

World Class

Chef Paul Lewis brings global influence to the landmark new Cullen's Grille

BY CHARLES FULLER

Cullen's Upscale American Grille sits on 4.431 acres and has an equally large personality — from its multi-faceted concept to its grand design appointments to its broad menu.

In short, owner Kevin Munz has created three unique places under one 37,500-square-foot roof. Cullen's is a 250-seat restaurant with a suspended private dining area; an eight-room banquet and meeting center; and a posh lounge, complete with live music stage.

But even Munz knows — without great food, all of it would seem empty. Ask him, and he'll tell you: the real maestro of Cullen's is Executive Chef Paul Lewis.




FLAVOR

AROUND THE GLOBE

A native of the United Kingdom, Lewis started working in a kitchen at age 11 — at a Michelin-rated hotel, no less, under the guidance of famed British chef Robert Smith.

Lewis' culinary coming up is a story in and of itself. Let's just say that he cut his teeth in various award-winning institutions during a resurgence in British culinary reputation. He emerged with both a formal degree and extensive hands-on experience in food.

Lewis landed at the Four Seasons in Houston. For the next 40 seasons, he spent time at Four Seasons hotels in Houston, Dublin, London and Hawaii. He eventually came back to Houston and served as executive sous chef at Quattro. While the experience was incredible, Lewis wanted to get his hands dirty again.

"In a hotel, when you get up in the upper levels of management in the kitchen, you're not very hands on," Lewis said. "I was looking to get back into a restaurant where I could really focus on the food."

Enter Cullen's.

Lewis has brought a renewed passion for food to Munz's brainchild. But he's also bringing the kind of versatility that Cullen's demands. Bar food, banquets and fine dining — Cullen's offers it all, and Lewis knows it.

TASTING MENU

The Bigeye Tuna Tartare appetizer comes straight from Lewis' days in Hawaii — both the recipe and the fish.

"I made a really good connection with a fish monger out there," he said. "We're able to buy tuna straight from the markets and get it shipped here within 24 hours of coming off the boat."

Lewis marinates it in a mix of soy sauce, hoisin, red chili paste, toasted sesame and nori, then throws in avocado, macadamia nuts and vegetable chips. (It's very similar to a ceviche.)

His homeland can be found in the entrees. A fish and chips dish features high-quality snapper fish with a flour-based batter — like you find street-side in the U.K. You can also find Texas throughout the menu, often in the ingredients. One example is Jolie Vue Farms, owned by a Houston lawyer with a farm in Brenham (Washington County).

"He's raising what we call Heritage Pork," Lewis said. "He raises them in a humane way; they're allowed to roam free, and they're fed a diet of seasonal produce. We're buying whole animals. There's chorizo in the mussels and a ragu with the pappardelle. We use its bacon for the club sandwich and other parts for a pulled pork panini and a pork chop."

The local ingredients and well-designed menu place Cullen's in a class with few other Bay Area restaurants. But they also reveal a dedication to environmental responsibility. Cullen's is the first restaurant in Greater Houston certified by The Green Restaurant Association.

Above all, Lewis and Munz want to push the envelope. But they still want to be accessible to the wide variety of people living near the restaurant.

"What I'm trying to do is use fresh ingredients, seasoned properly,



Chef Paul Lewis



Cullen's dining room

cooked by people who care about food, with flavors that belong together, presented well and with high-level service. You don't have to be a foodie or a millionaire to appreciate it. But if you are...you will."

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iDining

Cullen's spared no expense to develop a dining destination. Beyond the massive space, the chic design and the million-dollar kitchen, owners Kevin Munz has also taken full advantage of new technology. Check out some of Cullen's techie touches.

- The waiting room/bar features six flat-screen TVs with Microsoft X-Box video game consoles. They're intended to occupy restless or waiting children (or adults for that matter).
- Servers use handheld POS systems to take your order and run your checkout. Your credit card never leaves the table.
- A tablet PC also keeps track of real-time wine inventory.
- On the walls of the dining room, framed 42-inch LCD monitors display various pieces of famous artwork.
- When the lounge and music venue opens, it will not only feature a player piano and flat-screen monitors galore, the stage will have full theatrical sound and be lighted from beneath the musicians' feet through fiber optics.

