

Bravo, chefs!

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What an exciting time to be a food lover in Dallas: Our restaurant scene continues to get better and better. This year's selection of the Best in DFW chefs - 10 talented, forward-looking, dynamic heads of kitchen - speaks volumes about the level of creative energy in the city's kitchens at this moment.

Four chefs are first-timers on this list, which is very exciting, and promising for the future. A couple of others are longtime local heroes, chefs who are largely responsible for putting Texas on the culinary map decades ago.

So what did it take to make the list? It's about much more than skillful, consistent cooking; creativity is key. The chefs must be dynamic, offering dishes with a level of originality that keeps the conversation going, inspiring others with their ideas. If I visited a restaurant and the chef was offering the same dishes he or she had on the menu last year, that chef didn't make the grade. Of course what comes out of the kitchen has to be absolutely delicious, with the spark of something brilliant. Dine in any of these chefs' restaurants, and inevitably you're eager to return to see what the chef will be up to next.

In order to be included, a chef must currently be heading a Dallas-area restaurant kitchen, and he or she must be responsible for creating dishes. Someone who steps in as a restaurant's new chef but doesn't make the menu her own could not make the list, even if her execution is perfect.

Of course we'd love to know your own choices for the top toques in town. Please see Page 21 to learn how to tell us.

In alphabetical order, here are The Best in DFW: Chefs.

Julian Barsotti

Nonna

With a menu he changes up constantly, inspired by the season and the ingredients that are speaking to him at any given moment, the young owner of Nonna is one of two chefs leading the way to much more sophisticated Italian cooking in the city. Barsotti makes annual pilgrimages to Italy, bursting with ideas when he returns. But his cooking owes almost as much to the ideas of California cuisine, as in a simple yet brilliant salad, Little Gem lettuce tossed in Meyer lemon cream and crowned with a flurry of shaved bottarga. Or an antipasto of supremely tender, tiny grilled Monterey Bay squid atop farro piccolo, set off smartly by mint salsa verde and sliced radishes. His pasta is sublime, as in lasagnette layered with ricotta-filled squash blossoms, house-made mozzarella and a vibrant fresh tomato sauce, one of my favorite dishes of the year. Ditto the salumi he makes in-house, some of the finest in a town with lots of great house-made salumi.

4115 Lomo Alto Drive, Dallas.

214-521-1800. www.nonnadallas.com.

Anthony Bombaci

Nana

The chef at the elegant restaurant at the Hilton Anatole hotel is one of the most forward-looking in Dallas, with technique that often dazzles and a way of putting together flavors that unexpectedly sing together. His cooking is more consistently impressive than it was when I reviewed the restaurant last year. Lately I was wowed by his sweetbreads, some of the best

I've ever had, crisply pan-roasted, super-tender inside, and punctuated brilliantly by peeled red grapes in a sherry vinaigrette and toasted Marcona almonds. A thick stripe of wonderfully herbal salsa verde pulled it all together. Wow!

Hilton Anatole Hotel, 2201 N. Stemmons Freeway, Dallas. 214-761-7470. www.nanarestaurant.com.

Bruno Davailon

The Mansion Restaurant

Davailon is a class act, and everything that comes out of his kitchen impresses. His dishes are formal and luxurious, as in a parfait of caviar, silky house-smoked salmon, avocado and an egg custard that he cleverly serves in a caviar can. His idea of a peasant dish? Slow-roasted pheasant breast garnished with baby chanterelles, emerald-green Brussels sprouts petals and marinated, peeled red grapes. On the side is a foie-gras-enriched shepherd's pie made with the pheasant leg. There's always something unusual at play, like the bright-flavored pomegranate reduction that plays off perfect seared foie gras and glazed Bandera quail, with a velvety butternut squash purée that acts as a sauce.

2821 Turtle Creek Blvd., Dallas. 214-443-4747.

www.mansiononturtlecreek.com.

Tiffany Derry

Private Social

It's been exciting to watch this young chef's talents develop. Her cooking started to really take off with the menu she introduced at the erstwhile Go Fish Ocean Club once she returned from her first run on Top Chef last year. And now that she is executive chef at Private Social, her plates - sophisticated, soulful and original - really stand out. One of her strengths is using the vibrant flavor of an unexpected ingredient as a fillip to send the dish to another level: pomegranate seeds in a rich scallop dish, for instance, or radishes braised with a touch of vinegar as a counterpoint to sweetbreads in a rich ham broth. Both are among the most memorable dishes I've had this year.

3232 McKinney Ave., Dallas.

214-754-4744. privatesocial.com.

Dean Fearing

Fearing's

The esteemed chef works on a bigger canvas than most - oodles of elements on each plate, all with exuberant flavor. Texan with an Asian accent, or with a Middle Eastern accent, or an Italian accent: It's a great challenge, no doubt, to make this kind of cooking work, but this year Fearing's dishes have been more harmonious, and as a result, more thrilling than ever.

The Ritz-Carlton, 2121 McKinney Ave., Dallas. 214-922-4848.

www.fearingsrestaurant.com.

