

THE WELCOME TABLE

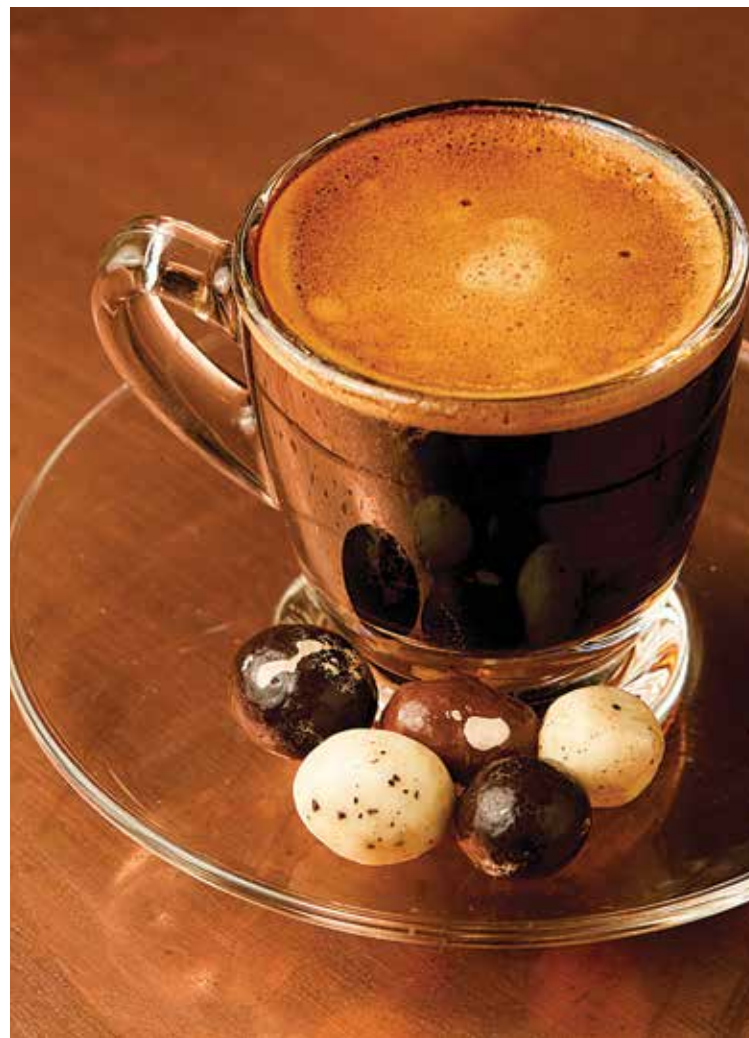
ONCE A LUXURY RESERVED FOR RESTAURANT OWNERS' HIGH-POWERED—AND HIGH-PAYING—FRIENDS, CHEF'S TABLES HAVE BECOME INCREASINGLY POPULAR AND ACCESSIBLE FOR FOOD LOVERS SEEKING A BEHIND-THE-CURTAIN PEEK AT THEIR FAVORITE RESTAURANTS AND THE PEOPLE WHO MAKE THEM SPECIAL.

BY ANGELA BOTZER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRANDON SMITH

EVEN FOR THE most social-media-accessible celebrities who invite fans and followers into every corner of their private lives, there's something alluring about the idea of a backstage pass. These lanyard-affixed signifiers of friendship, access, wealth, or influence—or all of the above—provide a look not only at the personalities behind the scenes but the processes that bring to life events like concerts, plays, political rallies, and other cultural events.

Argentinian-inspired dishes like sweet corn fritters, wood-grilled tenderloin with black garlic Bordelaise, and campfire rainbow trout with wood-roasted broccoli make for a satisfying spread at Amelia's Wood Fired Cuisine in Tulsa.





Similarly, chefs' kitchens once were the provenance of the wealthy and well-connected. For food lovers willing to pay for the opportunity, the chance to sit in a restaurant kitchen for multiple courses as a chef and his or her staff rush around creating new recipes, innovating on beloved dishes, and working out the nightly kinks of a high-end food service operation could, in the right setting, be almost as thrilling and action-packed as hanging out backstage at a rock concert.

