



the Ultimate Chef's Table



What's your ultimate culinary fantasy? Dining in a famed restaurant? Perhaps a private chef who prepares your daily meals? Or do you dream of cooking with a celebrity chef? For me, and countless others, it's getting the ultimate backstage pass to a real culinary show -- exclusive entrée into the theater that is the kitchen of a high-end restaurant to witness and interact with the elegantly controlled chaos choreographed by the executive chef. Luckily, this fantasy is easily within reach when you book an evening at a chef's table.

The history of chef's tables has not been fully documented. According to Lynne Oliver, editor of Food Timeline (www.foodtimeline.org), they started more than a century ago in Europe, where chefs placed tables in their kitchens, allowing them to visit with family, friends and important visitors as they worked. Julia Child's memoir, "My Life in France," shares her experiences visiting with favorite chefs in their kitchens. She not only sampled their dishes but observed and questioned the chef on techniques, tools and ingredients. At times, these were accidental learning opportunities; others were deliberate visits to learn about a specific dish or technique.

Newspaper articles from the early 1990s began reporting chef's tables in the United States. Most give credit to legendary chef Charlie Trotter for introducing the country's first chef's table in his Chicago restaurant after experiencing them in Europe. Other famed chefs and restaurateurs quickly followed, but mostly kept their clientele to VIPs and celebrities who sought the privacy a kitchen table offers. Predicted to be just a fad in the late '90s by one famous, and wrong, restaurant consultant, the chef's table now can be found in fine restaurants across the United

States. Luckily, they are accessible to all.

While many restaurants have adopted the chef's table concept in various forms, a classic chef's table has specific characteristics relating to location, exclusivity, menu, creativity, hospitality and service that in combination create the ultimate experience.

First, a restaurant doesn't offer a classic chef's table if it's not in the kitchen. This limits many restaurants lacking a large enough or properly designed kitchen. Many have improvised, creating a private nook or room for guests to dine with the same attention received at a classic chef's table, including a unique, creative, chef-inspired menu. But you miss the real show going on behind the scenes.

The ultimate chef's table takes you out of the calm, pleasant and controlled environment of the dining room into the tense, difficult, focused artistry and logistical brilliance that can only be seen -- and felt -- by being in the kitchen. At the ultimate chef's table, you not only get to observe but meet and interact with entire kitchen staff. Food is their art, and those who do chef's tables well are thrilled to share their passion and artistry with you, up close and personal.

Second, a chef's table is exclusive. Most chef's tables accommodate no more than six to eight guests, ensuring you have the undivided attention of the chef throughout the evening. Since the meal can last several hours, there is typically only one seating per evening. Many are booked weeks in advance.

Reservations give the chef time to plan the perfect menu and accommodate any special requests.

Third, a chef's table is a culinary adventure. It's not just a sampling of the restaurant's regular menu. The ultimate chef's table serves a personalized menu based on your preferences. Typically a prix fixe menu of six to eight or even more tasting courses, a chef's table allows the chef and staff to flex their creative muscle and offer a one-of-a-kind dining experience. The direction you give the chef might range from suggesting a theme to requesting specific types

of dishes to simply throwing your arms wide open telling the kitchen "Show me what you've got" and relishing in the surprises that follow. Being open about the menu is by far the most enjoyable for the chef and kitchen staff, so it's no surprise that the ultimate chef's tables are found in restaurants where the regular menu reflects the chef's creativity and commitment to quality, local,

seasonal ingredients and creative culinary expression.

Fourth, guests at a chef's table have the complete attention of the chef. At some restaurants, the chef may make an appearance every now and then, but wait staff primarily serves you. At the ultimate chef's table, the chef is at your service, presenting each dish while fully describing the ingredients, preparation and presentation, and often suggesting a beverage pairing. It takes a unique commitment by the restaurant, chef and kitchen staff to offer this attention to a small table when an entire dining room

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waits to be attended. But those who do chef's tables well have integrated them into the core of their service philosophy and heartily welcome guests into their kitchen.

To experience a classic chef's table close to home, book an evening at Hyeholde in Moon Township. When Barbara McKenna, whose father built Hyeholde, and her late husband, Quentin, repurchased the property in 1991, they committed to offering a chef's table like those experienced in their world travels. They designed a new kitchen with an area for daily produce delivery that transforms into a chef's table for the evening. When this new kitchen opened in 1994, they offered what is believed to be the first chef's table in Pittsburgh. Fifteen years later, and certainly not a fad, the chef's table is a favored tradition for many Hyeholde guests who return each year to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries.

Executive Chef Chris O'Brien and Barbara agree the chef's table is most exciting on busy nights, when guests can watch and interact with the chaos, logistical brilliance, attention to detail and hard work of a restaurant kitchen. It is available only when Chef Chris is working.

Hyeholde's chef's table accommodates up to 10 guests, but the ideal is six so all guests have full view of the kitchen. The cost is \$85 per person, drinks and pairings extra. The menu is designed specifically for each evening's guests, relying on local, seasonal ingredients, including vegetables and honey from Hyeholde's new garden and beehives.

An alumnus of Hyeholde, Derek Stevens, executive chef at Eleven Contemporary Kitchen in the Strip District, is no stranger to chef's tables. He worked at Hyeholde during the



make the most of your chef's table experience

Plan ahead. Make reservations at least 48 hours in advance. This allows the chef adequate time to accommodate special requests or dietary restrictions and creatively design the menu for your evening.

Don't be rushed. An evening at a chef's table will take time – on average three hours, sometimes longer. Relax, enjoy and savor the magic.

Trust the chef. Turn your evening's menu completely over to the chef and his/her staff. When you allow them creative freedom, they will guide you through a dining experience to exceed all others.

Engage with the kitchen. You will have the chef's attention, but to make the most of the experience, visit with the sous-chef, line and prep cooks and the rest of the kitchen staff. You will gain an appreciation for the hard work and dedication of those in the culinary industry and you may even learn a few things to take back to your own kitchen.

Be a polite guest. They strive to be gracious hosts and you are in the heart of their establishment, so be courteous, attentive, and mindful that you are in a busy workspace. Engage with the chefs and cooks, but be careful of hot surfaces, sharp implements and fast-moving staff.

Tip the service. You may not be in the dining room, but tipping for service is no exception at a chef's table. A chef's table adds extra work for both the chef and the entire kitchen. At Hyeholde, tips from the chef's table allow the chefs to travel to restaurants around the country in search of new ingredients, menu ideas and techniques.

kitchen's transformation and was there for the first chef's table. Admitting that he became a chef because he "loves to play with food," Derek brings an enthusiastic approach to the chef's table at Eleven, where the open kitchen offers a slightly different, some might say contemporary, experience. A part of the original design, Eleven's chef's table is a cozy, round booth accommodating up to six guests and situated right next to the kitchen with a full view of the line. While guests don't usually get up and converse with the kitchen staff, Chef Derek says such interest and inquiries would be relished.

As expected, Chef Derek is personally involved with planning and preparing each chef's table menu and presents each course to the table.

Local, seasonal ingredients are at the heart of the offerings. The chef's table at Eleven is \$100 per person, with beverage pairings starting at \$45. Special requests are welcome. The most memorable so far was a James Bond-inspired meal, but Chef Derek says he's waiting to be challenged to serve an all-vegan chef's table.

So if you love to eat, are willing to be guided through a culinary adventure, are curious to see the action and artistry of a restaurant kitchen and seek a meal out of the ordinary, book an evening at chef's table. It will be an experience like no other. •