

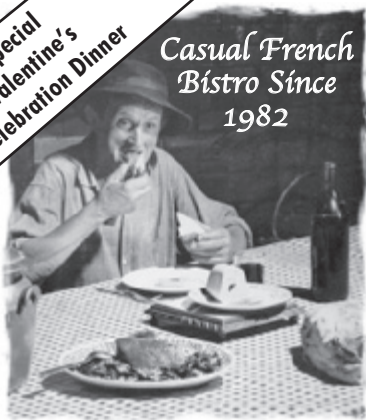
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From the very first day I took on the Food Editor position, the most frequently asked question has always been the same: "What are the best places to eat in Austin?" In answer, I would hem and haw, doing my best to avoid the subject. "You'll find out soon enough," I would say. "Just wait until we publish First Plates."

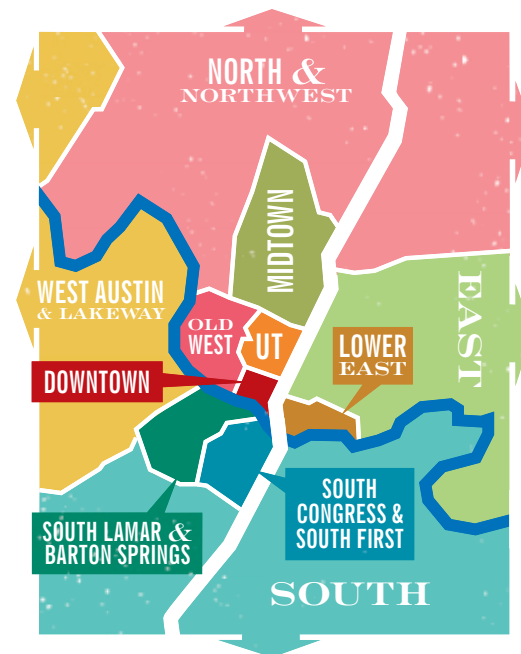
Part of the vagueness was not wanting to reveal my hand too early, but the truth is that answering that question is harder than it seems. What makes a First Plate is almost a big bang. Food is part of the equation. Nourishment is, after all, the primary function of a restaurant. But in Austin, that doesn't only include protein and carbs. It also includes all the other ingredients that give us life, from the hospitality of the front of house, to the details of the design, to the technical prowess of the kitchen.

Throughout the supplement, our contributing writers zero in on some of these elements, from ethical beef and honey, to lemongrass and forbidden rice. It's what makes the Austin dining scene one of the most vibrant in the nation. We're nowhere near sating our appetite.

But as the First Plates awards continue to evolve, we've had to make some tough choices. We agreed early on that only 100 restaurants would make the cut, even if that meant that many of our favorites would be left off the list. We also agreed that both staff writer (and grande dame of Austin food) Virginia B. Wood and I would put our necks on the line by naming Top 10s. To make it easier on ourselves, we decided that only restaurants serving a full menu would be considered for First Plates - eliminating many of our favorite places to get gelato, craft cocktails, and croissants.

Even so, any restaurant that was open in any part of 2014 was considered. We had many informal discussions and meetings, a packed schedule of restaurant visits to refresh our memory, and a few sleepless nights. The list was drafted and revised until the very last moment. We feel the final 100 capture our wide-ranging scene, and hope it will be a year-round resource. And next year, we'll do it all over again. It's no accident that we subtitled First Plates the 100 restaurants defining Austin dining now.

Shout-outs go out to contributing writers Mick Vann, Claudia Alarcón, Rachel Feit, Kate



ALL PHOTOS BY JOHN ANDERSON

Thornberry, Melanie Haupt, Jessi Cape, Anna Toon, Adrienne Whitehorse, and Amy Kamp, who contributed their palates and pens to First Plates. Our proofing team (Whitehorse, Danielle White, Nina Hernandez, and Kat McNevin) made sure these Plates were clean. Our marketing wizards, Sarah Wolf and Lia Crockett, planned a week's worth of celebration, all while gearing up for South by Southwest and the Austin Music Awards. Kate X Messer was invaluable in handling our online content. And Creative Director Jason Stout and Production Manager Chris Linnen are responsible for the section's handsome new look. I'm proud to work with them all.

Special appreciation goes out to Wood, whose knowledge, humor, and skill were an ace in the hole, and to Managing Editor Kim Jones, who helped walk this first-time supplement editor off a ledge more times than I can count. Without them both, I could have never stepped up to the Plates.

- Brandon Watson

TOP 10s



Dai Due

BRANDON WATSON

- 1) Dai Due (East)
- 2) IaV (Lower East)
- 3) Lenoir (South Congress & South First)
- 4) TIE: Uchi (South Lamar & Barton Springs)/ Uchiko (Midtown)
- 5) Barley Swine (South Lamar & Barton Springs)
- 6) qui (Lower East)
- 7) Foreign & Domestic (Midtown)
- 8) Congress (Downtown)
- 9) Kin & Comfort (North & Northwest)
- 10) wink (Old West)

VIRGINIA B. WOOD

- 1) Dai Due (East)
- 2) Lenoir (South Congress & South First)
- 3) Odd Duck (South Lamar & Barton Springs)
- 4) IaV (Lower East)
- 5) Congress (Downtown)
- 6) Franklin Barbecue (East)
- 7) Foreign & Domestic (Midtown)
- 8) El Naranjo (Downtown)
- 9) qui (Lower East)
- 10) Jeffrey's (Old West)

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Fixe

DOWNTOWN

LA CONDESA

From the trio of guacamoles to the ceviches, elevated street fare, and wood-grilled entrées, you can't go wrong at this sexy, modern Mexican standby. The bar gets packed thanks to expertly made signature cocktails and a spectacular selection of tequila and mezcal, and the patio is perfect for people-watching any time of day. 400 W. Second, 512/499-0300, www.lacondesa.com.

EASY TIGER

A pioneer in the effort to class up Waller Creek, this German biergarten-inspired bakery-cum-gastropub specializes in handcrafted breads and pastries (gotta love that spicy Tiger Claw) from head doughpuncher David Norman, and sausages, mustards, and delectable pastrami from the creative and ambitious chef Drew Curren. A meticulously curated selection of whiskeys and beers rounds out the sophisticated-yet-casual ethos. 709 E. Sixth, 512/614-4972, www.easytigeraustin.com.

SWIFT'S ATTIC

Although barely 2 years old, this classy spot has garnered plenty of national attention with a fresh and playful cuisine that defies categorization. Local ingredients are widely used, portions are fit for sharing, the bar program is excellent, and service is always on. Great for brunch and happy hour, too. 315 Congress #200, 512/482-8842, www.swiftsattic.com.

BANGER'S SAUSAGE HOUSE & BEER GARDEN

A stellar craft beer lineup, a killer brunch complete with a michelada bar, and an alluring variety of sausages can be expected at Banger's. Try the jalapeño cheddar brat with an Austin Beerworks Black Thunder schwarz and better yet, add a plate of fried cheese curds to an order of poutine. It's more than acceptable to roll out. 79 Rainey, 512/386-1656, www.bangersaustin.com.

VINCE YOUNG STEAKHOUSE

Ruth can have her Chris. Chef Phillip Brown outruns the competition with prime dry-aged steaks, pork chops, scallops, and sides that are considered dishes themselves. The contemporary dining room and sophisticated desserts may surprise you. 301 San Jacinto, 512/457-8325, www.vinceyoungsteakhouse.com.

CONGRESS

Chef David Bull didn't bring foie gras to Austin, but he surely helped evangelize it. Few other chefs use such precious ingredients in such a confident way, more matter-of-fact than "look-at-me." The cool kids always make it seem effortless. 200 Congress, 512/827-2760, www.congressaustin.com.

FIXE

Chef James Robert will use a dazzling array of techniques in service of a simple chicharrón. The work pays off, Fixe's crispy beef tendon manages to be both featherweight and beefy, playful and refined. Why, it might even be a metaphor for their entire operation. 500 W. Fifth, 512/888-9133, www.austinfoixe.com.

PARKSIDE

The flagship restaurant of celebrated chef Shawn Cirkiel, parkside was the city's first gastropub. It's still the standard-bearer of local sourcing, both of grass-fed meats and organic produce, as well as a first-class seafood destination. The top-quality fare is worth braving Sixth Street. 301 E. Sixth, 512/474.9898, www.parkside-austin.com.

ARRO

Say *mai oui* to the unfussy French bistro fare at this sister restaurant to the Easy Tiger bakery, where you can always count on exceptionally crusty bread with flavored butters, *moules frites*, or a steak *au poivre*. Seasonally changing specials keep the menu from going stale. The metal chairs are too small for American butts, but a Parisian might feel right at home. 601 W. Sixth, 512/992-2776, www.arroaustin.com.

