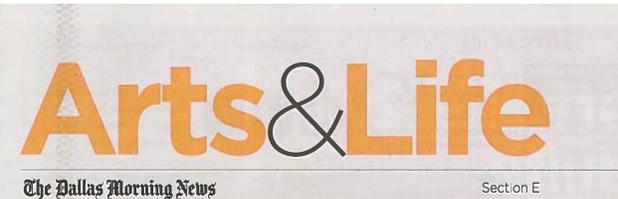


DALLAS MORNING NEWS - DRIFTWOOD CHEF HOOKS DINERS WITH HIS FRESH APPROACH TO FISH

BY EDEN STIFFMAN

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Omar Flores, a newcomer to this year's list of Best in DFW: Chefs, is in charge of the kitchen at Oak Cliff's Driftwood restaurant. Just two months into his first executive position, the El Paso native, 32, drew a four-star review from The Dallas Morning News.

Flores was raised in the kitchen: His father was the chef at several Mexican restaurants in El Paso, and for a time the family owned a restaurant in Chicago. Before opening Driftwood in April, he was a chef at Abacus, Kent Rathbun's high-toned Knox-Henderson restaurant; for his last three years, he served as Abacus' executive sous-chef.

At Driftwood, not only is Flores responsible for the savory side of the menu, but he also turns out desserts that restaurant critic Leslie Brenner called "sophisticated enough to be served in the swankiest white-tablecloth joint in town."

Flores sat down to chat with The Dallas Morning News about how the seasons inspire his seafood-centric menu, the fishy text messages he wakes up to each morning and the three ingredients he can't live without.

You grew up in a family of cooks. How has that shaped the way you think about food?

I grew up in my dad's restaurants, so I grew up eating really good food. As a kid, I never had Lunchables. I always had a homemade meal every single day for lunch.

I wasn't necessarily cooking, but I was always in the kitchen. I watched my parents cook and watched their technique. I'm a real visual person. If I see something, then I can pick it up really quickly. I had a real knack for it. There are very few things I'm good at, but cooking is one of them.

Do you cook any of your parents' dishes now?

My mom passed away two years ago. She always made the best enchiladas. And not like Tex-Mex, where they put that crappy canned sauce and ground beef on top, and yellow cheese. That's all you find here in Dallas - it drives me crazy. Hers were really authentic, with slow-roasted chicken and real New Mexico red chile sauce and scallions on top. So that's one of the dishes that reminds me of home, and I make it for myself every once in a while.

After studying hotel and restaurant management at New Mexico State University, you went to the Culinary Institute of America. What kind of an education did you get in New York?

The school just trains you on the basics: how to sauté, how to grill. Creativity comes outside of work. I spent most weekends going down to the city. Once I graduated, I ended up staying there for another year, working almost for free the whole time. I got exposed to a lot out there. New York is just one of those great food cities, where people experiment with food. They're not afraid to try something new.

Were there New York chefs or restaurants who particularly influenced you?

One guy who really inspired me was Eric Ripert, who owns Le Bernardin. And Michael White. He owns Marea. Eating at both of those places, they were just phenomenal - probably some of the best meals I've had in my life. Their menus are about 95 to 98 percent seafood. It's amazing what they do with it. It's so fresh, and it's so perishable. And I think it's something a lot of restaurants in Dallas don't do. Because if you don't sell it, it goes to waste.

How was the transition back to Texas in 2006?

Let's be honest: Texas is a steak state. It's meat and potatoes and all that.

I got the job at Abacus, right there in Park Cities. Most of the clientele, they've been eating the same stuff for however long they've lived there. They don't really move out of their bubble.

When I was executive sous chef, I tried to bring in a lot of fresh fish, but people just were not having it. I got to the point where I felt like I was almost just working at a steakhouse.

(CONT'D) DALLAS MORNING NEWS - DRIFTWOOD CHEF HOOKS DINERS WITH HIS FRESH APPROACH TO FISH

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What new aesthetic does Driftwood bring to Dallas?

I think we're a little edgy for Dallas. Not to say seafood's edgy, because it's not. We're not necessarily reinventing the wheel or anything. We're just not doing the norm - the shellfish platters, crab-crusted tilapia, crab cakes - the real cliché stuff.

I've educated my staff, so they educate customers. They know that we have a really limited amount of seafood in house every day. When we run out, we run out. Some people can't understand that. We had X amount of orders, and now it's gone. To me, you can't really trust a seafood restaurant that doesn't run out of seafood.

Are there challenges in sourcing seafood in a landlocked place?

It's actually not that difficult. I get fresh fish from Hawaii. I get fresh fish from Alaska and from Boston. It's literally overnighted. And all these vendors, they're hungry. I can't even tell you how many texts I get every single morning around 7 or 8 a.m. from people just wanting to sell me stuff. Like, "Hey, this is what I've got. This is what's fresh." So it's great! I don't even have to work that hard at it.

What inspires your menus?

Seasonal produce is one of those things I think is really important to tie in with seafood. I feel like a lot of restaurants serve just fish on a plate with sauce. To me, a proper plate is a composed dish, with the proper garnishes, that'll elevate the flavor of the fish.

Even fish are seasonal sometimes. Florida crab claw season started this week. Next month is Nantucket Bay scallop season. We just rolled out our fall menu. We're using sunchokes, squashes, pomegranates. Right now I'm doing a halibut cheek with smoked potato chowder. It's got bacon, potatoes. Not necessarily heavier, but a little heartier.

What ingredients could you not do without?

Definitely butter and salt. A high-fat, rich butter, like Plugrá, is always the best. For salt, fleur de sel. It's considered the caviar of sea salts. It's kind of crunchy and has that ocean flavor to it. And I'm really big on acidity. So either citrus or vinegar - one of those two. Almost all of my sauces or almost anything I prepare has some kind of citrus. If those three ingredients are there, you can make anything taste good.

Why do you make your own pastries?

They discussed buying desserts, having somebody else do it. But to me, a restaurant should have everything made from scratch. I'm not a pastry guy. I do what I know and I try not to get too elaborate. I have a seasonal pumpkin brûlée on the menu right now. And a sticky toffee cake with an apple-bourbon ice cream. I'm also doing a chocolate terrine with pistachios and a coconut gelato. We sell an absurd amount of desserts. I've never worked in a restaurant where we sell so many desserts. The only thing we don't do here is make our own bread. In the new year, I might actually look into making our own bread, too.

PHOTO(S): (Mona Reeder/Staff Photographer) Chef Omar Flores is trying to lure diners in Dallas, known as a steak town, with fish at Driftwood in Oak Cliff.

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