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Ten chefs to watch for the next delicious thing

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In the past six months, restaurants have been opening at an escargot's pace. But now, promising signs that the economy might be turning around could mean a boon for the Dallas dining scene.

Meanwhile, Big D foodies can get their thrills by looking to the chefs who are delivering something fresh – chefs who are energetic, creative and bursting with unexpected ideas.

Here are 10 local chefs I'll be keeping my eye on as we head into the second decade of the 21st century:



Jim Mahoney /
staff
photographer
David Uygur,
formerly of Lola
1. David Uygur

Dallas' food-loving community was pretty heartbroken when **Lola**, where Uygur was chef, closed last fall. His cooking there was personal and produce-driven; his dishes were some of the most interesting and well conceived in town. The good news is Uygur has promised to return to the kitchen this year: He plans to open a small Italian restaurant, where he'll feature house-made pastas and house-cured salumi. (His cured meats at Lola were outstanding.) It'll be fascinating to see what he does as he lights out on his own.



Jim Mahoney /
staff
photographer

Christopher
Short, Artin's
Grill executive
chef

2. Christopher Short

As the opening chef at **Bella**, the 1-year-old beautiful-people spot near the Quadrangle, Short turned out unexpectedly appealing dishes – sometimes homey, as in chicken cacciatore or seafood gumbo, sometimes more cheffy, as in seared scallops and braised Berkshire pork belly served with a sumptuous celery root-potato purée. His open-face lamb burger topped with cool, minty tzatziki was glorious. Now he's heading up the kitchen at **Artin's Grill**, a sleek new place in the Shops at Legacy that features dishes cooked over hickory wood. Considering his talents, I was a little surprised to see that the small menu's so heavy on standards, such as spinach-artichoke dip, sesame seared ahi tuna and surf 'n' turf. Someone obviously wants to play it safe. The herb-crusted rotisserie chicken with roasted-garlic mashed potato is very nice, but I wouldn't be surprised if Short either manages to push some more interesting dishes into the mix or bolts, before the year is out, to a kitchen where he can strut his stuff.



Allison V. Smith
/ F!D Luxe
[Jeff Harris](#) of
Craft Dallas
3. Jeff Harris

The East Texas-born University of Texas graduate landed his first job four days out of culinary school, at **Craft** in New York, and [Tom Colicchio](#) made him top toque at **Craft Dallas** last year. Harris has a terrific feel for produce and fish (I loved his halibut with butter beans, crave his artichoke risotto with roasted garlic). He's quite the talent, bound to make a lot of noise in this town sooner or later.



Oscar Durand /
staff
photographer
Molly McCook
of Ellerbe Fine
Foods
4. Molly McCook

The Louisiana-born, California-trained chef made an impressive debut at **Ellerbe Fine Foods**, the Fort Worth restaurant she owns with her childhood friend, [Richard King](#). Anyone who can deliver such compelling cooking right out of the gate is worth watching. Her dishes are also produce-driven, inspired by the seasons. Last fall, I loved her salad of mustard greens and warm, roasted carnival squash with shaved local raclette;

now that it's February, you might start with a Texas grapefruit and winter arugula salad with shaved purple onion and candied Texas pecans and follow that with duck confit paired with sweet potato-turnip hash, smoky mustard greens and fried sage. What a welcome escape from same old, same old.



Nan Coulter /
special
contributor
Kelly Hightower,
of soon-to-open
Nova
5. Kelly Hightower

The former Hattie's chef charmed diners at Kavala Mediterranean Grill, which he closed at the end of 2009 after only three years. Hightower is renovating the place now, and he plans to reopen it in mid- to late March as **Nova**. The menu will be more global than Kavala's, "share plates," says the chef, "along the lines of what Craft is doing." At the same time, he heads the kitchen at **Kindal's Soul Music Cafe**, with a planned opening of March 5, on the corner of I-35 and Northwest Highway. And what will Hightower be cooking there? "A mash-up of Creole and Asian," he says. That means dishes such as a southern-style pork chop with pineapple fried rice or a shrimp-and-andouille-stuffed chicken wing with a ginger-citrus sauce. Busy guy. It all sounds original and intriguing.



Jim Mahoney /
staff
photographer
Randall
Copeland
(foreground) and
Nathan Tate,
co-chefs/co-
owners of Ava in
[Rockwall](#)

6. Randall Copeland and Nathan Tate

At **Ava** in Rockwall, these two young chef-owners cook as a team, so they share an entry. My experiences at Ava last summer were uneven, but Copeland and Tate have some good ideas: I still remember their wonderful wood-roasted pork chop with Canton peaches. Like McCook, they revere great produce, and they're devoted to working with farmers, which benefits the entire food community. As they gain experience, it'll be interesting to see how they progress.

7. [Tre Wilcox](#)



Juan Garcia / Al
Dia special
contributor
Tre Wilcox, chef
at Loft 610 in
[Plano](#)

It was a relatively quiet year for the one-time [Top Chef](#) star, who has been practicing his craft at **Loft 610** in Plano. There he's turning out dishes like crisp pork belly with tangy house-made barbecue sauce and beguiling fennel purée. Or short ribs paired with a savory, cheesy bread pudding. But Wilcox has even more than that cooking: He and Loft 610 owner **Brian Twomey** plan to open a more chef-driven restaurant later this year in Highland Park. Though Wilcox told me he draws a percentage at Loft 610, this, he says will be his first experience as a real chef-owner.



Jim Mahoney /
staff
photographer
Sara C.
Johannes,
executive chef at
Five Sixty
8. Sara C. Johannes

[Wolfgang Puck](#) is notoriously good to work for (so my LA sources have long told me); therefore, I'd be very surprised if this talented chef leaves the fold anytime in the foreseeable future. But clearly she's got the chops. Will her skill and ideas continue to develop at **Five Sixty** ? That would gain her the kind of amazing but somewhat-under-the-radar status that **Lee Hefter**, the brilliant execu-chef who heads **Spago [Beverly Hills](#)**, enjoys. If so, she's bound to be the kind of chef where you absolutely must stop by and see (and taste) what's happening on her plates.



Matt Nager /
special
contributor
Tim Byres,

Smoke chef and
co-owner
9. Tim Byres

The former [Stephan Pyles](#) chef has made a lot of noise lately at **Smoke**, the [Oak Cliff](#) restaurant he co-owns with **Christopher Jeffers** and **Chris Zielke**. And now he's poised to do something radically different, as he, Jeffers and Zielke launch their "guerrilla restaurant," 48 Nights, with proceeds going to charity. They plan to debut the two-day-a-week pop-up restaurant Monday, Feb. 22 (it will be open Mondays and Tuesdays for six months).



Jeff Green /
special
contributor
[Bruno Davailon](#)
, of the
[Rosewood](#)
[Mansion on](#)
[Turtle Creek](#)
10. Bruno Davailon

Since he took over the kitchen at the **Rosewood Mansion on Turtle Creek** last November, Davailon has taken the **Mansion Restaurant** in more of a French direction. He's already gotten Dallas foodies talking about his jazzy shrimp cocktail with horseradish custard and tomato syrup. And now we're all watching to see where he'll take what's arguably Dallas' highest-profile kitchen.