

The Austin Chronicle



first_plates

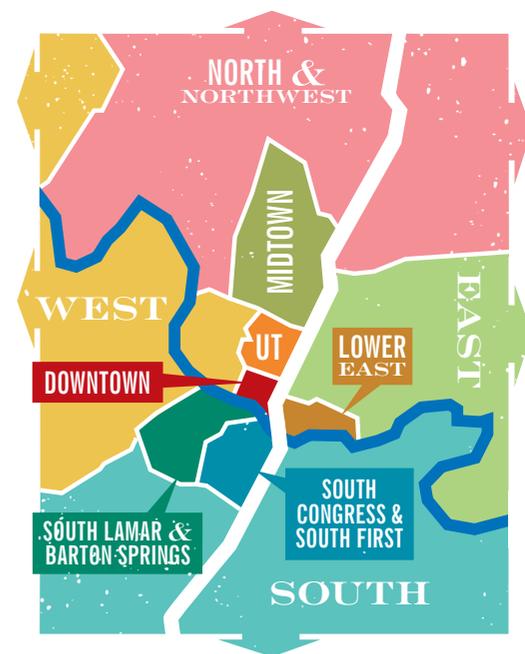
2016



THE AUSTIN CHRONICLE'S FIRST PLATES

100 RESTAURANTS

DEFINING AUSTIN DINING NOW



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There were times during the last year where the Austin restaurant scene felt like a giant, iridescent soap bubble. Good restaurants, some sure to make it onto our First Plates list, were closing at an unprecedented rate. It seemed like I was always mentally reorganizing my Top 10 list as first Congress and laV, and then Gardner closed. It was scary for a while. It seemed like everything was about to pop.

Turns out those fears were for nothing. The men and women who drive Austin's hospitality industry are too passionate, too driven, and too talented for that to happen. Our dining culture isn't deflating; it's just changing. We are developing our own vernacular – casual like the city – that shows in our commitment to local farms and ranches, the warmth of our service, and even the relaxed elegance of where we choose to put fork to mouth. An influx of out-of-towners are rushing to experience what we have, but that doesn't dilute our commitment to keeping it local. It just makes sure that the definition of local is always dynamic – now moving well beyond our city limits. Now you can find great food in Cedar Park, Round Rock, and the surrounding Hill Country, and we have expanded our map to reflect that. We might have taken a few liberties with what is “west” or “north,” but we wanted to recognize that local cuisine is not defined by borders.

This issue, as always, was a team effort. The difficult task of coming up with the definitive 100 was handled with aplomb by Dan Gentile, Eric Puga, Amira Jensen*, Adrienne Whitehorse, Jessi Cape, Rachel Feit, Melody Fury, and Emily Beyda – all talented food and beverage writers that I am honored to get to work with. I am equally honored to work with our proofing team – Danielle White,

Kat McNeivins, Joe Mayfield, and Whitehorse – who made short work out of a mountain of copy. Thanks also to Virginia B. Wood, the namesake of our inaugural Hall of Fame. Although retired, her spirit and vision will always be a part of the *Chronicle* Food section.

The look of First Plates was a team effort, too. Creative director Jason Stout, production manager Chris Linnen, and graphic designers Zeke Barbaro and Carrie Lewis outdid themselves this year. Kudos to John Anderson, our ever-capable staff photographer, who worked double-time capturing this year's new crop of restaurants. Frequent *Chronicle* contributor Sandy Carson is responsible for shooting our charming cover. Thank you to Sarah Jacober, the staff of Geraldine's, and especially LeeAnn Kahlor, Dave Junker, and their lovely family for making our two cover ideas a reality.

Behind the scenes, marketing director Sarah Wolf and digital coordinator Tamar Price were essential to making First Plates a success. And you might notice also that this issue coincides with the launch of a brand-new restaurant guide – the patient work of web director Brian Barry. Lastly, thank you to Austin's food community – the restaurateurs, front-of-house professionals, chefs, writers, and diners who leave ego behind to build something that feels less like a scene and more like a family. I have never been prouder to be a part of it.

– Brandon Watson

**Full disclosure: Jensen started working for New Waterloo, the hospitality company behind a few winners, after joining our First Plates crew. She recused herself from writing about/nominating any New Waterloo restaurants.*

BRANDON WATSON'S TOP 10



- 1) Apis Restaurant & Apiary**
- 2) Emmer & Rye**
- 3) Olamaie**
- 4) Odd Duck**
- 5) Lenoir**
- 6) Franklin Barbecue**
- 7) Barley Swine**
- 8) Juniper**
- 9) Via 313**
- 10) Dai Due**

ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN ANDERSON UNLESS NOTED

VIRGINIA B. WOOD HALL OF FAME

While working on First Plates last year, sorely missed *Chronicle* editor and writer Virginia B. Wood, who retired earlier this year, suggested a category devoted to the classic restaurants that continue to make their mark in an ever-crowded market. I didn't have time to enact her idea last year, but – as usual – she was absolutely right. We did need a mechanism to honor those restaurants that have not only stood the test of time, but continue to set the bar for the entire culinary scene. By being inducted into the inaugural class of the Virginia B. Wood Hall of Fame, the five restaurants named below will be retired from First Plates in recognition that they don't just define Austin dining now; they define Austin dining always – just like the irreplaceable woman in whose name they are honored.

– Brandon Watson



FONDA SAN MIGUEL

2330 W. North Loop, 512/459-4121
www.fondasanmiguel.com

Serving regional Mexican cuisine since 1975, Fonda San Miguel is as much of an Austin icon as it is a great happy hour spot. The walls of the expansive hacienda-style space showcase a fine gallery of Mexican art, and the dishes served are equally remarkable. Do not visit without ordering a ceviche and house margarita.

VESPAIO

1610 S. Congress, 512/441-7672
www.austinvespaio.com

A SoCo staple from before it was called SoCo, the elegant eatery takes its name from the buzzing dining room. It's classic Italian, with walls of wine, in-house butchery, a long list of house-made delights, and thoughtfully sourced ingredients. We love the calamari fritti arrabbiata, Scampi con Salsa all'Aglio, and the Sicilian cheesecake, so very much.

THREADGILL'S

6416 N. Lamar, 512/451-5440; www.threadgills.com

Calling Eddie Wilson's down-home restaurant an institution is an understatement. Generations of Austinites have downed a beer (or two) at Threadgill's while feasting on chicken-fried steaks that are as legendary as the musicians who performed there. The massive selection of sides still makes us hoot and holler.

ASTI

408-C E. 43rd, 512/451-1218
www.astiaustin.com

In 2001, *Chronicle* readers voted this Hyde Park mainstay the Best New Restaurant in our annual Restaurant Poll. Customers haven't stopped raving since. It's rare for a restaurant to have longevity over a more than 15-year span; it's rarer still when a restaurant still feels relevant.

CHINATOWN

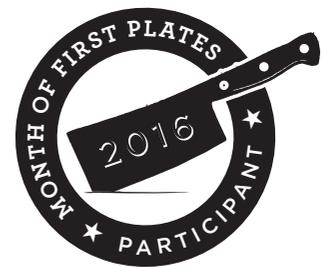
2712 Bee Caves Rd. #124, 512/328-6588
www.austinchinatown.com

In 2013, after a couple of years of health problems, owner Ronald Cheng had an opportunity to reopen in the building where Chinatown started in 1983. He kept some of the former menu items, added some delicious new ones, and gave the whole place a new look – simultaneously reinvigorating his brand and cementing his Austin culinary legacy. Austin is full of restaurateurs. Cheng is a giant.

