

AUSTIN, TEXAS

Forget the music — cue the food!

■ Austin has grown beyond music and BBQ to embrace sushi, food trucks and farm-to-table menus.

BY MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ
Special to The Miami Herald

When Austin is in the spotlight, it's usually because the thumping Austin City Limits Festival has set up shop in Zilker Park or the talent-heavy South by Southwest is in town. Lately, though Austin's food culture is also growing in reputation.

Fresh off a *Top Chef: Texas* run — with the winner, Paul Qui, hailing from Austin — and hosting the inaugural Austin Food and Wine Festival in late April, this town that calls itself the Live Music Capital of the World has also become a gourmand destination.

Opened in Austin in 1980, the flagship Whole Foods Market plays a role in the city's culinary story. At a time when Texas was predominantly known for barbecue and Tex-Mex, the first Whole Foods challenged Austin locals to care about their food, how it was sourced, and how it was prepared. The city and chefs responded resoundingly.

Embracing the slogan "Keep Austin Weird," chefs, both native and imported, experimented with both concept and cuisine, utilizing the produce and proteins of local farms.

When a tough economy crippled the country, those who couldn't afford a brick and mortar restaurant were still able to jump into the game with food trailers that require little overhead. Pretty soon, hundreds of original trailer menus were selling to phenomenal success.

National media recognition has followed. James Beard Foundation nominations and wins piled up, Food and Wine best new chefs were crowned, Bon Appetit and GQ regularly include Austin's eateries on their top ten lists, and of course, there's that most recent *Top Chef* win. Austin, it seems, has earned some serious bragging rights.

BBQ & TEX-MEX

Few states — some would say none — are better at smoky barbecue and spicy Tex-Mex, and Austin's many restaurants celebrate this idea. For barbeque, head to Lambert's, housed in a historic brick building complete with live music venue. The warm space features oversized booths, an open kitchen and aromas of bacon and brown sugar that make it hard to think straight.

Start with crispy wild boar ribs (a play on buffalo wings), fried green tomatoes, or Gulf Coast oysters, and finish with a heaping plate of smoked meats like maple and coriander pork ribs, achiote and lime-rubbed chicken, or brown sugar and coffee-marinated brisket or with a side of mac 'n' cheese and collard greens.

On Austin's grittier East Side, scratchy old school joints meet the tragically hip. Franklin BBQ — recently named "Best Barbeque in America" by *Bon Appetit* — has a cult-like following, including a YouTube video homage. The line forms two hours before opening, but the perfectly smoked, gently crisped brisket and pulled pork by the pound are worth every long-suffering minute of wait. Sandwiches comes with meats piled high. Save room for the pecan pie!

If your palate skews Tex-Mex, La Condesa serves both modern and traditional Mexican in a swanky downtown space. Traditional dishes like tortilla soup, chile relleno, and duck in mole sauce are featured nightly, and with three days notice, *cochinillo*, or a whole roasted suckling pig can be served family-style. Fresh ceviches like the excellent cobia with spicy aguachiles, and a vast array of tostadas and taquitos round out the menu.

If swank isn't your scene, Cisco's in East Austin wins the award for most authentic. The dingy storefront gives way to a back room where Willie Nelson snapshots hang on the walls, and cheap breakfast tacos



MARIE ELENA MARTINEZ

FOOD FRENZY: Another of Austin's food trailers found along trendy South Congress.

stuffed with eggs, chorizo, and cheese served as hang-over remedy. Locals prefer the *migas*, scrambled eggs with all the fixings, biscuits smothered in gravy, and re-fried beans. No matter what you have, it's the best Mexican breakfast institution in Austin. Period.

FABLED TRAILERS

From stand-alone trailers to large trailer parks, Austin is home to more than 1,500 mobile eateries, giving eaters whiplash with choices from Asian to kebabs to chicken and waffles. Now a nationwide phenomenon, Austin's trucks are legendary, and one can't-miss spot is Torchy's Tacos for messy offerings like the Green Chile pork taco, the Trailer Park made with fried chicken, the Brush Fire featuring Jamaican jerk chicken, or the Mr. Pink made with tuna and red cabbage.