But as diners have become more savvy, food has become more local, and restaurant kitchens have become more open about their methods and ingredients, the hows and whys of chefs' tables have changed. This tangible, communal experience of food includes camaraderie among the aromas, tastes, and sounds—there may even be singing—in an intimate, unhurried setting. It's all about life in the kitchen.



AT ROCOCO NORTH PARK in Oklahoma City, the type specimen of the chef's table is alive and well. The vibe is one of an Italian mafia joint, with red-checkered tablecloths, chandeliers, elegant crystal, and china. *The Godfather* could have been filmed here. But the experience is only cinematic in the culinary sense.

"Part of the beauty of the chef's table is that you are part of the experience of a live, working kitchen," says chef and owner Bruce Rinehart. "It's not contrived; it's the real deal that goes on in the kitchen."

Rinehart's chef's table may include six or eight courses that feature plates as unique as pan-seared scallops with caramelized ginger and Sriracha or something as universally popular as the restaurant's famous crab cakes.

"The great thing about having a chef's table here is how we interact with our guests," says Rinehart. "The chefs actually

At Moni's Pasta and Pizza in Edmond, Chef Rachel's jumbo s'mores crème brûlée; pan-seared lamb lollipops and diver sea scallops; Italian dark espresso with chocolated covered espresso beans; and East Coast Italian classic Clams Casino Bruschetta are known to make appearances on the chef's menu.

sit down at the table during the courses and talk about the wine pairings, laugh, and drink wine. It's a fun, fluid experience."

Also in Oklahoma City, The Tasting Room takes this interaction in a different direction with a cooking demonstration to accompany its dinner with four wine pairings. In fact, as chefs Jason Jones and Kurt Fleischfresser create each course, an overhead screen shows every mince, chop, and sauté. Which knife did they use to dice that tomato? Diners see it first-hand on the screen. In warmer months, the demonstration may occur on the restaurant's patio as Jones and Fleischfresser work their magic on an outdoor grill to prepare dishes like pork tenderloin, pumpkin bisque, shrimp and popcorn grits, butternut squash, and piquant fried apple pecan pie with caramel. From rustic wooden tables and chairs, guests may enjoy creamy crab corn bisque

preceding delectable grilled scallops and wild mushroom risotto followed by seared duck breast, roasted sweet potato, and confit Brussels sprouts with pomegranate gastrique—complete with warm, sweet grilled banana s'mores for dessert.

"People love the demonstrations, because they're hands-on," says Tasting Room events manager Cassie Simon. "The chefs talk about each course in detail while also explaining each particular wine pairing."



THIS INSIDER'S VIEW paired with a bit of culinary education is a major appeal for many seeking out chef's tables. But for

Rococo owner and head chef Bruce Rinehart prepares a meal in the restaurant's Northpark location for chef's table guests.





Chef Kurt Fleischfresser hosts monthly multi-course gourmet dinners at the Tasting Room on Western Avenue in Oklahoma City.

others, the experience is enhanced by the relative privacy it offers. At Moni's Pasta and Pizza in Edmond, an elegant tasting room situated away from the kitchen can seat a party of eight comfortably—co-owner John Foster says the experience is best with at least four—and comes with a private bar hidden speakeasy-style behind a small wooden window. Here, the center of attention is a professional-grade stove and oven where head chef and co-owner Rachel Foster creates a tasting menu that incorporates tastes of three geographic regions.

“We offer tastes of classic southern Italy and New Jersey Neapolitan food, local Oklahoma ingredients, and current produce in-season,” says Foster. “During each course, the guests learn about the ingredients, the history of the dish, and why it’s important for us to serve it during this particular meal. It’s part meal, part history, and part passion.”

The ten-course, three-and-a-half-hour meal begins with an *apertivo*, champagne, and an appetizer like olives in wood-smoked olive oil and Marcona almonds.