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DOWNTOWN



Geraldine's

THE DRISKILL GRILL

604 Brazos, 512/439-1234
www.driskillhotel.com

Suffering from quinoa fatigue? Get thee to the Driskill, where you can hide out in a dark wood-paneled room and have the sort of well-made, honest meal your grandfather would approve of: iceberg wedge salad and osso buco or a dry aged steak. And, of course there's crème brûlée for dessert.

EL NARANJO

85 Rainey, 512/474-2776
www.elnaranjorestaurant.com

With its emphasis on intricate spicing and sauces complex enough to rival French haute cuisine, Oaxacan food is one of the driving forces behind Mexican cuisine's recent designation as a UNESCO world heritage intangible resource. And El Naranjo, under the astute direction of chef Iliana de la Vega, is the best place in Austin to try it for yourself.

GERALDINE'S

605 Davis, 512/476-4755
www.geraldinesaustin.com

The name might sound like one of your grandmother's quilting bee partners, but there's nothing dusty about this fourth-floor showstopper. Featuring contemporary cuisine from chef Frank Mruk and pastry chef Callie Speer, and whimsical cocktails from beverage director Jennifer Keyser (plus local live music), this Geraldine is your guide to one of Austin's best nights on the town.

ITALIC

123 W. Sixth, 512/660-5390
www.italicaustin.com

Italic is the perfect neighborhood date night restaurant, with a menu of beautifully wrought Italian classics, and just enough original touches to keep things interesting. The slow-braised bolognese sets a new standard in carb-intensive comfort food.

COUNTER 3. FIVE. VII

315 Congress, 512/291-3327
www.counter3fivevii.com

Intimate and personal, Counter 3. Five. VII is the perfect spot for a date where you want to show off your restrained good taste, or a solo outing when you're in the mood to let someone else make the hard decisions. Just choose the three-, five-, or seven-course tasting menu, then sit back and enjoy.

BANGER'S SAUSAGE HOUSE & BEER GARDEN

79 Rainey, 512/386-1656
www.bangersaustin.com

The affable conviviality of this Rainey Street standby belies the seriousness of their sausage menu, which is as wide-ranging as it is delicious. And nothing goes better with a mimosa the size of your head than a plate of their biscuits smothered in outrageously creamy gravy.

WU CHOW

500 W. Fifth #168, 512/476-2469
www.wuchowaustin.com

Like Edie Sedgwick or Karlie Kloss, Wu Chow's Shanghai soup dumplings have been the muse for all sorts of artistic endeavors. Just last week, we rewrote *Hamilton* as a tribute to the tiny miracles. Maybe that was a bad idea, but when a place serves up Chinese food as delicious as Wu Chow's, it deserves a big production.

EMMER & RYE

51 Rainey #110, 512/366-5530
www.emmerandrye.com

You know those annoying text threads that pop up every weekend? Where one friend wants to get crazy on Rainey, another wants to keep it classy, and a third just wants to eat as much as possible? Emmer & Rye is here to save the day, with small bites, big plates, and roaming dim sum carts filled with one-off creations.

Emmer & Rye

SWIFT'S ATTIC

315 Congress #200, 512/482-8842
www.swiftsattic.com

Swift's Attic has one of the best happy hours in town, where you can wash down your smoked edamame and pop rocks with a couple of New Fashioneds. The menu here is elegant and playful, rife with unexpected pairings and bold flavors. It's the kind of place you should take a date to see if they have a good sense of humor.

FIXE

500 W. Fifth, 512/888-9133
www.austinfixe.com

Louisiana native chef James Robert plates up elevated, playful Southern eats. The team executes a fine balance between classics-done-well (like their famed biscuits) and outside-the-box concepts (like lobster & crawfish pot pie). The bar stirs up reimagined cocktails – the barrel-aged Manhattan with house-cured bacon is a showstopper. Whimsy carries into the eclectic space made up of a bright open kitchen and a chicken-coop-inspired dining room.

EASY TIGER

709 E. Sixth, 512/614-4972
www.easytigeraustin.com

With its relaxed beer garden vibes and extensive menu of smoked meats, Easy Tiger is the perfect refuge for grown adults dragged down to Sixth Street to see their friends' jam bands. A vat of their beer cheese and a couple of their well-balanced cocktails would put anyone in a good enough mood to listen to some white guy from IT do his best Bob Marley impression.



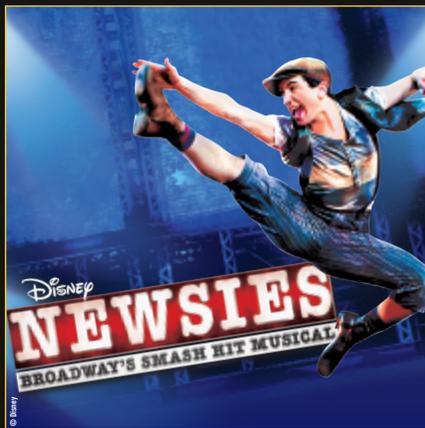


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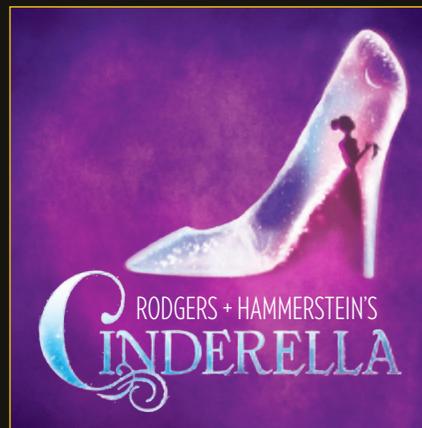
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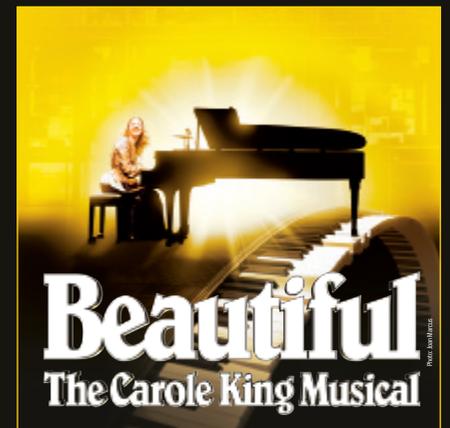
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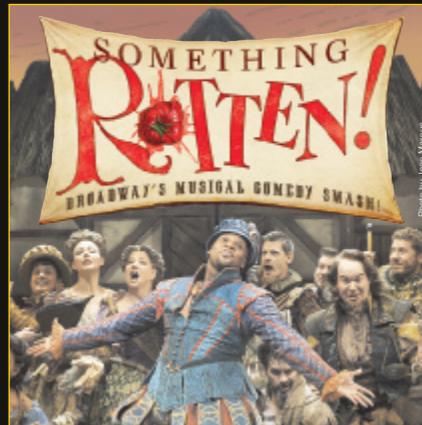
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Gardner

WALKING THE FINE-DINING LINE **HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH FOR AUSTIN DINERS?**

BY RACHEL FEIT

Ah, the fickle dining public! One minute we're all rushing out to sample the goods of the newest culinary luminary; fast-forward a year and we couldn't care less. Such seems to have been the ill fortune for a number of Austin's buzziest formal fine-dining emporia of late. The unceremonious shuttering of critics' darling laV on New Year's Day shocked staff and diners alike. Congress, Gardner, and Arro were also casualties of an industry that is so volatile these days even junk bond traders steer clear. The restaurants that remain on the field – Jeffrey's, Barley Swine, qui, Lenoir, and others – are continually experimenting with format, menus, service style, and promotional events to attract diners.