G'Raj Mahal is Austin's premier Indian trailer, known for a killer chicken tikka masala that you can't help but inhale, but East Side King is where Asian street food reaches new heights with tongue, chicken, and pork belly buns, yakitori with rice, sweet and spicy Brussels sprouts, and varicous *karaage*, or deep-fried, chicken dishes — all for under \$8.

Make no mistake; not all trailers serve fast food fixes.

Odd Duck Farm to Trailer began as an experiment by Chef Bryce Gilmore, focusing on dishes like slow-roasted pork belly sliders rubbed with coffee and roasted Brussels sprouts with rabbit. Included in Food & Wine's Best New Chefs for 2011, Gilmore now owns Barley Swine, an extension of the original Odd Duck truck that serves small plates of rich ingredients like cauliflower and foie gras, grilled sweetbreads, and brisket and barbecued beans. Though not all trailer operators aspire to evolution, many, like Odd Duck, are the breeding ground for larger concepts. "For me," says Gilmore, "my trailer and restaurant were meant to coexist but the goal was always to go brick and mortar."

RECOGNITION

Other Austin chefs are receiving accolades as well. Tyson Cole, last year's James Beard Best Chef of the Southwest, put sushi in Texas right up there with barbeque when his Japanese restaurant Uchi opened in 2003. Set in a small bunga-

low that feels cozy yet modern, Uchi presents diners with mind-boggling sashimi and sushi dishes that mix flavors like hamachi and pear to mouthwatering result.

Uchiko, Cole's second restaurant featuring a similar menu, came alive in 2010 with *Top Chef*'s Paul Qui — a James Beard Award finalist this year — at the helm. With Uchi and Uchiko, presentation is flawless, reservations are coveted and flavor pairings that seem off — tuna and goat cheese, for example — are sublime. Though straight sushi rolls rounds out the menus, experiment with the unexpected at both restaurants and your taste buds will be rewarded.

For elegant dining, it's all about Chef David Bull's Congress, named Best New Texas Restaurant by the *New York Times*. Set in a lush cream-colored formal dining room, Congress' tasting menus feature locally sourced ingredients and meticulously paired wines. A recent tasting menu offered scallops with cocoa and coconut cream, a prime

ribeye cap with black truffle puree, and rabbit agnolotti, while a *la carte* choices included beef tartare, arugula and burrata salad, potato gnocchi with merguez and fava beans, and veal tenderloin with prosciutto.

Austin's food frenzy will peak April 27-29 when the Austin Food & Wine Festival, will offer more than 40 gastronomic events encompassing grand tasting tents and seminars, chef demonstrations, and of course, live music acts. The event marks Food & Wine's first festival involvement in Texas.

"It's recognition that there is something going on here; a major collaboration between incredibly talented Austin-based chefs, restaurant owners, vendors, suppliers, growers, producers, and musicians. It is a celebration of Austin culture," explains Jesse Herman, owner of La Condesa and the festival's co-founder. And of course there will be music — this is Austin, after all — including performances by Grammy-Award winning Lucinda Williams, Mayer Hawthorne, and The Black Keys.

Going to Austin

Getting there: Southwest and JetBlue fly nonstop from Fort Lauderdale in a little over three hours. Several airlines make the trip from Miami or Fort Lauderdale with a connecting flight in 4 1/2 to 5 hours. Roundtrip airfare starts around \$280. Taxis to downtown Austin cost around \$25.

Getting around: Austin is easily navigable, and most locals keep it simple, getting around by bike or pedicab, which can be hailed like taxis on the street. Many pedicab drivers work solely for tips, but inquire before you jump in. Bikes can be rented for as little as \$5/hour at Mellow Johnny's (400 Nueces St.; 512-473-0222; www.mellowjohnnys.com).

