



Gage of Grandeur

Text by Lyssa Myska Allen

Much has been written about the esteemed Gage Hotel because of its checkered 80-year history. But who knew that one man, who last helmed a restaurant in tiny Buda, Texas, just south of Austin, could create a menu that might surpass even the Gage's historic grandeur?

Chef Paul Petersen is that man, and luckily for dirt-deviled, road-weary travelers to West Texas, Café Cenizo at the Gage Hotel in Marathon sets a perfect stage for his culinary masterpieces. He speaks of each dish with the kind of intimate knowledge of food that even some farmers don't have. "There's a big difference between homegrown and store-bought, and when we're doing heirloom tomatoes, those things might not be the prettiest things in the world when they come off the vine—though I think they are—they're meant to taste like a tomato."

Don't let on that you can't tell the difference. Because when it comes down to it, a walk through the newly-opened Gage Gardens, where those babies are grown, is just as sweet. There are seven and a half acres of gardens on the grounds, with a nine-hole putting green, pond, orchard, vineyard, and a garden with fresh veggies and herbs growing in abundance. Petersen and the main gardener work together to decide what to grow in the garden, so the chef can use fresh ingredients in his seasonal dishes.

Petersen strives to make every dish seasonal. "I do a chicken liver dish that people go insane for," he says. "The main ingredients inside change throughout the season. For instance, for summer it will have cherry tomatoes and spinach ... it's very decadent, we pan sear the livers, throw in roasted garlic, bacon, tomatoes and spinach, glaze it with white wine, hit it with a little cream, little bit of butter, reduce it, all in one pan, then serve it over grilled bread, and then melt cheese on top of it, so it's very decadent." Don't try that at home, folks. He continues, "In the winter we'll go with red peppers and maybe some Prosciutto and roasted garlic, things like that."

Things like that indeed. Petersen honed his craft at the Culinary Institute of America in New York City, where there's an emphasis on the French technique of cooking. "I came in and put a little

Above The iconic front of the Gage Hotel.

Below One of the hotel guest rooms, with authentic period decor.





Travelers get stamina for the desert from desserts like Café Cenizo's double chocolate bread pudding.

French twist on everything." While he is technique-driven, he says, "I cook very French, but I don't call anything by French names, you know, that would scare people off." He also focuses on freshness, saying "I'm a firm believer in just using the best ingredients you can find and letting them speak for themselves. A lot of my dishes don't have more than seven ingredients in them."

But Petersen balks at the notion that his cuisine is somehow simple. He claims to "do some crazy things every now and then," and points to his Thanksgiving buffet as an example. "I stick pretty much to the classics, but I put severe twists on them. I love to make my own cranberry sauce, and instead of using orange juice like most people, I use red wine. And spike it with cinnamon and brown sugar, instead of regular sugar." He goes on to say, "Thanksgiving is one of my favorite days to cook on. I like fall a lot, it gives me a chance to make things a little more decadent, a little more hardy."



Above The man who single-handedly revamped Café Cenizo at the Gage

Below The casitas and garden rooms boast living areas for escaping the West Texas heat—or cold



One of Petersen's major goals at Café Cenizo was to completely revamp the wine list. "Y'all, this is embarrassing!" he said when he first arrived and saw that the wine list was almost all Californian. So he called upon some smaller wine distributors and started dropping the "big boys" off the list, replacing them with "more eclectic bottles that you don't find on store shelves." He admits, "Central Market and Whole Foods make that hard to do!" His primary goal is to educate patrons, and he feels fairly confident about his progress toward that goal. "We have a pretty cool wine list now," he says. He serves as his house wine varieties from Fall Creek, the winery owned by good friends Ed and Susan Auler (see our Q&A with the Aulers on page 112).

As much as he's done for The Gage, the notoriety of the hotel has certainly done a bit for Petersen by way of helping him garner national attention. In October, *Esquire* magazine named him No. 34 on their *Esquire* 100 List, the magazine's annual list of emerging ideas, trends, discoveries, products and people, saying, "he's single-handedly reviving New Texas cuisine."

"It's pretty wild," Petersen says, "out in the middle of nowhere, hitting *Esquire* magazine." Though the Gage is in Marathon, Petersen lives with his wife and 2-year-old daughter in Alpine, 30 miles away. "I love it," Peterson says of living in remote West Texas, "It's beautiful out here, it's just different. I went from San Antonio to New York City to Austin to Marathon. Culture shock all the way around!"