Yet here we are, destined to become, if the food industry's trend spotters are correct, America's next culinary hot spot.

Why is it then that so many of our more influential fine-dining establishments are having trouble making ends meet? Are these restaurants simply casualties of public ennui, or is it, as this paper's Food Editor Brandon Watson suggested earlier this year, that Austin palates are still not ready to embrace true culinary innovation? Or could it be that Austinites, quite literally, are no longer putting their money where their mouths are?

"I've speculated about that a lot," says Andrew Wiseheart about the former Gardner, the creative, vegetable-forward restaurant he co-owned with Ben Edgerton, which closed in March. "Were there too many formal fine-dining restaurants? Was it location, price point, timing, food, aesthetic? It had to be some combination of those things."

One thing is sure, any market researcher will tell you that as Austin densifies, it is also becoming more neighborhood-based. For starters, traffic is a bitch. Most folks would pick waterboarding over trying to drive from Allandale to East Austin at rush hour. Although both neighborhoods are well within the urban core and separated by less than eight miles, driving there on any given weeknight can take close to an hour. Apart from cycling – and who wants to show up to a formal restaurant dripping with sweat? – there are no better transportation options. This effectively decreases the pool of patrons a restaurant can attract. In economic terms, in order to stay in business, restaurants must rely on the repeat business of neighborhood regulars. And to attract regulars, restaurants must set their price point at a level that an average indi-

vidual or family can afford on more than just special occasions. So clearly cost is an issue, but probably not the only issue.

In the food industry, a combination of income, consumer tastes, and demographics drive demand. With respect to taste, I actually don't believe Austin diners are less foodie than in other big cities. Indeed the success of places like Odd Duck or Launderette suggest that Austin diners are not just interested in food innovation, but are willing to wait in long lines to get it. What makes these places different from, say, the former Congress or Gardner is that they come not just with a more accessible price tag, they also have a mix-and-match menu style, along with a more casual service style that appeals to a broad audience. Let's face it, who really wants to be tethered to a chair for a 10-course formal meal served by a gaggle of white-gloved waiters?

Approachability is the latest buzzword of the dining scene here; and it encapsulates everything from price to decor, and service. A report on Austin's food industry indicates that the local food scene is rapidly becoming an important element in the tourism sector. The strongest allure for outsiders, the report concludes, is the way that certain local restaurants reflect Austin's hip, indie style. Austin food is smart, creative, and stylish. However, it is not formal.

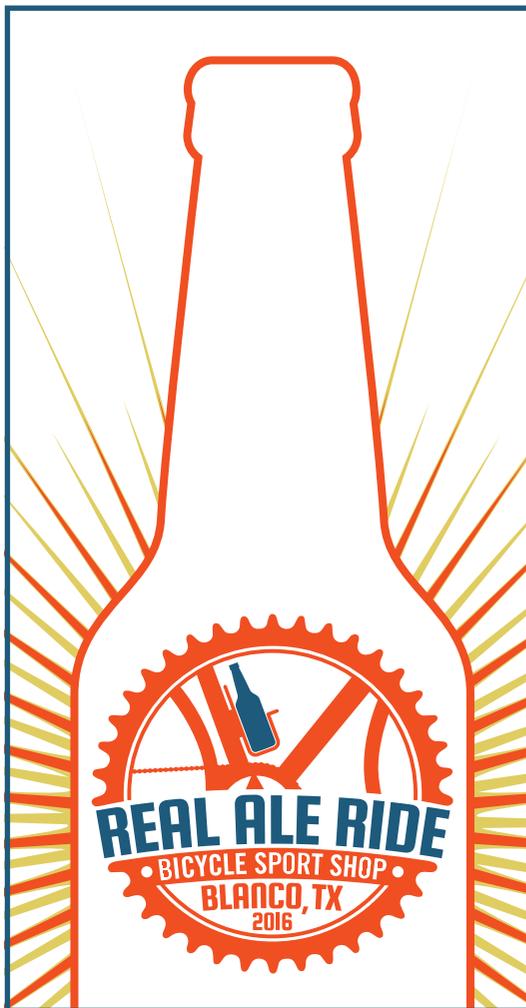
Gardner's Wiseheart believes that there will always be a place for formal fine dining, serving residents and tourists alike, but for the moment there seems to be a limit to the number this town can sustain. The former Gardner space has been repackaged as Chicon. With Chicon, Wiseheart and his partners lowered the price point, they opened up and brightened the space to give it a neighborhood feel – in short, made it more approachable. Although it is still too soon to say whether Chicon will be more successful than its predecessor, so far the change has been positive. It may simply be that formal fine dining is not Austin's brand. ■

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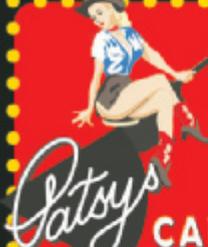
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EAST

Unit-D Pizzeria

UNIT-D PIZZERIA

2406 Manor Rd., 512/524-1922
www.unitdpizzeria.com

The crave-worthy menu offers Neapolitan pizza topped with fresh ingredients ranging from classic to creative, but it isn't just about pizza at Unit-D. The chic ambience and excellent local beer and wine selection pair well with the 27-year-old sourdough starter, charcuterie, wood-fired olives, lovely Caesar salads, and quietly innovative desserts.

CONTIGO

2027 Anchor, 512/614-2260
www.contigotexas.com

Boasting one of Austin's best outdoor spaces – modeled after its namesake ranch – and a creative assortment of Texas tapas, this is a pitch-perfect happy hour spot. It fills up fast with the neighborhood crowd, but you can sip an El Pepino, crunch popcorn and olive bar snacks, and throw horseshoes while you wait.

FRANKLIN BARBECUE

900 E. 11th, 512/653-1187
www.franklinbarbecue.com

So much has been written about Aaron Franklin and the restaurant that bears his name – the James Beard award, the lines, the religious experience of the brisket – that chiming in now really seems unnecessary. So instead, we'll just say one thing: It really is that good.

DAI DUE

2406 Manor Rd., 512/524-0688
www.daidue.com

Most Austin restaurants are concerned with sustainability, but few walk the walk as thoroughly as chef/owner Jesse Griffiths. From Gulf seafood to locally sourced yaupon tea and loquats foraged across town, everything about Dai Due is seasonal and local (not to mention delicious). If there is such a thing as a wholly Austin cuisine, this is it.

CHERRYWOOD COFFEEHOUSE

1400 E. 38½, 512/538-1991
www.cherrywoodcoffeehouse.com

Come for the award-winning burger, stay for an outdoor film screening. It may bill itself as a coffeehouse, but Cherrywood is more like a community hub, satisfying the yogi, budding artist, videophile, live-music lover, coffee snob, and foodie in all of us. No wonder there is always a line at brunch.



