

OCTOBER 9-15, 2014 | VOLUME 34 | NUMBER 41
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DALLAS Observer

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▼ Contents

VOL. 34 | NO. 41 | OCTOBER 9-15, 2014



Cover Story ▼

The New Guard

A bumper crop of young chefs is helping Dallas' dining scene flourish. And they're here to tell you about it.

BY AMY MCCARTHY | PAGE 10



6 Unfair Park

8 Jim Schutze

19 Night & Day

25 Culture

26 Movies

27 Stage

29 Dish

Cheap Bastard..... 30

City of Ate 32

35 TX/OU

49 Music

B-Sides 50

Let's Do This 52

Listings 54

68 Classified

On the Cover:
Photo by Can Turkyilmaz



Dallas Observer (USPS#000-886 ISSN#0732-0299) is published weekly by Dallas Observer LP. Mailing address: P.O. Box 190289, Dallas, TX 75219-0289. Periodicals postage paid at Dallas, TX. Postmaster: Send change of address to Dallas Observer street address: 2501 Oak Lawn Ave., Dallas, TX, 75219.

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THE NEW GUARD

A bumper crop of young chefs is helping Dallas' dining scene flourish. And they're here to tell you all about it.

STORY BY AMY MCCARTHY
PHOTOS BY CAN TURKYILMAZ

THE DALLAS OF 20 YEARS AGO EXISTS ONLY ON THE MARGINS OF THE CURRENT CULINARY CLIMATE. There are more restaurants in this city than ever, and the focus of the chefs who run its best restaurants has shifted dramatically in the last five years. No longer is Dallas known for its decadent-but-boring steakhouses and the stuffy cuisine that goes with them. Before our eyes, this city's culinary scene has transformed into, dare we say, a worthy destination.

The rest of the country is starting to take notice. You can hardly throw a locally sourced radish without hitting a national magazine with Matt McCallister or Omar Flores on it. And rightfully so: These chefs' widely diverse backgrounds, cuisines and personalities have revitalized a sluggish restaurant scene and ushered Dallas into a new culinary era.

Over the past year, we've been asking these chefs what they think about Dallas' culinary renaissance, and how they've contributed to it. Here, we pull together their wisdom, to help paint a fuller picture of what's happening nightly in kitchens across the city. Most of the chefs in the following pages are part of Dallas' new guard, like up-and-comers Flores and Stephen Rogers, but there are a few stalwart voices in chefs like John Tesar and Brian Luscher, who are still here, helping a fledgling food scene find its way.

The Hoods

ON THE EVOLUTION OF DALLAS' BEST DINING NEIGHBORHOODS.

Andrew Bell, Bolsa: I think what started down here in Bishop Arts is Dallas' first true sense of community. The rest of the city has kind of taken note as to what you can do with a neighborhood that is coming up, and how to re-think an already established neighborhood when you go forward with building infrastructure. The people who live and work there build a sense of community, and then the people who aren't there want to come down to Bishop Arts and see what is going on.

Stephen Rogers, Gemma: It was a gamble coming here to Knox/Henderson. A lot of people said that we were out of our minds. This strip on Knox/Henderson is so centrally located when you think about it — Highland Park, University Park, Lakewood and downtown are all just a stone's throw away. Then there are all these new apartments being built in Uptown. The beginnings of change were already happening when we got here, but maybe the restaurants before us were here too early.

Brian Luscher, The Grape: I'm an East Dallas guy. When I first moved here in 1996, I lived at the corner of Ross and Greenville, and I work on Greenville Avenue. I just love this neighborhood, I believe in East Dallas. There is opportunity in East Dallas. People keep their money in East Dallas, and there's still value in real estate here. Look at what the boys at Goodfriend did. There's obviously desire there. Look at Lowest Greenville and the rebirth that's going on there. The luster will come back to Greenville Avenue that it once had 50 or 60 years ago. Henderson Avenue used to be Shady O'Grady; people never wanted to drive there at night. Now it might be overdeveloped.