Of course, culture shock is often why travelers come to the Gage. They want to experience the Old West—but in luxurious style. Each of the Gage's hotel rooms is casually appointed with animal skins and blankets to preserve the charm of the old days. Some rooms share a community bathroom. Others function as casitas, with full kitchens and multiple bedrooms. Many of the individual houses have porches that open out into the Gage Gardens, or that look over the swimming pool. And the Desert Moon Spa offers rejuvenating treatments for sun-drenched guests.

Sun-drenched and stuffed guests, that is, who can't stop raving about Café Cenizo's cuisine. "I've elevated food quality by at least 85 percent," Petersen says. "Quality is number one. It is a fine dining restaurant." And that's why the Gage Hotel brought him here, to revamp food, wine, and service. "I have met my goals," Petersen says confidently. Perhaps even exceeded them?

From the beautifully-presented double chocolate bread pudding with warm vanilla bean cream to elk medallions served medium rare with a potato gratin that Petersen describes as "out of this world," the new menu at Café Cenizo is delectable, if not downright heavenly. But Petersen works hard to make it that way: "That gratin takes at least an hour and a half to make. It's made with love. And it's pretty serious."

Passionate and serious, Executive Chef Paul Petersen is many things: excited, enthusiastic foodie, classically trained chef, self-taught wine connoisseur, and seasoned restaurant owner. Moreover, he may well be the best thing to come to Marathon, Texas, since, well, the Gage Hotel itself. ^{TH&L}



Ancho Glazed Texas Quail

with honey roasted pear salad, smoked onion vinaigrette and fried quail egg

Serves: 4

4 semi-boneless quail from Texas
4 quail eggs
2 tablespoons olive oil
teaspoon each salt and pepper

Glaze:

2 tablespoons unsalted butter (softened)
2 tablespoons honey
1 tablespoon ancho chili powder
1 tablespoon dark chili powder

Pears:

2 Crimson pears (large dice)
2 tablespoons honey
2 tablespoons olive oil
teaspoon each salt and pepper

Vinaigrette:

2 small red onions (peeled and cut in half)
1 tablespoon Dijon mustard
2 tablespoons brown sugar
2 tablespoons red wine vinegar
¾ cup olive oil
teaspoon each salt and pepper

Garnish:

2 cups spring mix

For the Vinaigrette:

Season onions with olive oil and a little salt and pepper and smoke at 250° for about 40 minutes or until soft and nicely colored then let cool. Place onions and all other vinaigrette ingredients in food processor and blend until smooth. Reserve for plating.

For the Pears:

Heat medium sauté pan on medium high heat. Add olive oil and heat until just slightly smoking. Add in pears and season with a little salt and pepper and toss around, sauté for one minute and add 2 tablespoons honey and cook until honey bubbles, take off heat and transfer to a bowl. Reserve for plating.

For Quail and Glaze:

Season quail with a little salt and pepper and olive oil and place at an angle on a hot grill for 2 minutes. In a small mixing bowl mix the glaze ingredients until smooth and completely incorporated. Move quail to the other angle so you achieve nice restaurant grill marks and grill for another two minutes. Flip quail and spoon a little glaze on each, then grill for another two to four minutes. Pull quail off grill and reserve for plating.

To Plate:

Heat small nonstick pan on medium heat and add a little olive oil. Add quail eggs and cook sunny side up until done. Don't let the eggs touch because they become hard to get out of pan. In center of plate, place a half cup of spring mix and top that with some of the pears. Place the quail. Place a grilled pear on top of that. Drizzle some of the vinaigrette around the empty space close to the rim and then top quail with the fried egg. Enjoy!

Salsa Sensation!

Paul Petersen's work is never done. He's introducing a line of salsas bottled under the Gage Hotel label. There will be red salsa, green salsa, and barbecue sauce, each made with all-natural ingredients. Two of the salsas made an appearance at the late-summer Hot Sauce Festival in Austin, while they all will make their retail debut in November. Petersen proclaims the labels "awesome!" but would only hint at their look: "like something you've never seen before! There's rattlesnakes, skeletons and flaming chili peppers ... how's that?" Sounds hot.

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