EL NARANJO

Nestled among the often rowdy bars of the Rainey district, chef Iliana de la Vega's eatery is a sleek and refined oasis. El Naranjo serves fresh and contemporary renditions of the classic dishes of de la Vega's heritage, offering Mexican food aficionados something entirely new. 85 Rainey, 512/474-2776, www.elnaranjo-restaurant.com.





Go to any Thai restaurant in Austin – or anywhere, really – and you’ll see the same primary ingredients featured with comforting consistency: Fish sauce. Rice. Chiles. Coconut milk. *Galangal*. Lemongrass. Basil. They’re all deployed in the interest of developing complex flavors that keep four or five tastes in balance: sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy. These are staples used in a cuisine that dates back to the 14th century. And yet some folks are finding ways to use them that, surprisingly, help to broaden the scope of Thai food.

There are words we should not use when discussing food innovations these days. “Fusion” is far too tired. “Authenticity” comes with way too much baggage for polite company. Worse, these words are empty husks of language absent real meaning anymore. “Mash-up” is too DJ culture. “Modern” is overused and pretentious. So how, then, do we describe practitioners of an ancient cuisine that

THAI-BRIDS

**BLURRING
THE LINES OF
THAI CUISINE**
BY MELANIE HAUPT

test the borders, dancing an electrifying pas de deux with ingredients and techniques from other foodways while still maintaining the bones of home? In this globalized world rife with hybrid identities, perhaps it’s useful to think of the kind of tinkering chefs do in terms of seeing how far the rubber band will stretch. How far can one push the definition of a cuisine?

Take rice. It’s a blank slate (mostly). Not nutritious, but not *not* nutritious. It just ... is. But this staple crop of Thailand is a foundational ingredient in the traditional cuisine. While it usually rests alongside blazing hot and sour curries, it also gets dressed up and mixed with herbs and vegetables in southern Thailand’s *khao yam* (rice salad), or served steeped in coconut milk with banana or mango. But at Kin & Comfort, chefs Ek Timrerk and Bonnie Wright take the wallflower and turn it into the base of their *panang* mac and cheese: rice noodles bathed in cheese sauce and topped with a rich beef curry. It’s

a Southern child’s comfort food of fat and carbohydrates, reinterpreted and married to the tang and heat of galangal and chilies.

Down the road in San Antonio, chef Quealy Watson at Hot Joy takes a classic red tomato curry redolent of fragrant Thai basil, makrut lime, coconut milk, and fish sauce, and adds tripe for a distinctive South Texas flair. (Offal is not alien to Thai cuisine, but the choice here is both transparent and deliberate.) Sway here in Austin gives a similar Texan goose to an already-hybrid dish, the prawn miange. Betel leaves aren’t a common ingredient in stateside Thai restaurants, but Australian cooks specializing in Thai cuisine use them regularly. Sway’s prawn miange is an homage to that Aussie interpretation, with the traditional notes of fish sauce and tamarind present alongside a Texan twist of grapefruit.

Here’s why these dishes aren’t “fusion,” nor need we worry about whether they are “authentic”: Thai cuisine itself is rooted in a long history of borrowing. For example, northern Thai cuisine is informed not only by its geography and climate, but also by its proximity to Myanmar, Laos, and China. Southern Thailand is home to most of the country’s Muslim population, as well as the country’s coconut plantations; both of these factors have a profound influence on that region’s cuisine. Contemporary Thai food owes a debt to Japanese, Vietnamese, Indian, and Chinese cuisines; there are even “American-style” fried rice dishes made with ketchup, hot dogs, and bacon – an extension of how someone envisioned the way Americans eat. There is no authenticity: There is only bricolage, play, experimentation.

It makes sense, then, that chefs in Austin and its surrounds would borrow from the regional practices and ingredients that shape their identities here, poking at the boundaries that demarcate a cuisine and building upon it. For them, the most important ingredient is imagination. ■



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EAST

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When it comes to a favorite plate at this cash-only, humanitarian hole-in-the-wall, we can't decide between morning beignets, the shrimp po'boy for lunch, or the smothered potatoes and cornbread at supper. What's certain is our favorite menu item: a meal donation to the homeless (pork chop and fries for \$4). 1815 Rosewood, 512/474-5652. www.fb.com/nubianqueenlolascajun soulfoodcafe.com.

PATRIZI'S

Looking for some pasta baby this evening? There's no need to eat your heart out. Patrizi's rolls and cooks their semolina pasta to order, then tops it with gremolata, ricotta, or coddled egg. We like *cacio e pepe* the best. Those noodles don't need another thing. 2307 Manor Rd. (at the Vortex), 512/522-4834, www.patrizis.com.

CONTIGO

The adventurous cuisine at this rustic outdoor venue is hard to define – certainly sophisticated, but unpretentious enough to fit the ranch-like ambience. The seasonal eclectic menu is matched by stellar cocktails, local brews, and well-selected wines. The dog-friendly patio is the perfect spot to quench your thirst and catch up with friends. 2027 Anchor, 512/614-2260, www.contigotexas.com.



Contigo

FRANKLIN BARBECUE

When a small barbecue joint that's only open for lunch rockets to national fame with a service line that has its own Twitter feed, there might be a tendency to assume hype is involved. Not so; the brisket is that good. 900 East 11th, 512/653-1187, www.franklinbarbecue.com.

DAI DUE

Dedicated locavore chef Jesse Griffiths garners our admiration because he lives the talk, creating regularly changing seasonal menus using the best ingredients that Central Texas has to offer. Griffiths surrounds himself with like-minded talent in a restaurant that reflects quality, sustainability, comfort, and hospitality. 2406 Manor Rd., 512/524-0688, www.daidue.com.

MICKLETHWAIT CRAFT MEATS

Not only did the little acorn-adorned trailer survive its 2nd anniversary, they've busted through Austin's barbecue clique barriers. Rumor has it this list-topper is luring the cognoscenti with mouthwatering brisket, specialty sausages, and jalapeño cheese grits. Plus, with occasional live music, craft beer, and sweet treats like house-made moonpies, it's a real good time. 1309 Rosewood, 512/791-5961, www.craftmeats.com.



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LOWER EAST

SHHMALTZ

Most famous for their vegan Reuben, this all-vegetarian Jewish deli trailer is almost out of sight behind Farewell Books and Flat Track Coffee, but serves up some of the best falafel this side of the Mediterranean. Rotating varieties of home-made kombucha and an incredible vegan potato salad seal the deal for one of our favorite lunch spots. 913 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/529-1882, www.fb.com/shhmaltz.

JUSTINE'S BRASSERIE

Whether you're there for one of their elaborate, raucous parties, or a quiet, late-night dinner, an evening at Justine's makes you feel like a celebrity. It's a hideaway you always hoped others didn't find out about, but the secret's out: The great wine list, enchanting atmosphere, and divine steak tartare rightfully earn our praise. 4710 E. Fifth, 512/385-2900, www.justines1937.com.

LICHA'S CANTINA

The hospitality served up at this East Sixth bungalow has captured our hearts, and the authentic Mexico City dishes have captured our stomachs. When you're here, you're treated like familia, invited into mama Licha's home for her *flor de jamaica* blue-corn quesadillas and orange-chipotle chicken *sopecitos*. Happy hour on their festive patio also can't be beat. 1306 E. Sixth, 512/480-5960, www.lichascantina.com.



Licha's Cantina



Gardner

VIA 313

The Detroit-style pizzeria has us hooked on their foccacia-style four-cornered crusts and caramelized-cheese edges. Combinations like prosciutto, fig, gorgonzola, and balsamic glaze have us lined up at this trailer, often 10 people deep, regardless if it's 40 degrees out or 100. A second trailer on Rainey Street now means more bar-hoppers get a piece of the pie. 1111 E. Sixth, 512/939-1927, www.via313.com.

BUFALINA

The intimate and cozy (read: tiny) Bufalina consistently offers up well-executed, seasonal pies that are well worth the wait. And you *will* wait. The steady

stream of patrons filing in to the willfully understated dining room speaks fondly to their delectable, wood-fired, Neapolitan-style pizzas. The dough shines here. As it should. 1519 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/524-2523, www.bufalinapizza.com.

LA BARBECUE

La Barbecue brings out all the staples you'd expect in a barbecue joint – brisket, pulled pork, turkey, sausage, ribs, with sides like buttermilk potato salad rounding out the meat-centric spread. Pitmaster John Lewis, who honed his skills at Franklin Barbecue, cooks from a pit of his own design and his ingenuity reveals itself in every juicy, smoky bite. 902 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/605-9696, www.labarbecue.com.



Thai-Kun

THE HIGHTOWER

There's much to admire in chef Chad Dolezal's cocktail-friendly menu. He's a wizard with hanger steak and just as adept with tofu and green beans. But if he only served those fried chickpeas, we'd still be back every week. We're not ashamed to admit we have a problem. 1209 E. Seventh, 512/524-1448, www.thehightoweraustin.com.

