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Stephan Pyles taps his truck-stop roots for newest culinary oasis



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David Wool/Staff Photographer

Stephan Pyles stands in front of the new location of his next restaurant, Stampede 66, in downtown Dallas.



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Amid the construction chaos, it's hard to imagine what Stephan Pyles has in mind for his latest restaurant, at the juncture of Uptown and the Arts District. But when the celebrity chef talks about Stampede 66, his vision begins to take shape.

It's decidedly Texas — West Texas, truck-stop Texas.

Pyles, the guy who helped change Lone Star grub into Southwestern cuisine, is going back to his childhood, creating Stampede 66 from memories of his parents' Big Spring-Phillips 66 Truck Stop Cafe.

"For a while, I was promoting this as a re-creation of Star Canyon," Pyles says, referring to his beloved Oak Lawn restaurant, which closed in 2003. "But it's not that at all. This is going to be all things Texan. It's really simple: I'm coming home."

Stampede 66 is slated to open in early October in Park Seventeen, a multi-use complex at the corner of Akard Street and McKinney Avenue.

Pyles, 60, says 20 pairs of longhorn horns suspended above the bar will greet guests sidling up for margaritas and tacos. There will be table seating for 120 plus the bar and a screened-in porch, and the kitchen will be exhibition-style.

Video screens will stream wild horses and cattle stampeding and serve up Texas wisdom such as this quote from George W. Bush: "Some folks look at me and see a certain swagger, which in Texas is called walking."

And the food, ah yes, the food: Texas red chili (no beans, of course), cheese fritters, huevos rancheros and honey-fried chicken. Dinner prices will be in the \$40 to \$45 range, including alcohol.

"The cuisine will be rooted in Texas classics but done in a refined way that we haven't seen before," says Pyles, who has no formal culinary training but is acclaimed worldwide for his imaginative taste twists.

His life took an abrupt turn into food in 1974, when he went abroad with a buddy during his senior year at East Texas State University (now Texas A&M-Commerce) for what was supposed to be a three-week trip. He discovered the world of cuisine and never went back to finish his bachelor's degree in music.

These days, his research and development marries his two favorite activities, eating and traveling. He's visited 51 countries, including 51 trips to Spain, which is where he's picked up many of his flavor sensations. He'll use some of those Spanish hints to modernize his Tex-Mex at Stampede 66.

"I'm having more fun with this than anything I've done since Canyon," says Pyles, who sold that restaurant and AquaKnox to Carlson Restaurants Worldwide in 1998 for millions of dollars.

Pyles and George Majdalani have been partners for seven years and have worked together since the Star Canyon days.