

FLAVORS

Rose of Texas

San Antonio has become a chef magnet, bringing diverse, creative cuisine options to this Texas dining destination.

by Deborah Grossman

San Antonio is flashing on the nation's culinary radar. The city's dining scene has long emerged from the shadow of larger Houston and Dallas, and the seventh-largest metropolitan area in the U.S. has fared well during the recession. With military, medical and academic facilities, as well as oil, insurance and communications companies,

the population appreciates good cooking, albeit Texas or continental.

Add tourists to the dining mix. Exploring the San Antonio River Walk, the Alamo, museums and missions is appetite-inducing work. The popularity of the 10th annual New World Wine and Food Festival Nov. 11-15 attests to the rise of San Antonio food and Texas wine.

The diverse cultural elements of the San Antonio area stir up a unique style of Texas cuisine. From Le Rêve, the rare Texas restaurant that requires men to wear jackets, to Oro's venison at the historic Emily Morgan Hotel across from the Alamo to gourmet food-and-wine pairings at the Cabernet Grill in the heart of Hill Country, the influences of Mexico, France, Germany, Italy and local cooking styles are innovatively interpreted by an enthusiastic cadre of chefs.

Chef Jeff Balfour grew up on the Gulf Coast, closer to the French influences of New Orleans. "Once I moved to San Antonio and experienced the unique Mexican influences, I had a revelation that I couldn't live without cilantro, a food my family detested," he says.

This popular crab cake at the Hotel Valencia's Citrus features Gulf seafood with a San Antonio twist—roasted pumpkin seeds and chiles, cilantro and garlic.

A short list of Texas wine pairings

Wine-pairing recommendations by Ross Burtwell, chef/owner of Cabernet Grill, Fredericksburg, with one the largest Texas wine lists in the state:

- Charbroiled Texas bobwhite quail with jalapeño waffles and cayenne/honey glaze paired with Grape Creek Vineyards Cabernet Blanc—a semisweet Cabernet made in a rosé style that works perfectly with the slightly gamy flavor of the quail and explosive character of the jalapeño waffles.
- Oak-smoked dry-rub tenderloin with Inwood Estates Tempranillo—a big and full-bodied Texas red that matches well with the smoky flavor of the dry-rubbed beef tenderloin.
- Grilled Texas shrimp with Fredericksburg peach pico de gallo

and lavender beurre blanc paired with Becker Vineyards Viognier—a white wine with peach and grapefruit flavors named as one the best Viognier wines in the U.S. The lavender beurre blanc evokes the lavender fields that grow around the Becker vineyards.

- Almond-crusted catfish with red chili aioli paired with McPherson Cellars Viognier—this noble Rhone varietal, with its notes of melon, pear, citrus, peach, mango and honey, harmonizes with the slightly musky taste of Texas catfish. The nuance of honey plays off the almonds.

Wine-pairing recommendations by Terry Thompson-Anderson, Fredericksburg-based consultant/chef/author:

Balfour is executive chef at the Hotel Valencia. Trendy Vbar overlooks the River Walk and Citrus offers a wide-ranging, seasonal menu highlighting the Go Texan agricultural program. His quesadillas are layered in a rich *carne guisada* (meat stew) of local Broken Arrow Ranch venison topped with Oaxaca cheese and roasted-chipotle/raspberry sauce.

Heading to Hill Country

But one of Balfour's favorite dishes is Gulf snapper with German potato salad. The vinegar-based potato salad evokes the cuisine of neighboring Hill Country. Settled by Germans in the 19th century, Fredericksburg is located about two hours drive north of San Antonio, in the heart of Hill Country.

"Hill Country cooking is unique. I'd call it rustic elegant," says Terry Thompson-Anderson, consultant, chef and author based in Fredericksburg. "You'll see local peaches, pecan, game and Gulf Coast seafood prepared with Spanish and German

influences. And, of course, chicken-fried steak, the national dish of Texas."

Though probably evolved from German schnitzel with veal, chicken-fried techniques get creative at the hand of Ross Burtwell, chef/owner of Cabernet Grill in Fredericksburg. Burtwell makes chicken-fried shiitake mushrooms, antelope medallions, kangaroo flank and Texas oysters. His pork tenderloins are smoked over local post oak. The white-tablecloth restaurant also has one of the largest collections of Texas wine in the state.

Burtwell, who trained as an apprentice in Dallas, wouldn't trade his Fredericksburg locale. With a dozen well-known Hill Country wineries, such as Becker Vineyards in Stonewall, nearby, he specializes in pairing entrées such as grilled local quail stuffed with jalapeños and applewood-smoked bacon with local wines.