SALT & TIME BUTCHER SHOP & SALUMERIA

Sleek design meets old-world butchery at this unassuming Eastside spot. With plentiful craft beer options and a hearty menu (lunch, brunch, and dinner) ranging from small plates to honkin' entrées, there's something for almost every palate. And yes, they do have great vegetarian options. 1912 E. Seventh, 512/524-1383, www.saltandtime.com.

THAI-KUN

Thai-Kun's uncompromising cuisine should come with a warning. When they say "hot," they don't mean a deseeded jalapeño was chopped somewhere within a three-mile vicinity of the truck. They mean that they used enough heat to get your endorphins going. Few other Austin restaurants can get you that high. 1816 E. Sixth (at Whisler's), 512/407-8166, www.eskaustin.com/v2/thaikun.

GARDNER

This much-discussed newbie is the intersection of maximalism and minimalism. Beautifully presented bites, small plates, and entrées might employ a bounty of hay and hazelnut or squid ink and sorrel, but each mouthful is a testament to a love for freshness and simplicity. 1914-C E. Sixth, 512/354-1480, www.gardner-austin.com.

CONTINUED ON P.10

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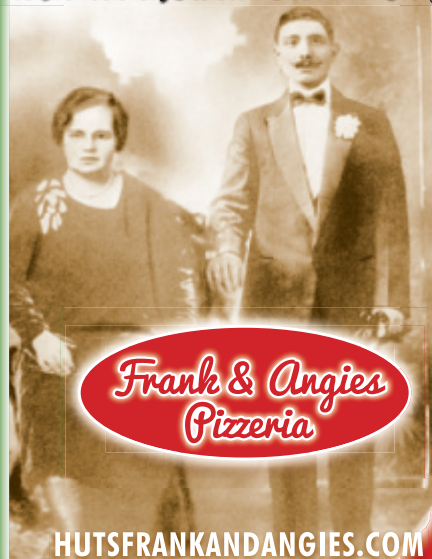
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LOWER EAST CONTINUED FROM P.8



Kyōten

EDEN EAST

Chef Sonya Coté's darling offers weekly showcases of fine cuisine created directly from the farm's bounty. Al fresco dining gives a delightful glamping vibe, complete with twinkle lights, chickens, and charm. 755 Springdale Rd. (at Springdale Farm), 512/428-6500, www.edeneastaustin.com.

KYŌTEN

Holy mackerel! It's difficult not to use a few mild expletives when describing Kyōten's battera. It's that dang good. That perfect cuts of extraordinarily fresh, ecologically responsible fish can come out of a tiny kitchen is perhaps our town's best indication that we're not quite done with food trucks. 1211 E. Sixth, 512/888-7559, www.kyotenaustin.com.

QUI

Tom Colicchio called Paul Qui the "most talented chef" to ever compete on *Top Chef*. Duh, Tom, tell us something we didn't know. We are just glad we can get to his wildly original flagship restaurant by a cab ride. 1600 E. Sixth, 512/436-9626, www.quiaustin.com.

RED STAR SOUTHERN

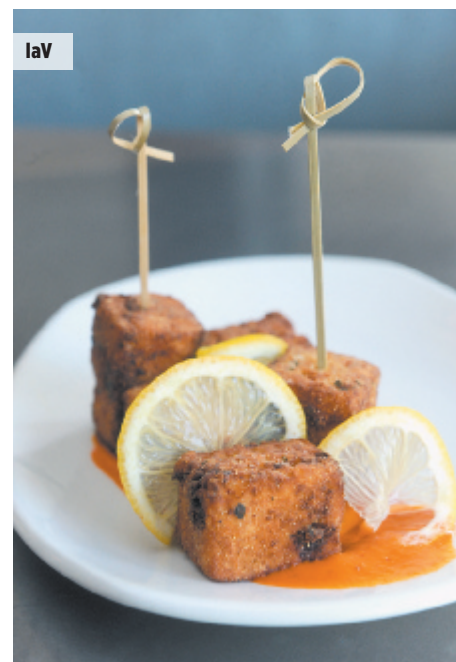
Cheeky chef Erica Waksmunski gave the Austin restaurant scene an old-fashioned poke in the eye with the launch of Red Star. From quirky vegan renditions of meatloaf to fried chicken that would bring a tear to your mee-maw's eye, this Airstream transports you to the Southern upbringing you never had. 1700 E. Sixth (at the Grackle), 512/962-3674, www.redstarsouthern.com.

LAV

The elegant yet approachable laV has been a game changer, helping to establish a fine-dining scene on the Eastside. Run by one of the most talented trio of ladies in town, the elegant dining room offers expertly prepared Provençal cuisine complemented by refined and knowledgeable service and one of the most impressive French wine cellars in town. 1501 E. Seventh, 512/391-1888, www.lavaustin.com.

JACOBY'S RESTAURANT & MERCANTILE

Only Ree Drummond has done more to glamorize the ranch. But unlike the celeblogger, owner Adam Jacoby has some bona fides. The prime beef raised for the restaurant comes from his folk's land. And that fine-tuned sense of hospitality is another family tradition. 3235 E. Cesar Chavez, 512/366-5808, www.jacobysaustin.com.



laV

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As soon as you take a seat at Whisler's the smell of fresh rosemary hits you, while your eyes wander from jars full of dried *chiles de árbol* to a container of fresh serranos to bottles of house-infused syrups and shrubs.

The bartenders here don't shy away from using culinary ingredients seldom found in cocktails. For example, the I Yam What I Yam gets its unique flavor profile from a fresh sweet potato shrub, which is as savory and tangy as a marinade. Seasoned with cinnamon and nutmeg, a bit of apple cider vinegar counteracts the cocktail's sweetness. It's a liquid version of your mom's sweet potato casserole, down to the toasted marshmallow garnish.

Whisler's is not the only bar in Austin using ingredients usually considered to be culinary, and I couldn't be more pleased with the trend. I've always gravitated toward savory drinks, but one can only drink so many Bloody Marys. When Midnight Cowboy opened in 2012, owner Bill Norris served me one of the best cocktails I've had: the South of Bangkok, featuring gin, coconut, fresh lime, Thai lime leaf bitters, and Thai basil. And a few years – and a few bar-men – ago, East Side Show Room wowed me with the Zanahorita, a play on the margarita made with carrot juice as the base. Now, at the start of 2015, there are plenty more culinary cocktails on offer.

At a place like qui, you'd certainly expect culinary creativity to spill over from the kitchen to the bar. Order the Spanish Bombs, named after the Clash song, which combines Siembra Azul tequila reposado, Lacuesta vermouth, Benedictine, and a house-made sesame oil infusion. The result is boozy, subtly toasty, and has a slightly oily mouth-feel. The American Slang features bourbon, Kinsman Apricot Rakia Galliano, and Peychaud's bitters, served on the rocks. In classic qui style, it comes with a mouthful of basil seed "caviar" (when hydrated, basil seeds release a mucilaginous cover, making

them look and feel like fish roe), perched atop a mother-of-pearl spoon inside a real caviar tin.

When it comes to applying kitchen techniques to the bar, smoking is, well, hot.

Adding a smoky component to a drink with mezcal seems to be popular everywhere, but bartenders at restaurants where a smoker is the centerpiece of the kitchen are playing with the trend and smoking a variety of cocktail ingredients. At Contigo, Jen Keyser is working with kitchen staff to extend the restaurant's campfire to her bar program. Her latest experiment, which should be on the spring menu, includes smoked lemongrass. The folks at Freedmen's take it a step further by smoking pretty much everything. I love the Smokin' Cactus: Del Maguey Vida mezcal, grapefruit juice, lime juice, jalapeño-infused agave syrup, and a smoked sea-salt rim that accentuates the smokiness of mezcal. The Ol' Schmokey (Old Forester, smoked pecan bitters, smoked orange, sugar) pretty much speaks for itself. And I would be hard pressed to find a more savory fresh Bloody Mary – made with smoked tomatoes, of course.

Back at Whisler's, there are more culinary cocktails to tempt you. The Hornet's Nest is spicy and almost savory. Gin is infused with fresh puréed red bell pepper – there's a little bit of pulp after straining – and the drink gets a kick from the much-en vogue Ancho Reyes liqueur. The Battle Born features house-made sarsaparilla syrup with fresh vanilla bean and, for garnish, a chunk of peppery beef jerky that balances the sweet with some salty, as bar manager Matt Ross explains. I'm looking forward to the spring menu; I have my fingers

crossed they'll bring back the Campechano. Inspired by Ross' favorite taco truck, the drink combines grilled pineapple juice, fresh lime, and mezcal infused with Spanish chorizo, cinnamon, and black pepper. Think tacos al pastor in a glass. ■



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Titaya's Thai Cuisine

MIDTOWN

TITAYA'S THAI CUISINE

Our city waited with bated breath for Titaya's 2.0 to finally reopen. It's shinier and has some tasty new dishes, but our favorites – *tom yum gai* and green curry – are just as delicious as before. Long lines are common, but there's always takeout. In or out, make sure to try the fried banana roll and house-made coconut ice cream. 5501 N. Lamar, 512/458-1792, www.titayasthaicuisine.com.

