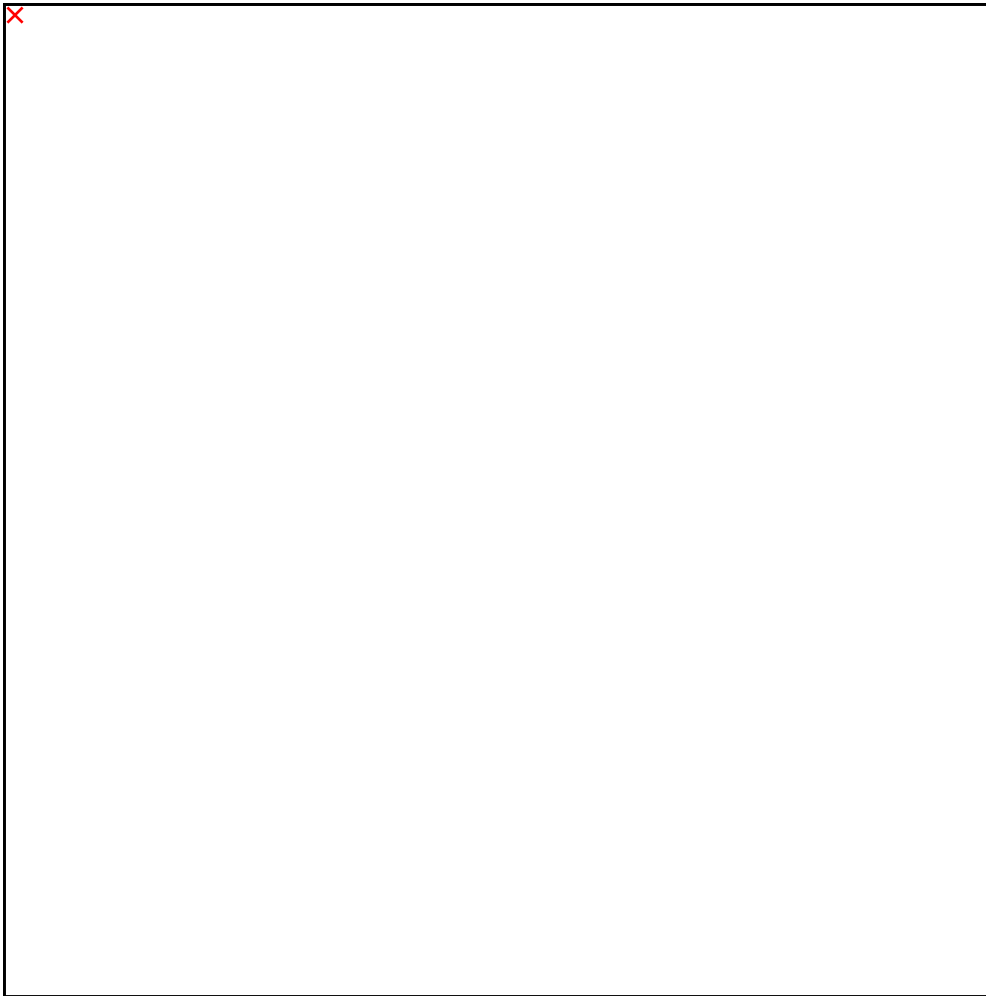


Benchmark Partners with Acclaimed Chef Stephan Pyles To Create Ground-Breaking Culinary Program

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The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, March 30, 2017 ... BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company, has announced a far-reaching new partnership with internationally acclaimed Chef Stephan Pyles that will inform every aspect of the company's food and beverage program. The comprehensive and ambitious plan will bring new levels of culinary innovation to BENCHMARK and the 70 luxury properties under its Benchmark Resorts & Hotels and Gemstone Collection brands. Chef, cookbook author, philanthropist, educator and visionary, Chef Stephan Pyles is uniquely qualified to lead this groundbreaking new initiative. The trend-setting chef has been at the forefront of a renaissance in American cooking, pioneering New American Cuisine and celebrated as one of the founding fathers of the hugely popular Modern Southwestern Cuisine. He is a James Beard semi-finalist this year for Best New Restaurant for Flora Street Café in Dallas, one of a myriad of awards the acclaimed restaurant has garnered this year, including Best New Restaurant in Texas by Texas Monthly. Working closely with Benchmark's chefs, Home Office executives, and general managers, Pyles will create and launch innovative programs in food and beverage recruitment, restaurant design concepts, culinary training, research, menu development, operations, marketing and branding. Long-term plans for the partnership include the creation of a Culinary Academy to be located at one of Benchmark's culinary-focused resorts.

Designed to address the complex, challenging and constantly changing issues of the hospitality industry's food and beverage and fine dining services and to personalize the guest experience at each Benchmark property, the new partnership was developed in response to requests from Benchmark's general managers, chefs and Home Office executive team. They saw the need to bring hotel food and beverage services to the level of highly successful independent restaurants. Chef Pyles' new initiatives will create innovative, free-standing hotel restaurants that will reflect the best of regional and local ingredients and culinary styles, offering top quality dining experiences, superior design and exceptional cuisine. The new

restaurants will be designed to appeal to local audiences first, providing an authentic local dining experience for both local patrons and hotel guests.