Molly McCook

Ellerbe Fine Foods

This talented chef's cooking is even more impressive than it was when she opened her Fort Worth restaurant in 2009. Inspired by the best ingredients in season, McCook cooks with assurance and grace, turning out dishes that are loose-limbed, freewheeling and utterly delicious; she changes her menu constantly. Lately I've been wowed by her crumbled buffalo meatballs in a soffrito-flecked brodo, paired with luscious mascarpone-filled ravioli, like something you'd eat in an Umbrian farmhouse. And I loved her tarragon-perfumed salad that layered lots of sweet, blue gulf crabmeat with bibb lettuce, fried capers and applewood smoked bacon. And a thick, rich, tender pork short rib that was pick-it-up-and-gnaw-the-bone good, served on buttery pepper-jack grits.

1501 Magnolia Ave., Fort Worth. 817-926-3663.

www.ellerbefinefoods.com.

André Natera

The Pyramid Restaurant

Over the past year, this fine young chef, a native of El Paso in love with his hotel rooftop garden, has made remarkable things happen in the kitchen at the Pyramid. His starters can be astoundingly good, like a salad of peeled, lightly blanched heirloom cherry tomatoes topped with a delicate celery salad that slayed me last summer; set atop a silky tapenade, it was paired with a wedge of Texas blue cheese, resulting in an enchanting alchemy. Lately, a pitch-perfect dish of gyoza-style foie gras dumplings in a spicy sauce accented with Thai herbs was absolutely smashing and original. His main courses are just as wonderful, whether roasted cod with a perfect caper beurre blanc and deep-flavored tomato marmalade, or rosy slices of peanut-crust duck breast set atop udon in a rich, peanutty sauce.

The Fairmont Hotel, 1717 N. Akard St., Dallas. 214-720-5249.

www.pyramidrestaurant.com.

Stephan Pyles

Stephan Pyles and Samar

Chef Pyles is a Dallas treasure. I've been less impressed with dinners I've had from the regular menu of his namesake restaurant this year, but recently I was floored by Fuego, the tasting menu he offers there on Friday and Saturday nights. Technically brilliant and utterly delicious, the dishes make use of both molecular gastronomy and a wood-fired oven. He's been using Fuego as a laboratory to develop ideas for both Stephan Pyles and Samar, his spice-route-themed restaurant. What started out as a small-plates restaurant has added large plates to the mix, and the cooking is as impressive as when it opened just over two years ago. A parfait-style "vaso" that layered delicate garlic custard with huitlacoche (corn fungus) en escabèche and corn foam connects the dots with Fuego. Samar's large plates, like one starring tandoori-roasted Maine lobster tail with its claws tempuraed in a super-light chickpea batter, are equally compelling.

Stephan Pyles, 1807 Ross Ave., Dallas. 214-580-7000.

www.stephanpyles.com.

Samar by Stephan Pyles, 2100 Ross Ave., Dallas. 214-922-9922.

www.samarrestaurant.com.

Teiichi Sakurai

Tei-An

I'm always afraid I'll be disappointed by Tei-An: It can't possibly be as wonderful as I remember it. But it always is. You can pretty much place your finger anywhere on Sakurai's ever-changing list of specials and find yourself facing something amazing, like a Dungeness crab flan that suspends sweet Pacific crabmeat in an unfathomably light and delicate custard; Sakurai baked and served it in the crab's shell. Or an ethereally light tempura of hamo eel. Autumnal, deep-flavored and preternaturally tender, his 48-hour braised Angus beef in a rich, winey sauce was another recent stunner.

One Arts Plaza, 1722 Routh St., Dallas. 214-220-2828.

www.tei-an.com.

David Uygur

Lucia

From Uygur's tiny kitchen in Oak Cliff comes some of the most impressive cooking in town. The party might start with tiny foie-gras filled prunes (dreamy texture, outrageous flavor) and end with a silken buttermilk panna cotta with ripe figs and a bright fig sorbetto. What's amazing is the breadth of Uygur's palette, his incredible range and unrelenting imagination and mastery within an idiom that's loosely Italian. What's more wonderful, a seafood salad - hot-smoked arctic char with slices

of red and yellow beets, plus greens and sea beans, all bathed voluptuously in horseradish cream? Or tender, ravioli-like francobolli filled with sweet potato and set in brodo strewn with salty, rich Guinea hen confit? Impossible to say. Let's discuss it over a juicy veal chop set on creamy escarole set off by thick batons of fabulous pancetta. Fried sage leaves send it out of this world.

408 W. Eighth St., Dallas.

214-948-4998. www.luciadallas.com.

TELL US YOUR PICKS We'd love to hear your choices for the best chefs in the D-FW area. Go to eatsblog.dallasnews.com, look for the Best in DFW: Chefs post and tell us in a comment. Or send an email, including your full (real) name and city of residence to lbrenner@dallasnews.com We'll publish highlights, focusing on chefs not included in this story, in the Dec. 16 issue of Guide.

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