ÉPICERIE

Since 2012, chef Sarah McIntosh has been gracefully translating the French cafe to an Austin audience. That means on-point salads with seasonal and local ingredients, très bon macarons, and richly marbled charcuterie. And oh, that cheese. Fantastique! 2307 Hancock, 512/371-6840, www.epicerieaustin.com.

FORK & TACO

Austinites will wrap anything in a tortilla, but somehow chef Casey Fannin's tacos still manage to surprise. Fork's broad palate and thoughtfully sourced ingredients are our favorite example of "think global, act local." 4801 Burnet Rd., 512/838-6768, www.forkandtaco.com.



TOP NOTCH HAMBURGERS

A relic of Austin's past, this old-timey burger joint has legions of dedicated fans who love their no-frills, classic char-grilled burgers, superb onion rings, and crispy, juicy fried chicken. The ultra-cool curb service stations are great, but dine inside for an awesome trip down memory lane. 7525 Burnet Rd., 512/452-2181, www.topnotchaustin.com.

STILES SWITCH BBQ & BREW

Named for an old railroad station, this Austin original helped rehab an old North Lamar shopping center, Violet Crown. Pitmaster Lance Kirkpatrick is all about that meat, but the craft beer, uber-cheesy mac and cheese, lemon-vinaigrette slaw, and home-style peach cobbler will make you feel better than McConaughey at the Moontower. 6610 N. Lamar, 512/380-9199, www.stilesswitchbbq.com.

FONDA SAN MIGUEL

The first major Interior Mexican restaurant in the country will celebrate 40 years in 2015, still presenting exquisite versions of Mexican regional classic dishes in a graceful hacienda that boasts an enviable, museum-quality collection of Mexican folk art. 2330 W. North Loop, 512/459-4121, www.fondasanmiguel.com.

FOREIGN & DOMESTIC

This cozy and unpretentious neighborhood bistro with an open kitchen regularly puts out some of the most original food in town. Chef-owner Ned Elliott also has a flare for networking with other young chefs around the country, generously hosting pop-ups that showcase emerging national talent. 306 E. 53rd, 512/459-1010, www.fndaustin.com.

MICHI RAMEN

On a recent lunch visit to Michi Ramen, the place was packed with diners wanting a reprieve from the cold weather. But you don't have to wait for an arctic chill; Michi is a welcome respite in any season. Even in our blisteringly hot summer, you'll still welcome the warm fuzzies. 6519 N. Lamar, 512/386-1908, www.michiramen.com.

THE PEACHED TORTILLA

Our love affair with this food trailer empire began with bánh mì tacos. Now their new brick-and-mortar has won us over with an artful blending of Asian and Southern cuisines. Dishes like Southern Fun – a take on *chow fun* noodles with brisket – and an impressive whiskey program have us praising this peach. 5520 Burnet Rd. #100, 512/330-4439, www.thepeachedtortilla.com.

KOMÉ

If you have a hankering for Japanese comfort food, this star of Airport Boulevard serves the real deal. From hearty ramen bowls to super fresh, signature sushi, Také and Kayo Asazu's home-style darling always excels. Expect superb *teishoku*, a new happy hour menu, and a happy belly. 4917 Airport, 512/712-5700, www.kome-austin.com.

MELVIN'S DELI COMFORT

Deli food isn't a particularly hot topic on the Austin dining scene, but Melvin's is an example of why we should be paying closer attention. For a little over two years, Melinda and Kevin Ellis have mastered the art of the monster sandwich, from house-cured pastrami Reubens to delightfully gooey croque monsieurs. Wear your loosest pants for lunch. 501 E. 53rd, 512/705-3906, www.melvinsdelicomfort.com.

CONTINUED ON P.15



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THE MEAT OF THE MATTER

TOWARD BEING A BETTER CARNIVORE BY AMY KAMP

Whether eating meat is ethical is a debate that's not likely to be resolved anytime soon. But the argument for "humanely raised" meat is quickly becoming mainstream: Starbucks recently agreed to "phase out" its use of cage-raised poultry, among other things; California's Proposition 2, which took effect at the beginning of the year, requires that all eggs sold in the state come from chickens with room to stretch their wings; and here in Austin, it's become more and more common to see menus touting meat from suppliers such as Niman Ranch, which is well-known for its commitment to humane standards.

For those of us who have little or no contact with the source of our eggs, dairy, and meat, it can be disturbing to contemplate the reality of

modern-day agriculture: Factory farms, emphasizing profit over all, tolerate and even promote practices that result in unmitigated misery for the animals involved, and heavy use of antibiotics to treat injuries and infections. Yet it's possible to purchase meat from places that adhere to standards of care that benefit the livestock and the consumer.

Niman Ranch, which was founded in the early Seventies, is perhaps the most prominent supplier of humanely raised meat. A network of "family farmers," all of whom are certified by respected third parties, its standards require that animals be given the opportunity to "behave naturally" and be fed a vegetarian diet. For cattle, this means the ability to move freely, exercise, and lie down.

Sick animals are treated, but any that receive antibiotics aren't sold as Niman meat. The resulting product is not only more humane, but of a higher quality, since the meat comes from only healthy, well-fed animals. Niman's requirement that members of its network be "family farms" – "owned and operated by a single family ... who relies on that farm as primary source of income" – gives an advantage to smaller farmers who would struggle in the larger marketplace.

While Niman meat is used at a variety of Austin restaurants, including Uchi, Dai Due, and Fork & Taco, it can also be purchased at Wheatsville Co-op. The local grocer only stocks meat that's "sustainably raised," and doesn't contain artificial hormones or antibiotics. Wheatsville's buyers look for farms that use third-party certification to verify their practices, and build relationships with their suppliers, including visiting the farms when possible, in order to ensure the livestock is being raised humanely. Along with an assortment of cuts of pork and beef from Niman, Wheatsville carries certified organic and humane Smart Chicken from Nebraska-based Tecumseh Farms. Shoppers can also choose from a selection of fresh and frozen meat from more local suppliers, such as Dewberry Hills, Windy Hill, and Richardson farms.

Mark Maddy, Wheatsville's meat and seafood coordinator, gives last Thanksgiving as an example of the cooperative's commitment to providing its customers with as many good options as possible. "Local and organic in a turkey is sort of the holy grail," Maddy says. Wanting to offer fresh as well as frozen Thanksgiving turkeys, Wheatsville partnered with Coyote Creek Farm in Elgin. The farm, which sells organic feed and Jeremiah Cunningham's World's Best Eggs,

had never raised turkeys before, but was willing to give it a shot. The turkeys were given plenty of room, access to the outdoors, and only fed certified organic feed. Maddy says Wheatsville plans to have the turkeys, which sold out last year, again this Thanksgiving.

All things being equal, who wouldn't prefer to eat the meat of a healthy, well-treated animal? But, of course, the reason that so many farm animals have it so bad is that it's cheaper to raise them that way. Raquel Dadomo, Wheatsville's brand manager, says that the cooperative is aware that not everyone feels like they can afford to buy high-quality meat. To that end, Wheatsville has

rolled out Co-op Basics, a selection of staples with drastically reduced prices. Co-op Basics, which extend beyond the meat department, include ground beef at \$4.99 per pound, whole chickens at \$2.99 per pound, and individual eggs costing 19 cents each. The lower prices mean that Wheatsville makes less money off the items, but is able to serve a greater swath of the community.

The rise of kinder, gentler meat isn't going to convert every vegetarian into an omnivore – after all, even the most humane ranches can't avoid the fact that their animals are being raised for slaughter. However, it's heartening to see a shift away from the thoughtless cruelty that's been associated with meat production since Upton Sinclair wrote *The Jungle* in 1906. As the trend grows, it will be important to make sure that "humanely raised" claims retain meaning, rather than going the way of "all natural" and other empty buzzwords. Luckily, Austinites can look to stores such as Wheatsville to assure there's an actual difference in the meat they buy. ■

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MIDTOWN CONTINUED FROM P.12

APOTHECARY

When Apothecary first opened, it had the feel of a bohemian, if slightly generic, coffee shop. My, how times have changed. The sophisticated new interior (in Dorothy Draper gray) is only matched by the assured food. It's a perfect perch for oysters and bubbles. 4800 Burnet Rd., 512/371-1600, www.apothecaryaustin.com.

NOBLE SANDWICH CO.

Noble Sandwich has redefined our ideas of what a sandwich can and should be, elevating the genre to high art. The snappy duck pastrami with Russian dressing has become legendary among food cognoscenti. Stick-to-your-ribs breakfasts include luscious biscuits and gravy, as well as sweet and savory waffles. 4805 Burnet Rd., 512/666-5124, www.noblesandwiches.com.