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia: Right now, Trinity Groves is kind of like a construction zone of restaurants, but if you know what's going on here in the next couple of years, it's really exciting for the neighborhood. They're building more restaurants, hotels, apartment complexes, an amphitheater. So it's going to be a really cool place. When I first moved to Dallas, the only reason you came down here was to buy a gun at Ray's Sporting Goods. Other than that, you stayed away from this area. But the developers are sinking some serious coin into it, so it's going to be a badass spot.

John Tesar, Knife/Spoon: The growth in Dallas is exciting. It's great. The only thing that's kind of screwing things up right now is that Trinity Groves thing. I don't think it's screwing up business for anybody, but it does kind of pull the wool over people's eyes, I think. They own the concepts if you succeed. It does give opportunity to people who may not have been able to open a restaurant on their own, but to me, the whole thing seems like a good way to get people out there to eat so they can level it and build skyscrapers 10 years from now. It's a very ingenious project, and it has merit, but I want to see the politics of it, and who it really benefits.

Jon Stevens, Stock & Barrel: I personally think that there is a very artistic presence in Bishop Arts, hence the name. Already those people are going to be more open-minded, and when you bring in foodie-type restaurants, people are going to support that. I come from San Francisco, and there are a lot of neighborhoods like this. I think that's part of why Bishop Arts resonates with me. It has that same kind of feel. Everybody knows each other, and everyone's got each other's backs.

The Blind Butcher's
Oliver Sitrin



NEW GUARD

The Hoods

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The Blind Butcher's Oliver Sitrin



OVER IT

RESTAURANT "THINGS" CHEFS ARE SO DONE WITH.

Andrew Bell, Bolsa: I have no place to tell people what they should put on their menu. I'm not the food police. I don't go to the chain restaurants, so most of the places I'm going, the things on their menu, I want to eat. I eat pretty much everything. I'm not crazy about cream cheese, and I don't eat a lot of natto, but outside of that, I'll eat it.

Kirstyn Brewer, Victor Tangos: Truffle oil. I hate it. That's the only thing. I used it a lot, and I think I probably just burned myself out on it. Whatever, I'm not snobby about the concept of it — I don't care. It's everywhere, and I love truffles, but truffle oil is so overpowering. Even just a drop of it takes over the flavor of a whole dish.

Brian Luscher, The Grape: The number one thing that drives me apeshit is going to a steakhouse where I've got to put on a jacket and pay \$85 for a steak that comes out and it's bullshit. When I'm going to one of these "nicer" places (air quotes for added sarcasm), I don't think they're cooking steaks to culinary temperature standards. When I say I want a medium-rare steak, it's really more like medium-well in these restaurants.

Brian Zenner, Oak: Bread service. That one pains me sometimes. It's this begrudging thing, and I feel like I don't always want you to eat half a loaf of bread when you're about to eat my dinner. It's not my choice. We choose to do bread service. At the Mansion, they have little demi baguettes, and I always thought that should be it. That's all you get. That's the fun part of having bread at your table, not just gorging on it. I applaud places like Gemma that do something more interesting than just handing out bread, but maybe we don't need it.



Stock & Barrel's
Jon Stevens

WHAT DINERS WANT

MEASURING (AND SOMETIMES IGNORING) THE EXPECTATIONS OF DALLAS DINERS.

Nico Sanchez, Meso Maya: I think that not a lot of people were willing to invest money and time in trying to change the mentality of people in Dallas. And nobody will ever be able to change the fact that for 80 or 90 percent of people in Dallas, Mexican food is Tex-Mex. And there's nothing wrong with that, but that's not what we're trying to do. I think when you try it, you'll enjoy the flavor combinations in our food.

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia: In Dallas, there's always restaurants opening. It's probably going to continue that way. Ever since I've been here, restaurants open, they do well for a couple of years, and then they close. I have a lot of admiration for restaurants that can stay open over 10 years, especially in this city. It's a tough market, you know? I think a lot of that has to do with the people here in Dallas. They're looking for something new and exciting. Once you're the new kid on the block, it's great, but you've got to find a way to stay new and trendy. Or you close.

