patron's lap), Pyles is undeterred in creating a bespoke experience. Sit and behold the custom crockery. Occupy one of the high chairs on the kitchen perimeter and take in an unobstructed vista of a vibrant kitchen at work. Sit almost anywhere

and try to make sense of the "**shylight**" — an animated art installation from Amsterdam's Studio Drift that is intended to depict the phases of a flower coming into bloom. It was considered so poncy by the art world that it made it into the Rijksmuseum. (Maybe someone could mashup one into Vermeer's "The Milkmaid" or have it cheer up Rembrandt's morose "Nude Woman Seated by a Stove.") Now Dallasites do not have to go all the way to Amsterdam to see one; they can — and *should* — just go to Flora Street Café.

Almost any seat is a good one, but for couples I recommend a table against the west wall. It gives a panoramic vista of the whole restaurant. Single diners should go “ringside” and take one of the seats on the perimeter of the kitchen for a show as well as a meal. Quick-biters might choose the lounge chairs near the entrance for the special lounge menu.

The menu is astonishing. It would be so easy, with Pyles’ pre-existing reputation and the stellar location, it would have been a shame to just re-work the old favorites or settle for a “menu in beige.” Pyles is 65 years old, an age when many chefs might be slowing down. The thing is: He’s *not*. He is behaving like a 20-something chef who is opening his first property and who adamantly needs to make his name. It comes across most tellingly on the tasting menu (\$125/\$225 with wine pairings for 10 courses). It is a discursive, no-holds-barred journey through what the restaurant is about, and while the number of courses may sound daunting, it does not leave you feeling stuffed.

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The menu arrests you right from the amuse bouches — four little gems. First, a saffron and squid ink nixtamal crisp topped with refried fava beans, marinated snap peas, and sweet Carolina trout roe is a precise merge of earthy, saline, and umami flavors within succulent and crisp textures.

The “Grapefruit Rhubarb Explosion” (which sounds like the name of a ’60s rock band) shows that spherification is not forgotten -- it’s just gone mainstream. These little balls burst in the mouth to reveal the fruity liquid inside.

A Texas strawberry was dehydrated and then rehydrated before being encrusted with powdered strawberries. The effect was like a strawberry at 200 percent flavor potency — is this a weaponized strawberry? — just right for this early spring.

What goes with oysters? In Flora Street’s book, it is ripe banana, as in the Sweet Petite Oyster with green curried banana. This will be the most controversial amuse in this selection, but I found it grew on me (and I’ll have yours if you don’t want it).

The effort in the first course was daunting. Spanish-caught octopus is poached in saltwater and lime juice and then cold-smoked, mixed with coconut lime noodle infused in liquid nitrogen, chipotle buckwheat groats, pineapple segments, and pineapple gelée. The harmony of the flavors was divine, but the high point was the presentation. The dish was balanced on a bed of Maine seaweed with hidden dry ice. At service time the staff poured a “jasmine sea essence” over all, causing the dry ice to evaporate in a swirling white cloud. It reminded me of Memories of The Bay of Biscay, a similarly theatrical mouthful at **Eneko in London**.

One of Pyles’ best techniques is taking a dish established in a particular culture and making it his own. The classic case was the Peruvian staple causa (mashed potatoes dyed yellow using aji amarillo with chicken and peas), which Pyles took at San Salvaje from a fairly slapped-together dish to a refined tower of color and unimpeachable flavors. He even pulled off that French trick of making the dish small enough that you were left hankering for more. So it is here where the humble empanada gets itself stuffed with rabbit and rattlesnake. Despite any ambivalent view of rattlesnakes, it is actually delicious and prompts a discussion about why we don’t eat more.

There are vineyards in south New Mexico where rattlers wrap themselves around the base of virtually every vine, so the creatures must be a sustainable protein source.

The same principles applied to Stephan Pyles' interpretation of traditional Mexican caldo. His take includes Prince Edward Island mussels, lobster, and scallops topped with carrot espuma and a little smoked corn.

Ultimately, the dish of the night, the one that must be put in the Smithsonian, or sent into space for some astonished resident of Alpha Centauri to discover, and the dish that is my personal "Dish of The Year" (so far) is Lobster Tamale Pie. Imagine the indulgence of bananas Foster, the synergy of cream of mushroom soup, the good morning happiness of Jägermeister. Well, this is *better*. Specifically, we have, built in a martini glass, a layer of ancho masa mix, a layer of corn custard, and a layer of butter-poached Maine lobster topped with a disk of ancho-infused sugar glass dusted with chipotle and topped with a pyramid of Tennessee wild paddlefish caviar, a sprinkle of corn kernals, two dollops of tamarind fluid gel and a clear garlic and lemon fluid gel. Classes may be needed for it to be eaten correctly, but the recommended method is to break the sugar glass

(like setting off a fire alarm), and stir up the whole contents of the glass to blend the ingredients. Sheer heaven.

It would be unfair not to mention the other “exotic ingredient” dish. Poblano Inflatito is a masa puff stuffed with black bean mascarpone purée topped with Tennessee paddlefish caviar and a chapulin (a grasshopper commonly eaten in several parts of Mexico). Crickets of various types are a substantial dietary component of several cultures, and once you get used to them you wonder why you ever bothered with Doritos — grasshoppers are not only more healthy, they are more crispy.

If you order the (recommended) tasting menu, then I also recommend the wine pairings. Beverage manager Madeleine Thompson brings a broad knowledge to the 400-plus wine selections on her list and a good palate to the task of selecting those that pair well with each course. She also pours from the bottle at the table so you can examine the label. On the list, older vintages of stellar clarets and Napa cabernets abound, although not verticals yet. If the Bordeaux and Burgundies look oddly arranged, they are not. They are organized by appellation.

All of this culinary invention is delivered by one of the most professional serving crews in town. This is actually rarer in Dallas than it should be, where strong service (for price) is in the budget sector, where friendliness (“Hi I’m Wally, I’ll be your waiter tonight”), ability to recite the menu, and willingness to be accessible to diners are good enough to earn a B. In the higher echelons, an ability to make each customer feel special is important, and Flora Street singularly delivers.

In the kitchen, the chef de cuisine is Peter Barlow and the pastry chef is Ricardo Sanchez. Both come with strong resumes. Hiring the “strongest horse” is a Pyles tradition. When people say “Why does Stephan Pyles lose chefs?” it is not a flaw in his management but a strength — he is willing to hire the best, and hence the most upwardly mobile.

Reverting back to the question of what Stephan Pyles should be doing with Flora Street Cafe now that he has a buzzing Stampede 66 and a history of successes in fine dining in his past: I think he should give Dallas its first world-class restaurant. Looking at the just published **World’s Top 50 Restaurants**, and cognizant of all the quirks and nonsenses of all lists,



and considering the restaurants on that list that I have visited, Flora Street is in the ballpark. We just need the cold glare of a blue laser on Dallas to give it the attention it deserves.