



says Fox. "Chefs need to set expectations for their servers. It doesn't matter how good your food is. If your service is bad, that's it."

Fox's sentiments on service are echoed by both Lazarus and Cole. "I always tell my staff 'you only get one shot,'" says Cole. "If we don't wow them on their first visit, they'll never come back." Having worked his way up through the kitchens at Kyoto and Musashino, and apprenticing in both New York and Japan, Cole wanted to change the way Austinites approached sushi. When Uchi opened in 2003, South Lamar didn't have a lot of upscale variety, but Cole's penchant for taking traditional sushi and tweaking it with subtle flavors and his deliberate intention of creating a unique identity for his restaurant have been a transforming element in Austin's national recognition as a great place to eat.

Cole attributes much of the restaurant's success to the overall experience. From the stylized interior design by Michael Hsu to the rhythmic background music, the "wait treats" served while waiting for a table on the patio, and the knowledgeable waitstaff, Uchi represents the ideal image of a clean, well-packaged concept. "Value is the key word," says Cole. "In this economy, people are being more selective about where they go out to eat. The restaurant experience should be an escape where you go and forget your problems." Today Uchi runs like a well-oiled machine. So well, in fact, that Cole has had to face the challenge of giving his staff opportunity to grow—and his preference is for them to grow with him. In 2010 the Hyde Park area can expect to see an expansion of the Uchi name with the same exquisite food and service, but with a few changes as well. Unlike Uchi, Uchiko, the working name for the new restaurant, will take reservations and will feature a larger bar area where diners can order off the menu.

In addition to Uchiko, Cole is overseeing the culinary retail space at the W Hotel in the 2nd Street District. He hopes to welcome a few small concepts such as a bakery or a butcher and deli as well as developing his next restaurant concept. Canteen, which isn't slated to open for a couple of years, promises to reflect the style, service, and culinary quality that Cole has staked his name on, but it will involve a completely different genre of food—Spanish. Though that's not exactly what one might expect from a sushi chef, Cole explains that in many ways, the Spanish and Japanese approaches to cuisine are similar to each other. "My goal with Uchi was to take traditionally prepared Japanese food and add personal tweaks and flair to it," says Cole. "I found I was using a number of Spanish ingredients in my sushi preparations, and as I began to dedicate myself to learning more about Spanish food, I found similarities between how the two cultures approach food that are hard to ignore." In Cole's eyes, the growth that Austin has experienced has raised the level of accountability for the city's restaurants and

chefs. Willing to meet that level of accountability is Larry McGuire, a savvy young chef who took to heart the example set by the likes of Lazarus, Fox, and Cole when he joined mentor Lou Lambert, Thomas Moorman, and Will Bridges, to open Lamberts Downtown Barbecue in December 2006.

"There's a lot of opportunity in Austin for quality whole-restaurant concepts," says McGuire. "It's not about just hiring a chef and then developing some great menu items. You have to have a specific type of food, a specific design and focus. That's why chef-owned restaurants like Vespaio and Uchi, and now Lamberts have done so well in Austin. The whole menu is constantly being refined, and the interior design and overall experience make sense when you walk in the door."

McGuire also spent time during Lambert's first year in developing a strong, cohesive staff that understands the importance of customer service. He devoted more than a year to working both the kitchen and the front of the house, tweaking the process until his staff had achieved an effective routine. "Food is extremely important," says McGuire. "But I've learned that customer service is the main thing that makes it all happen. I've seen places fail because they thought that if the food is good enough, nothing else matters. It's just the opposite. I'm still tweaking everything at Lamberts. It is going to take a lot longer than the first year or two years to create what we want—consistency of quality that results in an institution type feel."

With a solid confidence in his team's growth, McGuire began looking to expand with other opportunities. He has recently taken on management consulting at La Condesa and the opening of Perla's, his new South Congress seafood concept with Tommy Mormon and Steve Wertheimer. This lively locale evokes a northeastern beach vibe and features an expansive deck for outside dining. Inside Perla's is an oversized saltwater fish tank, a fresh oyster bar, and a vintage shuffleboard table—all adding up to a laid-back environment complemented by upscale Nantucket-style seafood. "Perla's is an example of how we're trying to attack these gaps that are missing," says McGuire. "There's Quality Seafood and Eddie V's, which delivers higher-end dining, but there was not a hip seafood restaurant at a medium price point. Perla's is about letting us worry about the seriously executed food while our customers have fun."