Next is *antipasti* like Clams Casino Bruschetta—including a lesson on the history of Clams Casino on the East Coast—followed by *primi*, which usually features a meatless course accompanied by white truffle and rosemary risotto. The *secondi* customarily is a land-and-sea offering like lamb lollipops with herbs or a whole-skin-on salmon in garlic butter. The meal continues with a *contorni* course, which accompanies the *secondi* with seasonal vegetables and side dishes like grilled asparagus with blistered tri-colored tomatoes and parmesan or sage and brown butter sweet potato home fries.

The *ensalata* course showcases local produce such as spinach prepared with pine nuts and pepperoncini vinaigrette. The *formaggi e frutta* course follows with cheese and fruit, and dessert often is a decadent tiramisu. The meal ends with a cup of strong black espresso and limoncello as a *digestivo*.

In the Tulsa Arts District, The Tavern, rather than prizing privacy, leans into the meal-as-social-hour concept by occasionally hosting annual food events like a potluck-style barbecue in the alley behind the restaurant or a Wine and Swine Outdoor Barbecue. But The Tav-

ern’s chef’s table is available year-round by reservation.

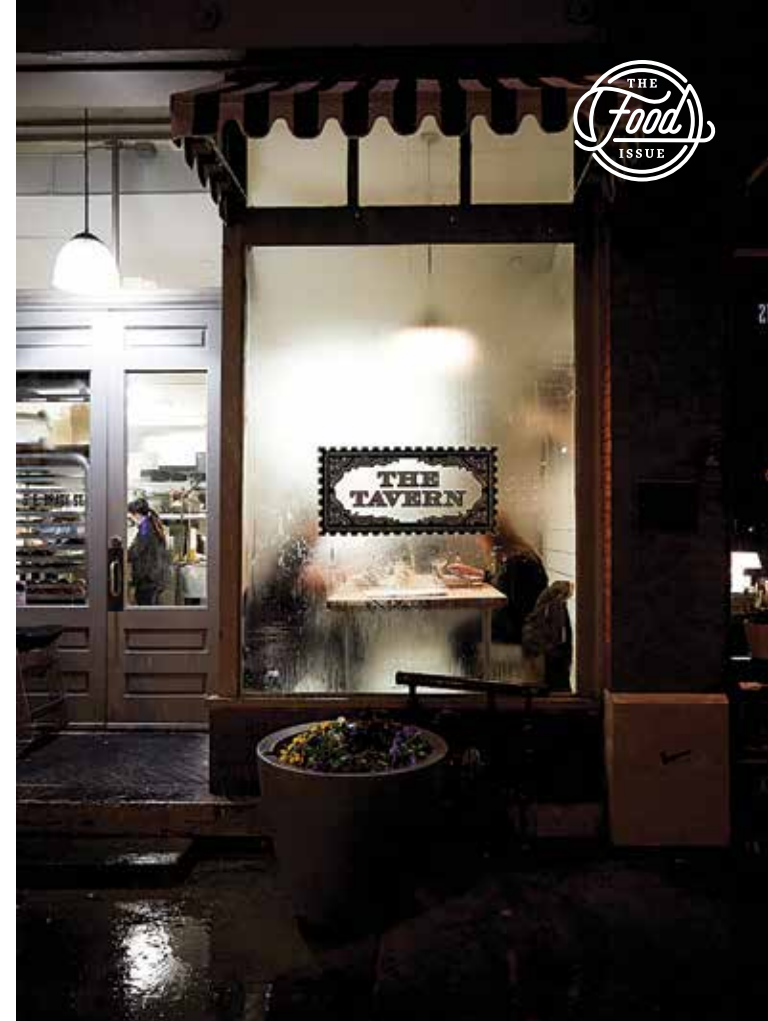
Diners are seated in groups of up to six in a back corner of The Tavern’s kitchen. There, they can look out the window and listen to music from the kitchen while chefs drop by between courses to announce each dish and explain the inspiration behind it. The restaurant’s head chef, sous chefs, and pastry chefs all collaborate to offer four courses and a dessert, each accompanied by a suggestion for wine, spirits, or beer. And most of the Tavern’s ingredients are fresh and locally sourced.

