

SUNDAY, MARCH 25, 2012

It was a banner year for Philippe eatery

By Greg Morago

A year ago at this time Philippe Schmit was sitting high in the saddle. Houston's self-proclaimed French Cowboy was aglow in the culinary adulation and prolonged party buzz that greeted the opening of his new Philippe Restaurant & Lounge at the posh BLVD Place in the Galleria neighborhood.

It was a splashy time when the champagne never stopped pouring on both levels of Houston's new hot spot and see-and-be-seen playground.

If you thought things have slowed down after a year, you've come to the wrong rodeo. Philippe remains packed and essential (Texas Monthly recently included it in the magazine's "Ten Best New Restaurants in Texas" feature). There have been staff changes in the kitchen, sure, but the French-born Schmit has been cooking with assurance and purpose.

Even his French countrymen have taken notice. Today Schmit finds himself in the south of France to attend his introduction into the elite ranks of Maitres Cuisiniers de France (Master Chef of France), recognizing chefs skilled in the techniques and traditions of French culinary arts. He will be among 10 French chefs from the United States to be recognized (and the only from Texas) when the awards are bestowed Monday.

"Obviously, it's very humbling. You're in a room with these big-time chefs who have Michelin restaurants in France.



Chef-owner Philippe Schmit of Philippe Restaurant embraces dishes that are French, but invested with a Texas palate.

It's pretty amazing," Schmit said. "It's also sentimental for me."

Schmit, who trained at three of Paris's most respected Michelin star restaurants, said he'll be thinking of his father who helped him find his first job after his apprenticeship.

France may have their native son for the week but Houston has Schmit in its culinary embrace and won't let go. He's returning the affection in dishes that are evocatively French but invested with a Texan palate. There are tamales coddling

Want to try it out?

Philippe Restaurant & Lounge
1800 Post Oak Blvd
at BLVD Place
713-439-1000
philippehouston.com

duck confit; salmon tartare splashed with tequila; baked scallops bathed in a veal reduction with a shot of Jack Daniel's; Caesar salad with a barbecue sauce-brushed skirt steak; a Texas-proud bone-in rib-eye steak served with cornbread and cactus salad; and beef burgundy cheeks are served, in a cheeky nod to local taste buds, with a luxurious macaroni and cheese.

But not all his dishes sport a Texas twang. Classic French inspiration and technique can be found in Schmit's escargot, onion soup, coq au vin with foie gras mashed potatoes, grilled trout with lentils, baked lemon sole with truffle-port sauce, monkfish medallions with artichoke confit, roasted



The House Smoked Fish Pate consists of Salmon, trout and eel in a bouillabaisse aspic with waffle and whipped horseradish.



The cowboy steak: 16 oz bone-in grilled rib eye, cactus salad, cornbread cake, BBQ sauce and fries

duck with duck confit ravioli and carrot flan, and a poached skate wing with ravioli in a lobster broth and brown butter "powder."

Schmit and his staff haven't had much time to sit back and savor the rewards of creating one of the city's most impressive restaurants.

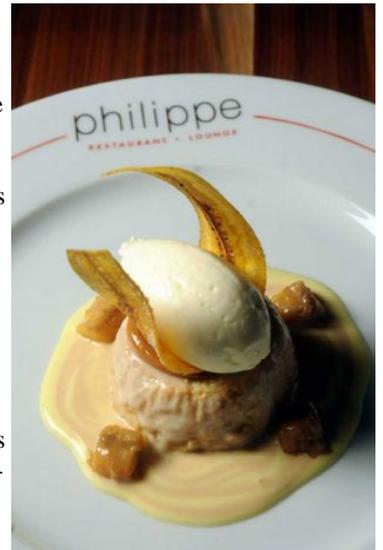
After a year they're as busy as ever. And when he's not in his kitchen Schmit is out on the floor charming customers who come to see him as much as savor his fare.

"The best part of being a chef in Houston is the relationship you can create with your customer. I want to see them. It's part of the success of this restaurant - we have an amazing base of return customers," he said. "And we are still being discovered every day."

The restaurant is in the process of creating a communal table for the downstairs bar as a way to promote wine tastings and take advantage of the talents of sommelier Vanessa Treviño Boyd. Boyd, who has run the wine program at Philippe since it opened, was recently named

one of Food & Wine Magazine's eight Sommeliers-of-the-Year.

Banner year for Philippe? Mais oui!



The tres leches with vanilla Chantilly, caramelized bananas and sour cream cajeta sauce



The pig in a "blanket" : sage and cream-braised pork shoulder with mushrooms, Fingerling potatoes and shallot confit



The poached skate wing, caper-parsley-lemon ravioli, lobster broth and brown butter "powder"