

Much brought to the Table

Redo of Philippe sees inventive, accomplished new menu and chef Pucha stepping into the spotlight

By Greg Morago

Some second acts don't necessarily end well. The boy doesn't get the girl. The village wasn't saved. The butler did it.

In the case of Table, the relaunch of the former Philippe Restaurant & Lounge, the drama that preceded its recent opening suggested an unhappy ending. First the restaurant's namesake, Philippe Schmit, announced he was leaving his French-ified restaurant in September. Then sommelier Vanessa Trevino Boyd decamped in December. That was followed by an announcement in January that the restaurant would close and reopen in May as Table. And even before it was set to debut, the restaurant lost its general manager, Dallas Easterly.

Such developments usually spell disaster. But the restaurant's owner, Crest Investments, appears to have invested wisely. It promoted chef de cuisine Manuel Pucha to executive chef and let him assemble a team and create a new dining concept that would bear no semblance to Schmit's brand of high-flying fare. While the restaurant was receiving a warm makeover, Pucha's kitchen was hard at work devising a new menu that was described only as seasonal.



Ponzu crab at Table features Colossal lump crab, avocado, shishito pepper and ponzu vinaigrette.

A better term would be stunning. In writing his own new chapter for the restaurant at 1800 Post Oak, Pucha has created dishes so joyous and elegant that any old ghosts or hints of desperation are blown to the Galleria winds.

"People are expecting something different," Pucha said of the new table he's set at Table. "But maybe nothing like this."

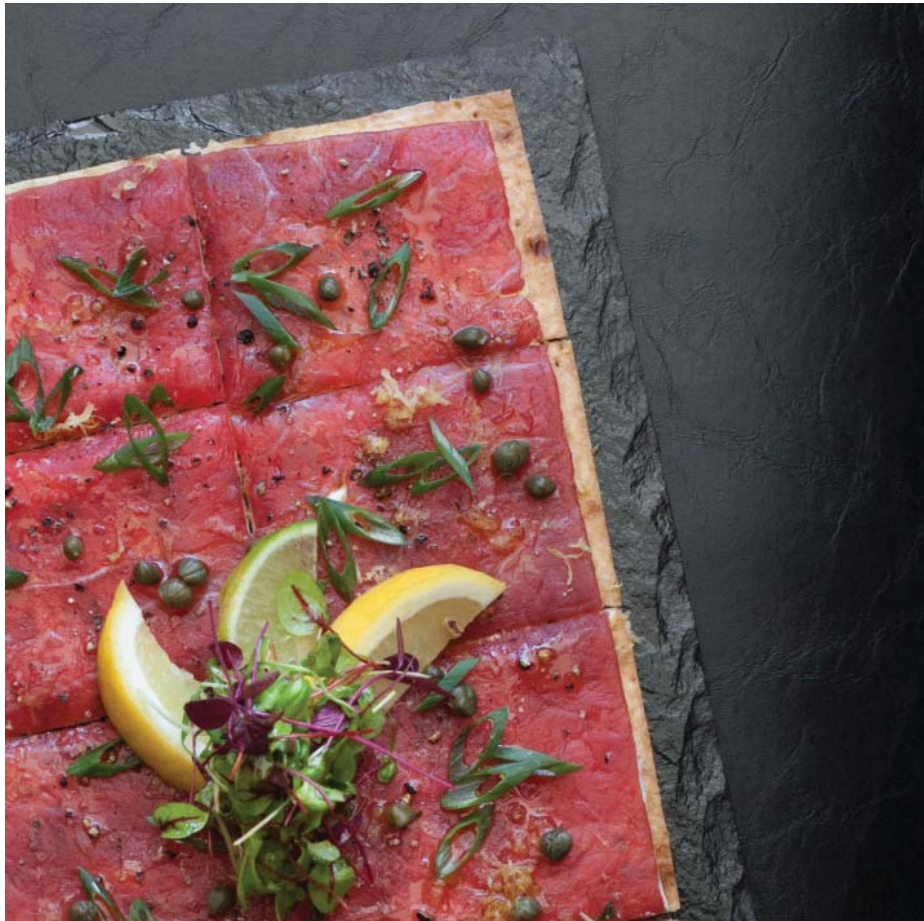
Indeed, the offerings - from cocktails, to bar snacks, to entrees, to desserts - are so accomplished that local foodies might wonder just where Table's team has been hiding. In truth, many have worked with Pucha before; some were promoted from within; some were strategic new hires.