“We emphasize what is in season and shop at the local farmer’s market,” says general manager Scott Zeier. “Our food is comfortable, chef-driven, seasonal, elevated and executed well, and beautifully plated.”

This plating—even the table itself—offers chef’s table guests a rare look at the everyday working of the restaurant’s kitchen.

The focus on locally sourced ingredients and careful, unique preparation is a hallmark of the chef’s table experience.

The chef’s table menu at The Tavern in Tulsa serves dishes such as *moules frites* and Cauliflower Bolognese in its inviting and sophisticated space in the Tulsa Arts District.





AND WHILE MANY chefs choose to bring diners into the inner sanctum, Ludivine in Oklahoma City brings the action to them. Here, the dining bar surrounds the kitchen, providing lines of sight as the staff works its magic and allowing aromas to waft freely and the chef's banter to add a lively soundtrack to the evening. The bar also makes it easier for diners to get a sense of the chef's table's appeal. Small groups easily can get reservations. Ludivine owner and chef Russ Johnson was intentional in designing the restaurant this way.

"He wanted people to watch how food is prepared and showcase what was in stock at local markets like Super Cao Nguyen," says assistant general manager Zach Carrel.

Both Johnson and chef de cuisine Shannon Goforth strive to bring products to the table that customers don't ordinarily see. The menu—which Carrel says could be described as classic French with Oklahoma American—may include a first course of barbecue mushroom lettuce cups followed by crab ravioli, followed by lamb strip loin with seared foie gras, carrot purée, roasted fingerling potatoes, oyster mushrooms, and garlic scape aioli. This may be finished with a sweet *Baumkuchen* cake—a German dessert whose name means *tree cake* because it resembles the rings of a tree when sliced.

Like Ludivine, Amelia's Wood Fired Cuisine in Tulsa's kitchen bar allows diners to do a little classy eavesdropping on chefs. From this perch, guests catch aromas from the kitchen and the noise of the staff—one chef is singing quietly while working—as they prepare dishes for the day's tasting menu. From here, one thing stands out: the Argentinian-style wood-fired grill. This beauty is the restaurant's workhorse, grilling meat, flat breads, pizzas, and more.

"Our cuisine could be called Oklahoma gaucho, because it's strongly influenced by the cuisine of Argentina with as many products from local farmers as possible," says owner and namesake Amelia Eesley.

Clockwise from top left: Amelia's Wood Fired Cuisine in Tulsa is highly regarded among locals. General Tso Ruby Red Trout and microgreen salad at Ludivine. The open kitchen at Ludivine gives it a chef's table feel all the time.

At a chef's table tasting, this may take the form of a wood-roasted black bean and sweet potato empanada, a fried Brussels sprouts Caesar salad, or a succulent steak and arugula wood-fired pizza—all prepared under the curious and watchful eyes of those seated at the cozy kitchen bar.

This intimacy lies at the heart of the chef's table concept's appeal. You can appreciate the skill and artistry that goes into a meal from the dining room, but if food is more than sustenance, isn't it natural that diners want to be more than just customers? The chef's table is not an invasion but an invitation—to eat but also to connect and understand the care and personality poured into each dish. These are meals that fill the stomach as well as the soul.



AMELIA'S WOOD FIRED CUISINE

➤ 122 North Boston Avenue in Tulsa
➤ (918) 728-2435
➤ amelias.us

LUDIVINE

➤ 320 Northwest Tenth Street in Oklahoma City
➤ (405) 778-6800
➤ ludivineokc.com

MONI'S PASTA AND PIZZA

➤ 17200 North May Avenue in Edmond
➤ (405) 285-5991
➤ monisokc.com

ROCCO NORTH PARK

➤ 12252 North May Avenue in Oklahoma City
➤ (405) 212-4577
➤ loverococo.com

THE TASTING ROOM

➤ 4322 North Western Avenue in Oklahoma City
➤ (405) 604-3015
➤ thetastingroomokc.com

THE TAVERN

➤ 201 North Main Street in Tulsa
➤ (918) 949-9801
➤ taverntulsa.com