UCHIKO

One of the new pleasures of the still-glittering Uchiko is a monthly vegetarian *omakase*. Where other fine-dining empires might rest on laurels, Tyson Cole's upscale farmhouse is still working for their raves, sending out revelations like a sunflower-seed risotto. 4200 N. Lamar, 512/916-4808, www.uchiaustin.com/uchiko.

ASTI TRATTORIA

A perfect little slice of Italian dining culture in a casual, modern spot, Asti is a place where neighbors can meet and share apps and wine, pasta and mains (luscious carbonara and braised short-ribs), and always-creative sides. It's also ideal for aperitifs and dessert after an evening stroll. 408-C E. 43rd, 512/451-1218, www.astiaustin.com.



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The germinating seed of Paul Qui's empire is still going strong, with two brick-and-mortar locations and an ever-expanding fleet of trucks and concepts, while holding the line with the classics. Want bánh mì hot dogs? Head to Cheer Up Charlies. Weird Japanese tacos? South Lamar's your huckleberry. The fusion ramen at Hole in the Wall edges out the internal competition. 2538 Guadalupe, 512/363-5365, www.eskaustin.com/v2/hitw.

THE CARILLON

Original chef Josh Watkins may have left, but his team carries on the legacy of high-quality, inventive New American cuisine – enhanced by friendly, professional service, an excellent wine list, fresh cocktails, and a serene atmosphere. Ideal for those seeking a fine-dining experience without Downtown parking hassles. 1900 University, 512/404-3655, www.thecarillonrestaurant.com.

BLACKBIRD & HENRY

The North University area didn't know it needed an upscale curry-and-pints gastropub, but chef Mark Schmidt has filled that niche beautifully. Go for the inventive salads or the raw bar, stay for the elegant preparations of rabbit, lamb, and beef. And don't dare skip the chocolate ganache tart, the stuff dessert dreams are made of. 3016 Guadalupe, 512/394-5264, www.blackbirdandhenry.com.

OLAMAIE

Olamaie's stunning space – lovingly adorned in slate and pomp – set the stage for a revolving offering of local, seasonal fare. The menu represents pristine Southern charm steeped in contemporary artistry. Yes, the much-lauded biscuits with sea salt-dusted honey butter are indeed divine, but so is everything else. Splendid, really. 1610 San Antonio St., 512/474-2796, www.olamaieaustin.com.

FREEDMEN'S

The location in a historic 19th century stone building and a secluded dining patio are worthy attractions, but chef Evan LeRoy's slow-smoked meats and award-winning hot sauces, not to mention the bar's craft cocktails, keep people coming back. 2402 San Gabriel, 512/220-0953, www.freedmensbar.com.

SALVATION PIZZA

The hook is this is New Haven-style "apizza," but we doubt neither Sally Consiglio nor Frank Pepe had such an ornery streak. Salvation plays with tradition, adding Texas touches like jalapeño and bacon, but they never forget the foundation. The clam pie is the real deal. 624 W. 34th, 512/535-0076, www.salvationpizza.com.

TEXAS FRENCH BREAD

Texas may be the first word, but the focus is on the second. The bistro can fry perfect frites, turn out a sublime coq au vin, and whip up any sauce ending with "aise." It's not trendy, and the interior isn't sleek, but it's always at the tip of our tongue. We guess it just has a certain je ne sais quoi, y'all. 2900 Rio Grande, 512/499-0544, www.texasfrenchbread.com.

FRICANO'S DELI

This campus-area eatery's confidence in sandwich artistry is demonstrated in the Ainsworth, a custom build comprised of your deli worker's choice of "the best ingredients of the day." Add a bag of Zapp's crunchy kettle-cooked chips and a cold can of microbrew, and we've got our favorite campus-area lunch spot. 2405 Nueces, 512/482-3322, www.fricanosdeli.com.



Olamaie

Real Ale Brewing Company
Brewmaster/Woodmaster
General Erik Ogershok



OVER A BARREL CASK SHORTAGE PLAGUES CRAFT BEER BY ANNA TOON

The long-term love affair between brewers and their craft remains forever nonfleeting. And the perpetual ebb and flow of the relationship only solidifies the unions. An unconventional love story or one steeped in tradition, there's a romanticism in brewing beer. There's also an investment – not just in the equipment, but in the sheer volume of time required to do it right. Unfortunately, in the case of barrel-aging in its most recent iteration, the investment may be getting too difficult to stomach. While barrel-age love remains at an all-time high, the availability of the required barrels rests at an all-time low, testing even the most stalwart of relationships.

After an increased demand of bourbon set off widespread fears of a shortage, bourbon producers ramped up production – as did the producers of other spirits such as scotch, gin, and rum. Adding to this is a renewed interest in barrel-aging beer, leaving a new crop of craft distilleries in dire need of the wooden vessels. While cooperages, the makers of the barrels, have been working in overdrive to meet the demand, they just can't keep up, and as a result, the price has gone up tremendously. In fact, it's more than doubled. For Austin's craft brewers this poses a big problem.

Barrel-aged beers offer a complexity and depth of character – often a more intense flavor – than their stainless steel counterparts. "If you put a good beer in a barrel, it's going to come out better," says Taylor Ziebarth of Adelbert's Brewing. Bourbon barrels specifically lend notes of marshmallow and sumptuous vanilla difficult to acquire in any other way. But it isn't just barrels for spirits; wine barrels are also in high demand – especially when trying to procure a barrel that still has some of the residual wine character. "Say you want to make a Belgian-style dubbel and add red wine characteristics to it. Well, then you're going to need to get a barrel that's been well-maintained, probably hasn't been used a lot of times, and is very fresh when it's shipped to you," explains Ziebarth.

According to Real Ale Brewing Co.'s head brewer Erik Ogershok, the barrel shortage has significantly impacted the craft brewery, setting back expansion efforts and delaying the release of new products to the market. Over the last five years, Real Ale's barrel program has steadily grown from four barrels to 150, currently producing close to 20 beers (not including four new ones). However, continued growth will be largely dependent on the availability of wooden barrels. Once abundant and inexpensive, they're now increasingly difficult to obtain. Plus, when it comes to barrels, quality matters. The integrity of the barrel itself is just as important as the barrel's former contents. "I have to know where my barrels are coming from," says Ogershok. "The goal of our program is to make a beer that we're proud of and in the way that we intend, not just to make something. Our goal is to make unique beer with character."

While larger craft breweries such as Firestone Walker and Goose Island are able purchase barrels at a high volume, small breweries are left in a predicament where shipping often outweighs the cost of the barrels themselves. To counteract this, small breweries often go in together to purchase at price break. However, this may not be good enough. According to Ogershok, Real Ale's most reliable bourbon barrel broker has advised that barrels won't be available this year and possibly throughout 2016. While Real Ale is actively looking for other sources, the availability must align with the brew schedule. "The bourbon barrel beers we currently make will remain very limited-release unless I find more cooperage," says Ogershok. "I have plans for at least two more bourbon-barrel beers, but they may now be on hold." Despite this, Ogershok vows to continue researching all available options, moving forward despite the risk. It's part of being in love, and he's not the only one.

"There's a certain romance in working with barrels," says Ziebarth. "I'm definitely caught up in it." ■



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TACO MORE

The heavenly *cabrito* consommé, seasoned with chile pasilla and topped with fresh onion and cilantro, is a good enough reason to rise after a long night of overindulgence. Add the tasty *antojitos*, luscious shrimp cocktail, and the salsa and condiment bar, and you will be revived pronto. Both locations are great, but the north one gets the bragging rights. 9414 Parkfield, 512/821-1561, www.tacomore.biz.

CHEN'S NOODLE HOUSE

This tiny hole-in-the-wall seems airlifted directly from a Chinese street corner. The kitchen rolls out inexpensive yet first-class meat dumplings and makes hand-cut noodles for their warming soups (beef and lamb) and stir fries. The stunning green onion pancakes flake apart like butterfly wings, while lamb skewers are seasoned with plenty of salt and curry. 8650 Spicewood Springs #127, 512/336-8889.

TÂM DELI & CAFE

A tiny spot with huge flavor and an even bigger heart. Tâm has a deceptively large menu with some nice surprises, including the *bánh xèo* crêpe and their *bánh cuốn* (steamed rice wraps). Excellent pho, bun, and all of the standards, and the best *bánh mì* in Austin. 8222 N. Lamar Ste. 33-D, 512/834-6458, www.fb.com/tamdeliandcafe.

