

Flora Street Café | The Best New Restaurants in Dallas 2016



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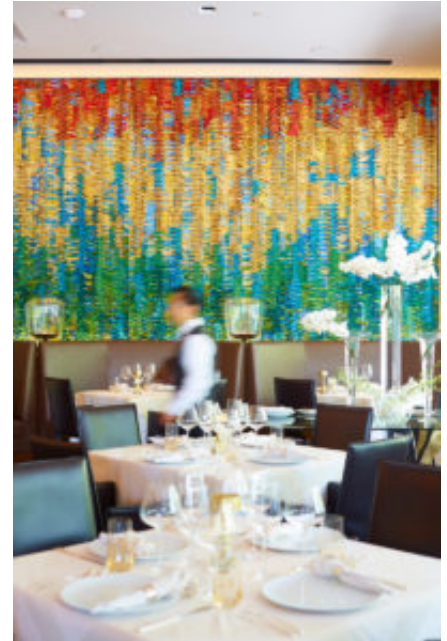
Flora Street Café

Life Imitates Art: Flora Street Cafe blends seamlessly into its Arts District setting, from the shimmering fabric wall by artist Tim Harding (opposite page) to sculptural desserts like the cassis parfait with hibiscus sorbet from pastry chef Ricardo Sanchez.

Partway through a night at Flora Street Cafe, it inevitably happens. Friends' conversations slip over you like water, and you watch the intricate choreography of fine service like a ballet. You're not having a meal, you realize, but participating in an interdisciplinary work of art. It's a highly

personal vision of fine dining that plays out in Stephan Pyles' jewel-box restaurant on plates with dimples like sea foam.

It's here I had the most intense experiences of the year—memorable, transcendent, magic. That's not merely because of the space, with its wall of shimmering fabric and a light sculpture that plays hide-and-seek above the bar, or because a scallop crudo spilled scented fog. Pyles has done something remarkable at Flora Street, raising the bar for himself and bringing us a new model of fine dining in the process.



The kitchen excels in meat morsels cooked perfectly and in Pyles' whispering Latin American flavors. These are showcased in a poblano infladito, a crispy puff filled with a daub of black bean purée and topped with caviar and a sauce of guajillo peppers and chapulines (grasshoppers), spicy, nutty, rich as mole. Silky flans of avocado, corn, or poblano and asparagus underlie complex compositions of deft microplane work, lovely on a tiny scale.

You cannot help noting, with profound appreciation, the spectacular creativity, the innovation that dazzles with sparks and flashes. It's in chewy beets that accompany a lamb loin wrapped in charred hoja santa leaf. In exquisite layerings of flavors, like an entrée's aji amarillo pepper purée, fresh favas, and pork. Or a dessert's saffron cream, green strawberries, rhubarb, and green almond.

But at some point, something deeper sets in. Maybe when you notice with what grace a marigold cocktail has extended its flavors to meet others along the way. Maybe when it strikes you that each stage of the seven-course tasting menu with chef's surprises has unfolded like a one-act play.

Whipped, spiced foie gras arrives with a crunchy, vegetal accompaniment of

briny sea bean pickles and fiddlehead ferns. The effect is somehow like foie gras candy, but you hardly know what to admire more, this startling fact or the Russian River rosé served alongside, perfect and intriguing, one of sommelier Madeleine Thompson's intelligent wine pairings, too numerous to count. They're born of her passion for unusual, underdog wines, like a single-vineyard Galician red, a biodynamic Loire Muscadet.

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Later, the first of five or six small dessert courses is a bar of frozen mousse—a smoked vanilla paleta—with lemon-verbena-poached peach submerged in peach soda. Once your brain parses the flavors, you see: it's peaches and cream, lit up in a million sparkling lights. It takes a powerhouse of talent, coordinated, methodical, to devise and deliver such performances.

I appreciate the exactitude, the thrill of complex dishes pulled off with grace. But also the way things always manage to feel intimate. The vision fits the Arts District

like a dream—elegant and whimsical at once, an interesting, engrossing theater. And you wonder: how is it possible that this magical thing wasn't here before?