

Aimee Olexy on Local Food, Hospitality and Her Newest Restaurant With Stephen Starr

INSIDE THE TALULA'S TABLE STAR'S FIRST RESTAURANT IN SEVERAL
YEARS

Credit: Neal Santos.

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Ask Aimee Olexy to describe **The Love**, her newest collaboration with restaurateur Stephen Starr, and you won't hear the usual specs like cuisine, design and seating capacity.

Rather, you'll get vague statements from Olexy like: "It will become what people want it to become and what the staff make it, and the menu will travel wherever it wants to land."

But there's a method behind the Philadelphia restaurateur's romantic notion of a customer and staff directed restaurant, as evidenced by the success of **Talula's Table**, her famously hard to book Kennett Square BYOB, **Talula's Garden**, the elegant Washington Square farm-to-table and **Talula's Daily**, the casual cafe/supper club next door. Like her other kitchens, The Love is intended to address what Olexy sees as an unmet need in a given area and to build community through food.



Aimee Olexy

In this case, Olexy was drawn to the former Serafina's location at the corner of 18th and Sansom because she felt the neighborhood lacked a refuge from the hustle and bustle of Rittenhouse. "When I'm in that area I'd just like to get in somewhere that's cozy," she says.

The itch to open a new spot developed when some of Olexy's longtime staff seemed ready for a new challenge, and her farm suppliers had more product than she could use.

Having Starr, who took home the 2017 James Beard Award for Restaurateur of the Year, in her orbit was also a driving factor. "He's a progressive business person, so there are always ideas," explains Olexy. The two have worked together on several projects, including Talula's Garden and Talula's Daily; The Love is the 34th restaurant in Starr's empire.



Inside The Love's dining room

Midway between the casual all-day cafe vibe of Talula's Daily and the high-end tasting menu at Talula's Table, Olexy intends for The Love to be "a new neighborhood restaurant," with a humble environment along the lines of the old-school taverns she grew up with, but with a significantly better culinary program.

The name reflects Olexy's laser focus on hospitality, the extra care put into her dishes and the idea of a restaurant as an extension of inviting friends into your home — the reason why she thrives in the industry.

"It's certainly not for like the money or the quality of life," says Olexy. "I do it for the love, the hospitality and to get inside of that moment where you feel like you made a nice time for people."

As for the food and design, Olexy is quick to stress that The Love is not breaking any ground, but focused on comfort. While working with Roman and Williams, the firm behind Starr's New York stunners **Le Coucou** and **Upland**, she insisted on using everyday materials like wood, rattan, wicker and linen. "Nothing is challenging the sensory experience," she says.



Ricotta ravioli with butternut squash sauce, rosemary and hazelnuts

Similarly, if you've been to Olexy's other spots, there are no big surprises on the menu here. "Seasonal, local cooking and handmade foods is the fabric of what we do," she says.

The menu is a collaborative effort among Olexy, chef Joshua Tomaszewski (ex [A Voce](#)), Charlie Parker (who oversees the kitchens at The Love, The Garden and The Daily), and pastry chef Olivia Portelli (Talula's Garden). Olexy also sought input from the staff as a whole. "I did a lot of staff consortiums, and a lot of their ideas are on the menu," she says.

Count on the stellar cheese boards Olexy is known for, plus a deliberate effort to use cheese as a building flavor in many dishes. "It's one of those things I think people are still behind the times on" she says. Salads are key, as well as "simply prepared proteins" like a whole roast smoked trout with pecans.

Olexy explained that because many of her guests are talented cooks, having "handmade" dishes like pastas and pierogi — something they might not have time to prepare at home— is essential.



Crudite on the menu is called "Eat Your Vegetables"

Desserts include luscious ice creams with unusual flavors, like genmaicha, plus a nostalgic cookie plate inspired by Junior League cookbooks.

But don't get too attached to any particular dish. As Olexy and her team hone in on The Love's style they will almost definitely rip up the menu and start anew. "For me everything is a work in progress," she says.

To create what she calls a beverage-forward restaurant, Olexy worked with sommelier Alexandra Cherniavsky (Talula's Garden, Garces Group) on a wine list aimed at bottles, rather than individual glasses. They're also bringing back retro drinks like hot buttered rum and Irish coffee.



The cookie plate inspired by vintage Junior League cookbooks

A key component to the bar program is the soon-to-open second-floor salon with a long country table, collection of vintage games, sofas and a bar. It will serve as an overflow area for the compact bar downstairs, a private event space and a venue for happy hours with free food, classes and community events. “I want it to feel like you’re hanging out at the best loft apartment, where you’d sit at a table and drink, have fun, maybe a snack,” says Olexy.

While the price points at The Love might not scream neighborhood restaurant, especially outside of Rittenhouse, Olexy says guests should feel comfortable ordering whatever they’re in the mood for, whether it’s a full dinner, or a glass of wine and a salad.

“We want The Love to be whatever you want to make it,” she says.

130 S. 18th St., Philadelphia; 215-433-1555; Sunday through Thursday, 5–10 PM; Friday through Saturday, 5–11 PM; Brunch and lunch will follow at a later date.

All images courtesy of Neal Santos



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THE LOVE.

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ZAGAT RATED

4.5 ★★★★★ (43)

Refined neighborhood destination from Aimee Olexy & Stephen Starr featuring seasonal American fare

TALULA'S TABLE

Cafe · \$\$\$

FOOD 4.6

4.5 ★★★★★ (85)

Year-ahead reservations are required at this tiny BYOB with a farm-fresh, multicourse tasting menu.

TALULA'S GARDEN

American · Washington Square West · \$\$\$

FOOD 4.7

4.6 ★★★★★ (409)

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TALULA'S DAILY

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FOOD 4.3



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