MEDITERRANEAN CHEF CAFE

The owner is a food scientist and chef from Istanbul, and the cafe in front fittingly provides a view of the food-production process, as the crew makes fantastic hummus, baba ghanoush, tabbouleh, dolmas, spanakopita, gyros, and falafel, all with an emphasis on healthy eating and big flavors. 5908 Aurora, 512/970-9150, www.themedchef.com

DAAWAT INDIAN CUISINE

The menu at Daawat offers spicy, no-compromise, southern-style specialties, with a buffet that's kept fresh. They coax every bit of flavor from Chettinad goat curry, Andhra catfish *pulusu*, *natu kodi* chicken curry, and Tamil chicken 65. Their naan is exceptional. 500 W. Canyon Ridge Ste. 275-L, 512/828-6909, www.daawataustin.com.

BALKAN CAFE & GRILL

Balkan food might seem scary until you find out it's all about comfort. The cafe serves excellent rotisserie lamb, rich and meltingly tender goulash, Austin's best chicken sandwich, and an amazing "hamburger" patty. 11800 N. Lamar #3, 737/703-5990, www.balkancafeandgrill.com.



Chen's Noodle House

KIN & COMFORT

Those who think all the joy of fusion was bled out in the Nineties have never had chef Ek Timrerker and Bonnie Wright's quietly innovative cuisine. Their Southern-meets-Thai mix revels in unexpected flavors, but the "comfort" part of their name is never forgotten. The "kin" part? That's in their always-warm hospitality. 1700 West Parmer #100 (in Hana World Market), 512/832-7870, www.hanaworldmarket.net/food-court/kin-comfort.

GARBO'S

Heidi Garbo's lobster truck has branched out into a brick-and-mortar, serving New England-style seafood, including fried clams, raw oysters, salt cod dumplings, and chowder – as well as their flown-in-overnight fresh lobster. It's a mini-vacation without the plane ticket. 14735 Bratton, 512/350-9814, www.garboslobsteratx.com.

SWAD

Tucked into a nondescript strip mall on far-North Lamar, Swad has been quietly churning out some of this city's best south Indian cuisine for nigh on a decade. The vegetarian menu includes enormous potato-stuffed *dosa*, a generous *thali* sampler platter, and sweet and creamy lassis. Bring a friend and a healthy appetite. 9515 N. Lamar #156, 512/997-7923.

RAMEN TATSU-YA

A tender ode to the Japanese soul-food staple, Ramen Tatsu-ya brought ramen to the masses as Austin's first brick-and-mortar ramen shop. The small space is beautifully designed by McCray & Co., and the food is brimming with well-balanced flavor. Try the Tonkotsu Original and the *gyoza*. Slurp. 8557 Research #126, www.ramen-tatsuya.com.

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CAFE JOSIE

For a restaurant this good, Cafe Josie is still surprisingly under-the-radar. Literally tucked away on West Sixth, the cafe utilizes local and sustainable ingredients to create dishes that are colorful, inventive, and consistently exceptional. Open for lunch and dinner with nary a wait (for now), Cafe Josie does not disappoint. 1200-B W. Sixth, 512/322-9226, www.cafejosie.com.



Cafe Josie

COUNTER CAFE

Austin's cozy go-to breakfast diner added a larger second outlet in late 2014, but we still prefer the cozy quarters and the camaraderie of the original. Both locations boast one of the best burgers in town. 626 N. Lamar, 512/708-8800, www.countercafe.com.

CLARK'S OYSTER BAR

An upscale oyster bar from the restaurant group behind Perla's and Jeffrey's, Clark's remains pristine yet unpretentious — no small feat when the menu includes caviar. An impeccable array of oyster varieties and an expertly curated wine list punctuate the offerings which include *cioppino*, crab cakes, and lobster rolls. Tightening the purse strings? Try lunch or happy hour. 1200 W. Sixth, 512/297-2525, www.clarksoysterbar.com.

CIPOLLINA

When you're in Clarksville and have a hankering for Italian food, Cipollina is your first and best option. The bistro, a younger sibling to the original Jeffrey's, specializes in house-made pizzas and pastas, which fit the bill both for a quick bite with the kids or an elegant night out. Regardless of the occasion, be sure to save room for tiramisu. 1213 West Lynn, 512/477-5211, www.cipollina-austin.com.

WINK

It's difficult for a 14-year-old restaurant to remain in business, much less remain relevant, but Wink's locally focused menu continues to astound. There's a timelessness in the ingredients that still manages to set trends. Some look to New York or San Francisco for the next big thing. We'd rather look to chef Eric Polzer. 1014 N. Lamar, 512/482-8868, www.winkrestaurant.com.

FABI + ROSI

Fabi + Rosi serves classic German cuisine with a sustainable, modernized twist in a cozy cottage just north of Deep Eddy. Look for fresh and handmade food that tastes like it just leaped off of the farm, great charcuterie, melt-in-your-mouth schnitzel, pristine seafood, and one of Austin's best dry-aged steaks. 509 Hearn, 512/236-0642, www.fabiandrosi.com.

JEFFREY'S

McGuire Moorman reimagined Jeffrey's as the company flagship back in 2013. The well-loved clubby ambience of the bar and distinctive personal hospitality remain, but are now paired with exemplary dry-aged beef and June Rodil's extensive wine knowledge. Now the West Austin fine-dining landmark has settled into a new groove for a new generation of Austin diners. 1204 W. Lynn, 512/477-5584, www.jeffreysaustin.com.

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OLIVIA

Olivia is a civilized restaurant for grown-ups, with comfortable seating, subdued light, and upscale decor. Unlike many hot spots, you can actually have a conversation here (even at a large table). Locally sourced ingredients, carefully prepared by chef/owner James Holmes and his stellar staff, are a reminder of the "fine" part of fine dining. 2043 S. Lamar, 512/804-2700, www.olivia-austin.com.

UCHI

Tyson Cole's flagship has garnered so many accolades that it is now shorthand for Austin restaurant success. Other upscale Japanese restaurants have opened during Uchi's 12 years in business; not one has escaped a comparison to the standard. 801 S. Lamar, 512/916-4808, www.uchiaustin.com.

LUKE'S INSIDE OUT

In a town oversaturated with food trucks, Luke's has not only withstood the test of time, but sets itself apart. From sharable appetizers to an array of sandwiches – plus a hangover-curing brunch and daily specials like Cajun gumbo or duck confit – chef Luke Bibby definitely has it going on. 1109 S. Lamar, 512/589-8883, www.lukesinsideout.com.

ODD DUCK

Odd Duck's sublime sourdough bread has become a cult item, perhaps the best indication that Barley Swine's sibling is on to something. Simplicity is the order of the day, whether it's a lamb sausage or a perfectly roasted beet. The Duck's not about doing things flashily; it's about doing things right. 1201 S. Lamar, 512/433-6521, www.oddduckaustin.com.



Uchi



Barlata

BARLATA

The place for authentic Spanish cuisine, and perhaps the only one serving real tapas. Everything on the menu is flavorful, carefully crafted, and beautifully presented. Savory paellas, seafood *latas*, delectable entrées – heck, even a simple plate of hand-sliced *jamón serrano* is sublime. Add a great wine list, excellent cocktails, and friendly service, and you can't go wrong. 1500 S. Lamar #150, 512/473-2211, www.barlataaustin.com.

HENRI'S CHEESE & WINE

No longer just the comfortable spot to wait for a table at next door Barley Swine, Henri's really came into its own this year with the addition of both happy hour and dinner service, with Keegan Archer back in the kitchen. 2026 S. Lamar, 512/442-3373, www.henrischeese.com.

EL MESÓN

Forget orange queso and gooey enchiladas. This South Austin spot spins out the vibrant palate of Interior Mexico. This means slow-cooked *cochinita pibil*, red and green *moles*, and zesty *salpicon* accented by pink pickled onions and leafy, fresh cilantro. The menu is criminally affordable. 2038 S. Lamar, 512/442-4441, www.elmesonaustin.wordpress.com.



Austin Bees' Brandon Fehrenkamp

HIVE MIND THE BUZZ ABOUT BACKYARD BEEKEEPING

BY JESSI CAPE

The masterfully orchestrated, clandestine society of bees eludes complete human understanding. But for nearly 10,000 years, honey hunters have risked body and sanity for another drop, and the ancient vocation of beekeeping still enraptures.

"You have this enormous volume of knowledge and stories and anecdotes and legends and lore, all the way up to modern science, which is just adding on to the pile," says Austin Bees owner Brandon Fehrenkamp. "It's not like this is stamp collecting or something."

It's easy to get obsessed. Recently, a surprisingly diverse group sold out an all-day beekeeping seminar at the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. True, it's part of the trend toward fully local food systems, but the tiny buzzers seem to inspire particular devotion. Fehrenkamp says, "I think the bees choose you sometimes."