Andrew Powers, Dee Lincoln Steak & Burger Bar: There's a different demographic wherever you go. If you're in Uptown or downtown or Plano or whatever, the people are all different. The spices are the same across the board. We're very far apart in terms of geography, but there are so many similarities. Uptown people aren't different from Plano people.

Michael Martensen, Proof + Panty: It's really an open crowd. Between the suburbs of Dallas and Fort Worth, there are 6 million people in the area. How many of them truly go out to cocktail bars? I'm going to say maximum, 10 percent, and I think that's pretty generous. It's kind of a learning curve, and I think Dallas is really in the middle of that. Restaurants and bars here want to be there for everybody, too. They'd rather have 20 sub-par drinks because they know that people are going to order them instead of focusing on giving people 10 really badass drinks. That's a Dallas restaurant thing that's fucked up. I don't understand it.

Brian Zener, Oak: There's no commandments, but this is how I want to think about it. It means offering a skin-on fish, a whitefish, and going within a few categories. You need poultry, you've got to have some kind of pork or beef. Maybe some kind of game, like some venison or elk. The beef dish is obvious, and there's usually a braised dish that falls into there somewhere. You also need a middle-of-the-road dish, something meat and potatoes. That always helps.

Matt McCallister, F133: I personally think the dining scene in Dallas is more interesting than Austin. We have more cultures that influence the cuisine here. I think Austin is cool, but when I go there, I know where I'm going.

There's no Koreatown, there's no diversity. It has great food, but there is no broader cultural influence. Houston does, and Dallas is on par with that. We just don't get any of the focus. People are starting to take notice, I think. That's a good thing.

Dennis Kelley, Lark on the Park: The diners in Dallas are pretty adventurous as diners go; they're open to trying things. In L.A., anytime we'd do something with any kind of spice or heat, most of the orders would ask for "no spice," or "chili on the side." Here, people love it. There's a couple of things we might have done that people may not have been sure about, but we didn't just sell one or two. It may not have been the most popular dish on the menu, but it would definitely sell.

Kirstyn Brewer, Victor Tangos: I feel like we have a ton of people who are really adventurous, but sometimes you get people who want something really simple like a steak. It's hard for me to understand that refusal to try something new and just be super-picky. I've never had that feeling before in my life. It's hard, but I accommodate as best I can. I want everyone to have a good time, and I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen.

Samantha Rush, Rush Patisserie: Dallas is very different from the Dallas that I had experienced 10 years before when I was working here as an accountant. Dallas also didn't have any bakeries at that time, and they still really don't. There's a lot of European-style pastry. I guess I just figured I would try my hand and see what happened here.

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IN THEATRES OCTOBER 17
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Rush Patisserie's Samantha Rush

HOW THEY COOK ON MODERNIST CUISINE AND MOLECULAR GASTRONOMY.

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia: We got kind of tagged as a "modern tapas restaurant," but I don't want people coming in and expecting molecular gastronomy. To be honest, that's really not the way I cook. My idea for "modern Spanish tapas" means using modern ingredients and modern techniques. We do utilize some liquid nitrogen, dehydrate some things, and sous vide a lot of our proteins here, which isn't really typical of real traditional Spanish cuisine. Yeah, I think the whole idea behind molecular gastronomy is kind of like a dying trend. Kind of like a fad. A couple of years back it was really trendy to encapsulate things and do foams and blah blah blah, but now I think people are just getting back to cooking simple food and putting their soul on a plate.

Matt McCallister, FT33: If you look at the things we're doing, it's all old-school shit. We just plate things differently. Everything we do is focusing on the harvest from this region. When I first started I was doing powders and stupid modern gastronomy stuff, but we're not doing that anymore. Everything is nature-focused, and that's more my style anyway. My plating style is more whimsical and free-flowing, and we want to focus on regionality. We're taking small steps.

SMALL-SCREEN SERVINGS ON THE POWER AND PUTRIDITY OF FOOD TV.

