



The Fab FIVE

Colorado's Chef-Driven Culinary Group Launches Its 6th Season

By Brian Melton

It feels like a high school reunion. Four chefs, one beverage director and the members of Leigh Sullivan Enterprises—a hospitality consulting company located in Denver, Colorado—are packed into a conference room in the Taxi development near downtown. The meet and greet between Denver's top chefs is hush-hush, but the mood in the room is jovial and relaxed.

The door to the conference room opens. It's chef number five, Sean Yontz, who apparently had a hard time finding the building. "Sorry guys, I got lost," he says.

Chef Matt Selby, one of Denver's most-notable chefs, stands and the two embrace. "It's good to see you man!"

And that's how the rest of the meeting goes—courteous and convivial—the personalities who make up the 6th season of FIVE have more than earned the right to be here. These are chefs who have spent time in the same kitchens, training the same culinary school dropouts, working the same charity events. There is no weak-link in the bunch, and the mood reflects that.

Over the next year, this newly formed band of brothers will make up FIVE™, a chef-driven culinary group whose purpose is to help put Colorado cuisine on the national culinary map. Singularly, these chefs are at the top of the culinary scene and have reached career heights that few ever see. As a team however, they bring attention to a thriving Colorado culinary environment that has built its reputation on hard work, dedication, creativity, and teamwork.

But what, exactly, is FIVE? Where did it come from? What does it do? And what would it take to get five of the brightest minds in Colorado's culinary scene to commit to a year-long collaborative cooking effort?

The answer lies in one powerhouse woman.

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The Origins of FIVE

The story Leigh Sullivan tells goes something like this.

“It was at Vesta Dipping Grill in 2007 when what I call my ‘Jan Brady’ moment happened. Troy (Guard) and I had just left the Sullivan Restaurant Group and were waiting for the pieces to fall into place so that we could open TAG on Larimer Square. Troy, Matty (Selby), Tyler (Wiard), and Goose (Sorenson) were cooking together at the Vesta Dipping Grill 10th Anniversary Party. I was just sitting at a stainless steel counter in the corner of the kitchen, watching these amazing chefs cook.

“But it wasn’t just cooking that made me think there was something special between these guys. It was the laughing and the joking and the shit-talking that went along with every sear. They were just so comfortable together that I had this crazy idea.”

That crazy idea would become the foundation of FIVE. Sullivan, a third-generation Coloradan, grew up in Golden and attended Colorado State. In 2004, when her father, Denver real-estate developer Jim Sullivan, opened Mao Asian Bistro and Sushi Lounge in Cherry Creek North, Leigh came on-board to help him manage the marketing of his growing restaurant group. By the time the Sullivan Restaurant Group opened Nine75 in 2006, Leigh Sullivan had become a force in the Denver dining scene.

“While we were opening TAG, we took the opportunity to travel all over the world and what I kept discovering was that we have some of the best restaurants right here in our own backyard,” Sullivan says. “But no one was talking about the Denver dining scene. So I started calling the James Beard House in New York about hosting a dinner and after my third phone call I think they started to figure out I wasn’t going to leave them alone. They finally said yes.”

“I’ve never met someone who could tell that woman no,” Jonathan Greschler, the first sommelier to be included in the FIVE team, says. “I’ve sure never been able to do it.”

But before Sullivan could head to New York for the dinner, she would have to convince five chefs to set aside time in their busy schedules to participate. At a potluck dinner at Sullivan’s house, the attendees were going to become the inaugural FIVE chefs: Tyler Wiard of Elway’s Cherry Creek, Matt Selby of Vesta Dipping Grill, Goose Sorensen of Solera, and Troy Guard, who was soon open TAG. The fifth member, Keegan Gerhard of D Bar, had yet to move to Denver, but was on his way.

“I remember asking them, ‘Do you trust me?’ which was bananas because I had never worked with anyone except Troy. But by the end of the evening I had them all convinced we could do this. That was crazy, but in May of 2008 we hopped onto a plane and were headed to New York.”

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Chef Selection

“The first round of chefs were this band of misfit brothers who were doing some of the most innovative food in the city at the time,” Sullivan says. “There wasn’t any sort of selection process. These guys were just my guys.”

The initial agreement with the James Beard House was to bring five different chefs to New York every year. But with momentum, and the replacement of Sorensen with Jamey Fader after the first FIVE season, Sullivan decided to keep the other four around for another year.

“We were building something special,” she reflects. “I didn’t want to stop our momentum, so I kept everyone around.”

The gamble certainly paid off. The second year included the addition of the FIVE @ Five series—five dinners throughout the year where each chef invites the other four chefs in for a culinary event—appearances at Denver Food & Wine and the Cherry Creek Arts Festival and repeated invites to the *Food & Wine* Classic in Aspen.

Although during the first year, money for the project was scarce, sponsors have grown along with the schedule: Shamrock Foods, Seattle Fish Company, Southern Wine & Spirits, On-Call Restaurant Accounting, and Roth Distributing are just a few of the companies that have bought into the promise FIVE brings to the Colorado culinary community.

“My favorite thing about FIVE is that we never took ourselves too seriously, even though we always take what we do seriously,” Selby says. “Ultimately, I love that every event we ever did together culminated in mischief, property damage, giant laughs, and good-natured fun.”

6th Year

“If you would have told me six years ago that I would still be doing this, I would have told you that you were crazy,” Sullivan says. “But here we are, with a talented new crop of chefs, an amazing beverage director, our own in-house management company, and a schedule filled with appearances at some of the biggest culinary events of the year. We work with the best chefs and support some great charities. It really is a dream come true.”

The 6th Season will kick off at El Diablo, and will continue through the months leading up to the James Beard appearance in New York City on September 12th. With the front-of-house leadership of beverage director Jonathan Greschler and the alumni program that ensures the past FIVE chefs can be involved whenever the occasion arises, FIVE is poised to present a new level of Colorado cuisine that few outside of the state have seen.

This year's roster includes a dream team of Colorado's celebrity chefs and rising stars. Sean Yontz is a Denver industry staple who has helmed some of the most respected kitchens in the scene. Kevin Morrison's Pinche Tacos has won national acclaim, but the talented chef is an Italian boy by heart. Chef Ian Kleinman is molecular gastronomy at its best, creating new ways to entertain with and enjoy food from his lab called The Inventing Room. Jorel Pierce is easily one of Denver's rising stars, setting new standards for pub food at Euclid Hall. And finally, there's Chef Matt Selby, a previous FIVE™ chef, whose new restaurant, Corner House, was named to Eater's Top 40 Most Anticipated Restaurants in the country.

For every event that FIVE holds throughout the year, a portion of the proceeds go back to local non-profits. FIVE chefs also work with ProStart, a high school mentorship program established by the Colorado Restaurant Association. Throughout the summer, FIVE will be involved with a multitude of charitable organizations, including the Escoffier School of Culinary Arts, Project Angel Heart, the Crohn's & Colitis Foundation of America, and others throughout the metro area. It's just one of many ways FIVE is making an impact in the state of Colorado.

"That's what this group has always been about. It's that brotherhood and community for me," Fader explains. "There are too many single memories to recount, but it was never the moments for me. It's the teamwork and common goal of shedding light on the amazing things going on in this wonderful city that makes me proud to be a member of FIVE."