To honor Fredericksburg's bountiful crop of peaches, Burtwell prepares grilled

- Grilled venison backstrap with ancho-chili/honey sauce paired with Alamosa Wine Cellars El Guapo Tempranillo—the complex Tempranillo, with rich fruit and notes of blueberries, juniper, chocolate and leather, is the perfect match for the bold flavors of the game and chili-infused sauce.
- Chicken-fried steak with cream gravy paired with Rancho Ponte Vineyards Sangiovese—the chicken-fried steak, a bold, rough-around-the-edges dish with cream gravy, pushes the level of fat over the top. This Sangiovese, a big and gutsy wine with lots of ripe plum and a noteworthy spicy finish, diminishes the mouthfeel of the fat.

Texas shrimp with peach pico de gallo and lavender beurre blanc. For dessert, he hones his Texan culinary techniques by serving chicken-fried pecan pie with chocolate/Jack Daniel's ice cream.

Back in San Antonio, executive chef Moses Cruz wows his sweet-toothed customers with *el taco de fruta* at Oro in the Emily Morgan Hotel. Beginning with a salted corn taco shell dipped in bittersweet chocolate, he layers in avocado mousse, topping it with fresh fruit, strawberry pico de gallo and white chocolate shavings.

The heart of San Antonio

At the historic hotel named for Emily Morgan, who allegedly helped the Texans win post-Alamo at San Jacinto, Cruz also recognizes Hill Country cuisine with breakfast eggs Luckenbach accompanied by local Holmes pecan-smoked sausages, brioche French toast, peppers, onions and cilantro with melted cream cheese. Cojita-crusted avocado with Bay City blue crab with tomato chutney is Oro's signature



Deborah Grossman



Oro Platinum Margarita

1¼ oz. Tequila Don Julio Blanco
 ½ oz. Grand Marnier
 ½ oz. Cointreau
 Splash of lime juice
 Splash of simple syrup

Shake; pour over ice. Do not strain.

Oro Watermelon Margarita

1¼ oz. Quervo Gold Tequila
 ¾ oz. Smirnoff Watermelon Vodka
 ¾ oz. Dekuyper Watermelon Pucker
 Schnapps
 Splash of lime juice
 Splash of simple syrup

Shake; pour over ice.

appetizer. Tobacco onions—thinly fried onion rings fried so dark they resemble shredded tobacco—top his cowboy rib-eye.

At Vbar and Citrus, Balfour's meat program also includes venison. But his bestselling crab cakes feature Gulf seafood with a San Antonio twist: roasted pumpkin seeds, roasted chiles, cilantro and garlic. Balfour's Mexican Martini with tequila, Cointreau, olive juice and jalapeño garnish enlivens Vbar's lounge menu. The chef prioritizes a green approach by using recyclables and installing the city's first Natura water purification system at an independent restaurant.

Jason Dady is a chef/restaurateur imprinting his eclectic style on San

Left to right: At Oro, executive chef Moses Cruz offers poached shrimp with oven-dried cranberry-Boursin. Grilled salmon with mojo glaze and ragoût of chorizo and baby spinach is on the menu at The Lodge Restaurant of Castle Hills. Classic barbecue and nontraditional preparations can be found at Jason Dady's Two Bros. BBQ Market.

Antonio. After studying at the California Culinary Academy in San Francisco and working in California, he chose San Antonio to open his first restaurant in 2001. "I saw the growth opportunities and the openness to new styles of food. The city has every kind of cuisine on the planet. The hospitality is genuine here."

Staking his roots first in a historic mansion in the bustling Castle Hills residential district, Dady opened The Lodge Restaurant of Castle Hills with Italian and Texas nuances. His duck confit with orecchiette pasta is topped with toasted garlic breadcrumbs and Parmigiano-Reggiano. Dady's Bin 555 Restaurant and Wine Bar is vinous-centric, with small plates such as veal meatballs with a sauce of Fredericksburg peaches, vanilla and cinnamon.

In 2008 he opened Tre Trattoria, favoring the flavors of Northern Italy. Yet the housemade linguini with clams claims a Texas kick with chili pepper flakes. Bowing to the Texas obsession with barbecue, Dady also launched Two Bros. BBQ Market. Along with classic Texan dry-rub beef brisket, Dady breaks

the rule against not-so-sweet sauce by slathering baby back pork ribs in a sweet-cherry glaze.

Heading to the River Walk

But in San Antonio, the holy grail for restaurateurs is opening a venue on or near the heavily trafficked River Walk. Dady will open Insignia this fall at the historic Fairmount Hotel, located downtown near HemisFair Park and a few minutes stroll to the River Walk. He plans a seasonal, wide-ranging menu with a global wine list.

