



uchi

Executive Chef

A Cut Above

By Jessica Dupuy
Photography by Cody Hamilton

Early each year, the Hollywood film scene is all abuzz with rumors of Oscar nominations. And once the top secret list of nominees is announced, the Academy Award buzz radiates throughout the country with all sorts of predictions and opinions: Who will win best actress? Will the little “Indie film” beat the “Big Box Office” production? Who will shine in this year’s red-carpet fashion? Indeed, Oscar euphoria has a way of taking center stage in showbiz.

By comparison, if there’s anything that gets members of the food industry giddy with anticipation, it’s the James Beard Foundation Awards. Many people may have seen Thursday, February 18 as just another average day, but the “foodie” world, Twitter and the general blogosphere were blowing up with the release of this year’s James Beard Award semi-finalist nominations, 3 of which were directed at Austin: La Condesa for Best New Restaurant, Tyson Cole of Uchi for Best Chef in the Southwest Region, and Philip Speer of Uchi for Best Pastry Chef. “There’s just nothing more prestigious than to be named a James Beard chef,” says Patricia Sharpe, executive editor and food writer for *Texas Monthly* who won her own James Beard Award in 2006 for her tongue-and-cheek food feature, “Confessions of a Skinny Bitch.” “When you consider how many chefs there are in the country, even being nominated as a semi-finalist is a really big deal.”

A cookbook author and culinary educator, James Beard has often been considered one of the fathers of American cuisine helping educate and mentor generations of chefs and food enthusiasts. Though Beard passed away in 1985, his legacy in supporting the American food industry continues through his

foundation with educational initiatives, food industry awards, and scholarships to culinary schools. The foundation also maintains the historic James Beard House in New York City’s Greenwich Village as a performance space for visiting chefs. Heralded as the “the Oscars of the food world,” by *Time* magazine, The James Beard Foundation Awards are the country’s most coveted honor for professionals in the food and beverage industry recognizing chefs, restaurateurs, journalists, and food authors for excellence and achievement in their fields. The selections begin with a round of semi-finalist nominations across the country. Selected from thousands of entries, the group of semifinalists in the 19 restaurant and chef categories represents a wide variety of culinary talent, from chefs and dining destinations in 10 different regions of the country as well as the nation’s best new restaurants and rising star chefs.

Once the first round of semi-finalists are selected, the committee of national judges narrows the pool down to a round of finalist nominees, one from each region, which are announced at the end of March. Voting on these finalists takes place during the month of April and the winners are announced at a formal Awards ceremony and dinner at the Lincoln Center in New York the first weekend of May.

La Condesa owner Jesse Herman was catching up on a popular New York blog when he saw the semi-finalist list. He was thrilled to see his restaurant in the line up.

“There’s nothing that could have been more important as far as national recognition for us,” says Herman. “This is something that comes from our peers in the industry and the people we’re nominated with

Tyson Cole of Uchi is nominated for Best Chef in the Southwest Region by the James Beard Awards and is hard at work on Uchiko, set to open this summer as well as the release of the first Uchi cookbook late this year.

are really the shining stars of the culinary world.” In its short first year, La Condesa has fast established itself as one of the top restaurants in Austin. In the community alone, it has developed strong ties with the Sustainable Food Center of Austin, launching a bi-annual benefit dinner featuring a multi-course meal created by some of Austin’s most notable chefs who are committed to supporting the local farmers and purveyors.

In addition, La Condesa has received the distinguished accolade as one of *Texas Monthly’s* “Where to Eat Now 2010” restaurants in Texas, not to mention a lead position as the first restaurant in Austin to receive a Two Star Green Certification by the Green Restaurant Association. (It’s one of only two in the entire state to earn this certification level.) From a culinary standpoint, Chef Rene Ortiz and pastry Chef Laura Sawicki have set the restaurant apart with a new approach to regional Mexican food. Ortiz’s broad influences from his work in Australia and New York are all reflected in a menu abounding with clean, layered flavors in everything from the sashimi-style tuna tostadas with a perky pickled cucumber base to the tender duck breast smothered in rich and earthy mole sauce.

“From the beginning we’ve tried to do something new with La Condesa in that we’re not just another Tex-Mex restaurant or Mexican restaurant,” says Herman. “But more importantly, we’re really happy to have La Condesa and Uchi recognized. The creativity and quality in the Austin restaurant scene is really heating up and it’s really great to have these few nominations in the city to help put Austin on the national culinary map.”

It’s an honor that Austin sushi darling, Uchi, has enjoyed for three years running. Not only was Chef/Owner Tyson Cole nominated for Best Chef in the Southwest Region this year, but among his team, Philip Speer has been nominated for best Pastry Chef as well. With Uchi coming into its seventh year as one of Austin’s top restaurants, Cole and his team are looking forward to new endeavors including the opening of Uchiko, in North Central Austin this summer and the release of the first Uchi cookbook in late 2010. “The James Beard nomination really solidifies our goal to constantly work to be better at what we do,” says Speer. “I’m really proud of the work we’ve done at Uchi and the fact that we’re on that list and that the pastry program alone has been recognized makes it all worth it.” Having been ushered through his Austin-based career by the likes of local chefs such as Jean Luc Salles, Shawn Cirkiel, Tyson Cole,

and Uchi chef de cuisine Paul Qui, Speer has evolved from basic baker to innovative pastry chef. “Shawn Cirkiel took being a chef to a different level for me when I was younger,” says Speer. “And having worked at Uchi for the past few years, Tyson and Paul have pushed me in so many ways with my cooking and the result has always been something better.”

Nominations aren’t the only way to get a special nod from the James Beard Foundation. For years, distinguished chefs from across the country have been offered opportunities to serve full course dinners at the historic James Beard house in Greenwich Village. For Chef/Owner James Holmes of Olivia, when you get an invitation to cook for peers and members of the professional food industry, you jump at the chance. “The James Beard name means different things to different folks, but it’s a true nod to industry people,” says Holmes who was invited to create a spring-themed dinner in April. “To me, that’s the ultimate compliment compared to the other nods or press recognition that you get.”

Having been recognized for his European-meets-down-home-Southern menu as well as his commitment to seasonal and sustainable produce, Holmes was thrilled to have a chance to show off the bounty of Texas farmers and purveyors. With a little help from Boggy Creek Farms, Loncito’s Lamb, Thunderheart bison, and a few other notable Central Texas purveyors, Holmes will be serving a menu including bacon-wrapped jalapeño and lamb’s heart, pickled pig’s ear panini, foie gras and smoked gouda grits, and roasted sweetbreads with Pure Luck Farms goat cheese. “I’ve used the James Beard culinary books since I first began as a chef,” says Holmes. “James Beard was kind of the father of starting a conversation in the States about bringing European cooking to America and I’m thrilled to be able to show off the best of what Texas has to offer.”

This spring, Austin has a lot to be proud of in the way of chefs making a great name for the city. From national nominations to special invitations to cook, the James Beard Foundation has an eye on the Lone Star State’s capital city, and it’s only a matter of time before the “Live Music Capital of the World” is noted for its culinary prowess as well. ■

Uchi’s innovative pastry chef, Philip Speer, is nominated and thanks his mentor, Tyson Cole. “Having worked at Uchi for the past few years, Tyson and Paul have pushed me in so many ways with my cooking and the result has always been something better,” he says.



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Philippe
Le Prieux