Cherrywood Coffeehouse

AUSTIN DAILY PRESS

1900-B E. MLK, 512/828-6463
www.austindailypress.com

Sure, we love the bánh mì-esque Lucy done up as tacos and the Baby Buffalo as a hearty salad, but the sammies at ADP are the real deal, served up on rolls from La Mexicana Panaderia and Sweetish Hill Bakery – and the jalapeño hush puppies always have us barking for more. Plus, anywhere with “Free Beer Fridays” has a permanent place in our hearts.

PATRIZI'S

2307 Manor Rd. (in the Vortex/
Butterfly Bar courtyard), 512/522-4834
www.patrizis.com

Embodying the idea that simplicity is a marker of sophistication, the made-to-order fresh pasta is one of our favorites in town. Open for dinner, the unassuming food truck in the Butterfly Bar courtyard boasts house-made ricotta, local veggies and eggs, and dishes designed around time-honored family flavors. The Pomodoro's roasted romas and garlic confit is worth a weekly trip.

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LOWER EAST



Fukumoto

BUENOS AIRES CAFÉ

1201 E. Sixth, 512/382-1189
www.buenosairescafe.com

Chef Reina Morris brought her native Argentinian cuisine to Austin over a decade ago, and her restaurants have been a mainstay ever since. Now daughter Paola MG Smith is a co-owner, bringing contemporary touches like a new amaro-focused speakeasy in the basement. The family collaboration has brought renewed energy to the building, proving the classics can still electrify.

PAPERBOY

1203 E. 11th
www.paperboyaustin.com

The humble, gravel-lot breakfast trailer sells out before many Austin slackers have left the house, but their brioche B.E.C. and steak & egg sandwiches are worth setting an alarm for. If the sandwiches are 86'd, the requisite 2016-style toasts (savory with goat chorizo or sweet with ricotta and tangerine marmalade) are equally eye-opening.



Paperboy

SALT & TIME BUTCHER SHOP & SALUMERIA

1912 E. Seventh, 512/524-1383
www.saltandtime.com

Artisanal butchering may have been supplanted by other food trends nationally, but the movement hasn't slowed down in Texas. Salt & Time still excel at the nose-to-tail tradition, evidenced by their in-house charcuterie and rotating offal specials. Their wide selection of meats ranges from popular cuts to the lesser-known ones, and lunch, brunch, and dinner in the minimalist dining room are simple and fresh.

JUSTINE'S BRASSERIE

4710 E. Fifth, 512/385-2900
www.justines1937.com

This "Best of Austin" and "First Plates" veteran continues to be our own private party. No matter how many times we traipse to Justine's, every visit is a brand-new experience – thanks to nightly black-board specials like flounder with spring onions, or bison- and bacon-stuffed cabbage. Mainstays like the steak frites and superlative pork chops will never cease to please. It's like a long-lasting relationship: familiar and intimate, but simultaneously exciting. We're still in love.

FUKUMOTO

514 Medina, 512/770-6880
www.fukumotoaustin.com

Chef and owner Kazu Fukumoto embarked on an ambitious undertaking by incorporating an izakaya concept (which he defines as a "Japanese gastropub") with yakitori (binchotan grilled skewers) and Edomae sushi that showcases top-notch fish. The chic saké-centric hangout is a go-to for unconventional eats like house-made tofu, firefly squid, and even grilled chicken butts.

BUFALINA

1519 E. Cesar Chavez #200,
 512/524-2523
www.bufalinapizza.com

A custom-built 900-degree pizza oven takes up a sizable portion of Bufalina's dining room, but they pack the rest of the space elbow-to-elbow with Austinites hungry for the most delicate Neapolitan crust in the city. The scope ranges from subtle sure shots like their must-order margherita to more ambitious options like braised goat with Catalan chèvre. Need more space and shorter waits? Try Bufalina Due on Burnet Road.

LAUNDERETTE

2115 Holly, 512/382-1599
www.laundretteaustin.com

Chronicle readers endowed Launderette with Best New Restaurant honors last year in the annual "Best of Austin" poll, and we are perpetually wowed. Sweet lump crab toast, whole branzino, and burrata with black mission figs all induce audible sighs of bliss, but we're most impressed by chef Rene Ortiz's treatment of vegetables – his transformation of humble cauliflower using pickled pear, fresno chiles, and mustard vinaigrette is otherworldly. Laura Sawicki's desserts are equally a special treat.



Launderette



Juniper

ARLO'S

2001 E. Cesar Chavez (at Drinks Lounge), 512/840-1840
www.arlostruck.com

Curbing carnivorous cravings has never been so easy. When even the most devout meat-eater yearns for the Bac'n Cheeze Burger from Arlo's, you know the kitchen's doing something right. This fleet now satisfies appetites all across town with its three trucks, but we personally pine for the Chik'n Tacos and tots washed down with a Gin Henry at Drinks Lounge.

NASHA

1614 E. Seventh, 512/350-2919
www.nashaindia.com

Specializing in Indian soul food, this psychedelic Eastside spot blends traditional dishes like tikka masala and saag paneer with Texas' culinary traditions. The lunch thali platter is a great deal, and options run aplenty with curries, flavored naan, biryani, samosas, and even tacos. The spicy curried margarita is our favorite summer tippie.

VALENTINA'S TEX MEX BBQ

7612 Brodie Ln., 512/221-4248
www.valentinastextmexbbq.com

In Texas, eschewing barbecue traditions is risky, but Valentina's pulls off the rare feat of marrying tortillas and smoked meats with such finesse that even the grouchiest salt-and-pepper stalwarts could be convinced that fusion isn't a dirty word. Bonus points for bringing barbecue into the realm of breakfast and offering the best pre-11am brisket in town.

LA BARBECUE

1906 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/605-9696
www.labarbecue.com

Much has been written about pitmaster John Lewis' way with brisket and ribs, and we won't deny the power in the smoke. But we will take a moment to herald genius sandwiches like La Frito Loco. It may start with pulled pork, but it adds chopped beef, corn chips, black bean salad, chipotle slaw, cheese, and jalapeños. If there's anything more Texan, we haven't seen it.

JUNIPER

2400 E. Cesar Chavez #304, 512/220-9421
www.juniperaustin.com

Executive chef and partner Nicholas Yanes' handsome Northern Italian eatery may be new, but it has already made its mark in the Eastside's budding fine-dining scene. The kitchen team prepares delicate pasta dishes and innovative small plates that nod to Texas, like risotto with local strawberry, avocado, and mint. Beverage director Nic Vascocu's refined drink menus are perfectly suited for the serene hideaway setting.

TOASTER

1910 E. Cesar Chavez (at Stay Gold)
www.toasterfoodtruck.wix.com/
toastertrailer

The description of the baked mac on the menu says it all: "It's fucking delightful." From the avocado crema-topped Scotch eggs at brunch to classic cheese-and-potato pierogies at dinner, Toaster is all about hitting your pleasure centers – proving that in these tweezered and bespoke culinary times, food is still about how it makes you feel.

THE HIGHTOWER

1209 E. Seventh, 512/524-1448
www.thehightoweraustin.com

The outside might look a little like an Eastside dive bar, but the Hightower isn't about pouring Jameson shots to denim vest-wearing beardos. Yes, there is a full bar, but the focus is chef Chad Dolezal's quietly adventurous menu that blends the Lone Star State's culinary traditions with a global palate. We'll drink to that.