There is, of course, all that honey. "Honey never spoils," Fehrenkamp says. "It will last long after all of us are dead and our grandkids are dead. It will still be edible, but some of the floral compounds and scents and flavors, they fade over time." The sticky, sweet treat has purported benefits ranging from allergy relief to arthritis and multiple sclerosis treatments. It's loaded with antioxidants; it's antiseptic, antifungal, antibiotic, and antibacterial. "In the springtime when the bees

are starting to bring some nectar in, go in there and cut out a piece of honeycomb with your pocket knife and just chew it. It's not processed, it's completely fresh and completely raw, and it's amazing," he says.

"IN THE SPRINGTIME WHEN THE BEES ARE STARTING TO BRING SOME NECTAR IN, GO IN THERE AND CUT OUT A PIECE OF HONEYCOMB WITH YOUR POCKET KNIFE AND JUST CHEW IT."
— BRANDON FEHRENKAMP

It's a good motivation for putting on the suit, veil, and gloves. Backyard beekeeping is often the next step after raising backyard chickens. "They go hand in hand with each other," says Fehrenkamp. Three or four generations ago, "we completely lost touch with our food supply," but people are migrating back to knowing the origin stories of our food. "Beekeeping is just a part of that puzzle."

For the budding beekeeper, though, there's plenty of other things to consider. Honey's flavor profiles depend upon the nectar the bees forage, meaning there is mesquite honey and sunflower honey, and crops colored almost white to dark brown. At the Wildflower Center seminar, Texas Master Naturalist Becky Bender discussed pollen analysis and planting pollinator-friendly native plants. Rainfall

affects nectar flow, so in a drought year, for example, honey could have a strange taste. "Snow on the prairie makes honey taste like jalapeños," Bender says. In planting, she encourages people to "go a little wilder" because a rainbow of food sources means optimal health and adds, "Things we typically mow are in my honey every year."

There's also the environment to consider. One-third of the food supply depends on pollination, including most crops grown for their fruit – tomatoes, fiber (cotton), hay (livestock feed) – and a type of insecticide called neonicotinoids are known disruptors. Opting for chem-free beekeeping is best. The city of Austin allows backyard beekeeping (with specific regulations), and February is the time to get a backyard hive set up. "Bees are very incognito, if done correctly. It's crucial to have the apiary sited correctly," says Fehrenkamp. A solid safety plan is critical, for humans and bees.

All that may sound overwhelming, but Austin offers a variety of resources for those who have the beekeeping bug. "There's an old saying that if you ask 10 beekeepers you're gonna get 15 answers," says Fehrenkamp. "Very true." Austin boasts a long list of knowledgeable voices, including fellow seminar speakers Tanya Phillips of Bee Friendly Austin and co-organizers of Austin Area Beekeeping Association, Lily Rosenman and Karl Arcuri. Even some inmates of the Travis County Jail are being taught beekeeping.

And those who aren't quite willing to be a backyard locavore can still be part of the buzz. Austin's thriving food scene embraces local, raw, unpasteurized honey – the best kind – from farmers' market suppliers like Round Rock Honey and Austin Honey Co., to restaurants such as Lenoir and Gardner, which feature honey-based dishes and drinks and champion local resources. There's even a new restaurant inspired by the honeybee, Apis – now taking reservations for Valentine's Day.

But there's still nothing quite like doing it yourself. "Beekeeping helps pollinate things in your area, and you'll get honey and wax out of it, but the greater thing is it opens you up to this entire other world that's out there. You start to notice all these things – subtle changes in the seasons, different things blooming, little things you normally wouldn't notice, and can't notice with just your human senses," Fehrenkamp passionately explains. "Every single day you wake up and do [beekeeping], you're gonna learn something new. You're going to go to your deathbed having questions that are totally unanswered about bees. That's kind of cool."

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Vespaio's little sister may have a more casual atmosphere, but the food comes from the same kitchen. The thin-crust pizzas and handmade pastas (oh, the *pappardelle bolognese!*) are stellar, but don't overlook the daily specials. Also lovely for a glass of wine or cocktail with a house-made pâté, or a cup of coffee with one of their decadent desserts. 1610 S. Congress, 512/441-7672, www.austinvespaio.com.

AUSTIN BEER GARDEN BREWING CO.

Affectionately known as ABGB, this South Austin brewery has already evolved into an essential venue for live music, craft beer, and sharing pizza pies with neighbors. Toppings galore include house-made sausage to local farm veggies, and bonus menu fare includes deviled eggs and a French Cuban. Try a pint of "Always" favorite, Industry Pilsner. 1305 W. Oltorf, 512/298-2242, www.theabgb.com.



ABGB



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GREEN PASTURES

The grande dame of Austin restaurants offers the city's most elegant Southern Sunday brunch buffet at the venerable Faulk-Koock family estate in South Austin. As always, it's a favorite spot for weddings and special occasions. 811 W. Live Oak, 512/444-4747, www.greenpasturesrestaurant.com.

HABANERO MEXICAN CAFE

The Ibarra's have been holding court on Oltorf for more than a couple of decades, serving up tender fajitas and steaks grilled over mesquite, fantastic gorditas

and tortas, and beautiful *chile colorado*, *carnitas*, and *chuletas*. The short wait for breakfast (get the *machacado*) and lunch is worth it. 501 W. Oltorf, 512/416-0443, www.habanerocafe.com.

SWAY

Glamour and workmanship converge in this modern temple to Asian cuisine. Bold flavors reign uncontested through dishes like beef jungle curry, with coconut cream and fresh green peppercorns, and the decadent Son in Law – stewed pork in thick, sweet soy. Communal tables foster uncommon festivity. 1417 S. First, 512/326-1999, www.swayaustin.com.

HOPDODDY BURGER BAR

The original location of the mini-chain struck a surefire formula for success: high-concept crafted burgers (including bison, chicken, veggie, and tuna), beer from small, artisanal breweries, and craft cocktails. Throw in the hand-cut, Kennebec potato fries and it's obvious why Hopdoddy is so popular. 1400 S. Congress, 512/243-7505, www.hopdoddy.com.

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focused menu amps up the amour. Better yet, the close quarters allow you to see every dish leaving the kitchen – so you can always have what she's having. 1807 S. First, 512/215-9778, www.lenoirrestaurant.com.

ELIZABETH STREET CAFE

Serving breakfast, lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch, this charming, neighborhood delight is an epicurean's dream. The Vietnamese cafe/French bakery offers bánh mì on house-made baguettes, pho, vermicelli bowls, a wide assortment of coffee, French baked goods, cocktails, and more. Enjoy the tranquility of the patio or the cheerful hum of the sunlit dining room. 1501 S. First, 512/291-2881, www.elizabethstreetcafe.com.



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VERACRUZ ALL NATURAL

Six years in food-trailer years is like, what, 120 dog years? Founder and co-owner Reyna Vazquez clearly tapped into some latent taco need among Austinites through an insistence on quality and freshness. While the migas taco is the gold standard here, you really can't go wrong with anything on the Queen's menu. All three locations are great, but we like the one at Radio Coffee & Beer the best. 4208 Manchaca, 512/629-8238, www.veracruztacos.com.



Veracruz All Natural

ST. PHILIP PIZZA PARLOR & BAKESHOP

Uchi's DNA continues to infiltrate the Austin restaurant gene pool. The most recent offshoot is their pizza-centric palace in Sunset Valley. In addition to the wood-fired pies, other menu standouts include luscious meatballs, inventive brunch dishes, and an outstanding interpretation of a Twix bar in the bakeshop. 4715 S. Lamar, 512/358-7445, www.stpaustin.com.

SAP'S FINE THAI CUISINE

An encyclopedic menu begs you to venture beyond pad thai. Sap's generously spiced Thai dishes are deliciously made from fresh ingredients (owner Sap grows a lot of his own herbs and spices.). Both locations are visually stunning and comfortable, with plenty of options for the vegetarians, but we're still loyal to the original. 4514 Westgate, 512/899-8525, www.sapsthai.com.

ASIANA INDIAN CUISINE

Affordable, fragrant Indian specialties abound here, on a very complete buffet for lunch and Sunday brunch, and à la carte for dinner. The space may not be fancy, but it is spotless. And service is friendly and helpful. An excellent choice for takeout. 801 E. William Cannon #205, 512/445-3435, www.asianaindiancuisine.com.

EVANGELINE CAFE

The aromas of Cajun/Creole cooking seasoned with the thumping backbeat of swamp rock and zydeco transport guests to southwest Louisiana as soon as they cross the threshold. The food is authentic, the drinks are generous, and the hospitality is genuine. The good times always roll. 8106 Brodie, 512/282-2586, www.evangelinecafe.com.

CAFE MALTA

This eclectic Mediterranean-inspired joint might not be on the radar of folks who live north of the river, but it should be. Despite rave reviews of the house-made pasta, brisket ravioli, and unusual desserts (chocolate chili crème brûlée, anyone?), this 3-year-old shop has yet to shake off its best-kept-secret status. Pro tip: Go for lunch and enjoy high-end plates at a reasonable price point. 3421 W. William Cannon, 512/853-9584, www.cafemaltaaustin.com.