You may not be thrilled with the rapid growth of Austin in the past decades. And you may be even less thrilled with the inevitable growth that's just around the corner, but these celebrated local chef-owners with their successful restaurant concepts have adjusted to the maturing Austin food scene and given us accessible, service-focused dining options with sophisticated food. That's something we can all be happy about. ■

# Kitchen Confidential

For these top chefs, it's all about the joy of cooking.

By Jessica Dupuy

Photography by Jeff Stockton

If you're one of the lucky few who can call yourself a native Austinite, or at least can claim residency for more than 20 years, then you've seen a lot of change in this city. From the tech boom and massive residential development to the perpetually changing skyline, the second-fastest-growing city in the country has seen an influx of business, arts, fashion, and a steady swell of excellent restaurants whose offerings extend well beyond Tex-Mex and barbecue.

"The scales are tipping because of the people moving here," says Tyson Cole, executive chef and co-owner of Uchi. "That influx of people is really maturing our market with people whose experience with cuisine is higher than what Austin used to have." Cole, along with chef/restaurateurs Alan Lazarus of Vespaio and Emmett Fox of Asti and Fino, are a few of the pioneers who took note of the changing Austin market and have used their extensive culinary skills to add new dimensions to the restaurant scene. The result has paved the way for fresh, edgy concepts that offer a modern spin on dining out but still maintain an Austin authenticity. In this supportive atmosphere newcomers such as chef Larry McGuire are continuing to blaze trails with newer hot spots like Lamberts, La Condesa, and the recently opened Perla's.

"Ten or 15 years ago, there wasn't much going on here," says Emmett Fox. "There was Jeffrey's and Zoot, but for a while it was high-end, expensive restaurants and a bunch of Tex-Mex or barbecue restaurants, but nothing in between. It wasn't until places like Vespaio and eventually Wink, Uchi, and Lamberts that we've seen those gaps fill in."

When Alan Lazarus and partners Claude Benayoun and Scott Bolin opened Vespaio in October 1998, they each drew from their extensive culinary and restaurant

experiences as well as their many travels to Italy to create fresh, flavorful, "real" food delivered with impeccable service in a small, comfortable atmosphere. At the time, South Congress primarily had Güero's and the Continental Club to attract visitors, but the partners were convinced that Vespaio could help transform the potential for the neighborhood.

Vespaio, Italian for "beehive," has succeeded at maintaining its buzz as a hip-yet-not-haughty neighborhood restaurant. To accommodate the overflow of its success, the partners were able to open Enoteca, a more casual Italian bistro next door to Vespaio.

"There's a method to how you do things in the kitchen and in the front of the house to make our customers want to come back—that's how restaurants stay great," says Lazarus. "We've always stuck to what we wanted to be when we opened—a great Italian restaurant."

As Vespaio was breathing new life into the South Congress scene, Emmett Fox zeroed in on Hyde Park. Having spent time at the helm of some of Austin's old favorites, the Bitter End and the Granite Café, Fox relied on his broad Italian and Mediterranean culinary background and opened Asti Trattoria in 2000 and Fino, a Mediterranean-driven restaurant, in 2005. In Fox's opinion, Austin was in need of fine-dining options with a reasonable prices.

"For the quality and level of food we're serving, I've been adamant about keeping our menu items under \$20," says Fox. "I always keep in mind that this is not my menu; it's my customers' menu. You can't be so chef-driven that you forget to think about what your customers like to eat." Fox's philosophy includes putting his customers' experience first, which includes training his staff on the food and wine menus weekly. "Your wait staff spends the most time with your customers in any given evening,"

**FACING PAGE** Subtlety and simplicity define Tyson Cole's approach not only to creating exquisite food, but in delivering an entire experience to his customers at Uchi—a practice he intends to duplicate in his upcoming endeavors, Uchicko and Canteen.