JACOBY'S RESTAURANT & MERCANTILE

3235 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/366-5808
www.jacobysaustin.com

Want to impress your parents the first time they visit you in Austin? Take them to Jacoby's. Chef Albert Gonzalez's elevated, but not precious cuisine will impress your mom, and the breathtaking views and decor of the patio will wow your other mom. It's guaranteed to put them in a good mood before you ask for just a little more money.



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YOSHI DREAMS OF (MORE THAN) SUSHI

OTOKO ISN'T WHAT YOU THINK IT IS BY DAN GENTILE

Despite opening fanfare proclaiming it a pet project of the *Top Chef* star, Paul Qui never planned to cut the fish (even before his recent arrest), but rather saw it as a chance to endorse his longtime colleague and mentor Yoshi Okai. A Kyoto-born jack-of-all-Japanese-trades, his 22-course tasting menu is a kaiseki-style journey through different preparations of Japanese cuisine.

Traditionally a kaiseki experience progresses from light appetizers (sakizuke, zensai) to steamed (mushimono), fried (agemono), and grilled (yakimono) courses, then closes with a hot pot soup (shirumono), fresh fruit (mizumono), and dessert (kanmi). In Kyoto the flavors skew toward umami over saltiness, which translates to Otoko's use of a lighter shoyu soy sauce and signature dashi that's savory enough to sip on.

There's always a sashimi course (mukouzuke), but sushi is atypical of most kaiseki menus. Breaking with tradition, Otoko sneaks in eight or nine nigiri bites at the beginning of the meal, working from lighter white sea bass to oak-grilled Wagyu from the original Mishima breed, topped with luxuriously rich scallion miso sauce. But the sushi is just one part of the show.

Unlike many sushi chefs whose knife skills don't translate to the kitchen, Okai learned to cook before slicing sashimi thanks to his early years spent helping his family's catering business. At the age of 20 he moved from Kyoto to California with a diverse set of cooking skills, but an aspiration to study landscape architecture (his family's other business was a flower shop).

When it proved too easy to assimilate into L.A.'s large Japanese community, he headed to Austin for a more culturally diverse experience. Landscaping was traded in for a makimono-rolling position at Uchi and lead vocalist duties in punk band the Kodiaks, which also happened to feature pitmaster Tom Micklethwait on guitar.

Years later he'd go on to help open the East Side King at Hole in the Wall and work in the kitchen at Qui. The Kodiaks no longer play shows, but he's likely the only head chef of a ticketed tasting menu with his band's 7-inch single behind the counter.

it allows for an indulgent, devil-may-care attitude toward ingredient sourcing that justifies the \$150 reservation price.

For instance, Okai buys specific herb seeds that HausBar Farms grows just for him. And when the farm's mascot goose couple Gustavo and Gabriela crank out their yearly six eggs, Otoko's lean nightly covers mean they can turn that half-dozen into a special egg custard for the mushimono course to feed four nights' worth of guests.

The intimate nature of seating, a wraparound bar that frames Okai and Walter's open kitchen, allows them to interact directly with the guests and explain the composition of each dish. The chefs will wax on about personal favorites like a lightly tempura-fried Japanese eggplant, but like in most restaurants that serve sushi, the ultimate ingredient is the bluefin tuna.

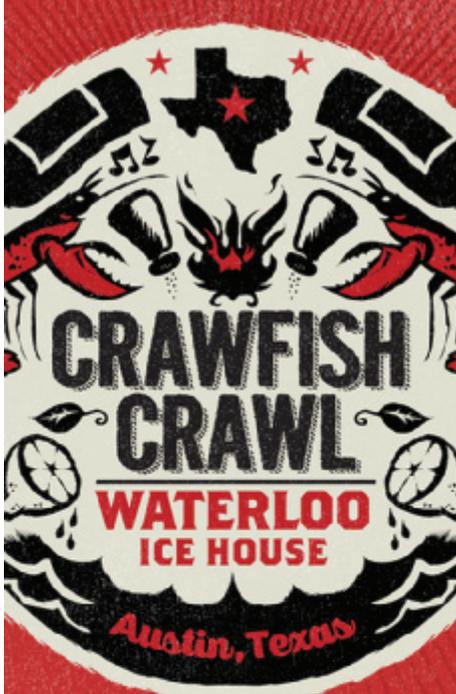
Chefs usually serve bluefin with a side of guilt due to its dwindling population, but Otoko has no qualms about having the endangered fish on the menu because it's sourced sustainably. The current supply stems from a 110-pound whole fish that Okai broke down himself, saving typically discarded bits for creative dishes like fried tendon tacos and mousse made from the fish's bloodline. And they've even found a way to amplify the flavor on the fillets by dry-aging it for a month, a process that leads to a level of shrinkage that would make most restaurant managers have a nervous breakdown. Alex

Dubey, formerly of Apis and a string of NYC fine-dining restaurants like Jean-Georges, shrugs off the loss as more of a gain.

It's this type of attitude that helps Otoko dodge the main pitfall of many luxe tasting menus: that a diner will leave hungry. More often it's been the case that the barrage of dishes doesn't leave room for dessert, but the direct interaction between diner and chef means it's not hard for them to send out an extra course. If that sounds like a dream, Otoko is just the ticket. ■



Yoshi Okai



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This month, in honor of the *Chronicle's* annual First Plates, our critics pick their FAVORITE FILMS SET IN RESTAURANTS.

NOW AT VULCAN VIDEO

Waitress (2007)

COMEDY

Now is a good time to visit Adrienne Shelly's 2007 film since a stage adaptation has just opened this season as a Broadway musical. The film stars Keri Russell as Jenna, a beleaguered waitress in a Southern diner. A mixture of comedy, drama, and wish fulfillment, *Waitress* is as delectable as the pies with the funny names that Jenna bakes for sale at the diner. Strong comedic support comes from obstetrician Nathan Fillion, Cheryl Hines, and writer/director Shelly as fellow waitresses, and, yes, - Andy Griffith - as an odd customer. *Waitress* is like the meringue topping on the American indie cinema.

- Marjorie Baumgarten

Life Is Sweet (1990)

DIRECTOR'S WALL - LEIGH

Mike Leigh has called this his least favorite film - a contrarian opinion for such a crowdpleaser that's sweet but never cloying, and refreshingly matter-of-fact about life's endless cavalcade of disappointments. The main focus is on a working class family in London, but supporting player Timothy Spall (a Leigh regular) steals the show as a family friend who sinks all his money into opening a restaurant. When no customers show up for the first night, Spall gets drunk, strips down to his skivvies, and smashes the place up. So much for a stiff upper lip.

- Kimberley Jones

Big Night (1996)

COMEDY

This underrated gem tells the story of two immigrant brothers trying to save their failing Italian restaurant. Primo (Tony Shalhoub) is a brilliant chef who creates perfect dishes, but his brother Secondo (Stanley Tucci) struggles to fill the restaurant with patrons who want more Americanized fare. The two are given an opportunity to turn it around when they are promised that Louis Prima will patronize the eatery, and so begins an epic night of magnificent food, sterling ensemble acting, and gallons and gallons of wine. Do not watch on an empty stomach. - Josh Kupecki

austinchronicle.com/screens 

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1305 W. Oltorf, 512/298-2242
www.theabgb.com

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CAFÉ NO SÉ

1603 S. Congress, 512/942-2061
www.cafenoseaustin.com

You could easily play hipster food bingo with Café No Sé's menu (Avocado toast? Check! Kale salad? Yup!) but the execution here is flawless, simultaneously excessive and elegant. #foodporn-worthy bites for the Instagirl in your life that taste good enough that you don't mind putting up with her.