Chefs and hoteliers also cited the importance of closely following new trends that will inform and impact culinary preferences in every aspect of a hotel's food and beverage product. Says Chef Pyles, "The scope of this new initiative is international and must address a growing variety of consumer demands. Our guests are far more conscious of wellness, environmental issues, animal welfare and the origins of the food they consume." Chef Pyles also notes that hoteliers must meet a clear demand for quality and innovation on every level, from a corporate event to a room service breakfast. "We have set the bar very high with this new initiative that will be a revolutionary and strategically planned transformation of the way Benchmark Resorts & Hotels- and the Gemstone Collection-brand properties plan, operate and deliver their food and beverage services."

Benchmark's CEO Alex Cabañas notes that the new partnership will bring benefits well beyond increased food and beverage revenues and new business for the expanding company. "This concept will also enhance our recruitment efforts, assist our culinary staff in developing their skills and careers, build staff loyalty and provide increased benefits to ownership," Cabañas says. "Most important, we are addressing complex and diverse issues in a proactive, comprehensive and far-sighted way that differentiates us from our competitors. Our collaboration with Chef Pyles will have a positive, long-term impact on our business and provide the resources we need to bring our food and beverage product to new and outstanding guest experience levels."

Benchmark has long been in the vanguard of culinary innovation, introducing new food and beverage concepts at its hotels and resorts, and significantly raising the bar for group dining at its conference centers. The company is a proud partner with the acclaimed James Beard Foundation in New York City. For more than a decade, Benchmark's top chefs have been invited annually to create spectacular dinners at The James Beard House, often launching the holiday season with these remarkable dinners. Benchmark has also established a culinary scholarship to benefit young culinarians in partnership with the James Beard Foundation, named for Bob Zappatelli, the company's first and uniquely gifted vice president food & beverage. Chef Stephan Pyles has a long-term relationship with the James Beard Foundation as well, and was the first person in the Southwest to win a James Beard Award for Best Chef.

Chef Stephan Pyles

A fifth-generation Texan, Stephan Pyles brought his vision, skill and knowledge of Southwestern cooking to become one of the originators of Modern Southwestern Cuisine. The movement brought new flavors, sophistication and techniques to the American culinary scene, not only in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona, but nationwide. The technical innovations, such as smoking and grilling and the use of ingredients such as chiles and other Mexican staples, helped put American Cuisine on the path to big, bold flavors that are so representative today.

The Modern Southwestern Cuisine movement forged several acclaimed restaurants, including Pyles' first Dallas restaurants. His creative dishes blend elements of Southern home-style cooking, Southwestern fare, Mexican and Tex-Mex food, as well as Cajun cuisine and Creole cookery. He has authored four highly successful cookbooks and hosted two seasons of the Emmy Award-Winning PBS series *New Tastes from Texas*.

After selling his restaurants in Dallas, Las Vegas and Austin, Pyles took a five-year sabbatical that let him study, write and teach in Latin America, the Eastern Mediterranean, Spain and India. These countries and their diverse cuisines have left a lasting impression on his style of cooking and have inspired several of his current Dallas restaurants.

Pyles was the first person in the Southwest to win a James Beard Award for Best Chef and the first Texan inducted into the James Beard Foundation's Who's Who of Food and Wine in America. He has been named Chef of the Year by *The Dallas Morning News* and *Esquire Magazine*. Chef Pyles was cuisine consultant to American Airlines for 22 years and has consulted for the Dallas Museum of Art, as well as numerous hotels and resorts. Pyles will be the 2017 inductee into the Nation's Restaurant News Menu-masters Hall of Fame and is a James Beard semi-finalist this year for Best New Restaurant for Flora Street Café in Dallas. Flora Street Café was recently named Best New Restaurant in Texas by *Texas Monthly* and earlier this year was named Restaurant of the Year by *The Dallas Morning News*, *D Magazine*, and *Dallas Voice* and "Most Stunning Restaurant of the Year" by *Eater*.

A tireless philanthropist, Pyles is a founding board member of Share Our Strength, an international hunger relief organization, and received its Humanitarian of the Year award. He is a life board member of the North Texas Food Bank and founded The Hunger Link, Dallas' perishable food program. Chef Pyles has given over \$250,000 in culinary scholarships.

About BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company.

BENCHMARK®, a global hospitality company, is a trailblazer in the development, management, marketing and owner-advisory services of resorts, hotels, conference centers and exclusive private clubs. In addition to the company's iconic Benchmark Resorts & Hotels portfolio, the Gemstone Collection is a distinctive luxury portfolio of independent hotels & resorts in highly preferred destinations.

BENCHMARK'S distinguished and proven reputation is deeply-rooted in core values that are focused and aligned with exceeding ownership and stakeholder performance expectations. The combined portfolios feature nearly 70 unique and distinctive properties domestically and internationally. The company leadership and valued employees are passionately committed to delivering the industry's most authentic, enchanted, soulful, vibrant, unrivaled and memory-making experience. BENCHMARK'S progressive "Be The Difference" culture and values are a cornerstone to the company's nearly 40 years of extraordinary achievement and prosperity. Many properties have been recognized with the Benchmark Conference Centers® mark of meeting excellence. BENCHMARK, a global hospitality company, is based in The Woodlands (Houston), Texas, and has regional offices in Park City, Utah; Miami, Florida; New Brunswick, New Jersey; Seattle Washington; and Tokyo, Japan.

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