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia: The shows nowadays are so stupid. Guy Fieri, for example, has this supermarket bonanza show where, I don't know, you go pick a bunch of frozen shit and make some food. Some of these shows are just dumb. *Cutthroat Kitchen* for example, making people use plastic knives, that's just not cooking to me. *Top Chef* is a pretty decent show. They highlight ingredients, have good chefs, and they have good challenges. That's the only show I would probably be on. I applied when I was younger, and I never made it on. I kind of gave up on it. They approached me this year, but I declined. I already had a restaurant, I was busy here, and I felt like I had nothing to prove. When I was younger, I was a lot more hot-headed and I definitely would have gone in an instant.

John Tesar, Spoon/Knife: I got more fans from doing *Top Chef*. People saw my honesty, and they knew that I wasn't really going to be the pot-stirrer. I was 54 years old and working around a bunch of viperish kids who didn't even deserve to cook yet. Some of them didn't even have their own restaurants. As a restaurateur, I don't want to knock anyone. Especially now that I'm not competing.

Uno Immanivong, Chino Chinatown: I think that being on *The Taste* gave me validation as a home cook. I think my food is great, my family thinks my food is great, but to have these celebrity chefs as mentors who taste my food and love it. That was what I needed. Of all people, Anthony Bourdain gave me that encouragement. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I went in thinking that he [Bourdain] was going to be a hard-ass and give us tough love, but in actuality he was very nurturing. He gave us the tools that we needed and guidance to make the best dishes for our team challenges. It was just a surreal moment. It's been a whirlwind, my life has turned upside down. In a good way.



FT33's Matt McCallister

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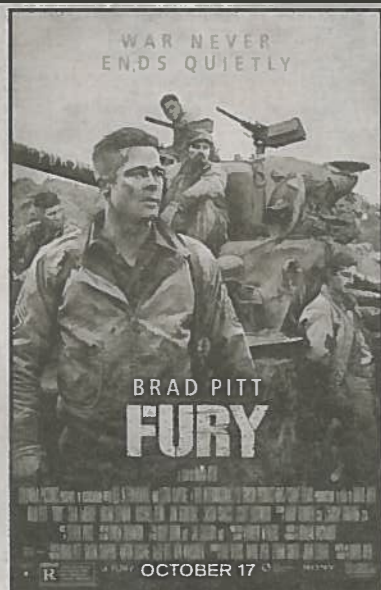
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Casa Rubia's
Omar Flores

SLIGHTLY LESS BIG D

ON BALANCING DIET WITH DELICIOUSNESS.

Meaders Ozorow, Empire Baking Company: We don't do gluten-free. I am super-respectful of people who make dietary choices for their health and people who know their bodies and what works for them. But we do what we do. If someone comes to us and asks me, I always have a few suggestions that I'm happy to recommend. For my money, Udi's gluten-free rolls from Denver, Colorado, is one of the best gluten-free rolls.

Samantha Rush, Rush Patisserie: People tell me that gluten-free is where it's at, but I tell them that I have not personally been able to make a gluten-free product that I would make myself or that I would pay to purchase. Until I can do that, I'm not making anything gluten-free.

Jon Stevens, Stock & Barrel: People's diets are changing. People are eating lighter and cleaner, and we had to adapt to that. There's always that issue for chefs when a vegetarian walks through the door. They have

to scramble to put something together that meets their standards. I don't feel like I'm breaking new ground here, but I wanted to have a strong vegetarian approach that non-vegetarians would also care about. We have an entire section of our menu that is dedicated to vegetable dishes that are actually composed. They're not just grilled asparagus or mashed potatoes. I wanted more interesting options in that category. Like our roasted eggplant hot pot. Roasted eggplant, tomato sauce and fresh mozzarella that's bruleed in the oven. That's just to pique someone's interest, but who wouldn't enjoy that? Vegetarian or not.

Matt McCallister, FT33: I like vegetable-focused food. To me, vegetables are much more interesting. They're more colorful. They're visually more appealing. I tend to start with the vegetables first when I'm planning a dish, then add the proteins. I cook with the bounty of the seasons, you know? Lamb doesn't determine a season, it's raised all year long.