OTOKO

1603 S. Congress, 512/772-5899
www.otokoastin.com

Like Buccellati engagement rings or the Olsen twins, good things come in small packages. Case in point: chef Yoshi Okai's 12-seat tasting table in the South Congress Hotel where every detail – from the napkins to the impeccable omakase – has been carefully considered. It's not cheap, but treat yo'self.

LENOIR

1807 S. First, 512/215-9778
www.lenoirrestaurant.com

A rare affordable date spot in a crowded high-dollar dining scene, Lenoir's three-course prix fixe remains the best value and one of the most dazzling meals in town, with dishes like masa-stuffed quail and cold crawfish salad defying categorization without confusing taste buds.

SWAY

1417 S. First, 512/326-1999
www.swayaustin.com

Sway's extensive menu means there's never a lack of exciting dishes to try, even though we can't seem to forgo our favorites like prawn miange and blue crab fried rice. (We've learned to come with a group and share all the dishes.) Chef Martin Wilda's special menus, celebrating events such as the recent Songkran, as well as a new brunch menu, ensure we keep coming back.

HOPDODDY BURGER BAR

1400 S. Congress, 512/243-7505
www.hopdoddy.com

It's hard to resist the sirens' call of a big juicy handcrafted burger, especially from a place that offers endless variations in toppings and proteins. Even though this Austin original opens its fourth location soon, it still packs the house – proving that craft burgers are more than just a trend.

SNACK BAR

1224 S. Congress, 512/445-2626
www.snackbaraustin.com

Shopping is hard work, but SoCo has a time-honored respite. A diner space adjacent to neighbor-with-the-best-sign Austin Motel for 70 years, this revamped space offers the best in tasty, consciously sourced and created eats and drinks. Rest your weary dogs, support local farms, and get in some stellar people-watching.

ALCOMAR

1816 S. First, 512/401-3161
www.alcomaratx.com

We don't want to get too much into Lana Del Rey's business, but maybe if she had a restaurant like Alcomar nearby, she wouldn't experience so much "Summertime Sadness." With an effortless interior, achingly fresh seafood, and heady margaritas, chefs Alma Alcocer-Thomas and Jeff Martinez preside over an instant pick-me-up.

HOME SLICE

1415 S. Congress, 512/444-7437
www.homealicepizza.com

This beloved hang spot might have the best mascot in town: a queen of pies with rockin' 'stache and a sly wink. She knows why she rules – her New York-style and Sicilian pizzas are above reproach, and the garlic knots can build empires. But that doesn't mean she won't treat you like royalty too.



Sway

Fukumoto

SUSHI & YAKITORI IZAKAYA



PHOTO BY ROBERT JACOB LERMA

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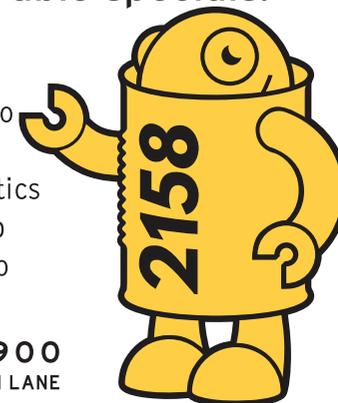
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2000 Southern Oaks, 512/240-2748
www.fullenglishfood.com
 The ramshackle dining room could have been decorated by one of Hyacinth Bucket's sisters, and that's only one of the many charms. Gorgeous pasties, fish and chips, and traditional breakfasts rule here, all handmade using local ingredients.

INDEPENDENCE FINE FOODS

1807 W. Slaughter #100, 512/363-5672
www.independencefinefood.com
 The beef cheeks are braised for hours, the pork belly is cured in-house, and the brioche are baked on-site. Independence didn't have to do any of that – after all, we are talking about sandwiches – but the effort pays off in some of the best food in all of South Austin.

ASIANA INDIAN CUISINE

801 E. William Cannon #205, 512/445-3435
www.asianaindiancuisine.com
 In present-day Austin, we often forget that good isn't a synonym for unaffordable. Asiana's lunch buffet doesn't require a late credit card payment, but it's stocked with saag paneer, and lamb vindaloo, and rotating specials – in short, a showpiece for everything the bare-bones restaurant has to offer. If you don't leave stuffed, you don't love food.

EVANGELINE CAFE

8106 Brodie Ln., 512/282-2586
www.evangelinecafe.com
 All the Cajun classics are here – gumbo, jambalaya, étouffée, red beans and rice – but owner/chef Curtis Clarke's less traditional creations like Gold Band Creole (huge fried butterflied shrimp served on fettuccine with a spicy aioli) and a titular strip of Parmesan) steal the show. The frequent live music keeps things rockin'.

VERACRUZ ALL NATURAL

4208 Manchaca Rd. (at Radio Coffee & Beer), 512/629-8238
www.veracruztacocos.com
 In the preliminary round of the Chronicle's breakfast taco competition, Veracruz beat out Torchy's 60% to 40% – no easy feat. In addition to excellent Mexican hand pies, Veracruz slings incredible tortas, and the original location on Cesar Chavez still whips up fresh fruit smoothies and aguas frescas.



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CAMPUS AREA



Daito

DAITO

2716½ Guadalupe, 512/474-7770; www.restaurantdaito.com

This humble mom and pop's shop highlights exquisite handmade udon that's difficult to find outside Japan. Their meticulously prepared dashi broth brings deep umami to comfort staples like chawanmushi. The manager Yoshi, currently pursuing saké sommelier licensure in Japan, enjoys introducing diners to lesser-known premium varieties.

GOODALL'S KITCHEN

1900 Rio Grande, 512/628-4400
www.goodallskitchen.com

Nestled in the lobby of the historic Hotel Ella, Goodall's Kitchen is a welcome refuge from the ubiquitous spread of pizza joints and taco shops of West Campus. They have rotating seasonal offerings like pork belly tater tots, and their cocktail list is expansive and well thought out. Need we say more?

OLAMAIE

1610 San Antonio St., 512/474-2796
www.olamaieaustin.com

We are not saying that the phrase "Jesus is a biscuit" has anything to do with Olamaie, but if any one biscuit is worthy of such religious thoughts, it's the one made by chefs Michael Fojtasek and Grae Nonas. The rest of the contemporary Southern – from pickles to chicken dumplings – have us testifying, too.

TACO JOINT

2807 San Jacinto, 512/473-8223
www.fb.com/thetacojoint

There are few breakfast taco secrets left in Austin, but this campus-area hangover cure has been left largely untouched except for a steady stream of UT students and staff. It's rare you'll find eggs on a house-made tortilla in this town, even rarer to find one topped with such a gluttonous mound of cheese.

DON JAPANESE FOOD TRUCK

28th & Guadalupe, 281/725-3686
www.fb.com/don-japanese-food-truck-692738280861004

Every day, hordes of UT students line up for Don Japanese's pork belly or Veggie King bowls. Why? Because you are not likely to find a more harmonious marriage of price, quality, and taste (so what, it's a triad) in all of Austin. A brief hiatus has us patiently waiting for May 12.