INDEPENDENCE FINE FOODS

Way down yonder in the far Southside bustles a pleasant surprise: a strip mall spot with a chef-created menu perfect for takeaway or dining in. They've got a full deli case, scratch soups, and house focaccia paninis. Nightly dinner specials are a star attraction and regularly include meats from local ranches and organic veggies. 1807 W. Slaughter #100, 512/363-5672, www.fb.com/pages/independence-fine-foods/563394570372167.

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SO HOT RIGHT NOW

2015'S TREND INGREDIENTS ARE RIDICULOUSLY GOOD LOOKING
BY RACHEL FEIT

Say bye-bye to burrata cheese, sayonara to shishitos, and adiós to aioli. The food industry is a fickle lover. Kale, brussels sprouts, and pork belly are already yesterday's flame. Cuisine's new darlings (with a few exceptions) are mostly the plain Jane ingredients we've known for years, made suddenly dazzling with some new adornments.

PICKLES: Not the dill or bread-and-butter variety. It turns out that eggplant, cauliflower, turnips, and even cantaloupe can be profitably pickled. Salt & Time, qui, Swift's Attic, and others are doing it to crowd-pleasing results. Low in calories and bursting with flavor, expect to see more of these on menus across town.

FLANS, PUDDINGS, AND CUSTARDS: Both sweet and savory varieties are popping up on menus around town. And why not? Eggy, custardy dishes take us all back to tender moments in grandma's kitchen. Think Lenoir's terrific vegetable flans, or Sway's sinful jasmine panna cotta.

CAULIFLOWER: This meatiest of all brassicas is finally getting the love it deserves. Whether it is a healthier substitute for mashed potatoes, pickled, roasted, or curried, cauliflower is definitely 2015's kale. Look for it wrapped up at Fork & Taco or paired with scallops at Apothecary.

SUNCHOKES: These knobby tubers have the versatility of a potato. They can be roasted, mashed, or served raw, drizzled with herbed olive oil, but they have a sunnier flavor and are often considered to be a healthy choice because they are high in inulin, vitamin C, and iron. They are abundant in the farmers' markets around town, and chefs – such as Andrew Wiseheart at Gardner – are starting to use them on their menus as well.



RICOTTA: Most of us only know how to use ricotta in lasagna or ravioli, but its creamy, mild taste is actually the perfect platform to support many different types of foods. Chefs know this too, and ricotta is making regular appearances in salads, desserts, custards, and spreads. And at Patrizi's, you can still have it with pasta.

YOGURT AND BUTTERMILK: Chefs are discovering what little old ladies have known for generations: that foods marinated in yogurt or buttermilk before they are cooked are delicious. But that's not all – in 2015 look for these to replace cream and aioli in sauces, dressings, and cakes. Buttermilk is an essential component of Fixe's fried chicken.

BROTH: Pun aside, broth is hot these days. New York's Marco Canora has a takeout window devoted to it. An entire subplot revolves around it in this season of *Downton Abbey*. Homey, curative, and healthful, paleo-dieters love it. Look for it served as a restorative shot or paired with something else. You can even take some of it home at Dai Due.

FORBIDDEN RICE: The name alone evokes secret assignations met in dark corners. And for that we want it. Actually, forbidden rice is so named because supposedly only Chinese royalty were allowed to eat it. Chefs love it now because of its nutty flavor and stunning deep purple hues. It looked great next to salmon belly at Congress.

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TEXAS HONEY HAM CO.

When this West Lake stalwart reopened in October after spending the better part of 2014 closed due to a devastating arson, ravenous fans rejoiced to be reunited with their favorite menu items. While the breakfast tacos are the claim to fame, don't miss the pig in a blanket (a slice of ham wrapped in a pancake) or the Frito pie, topped with Texas Honey Ham's signature ham-bone soup and pulled pork. 3736 Bee Cave Rd. #6, 512/330-9888, www.texashoneyham.com.

THE LEAGUE KITCHEN & TAVERN

Featuring well-executed burgers and steaks, comfort-food classics, and reliable libations, Tony Ciola and Creed Ford IV's League evokes the atmosphere of a comfortable country club sans snobbery and the membership fee. 1310 RR 620 S., 512/263-3279, www.leaguelakeway.com.

SCHMIDT FAMILY BARBECUE

This suburban smokehouse is operated by the third generation of rural Central Texas barbecue royalty, the venerable Schmidt family of Lockhart. Chad Franks and Suzy Schmidt Franks uphold the Texas meat market barbecue joint tradition in fine style, developing their own following. 12532 FM 2244, Bee Cave, 512/263-4060, www.schmidtfamilybarbecue.com.

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INGREDIENT FATIGUE

A RESTAURANT CRITIC'S LAMENT
BY VIRGINIA B. WOOD

In the space of a week at the end of August 2014, I had occasion to try three new Austin eateries that make an effort to embrace a farm-to-table, seasonal locavore aesthetic. At each meal, the proteins were served with some variation of eggplant and okra. By the third time that duo of hardy, late-summer vegetables took its turn onstage, I had already eaten all the eggplant and okra I wanted for that week. No, eggplant and okra weren't trending (another annoying contributor to the problem entirely), they just happened to be the only vegetables still producing locally during the no-man's-land of late summer. But the effect was the same – I felt exactly the way I do when I encounter yet

another crispy brussels sprouts treatment, a proliferation of poorly prepared pork belly, or one more beet dessert – I was struck by ingredient fatigue.

Of course, I can hear the sighs and see the eyes rolling from here. Ingredient fatigue, what a first-world problem! Well, of course it is, but then reviewing restaurants for an audience of people who eat out regularly and share photos of their meals on Instagram is a first-world kind of career. And in this day and age when dining out is the new entertainment, restaurants are the new theatre, and chefs are the new celebrities, ingredient fatigue is a real job hazard for people who write about food. Take the locavore move-

IN THIS DAY AND AGE WHEN DINING OUT IS THE NEW ENTERTAINMENT, RESTAURANTS ARE THE NEW THEATRE, AND CHEFS ARE THE NEW CELEBRITIES, INGREDIENT FATIGUE IS A REAL JOB HAZARD FOR PEOPLE WHO WRITE ABOUT FOOD.

ment, for example. While the concept of eating locally produced food in the season when it grows naturally is generally considered to be a good thing, following that directive can be a challenge for chefs in Central Texas.

When you take into consideration the fickle weather, the persistent drought, and the fact that the volume of produce grown locally couldn't begin to sustain all the restaurants flying the farm-to-table banner, it's no wonder we're skeptical when we read menu advisories that say, "We source our ingredients locally whenever possible." That statement covers a mighty big territory, everywhere from our chef went to the farmers' market once three years ago and it hasn't been possible to go back, to those out-of-season tomatoes on our Caprese salad grown hydroponically in a yurt on the desert, to serving eggplant and okra daily during August and September. So, what's a locavore chef to do? Realistically, in my job you just hope they do their best work with the finest possible ingredients, regardless of their geographical provenance.

As if the locavore challenge weren't disconcerting enough for a restaurant critic, the propensity for chefs to pile on the trend bandwagon can really damage a menu. Yes, pork belly has been trending for a few years now, but that doesn't mean that every menu is enhanced by a tough, greasy rendition of that particular cut of pork. Just because everybody's doing it does not mean everybody can do it well. And it's not just pork belly, believe me. The decadelong trend of molten chocolate cakes finally passed, but now vegetables are showing up in desserts and pastries, and there's a generous dusting

of salt on everything sweet, whether it needs it or not. This trend is genuinely distressing for a dessert lover with a serious sweet tooth. Just because someone can make salted beet ice cream does not necessarily mean they should.

Brussels sprouts and beets have certainly enjoyed their time in the spotlight, both nationally and locally. Turns out both vegetables grow well here, and savvy farmers such as Carol Ann Sayle at Boggy Creek have inspired chefs to add variations with the greens for both plants, but they still show up too often for my taste. We can thank a generation of chefs from Uchi, Uchiko, and East Side King for all the crispy brussels sprouts imitators, sort of like the turn-of-the-century years when many local chefs felt compelled to present their version of David Garrido's oyster nachos on yucca root chips. Kale is riding high these days, even having inspired its own cookbook, *50 Shades of Kale* – seriously. The cruciferous green will probably maintain trend status for a while yet, appearing in everything from smoothies to the currently ubiquitous kale salads.

Regarding trending ingredients, unless you've got something truly innovative up your sleeve like the Hightower's peanut butter brussels sprouts or 40 North's kale pizza, in the immortal words of the cryokinetic Princess Elsa, let it go. However, cauliflower appears to be ascending the veggie trend throne. Apparently cauliflower can be transformed into everything from creamy soups to risotto to "steaks," all of which I fully expect to discover on local menus sometime in the coming year.

I'm already starting to yawn. ■

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