Stephen Rogers, Gemma: In California, I was exposed to so many different interesting vegetables from the farmers there. Because the market was so competitive, they had to be creative and find ways to make their money, and that meant using all parts of the plant. When they'd thin out the garlic plants, they'd harvest the green garlic and sell it to chefs. Or tender fava leaves. They found a market for parts of the plants we weren't used to eating. I wanted to incorporate that ingenuity when we came here to Dallas.

Oliver Sitrin, The Blind Butcher: I felt that was good, to have an entree salad for a vegetarian that can be vegan. It's important. I know some people who won't go to a restaurant if it doesn't have a vegetarian option, so it matters. We're using meat from Local Yocal, produce from Tom Spicer. I think that's just where everyone is trending towards, and that works with my style. I want to use what's around, in-season, and what my local producers can bring out.

Gemma's
Stephen Rogers



Chino Chinatown's
Uno Immanivong

WHAT
GOES

HOW CHEFS S
IN DALLAS.

Matt McCallister want to pay X amount of food, and they're not value. People tell you you don't get a lot of shit about the four their food. That's different because it's about their budget, I guess come in and want drink's gin or whatever cause we don't have can buy them at a farm. Sorry, deal with here. Sorry, deal with

Melody Bishop There's local produce as going to one place and seeing it all. ers Market here is resemble that feel visit one or two days vendors are going product that we've become inspired by things that they have

Katherine Clapp late: I never stop locally here. I'll go in when I'm going to find something. They around you when you

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia goal was just to take indigenous to Spain that are local to Dallas good. With a lot of I try to understand them. Instead out of season, we're with something that taking the creativity now, and you see agus and strawberries and highlight those ing it somewhat seasonal ingredients.

Stephen Rogers percent focused on with the vegetable son, and we want be fresh.

Brian Luscher, The Lodge quality. They're the cheap barbecue. I can Lodge to get le times better. People think that's important. I don't microfe here. I make choices

WHAT GOES IN

HOW CHEFS SOURCE SMARTLY IN DALLAS.

Matt McCallister, FT33: A lot of people want to pay X amount of money for X amount of food, and they need to feel like they get that value. People tell us our portions are small and you don't get a lot of food, but they don't give a shit about the four farms that provided all their food. That's a battle that's totally different because it's about my philosophy versus their budget, I guess. We have people who come in and want a cucumber in their Hendrick's gin or whatever, and they're pissed because we don't have them out of season. You can buy them at a grocery store, but I can't get them from a farm. So no fucking cucumbers here. Sorry, deal with it.

Melody Bishop, Lark on the Park:

There's local produce here, but it's not as easy as going to one place in downtown Santa Monica and seeing it all. Hopefully when the Farmers Market here is revamped, it will kind of resemble that feel. Where restaurants could visit one or two days a week and know that our vendors are going to consistently be there with product that we want to use. We also want to become inspired by some of the more unique things that they have.

Katherine Clapner, Dude, Sweet Chocolate:

I never stop looking for ingredients, especially here. I'll go into Kurry King on a Saturday when I'm going to the Farmers Market, and I'll find something. There are great flavors all around you when you're there.

Omar Flores, Casa Rubia:

For us, the goal was just to take ingredients that are indigenous to Spain, pair them with ingredients that are local to Dallas, and make them taste good. With a lot of the traditional tapas dishes, I try to understand and cook them, then reinvent them. Instead of adding something that's out of season, we'll try to make the same dish with something that's more seasonal without taking the creativity out of it. It's spring right now, and you see stuff like ramps, peas, asparagus and strawberries. We'll take those foods and highlight those on the menu, while making it somewhat Spanish by adding Spanish ingredients.

Stephen Rogers, Gemma:

We are 100 percent focused on seasonality. We're cooking with the vegetables and fruits that are in season, and we want all of the food on our menu to be fresh.

Brian Luscher, The Grape:

People want quality. They're thinking, I don't want a ton of cheap barbecue. I'll pay double at a place like Pecan Lodge to get less food, but it's a hundred times better. People have choices now, and I think that's important. I don't buy everything local. I don't microfeed every single animal I serve here. I make choices.

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SMALLER BUT BIG D WITH DELICIOUSNESS.

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