FOODHEADS

616 W. 34th, 512/420-8400
www.foodheads.com

This beloved little midtown cafe offers fresh takes on soups, salads, and sandwiches served at breakfast and lunch. Dine al fresco on the charmingly dishabille shaded front yard with their Tuna Niçoise Sandwich, soup du jour, and a side salad with blackberry balsamic vinaigrette.

VIA 313

3016 Guadalupe #100, 512/358-6193
www.via313.com

Forever famous for their Detroit-style square pan pies with a caramelized cheese crust, the newest locations (both full-service restaurants with a full menu) offer apps like stuffed artichokes, beet salads with candied prosciutto, and thin-crust "bar style" pizzas that are – gasp! – round. As devoted to the four corners as we are, we can't deny we want to try all Via has to offer.

TEXAS FRENCH BREAD

2900 Rio Grande, 512/499-0544
www.texasfrenchbread.com

One of the most pleasant things about Texas French Bread has nothing to do with the food. Owner Murph Willcott's emails are part holiday newsletter, part memoir, and part photo essay, sharing anecdotes about restaurant life next to weekly specials. That personal touch shows in everything TFB does, from the Texas bistro cuisine to the charming garden patio.



Texas French Bread



Barlata

TAPAS BAR

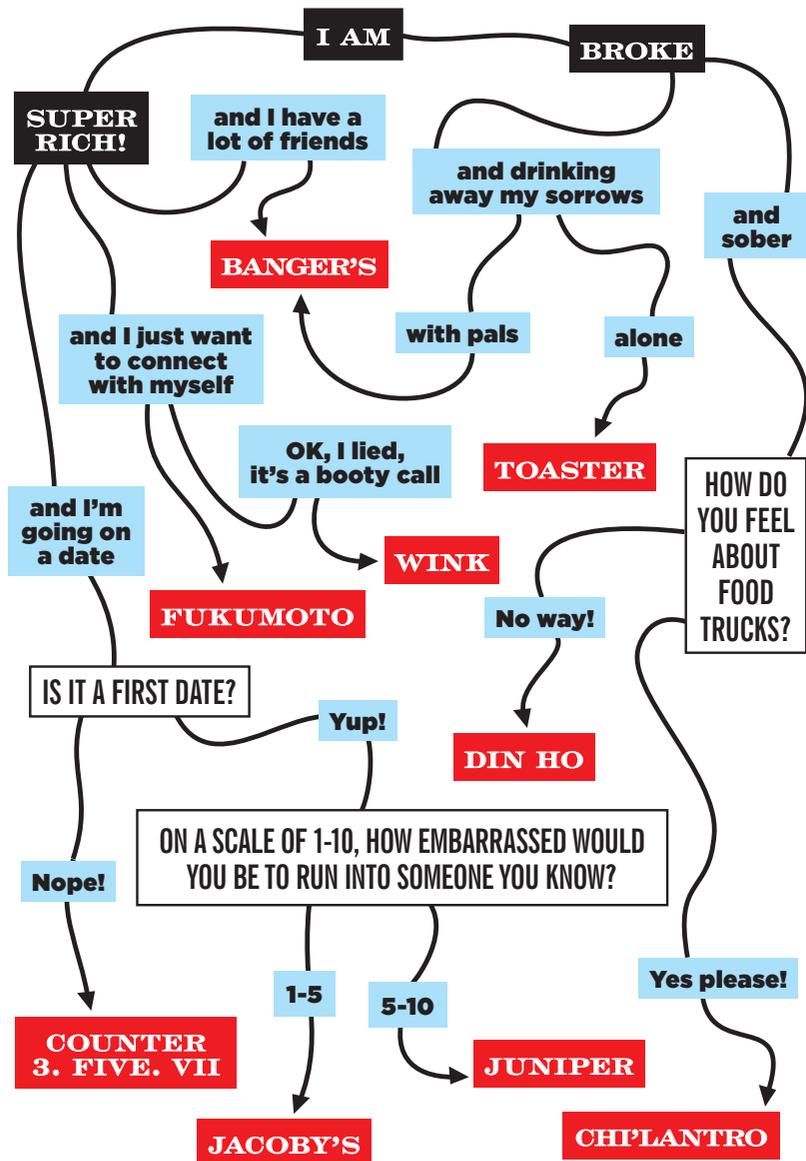


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1500 Barton Springs Rd., 512/479-1800
www.juliet-austin.com

We can't wait for drier weather so we can fold Juliet's gorgeous patio into our happy hour rotation. From the polpo and pesce crudo to the pizzas and handmade pastas to the ample parking lot, Juliet beckons us back for her well-executed Italian dishes and stunning decor. The olive oil tastings offer a true touch of Tuscany.

SAZÓN

1816 S. Lamar, 512/326-4395
www.sazonaustin.com

This South Austin favorite visits different culinary regions of Mexico, with nuanced twists and an emphasis on a worldwide food staple – corn – with delectable

crema de elote and handmade corn tortillas. Enchiladas de mole, or de pipián, are solid choices, and the garlic rice is a nice detour from oft-featured Spanish rice.

VOX TABLE

1100 S. Lamar #2140, 512/375-4869
www.voxtableaustin.com

The seasonally changing yet always-gorgeous platings (read: highly 'grammable) have us coming back to VOX on the reg. Chef Joe Anguiano's albacore tuna tartare scooped with a delicate potato lavash is divine, and smoked Tasmanian trout at brunch had us swimming. Beverage director JR Mocanu is also doing some very innovative things behind the bar, utilizing house-made ingredients like smoked pineapple ginger shrub and tangerine tincture.

CHI'LANTRO

1509 S. Lamar, 512/428-5269
www.chilantrobbq.com

Let's be honest; you're here for the kimchi fries. And they are amazing, especially topped with the spicy pork. With a fifth location on the way, Chi'Lantro is becoming something of a local empire; you might as well get in on the action before they go national.

BARLATA

1500 S. Lamar #150, 512/473-2211
www.barlataaustin.com

Bringing authentic Spanish tapas by way of San Francisco, husband-and-wife team Daniel Olivella and Vanessa Jerez should be kissed for bringing this gem to South Lamar. What more could a person want than to be able to pick an assortment of small plates bursting with flavor, from squid ink paellas to traditional latas? Oh yes, to wash it all down with house-made sangria. Barlata's got it all.

ODD DUCK

1201 S. Lamar, 512/433-6521
www.oddduckaustin.com

Any person walking into Odd Duck for the first time will see the open kitchen and wood-fired oven and know they're about to get both dinner and a show. Starting as a trailer by Barley Swine owner Bryce Gilmore, Odd Duck focuses on letting local ingredients speak for themselves through small plates, like the duck fat fried rice and sweet potato with green chile. Some dishes are so good, you'll find yourself ordering another round of them before the night is over.

UCHI

801 S. Lamar, 512/916-4808
www.uchiaustin.com

Rumor has it that Matthew McConaughey frequents this classy sushi joint and orders nothing but sea bream sashimi. We would be fine with just that as well – no soy sauce or wasabi needed on the immaculate cuts of fresh fish – but other menu items (Wagyu hot rock, tiger shrimp tempura, or the hakuji roll, to name a few) make it nearly impossible to not go all-out.

