

# Houston Culinary Scene

By Dena Roche



Austin may be quirky and Dallas may have the Cowboys, but Houston, the fourth largest city in the country, is the culinary capital of Texas. As a hub of oil and gas, international business dominates the city, and with a whopping 90 plus languages peppering the dialect, it's safe to say whatever type of ethnic cuisine you desire can be found in the snarled maze of the city's notorious 12-lane mega highways.

There is a dizzying array of award-winning chefs and restaurants that one could highlight in Houston, but I decide to focus on something old and something new.

Holleys Seafood Restaurant and Oyster Bar opened its doors this summer in Midtown, and has quickly become a hotspot. On a recent Monday night, the airy dining room is packed, and diners are treated to watching Low-country, Southern and Texas cuisine created in the semi-open kitchen.

Chef Mark Holley draws on his family's Midwest and Southern roots, while using local, fresh produce and protein to craft a unique menu with many different influences at play.

Starters run the gamut from gumbo, to Texas BBQ shrimp to Thai Curry mussels. My friend and I opt for the Midwestern carb fest of benne seed parker house rolls served with pimento cheese, smoked drum mousse and pickled veggies.

Seafood is the star here, and popular entrees include blackened grouper with Carolina gold rice, creamer peas and Kimchi greens, which my friend tries. I select for another favorite, the Gulf flounder, topped with crabmeat, maitake mushrooms, peanuts and charred tomatoes. We share both entrees and not much is left on the plate.



For over 30 years, Backstreet Cafe has been delighting Houston diners in its 1930s era house in River Oaks. During its long history, it has morphed from a salad and sandwich cafe to an award-winning American Bistro, while still retaining a cozy, neighborhood feel.

Just as the restaurant has grown, so has Executive Chef Hugo Ortega's culinary career. He actually started his career at the cafe as the dishwasher! After culinary school and a few more positions at the restaurants, he and his wife, Tracy Vaught, bought the cafe. Ortega has been a finalist for James Beard Best Chef of the Southwest for the past three years.

The restaurant also consistently wins awards for its wine, including Wine Spectator's Award of Excellence from 2001-2013 and Rising Star Sommelier by StarChefs in 2011 for Sean Beck. I loved the "hostel" wine section of the extensive wine list. Just like hostels are cheaper alternatives to hotels, hostel wines are hidden gems the restaurant has received in small quantities from its supplier. Roll the dice and you never know what you'll be rewarded with.

I can't recommend highly enough the Roasted Pear Salad to start. The basic menu description of roasted pears, bleu cheese, dried fruits and nuts does nothing to describe this surprising salad. In reality, it is a full roasted pear, stuffed with an intoxicating mix of fruit, nuts and cheese. I don't even like bleu cheese, but in this marriage, it worked perfectly. I think the chef could easily put this on the dessert menu as well.

For the main course, seared scallops with cauliflower puree and wild mushrooms are divine. My friend goes for comfort food, choosing the waiter's recommendation of roasted half-chicken, prepared with a pepper coriander rub and served with mixed grains and roasted vegetables. As you explore the Houston dining scene, make some time to try these two old and new stand-outs.

Make the JW Marriott in downtown your base in the city. Besides being well-located to a wealth of culinary treasures and the 20+ strong museums in the Museum District, the hotel just launched a new spa concept, the first JW in the country to transform to a Spa by JW.