Information: www.austintexas.org

WHERE TO STAY

Driskoll Hotel (604 Brazos Street; 512-474-5911; www.driskillhotel.com): Rumor has it that this landmark is haunted, though it may merely evoke the Austin of 1886 when it belonged to a cattle baron. Now it is a centrally located option featuring one of the city's coolest bars. Weekday rates begin around \$200.

Hotel Saint Cecilia (112 Academy Drive; 512-852-2400; http://hotelstcecilia.com): Set in a wooded estate off South Congress, the funky bungalows, studios, and suites that derive inspiration from legendary poets, writers, and musicians like William S. Burroughs and the Rolling Stones make this place the place to stay in Austin. Rates for studios begin around \$265.

W Austin (200 Lavaca Street; 512-542-3600; www.whotelaustin.com): Contemporary luxury, Bliss Spa products, and restaurant Trace, which backs the iconic Austin City Limits' music venue, make this a perfect place to set down nightly roots. Rates from \$260.

WHERE TO EAT

Uchi (801 S. Lamar Boulevard; 512-916-4808; http://uchiaustin.com) and **Uchiko** (4200 N. Lamar Boulevard; 512-916-4808) are Austin's hottest reservations, serving Japanese fusion and sushi plates by the city's golden chefs. \$80+ per person, minimum, including drinks.

Congress (200 Congress Avenue; 512-827-2760; http://congressaustin.com): Within the temple of this elegant dining room, three-course (\$75) and seven-course (\$125) locally driven tasting menus can be enhanced with wine pairings for an additional \$60.

Lambert's (401 W. 2nd Street; 512-494-1500; http://lambertsaustin.com): This live music space (upstairs) and cozy BBQ haven draws raves for massive platters of smoked meat and decadent side dishes like cheese grits and fried okra. For dessert, don't miss the fried cherry pie. About \$60 per person for dinner with drinks.

La Condesa (400A W. 2nd Street; 512-478-0300; http://lacondesa.com): Upscale Tex-Mex never tasted so good at this chic bi-level space dishing out small plates like tostadas and taquitos, larger dishes like duck in mole sauce, and drink specials heavy on the tequila. About \$60 per person with drinks.

Barley Swine (2024 S. Lamar Boulevard; 512-394-8150; http://barleyswine.com): Riffing on the fare offered at Odd Duck Farm to Trailer, super chef Bryce Gilmore features a changing menu of small plates with farm-to-table sensibilities. From \$50 per person with drinks.

Gourdough's (1503 S. 1st Street; 512-607-6568; www.gourdoughs.com): Specialty doughnuts hit the sweet spot. From \$4.25.

Austin Cake Ball Kitchen & Bar (3401 Esperanza Crossing; 512-215-3633; www.austincakeball.com): Relaxed setting offering both sweet and savory options, though the cake ball is the reason to come. Dinner, \$30 per person with a drink. Cake balls, \$2.95 each.

Cisco's (1511 East 6th; 512-478-2420): Dive Mexican where the \$8 migas, scrambled eggs with all the fixings, steal the show. Full breakfast, \$10.

Franklin BBQ (900 E. 11th Street; 512-653-1187; www.franklinbarbecue.com): Don't be scared of the line. Get on it and be rewarded with gently crisped brisket (\$16) and pulled pork (\$13) by the pound. Plates with two sides run from \$8-13.

Torchy's Tacos (1311 S. 1st Street; 512-366-0537; http://torchystacos.com): With various locations throughout the city, cheap, delicious Mexican fare is never far away. Tacos, \$5.

WHAT TO DO

Austin Eats Food Tours (512-963-4545; www.austineatsfoodtours.com) cover the food scenes in Downtown, South Congress, and East Austin neighborhoods by foot, bike or van. Prices from \$65-\$75.

Austin Food & Wine Festival April 27-29 (Auditorium Shores, 950 West Riverside Drive between 1st Street and South Lamar Blvd; www.austinfoodandwinefestival.com): With events from tastings to hands-on classes, weekend attendance packages start at \$250.

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