CANTINE

1100 S. Lamar #2115, 512/628-0348
www.cantineaustin.com

If restaurants were greatest hits albums, Cantine would be burning up the charts. Hospitality veterans Lisa and Emmett Fox borrowed elements from their Hyde Park classic, Asti, and sorely missed Hollywood Regency stunner Fino for their new venture in the Lamar Union development. The result is an innovative Mediterranean restaurant with a bright dining room and a serious beverage program that couldn't be more contemporary.



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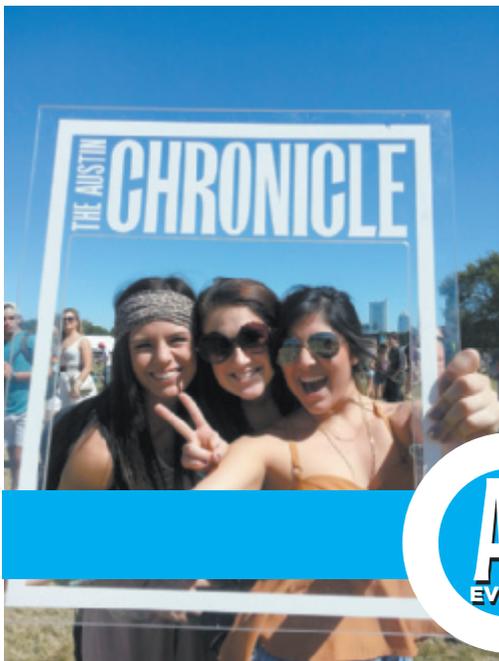
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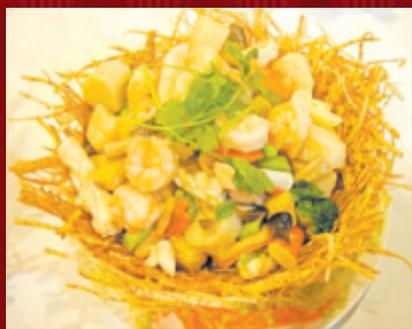


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CHEF D'OEUVRE

AUSTIN PASTRY STARS RECOUNT THE DISH THAT MADE THEIR CAREER
 BY AMIRA JENSEN

When someone says desserts aren't for them, they're mistaken. What they're really saying is that they don't crave the mediocrity often displayed in grocery stores' bake cases, or the surprisingly bland triple-chocolate this-or-that tacked on to a dinner menu as an afterthought.

But alongside the award-winning chefs who have risen in Austin are their pastry chef counterparts. This city has been indulged with desserts that will have you licking your lips for weeks (there's a reason why Lenoir's dessert portion of the menu is titled "Dream.") These desserts find the perfect balance of flavors, push boundaries, and sometimes just taste so good that you close your eyes and melt in the middle of the restaurant.

But before these heavenly desserts graced our city, pastry chefs had to be inspired to pursue their craft. For some, it was a flavor they encountered or a childhood memory. For others, it was a dish they created well into their careers. Here, some of the city's best pastry chefs recount the dish that makes skipping dessert unforgivable.

THOMAS CALHOUN

Pastry chef, Lenoir
Dish: Sopapillas

"My mother was never much of a baker, but one of the few things she would make us as a snack would be sopapillas. She would take the day-old flour tortillas she made, fry them to get a crispy outside and soften up the middle, then spread butter, sugar, cinnamon, and salt on it. We just thought it was crazy good. In hindsight it was all the right things to satisfy a sweet craving."

SUSANA QUEREJAZU

Executive pastry chef, Odd Duck and Barley Swine
Dish: Carrot cake doughnut, cajeta, coconut rum raisin ice cream, carrot butter, carrot chips

"We would have carrot cake on birthdays when I was growing up, and I thought it'd translate perfectly into a doughnut. I always try to have a doughnut on the menu whenever possible. I used cajeta as a glaze on the doughnut because it was seasonal, but my dad would always have sweetened condensed milk in the fridge ready to eat. We would spoon it onto everything. I also love rum raisin ice cream and thought it'd add a nice contrast of temperature and texture to the dish. The rum-soaked raisins work really well frozen, and who doesn't like coconut ice cream?"



Milk + Honey at Juniper

PHOTO BY ADRIENNE DEVER

KIRSTEN BELLAH

Pastry chef, Juniper
Dish: Milk + Honey

"The Milk and Honey dish actually came from my love of dairy, and cows, and bees. I ended up with the nickname Bumblebee, that has since shortened to just Bee, from a former chef while I was working at Uchiko, and it has followed me all the way to Juniper. Since getting that nickname, I've fallen in love with anything related to bees and honey, and really wanted to do a honey-centric dessert at Juniper. Honey is a pretty blank canvas that is available all year round, and we have some really great local honey, too."

PHILIP SPEER

Co-owner and chef of the upcoming Bonhomie
Dish: Peanut butter semifreddo with apple miso sorbet at Uchi

"This dish would have to be the peanut butter semifreddo with apple miso sorbet that was created at Uchi in 2005. This dessert still runs strong at the multiple locations and will always be one of my very favorite desserts. The dessert was inspired by my daughter Ella and her sack lunch. I made her lunch that morning, and it was a peanut butter sandwich, apple juice, chips, raisins, and some other treats. I was in a little bit of a mental block at that time and was smacked in the face with the dessert idea. The peanut butter semifreddo was the base of the dessert, then I added some peanut brittle, for texture, and dehydrated some apple slices for the chip. I rehydrated some raisins in saké for the sauce and made an apple sorbet. I added white miso to the sorbet because I've always loved how miso plays with peanuts, and it balanced the apple nicely. Obviously apples, peanut butter, and raisins all work together. Every toddler I've ever known eats a steady diet of these items."

KENDALL MELTON

Pastry sous chef, Odd Duck
Dish: Ginger tuile, Champagne sabayon, smoked peaches, and white chocolate

"I would say that the dish that really made me a better chef was the smoked peach dessert at Contigo. I was still green and finding my footing there, and when I started working on that it really helped me think about more possibilities with more conventional and unconventional ingredients. That specific dish helped me find my foothold in whimsical pastries."

SORAIYA NAGREE

Owner and baker, La Pâtisserie by Luxe Sweets
Dish: Rose macaron

"Rose is the flavor from my childhood that has had such a lasting impact on my career. It is a very popular flavor in Indian desserts, and when I went to Paris for the first time when I was 10, I tasted a rose-flavored macaron and fell in love with all things French. I loved how there was a hint of my heritage in something so modern and refined."

TAVEL BRISTOL-JOSEPH

Pastry chef, Emmer & Rye
Dish: Tres leches cheesecake

"I have a not-so-secret obsession with cheesecake. I seek it out everywhere I go. I look for texture and it doesn't matter if it's a plain cheesecake. If the texture is on point, I'm in heaven. This obsession didn't even start until I was a student at the New York Restaurant School. There I made and tasted my first cheesecake. This was a defining moment in my life. I always knew I wanted to be a pastry chef, but at that point all I wanted to do was make more cheesecakes. ... With the creation of the tres leches cheesecake, I was inspired to make it from desserts that influenced me in my two favorite cities: Brooklyn, N.Y., and Tucson, Ariz. The base of the tres leches was inspired by the rich Mexican culture in Tucson. My favorite part is the sweet, milky, cinnamon flavor it poses. It reminds me of rice pudding that I loved so much growing up in Georgetown, Guyana." ■



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