"I'm so proud of the team," Pucha said last week when Table launched. "We want to be one of the top restaurants in Houston."

Right off the bat, it looks like an easy goal for Table.

Pucha's menu is littered with inventive, exquisitely plated stuff: tufts of lump crab with avocado, shishito peppers and a ponzu vinaigrette; spinach and ricotta-filled ravioli laced with three beans (string, fava and soy) and glossed with sage butter; seafood risotto studded with mussels, clams, scallop, shrimp and salmon lashed with basil lobster sauce; and blackberry ponzu-glazed duck breast set on bok choy and lightly doused with smoky lapsang souchong tea broth.

Among the lineup of potential signature dishes, one has already been getting strong word of mouth: a lavosh flatbread smeared with crême fraîche aioli and topped with tuna carpaccio. Sliced into immaculate cracker-size bites, it already is Table's top-selling dish.



Table's best-selling dish is the tuna carpaccio flatbread with crème fraîche aioli, green onion, Himalayan salt and capers.

The before and afters are also scoring. Table hired a new bar manager, Hector Vargas, from the Havana Hotel in San Antonio to create more than a dozen new signature cocktails. Jami Kling, who worked at Tony's and Philippe, is the pastry chef responsible for sweet endings such as "Pancakes & Bacon" (blinis with maple crème caramel and candied bacon), green matcha tea panna cotta with blackberry compote, and a warm Dr Pepper cake lava drenched with chocolate ganache and served with a mini "float" of Dr Pepper granita and vanilla ice cream.

Pucha is quick to give credit to his kitchen team, which includes chef

de cuisine William Wright, and sous chefs Jason Bergeron and Alberto Baffoni. The Table team also includes new general manager Henry Cid, who has been with Philippe since it opened, and Evan Turner, a well-known local sommelier who is the vice president of Crest Restaurants (a new position that suggests Crest has new concepts it's ready to push out).

Though he calls Schmit a friend and mentor, Pucha knew he had to do something that wouldn't suggest culinary ties to the former chef. The 39-year-old Ecuador-born chef, who has worked in French, Italian, Mexican and steakhouse restaurants during his 20-year career, was ready for

the challenge. His modern American menu buzzes with fresh ingredients and colorful, voluptuous plating.

"I don't like my food to be flat. I like color. I want you to see it and think, 'Wow.' Hopefully, it tastes as good as it looks."

If Pucha's arresting compositions suggest an artistic nature, there's good reason. He moved from Ecuador to New York in 1993 to study art and worked in oils. "But somehow I found passion more in food than painting." He met Schmit working in New York restaurants and moved with him to Houston to open Bistro Moderne; he followed Schmit again to Philippe.

With Table, it's now Pucha's turn to shine. His promotion to executive chef of the restaurant that for months still bore the name Philippe was bittersweet. "I was sad and happy at the same time," he said. "When he left, I was worried about the changes."

It doesn't show. His team's dishes show meticulous, intelligent attention. "All I can say is great minds think alike," Pucha said. "I'm blessed to have this team."

But it's also Pucha's time to stand in the limelight. And he knows it.

"Having to carry a restaurant on your shoulders is pressure," he said. "If you succeed, it's on your name. If it goes down, it's on your name. This time I can sense and feel it's going to be different - in a good way."

Now, that's how to write a happy Act 2.

Table on Post Oak

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