Bruce Auden arrived in San Antonio in 1986 at the height of attention on "new" Texas cuisine. A native of England, the chef fell for the broad scope of Texas agriculture, seafood, wine—and warm weather. He moved the original Biga restaurant to the southern section of River Walk in 2001. But noting the average of 50 summer days with more than 100-degree heat, he's pleased that Biga on the Banks is housed in the former reading room of the library, with floor-to-ceiling windows and air conditioning. The 25-seat patio is packed in more temperate weather.

As for the food, Auden co-opted chicken frying in his upscale version: chicken-fried Gulf oysters, squid ink linguini, Swiss chard, pancetta and mustard hollandaise. Smoked salmon nachos are another twist on Texas cuisine. But all-around Texas fare is weathering the economy well.



Mighty Studio

Citrus Crab Cakes

Jeff Balfour, Executive Chef
Citrus and Vbar at Hotel Valencia

- 2 lbs. jumbo lump crab
- Juice of 1 lime
- 2 bunches green onions, sliced
- 1 roasted red pepper, diced
- 2 seedless roasted jalapeños, diced
- 1 t. chili powder
- 1 cup roasted pumpkin seeds, coarsely chopped
- 1 cup mayonnaise
- ½ cup Japanese breadcrumbs (panko)
- Salt and pepper, to taste

Butter, as needed
Citrus/cilantro hollandaise, for service

Method: Fold together crab, lime juice, green onion, red pepper, jalapeño, chili powder, pumpkin seeds, mayonnaise, breadcrumbs and salt and pepper, being careful not to break up crab. Mold mixture into 4 (4-in.) ring molds (or donut cutters with center-hole cutter removed). Sauté crab cakes in butter over medium-high heat for approximately 3 minutes per side. Serve with citrus/cilantro hollandaise.

The patio at Biga on the Banks is a favorite spot to enjoy Bruce Auden's chicken-fried Gulf oysters, smoked salmon nachos or venison surf and turf.

"People may buy fewer courses, but they still want their local venison," says Auden. His venison surf and turf—11-spiced Texas Hill Country Axis venison chop and lobster tail and claw—is a perennial favorite. He also pairs the venison with grilled quail, potato purée, chestnuts, Brussels sprouts leaves and cranberry chutney in a juniper sauce. But for dessert, Auden sticks to his British roots with sticky toffee pudding with English custard and housemade pastries.

Growing up in San Antonio, Andrew Weissman expected to continue his career as a broadcast journalist. But the cooking bug struck, and he attended The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., and cooked in France. He returned home to open Le Rêve (the dream) in the historic Builders Exchange Building above a secluded section of the River Walk.

Le Rêve is one of the few restaurants in Texas to require reservations and a jacket. Weissman hasn't missed a night of French cooking in years, yet for amuse-

bouche, he found himself veering toward Italy, preparing ravioli with lobster and black truffle. When he decided to open a restaurant in the redeveloped Pearl Brewery, he chose an Italian concept. For Il Sogno Osteria (also means, "the dream"), he menus only food his Italian chef would serve to his mother.

The Pearl Brewery development, with its own farmers market, resides on the newly opened northern section of the River Walk. Set in a replica of a grain-drying building, the centerpiece of Il Sogno Osteria is an antipasti bar where guests can choose between three- or five-item plates such as octopus salad, bagna cauda, fava beans and mint purée, and mostly house-cured charcuterie. The Italian obsession boils down to housemade Burrata and grinding Bristot 1919 espresso beans.

Given the diverse cuisines in and around San Antonio, it's the comfort food that's spreading like Central Texas wildflowers across the country. Hill Country Barbecue Market opened three years ago in Manhattan's Flatiron district. In homage to the owners' Texas roots, post oak is trucked from central Texas to fuel the pit-smoker.

With her Southern heritage also rooted in barbecue, executive chef Elizabeth Karmel applies a Texas rub of butcher-grind black pepper, kosher salt, and "just enough cayenne to turn the rub pink" to her meats. Though Hill Country brisket is often served without gravy, Karmel offers "if-you-gotta-have-it" peach/chipotle sauce, the fruit a nod to Fredericksburg.

For chefs such as Cruz, Balfour, Dady, Burtwell and Weissman, who like to express their creativity in the kitchen, the San Antonio area is the place to be, replete with nearby Hill Country wine country, farmers markets, abundant produce—and eager guests.

Whether restaurants are opening with white tablecloths or smokers, Weissman remarks that the city has become a chef magnet. "San Antonio is like Atlanta in the 1980s. Restaurants are popping up all over, and chefs want to move here."

Deborah Grossman is a San Francisco Bay Area journalist who writes about people, places and products that impact the food-and-wine world.