

"It is the gold standard." -ALI KHAN



The tonkotsu original at Ramen Tatsu-ya in Austin

THE BEST THING I'VE EVER ATE IN Texas

"IF I CAN HAVE HOMEMADE LINK BARBECUE SAUSAGE, FOLDED WITH A PIECE OF BREAD, I KNOW I'M HOME!"
-GEORGE FOREMAN

"It was the first thing I tried, and I loved it so much there was no need to order anything else."
-JODI THOMAS

"Licking your fingers with each bite is the best part." -CHET GARNER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIC W. POHL | ILLUSTRATIONS BY SAMUEL KERR

TIMES HAVE BEEN TOUGH

Times have been tough for restaurants. For nearly two years, the COVID-19 pandemic has presented a gauntlet of challenges for businesses small and large whose primary passion is pleasing their customers with satisfying grub and service. Instead, restaurateurs have had to reckon with shuttered dining rooms, safety measures, weather disasters, supply-chain interruptions, rising food prices, changing business models, staffing shortages, nervous employees, and a tentative public. There's no manual for navigating times like these.

"We love throwing a great dinner party every night in the restaurant—being around people, working for people, making people happy," says Jon Bonnell, the chef and owner of four Fort Worth restaurants, including the popular Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine. "It was so hard to see an industry that I've loved for over 20 years falling apart when nobody did anything wrong. I think it's worth fighting for and worth saving."

We couldn't agree more. At their best, restaurant experiences are like mini-vacations. We go out to eat not only for a break from cooking at home, but also for a sensory escape from our day-to-day routines. And we're lucky to have great options, too: Numerous Texas chefs and eateries have been honored with James Beard Foundation awards, the Oscars of the restaurant world.

To celebrate the state's acclaimed dining scene, we reached out to noteworthy Texans and asked them to share their favorite restaurant meals. The responses ran the gamut. *Hank the Cowdog* author John R. Erickson, who lives on a Panhandle ranch, told us about the gargantuan carne asada burrito at Chihua's in Perryton. Businessman and former Dallas Cowboys linebacker Dat Nguyen said grilled spring rolls are his barometer of a good Vietnamese restaurant—and his favorites are at his sister's restaurant, Hu-Dat Noodle House in Corpus Christi. You'll find something for pretty much every taste here.

We hope this story will inspire you to support your favorite restaurants, but we also urge patience. Restaurants face continued struggles prioritizing health policies, maintaining a labor force, and keeping their kitchens stocked. "We can't predict what the next problem is going to be, but we know there will be problems," says Bonnell, who chronicled his pandemic experience in the book *Carry Out, Carry On: A Year in the Life of a Texas Chef*. "On the positive side, people want to go out. Business is booming and restaurants are full." —Matt Joyce



JODI THOMAS AMARILLO-BASED BESTSELLING ROMANCE AUTHOR

"A favorite of the students of West Texas A&M University, **Sayakomarn's Restaurant** opened on the square in Canyon in 2007. My favorite dish is their **lemon chicken with fried rice** and a diet Coke. It was the first thing I tried, and I loved it so much there was no need to order anything else." *sayakomarns.com*

Small Town Favorites

THE CALABREZE WITH SHRIMP AND ARTICHOKE IN PINK SAUCE at **Bella Italia** in Lampasas. 512-564-5202
—Brittany Pozzi Tonozzi, Lampasas, champion barrel racer

THE SPANISH OCTOPUS AGUACHILE at **Los Olivos Market** in Buda. losolivomarkets.com
—Ali Khan

THE CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK WITH EGGS at **The Café** in Graford. facebook.com/thecafegraford
—Erin Rahr

THE GRILLED SPRING ROLLS at **Hu-Dat Noodle House** in Corpus Christi. hudatnoodlehouse.com
—Dat Nguyen, Grapevine, former Dallas Cowboy

Top Tex-Mex

THE MILANESA TORTAS WITH FRESH AVOCADO AND THE PALETAS (frozen pops) at **Flautas y Paletería Tepalca** in El Paso. flautastepalca.com
- *Alejandra Chavez*, owner-chef of Thyme Matters in El Paso

THE QUESO WITH SPICED BEEF AND A MEXICAN MARTINI at either **Trudy's Texas Star** or **Matt's El Rancho** in Austin. trudys.com; mattselrancho.com
- *Sarah Jarosz*

PORK CHICHARRONES AND SALSA MACHA at **Chicharrones El Güero** in Palmview. facebook.com/chicharroneselguero
- *Macarena Hernández*, Edinburg-based journalist and educator

SOUR CREAM CHICKEN ENCHILADAS at **Leal's** in Muleshoe. myleals.com
- *Jodi Thomas*

THE CARNE ASADA BURRITO AND CEVICHE at **Chihua's** in Perryton. facebook.com/chihuasmexicanrestaurant
- *John R. Erickson*, author of *Hank the Cowdog*

THE MOLE POBLANO ON CHICKEN ENCHILADAS at **Hugo's** in Houston. hugosrestaurant.net
- *Adán Medrano*, Houston-based chef and food writer



GEORGE FOREMAN

HOUSTON-BASED HEAVY-WEIGHT BOXING CHAMP, PITCHMAN, AND PREACHER

"When I'm in Marshall, I like to eat my barbecue at **Porky's Smokehouse**, especially the barbecue ribs and sausage."
porkysmokehouse.com



ERIN RAHR

**CO-FOUNDER AND PRESIDENT
OF FORT WORTH'S RAHR & SONS
BREWING COMPANY**

"My all-time favorite meal in Fort Worth is the **pepper-crusted bison tenderloin**, which has a whiskey-spiked cream sauce and truffled french fries with it, at **Bonnell's Fine Texas Cuisine**. This seriously Texan food feels exactly right for any occasion." *bonnellstexas.com*

SARAH JAROSZ

**NASHVILLE VIA WIMBERLEY
GRAMMY AWARD-WINNING
SINGER-SONGWRITER**

"The **enchiladas** or **tamales** at **Mi Tierra Café y Panadería** in San Antonio. My family and I have a tradition of making a trip to Mi Tierra around Christmas. All the decorations and music set such a vibrant, joyful scene. Basically everything on the menu is delicious." *mitierracafe.com*



Seconds, Please!



ADÁN MEDRANO

Houston-based chef, food writer, and executive producer of the food documentary *Truly Texas Mexican*

"The **carne guisada** at **El Puesto No. 2** in San Antonio. This stove-top beef stew is one of the iconic dishes of *comida casera*, Texas Mexican home cooking. Every time I order it, El Puesto hits it out of the ballpark with the trinity of spices unique to Texas Mexican cuisine: garlic, black pepper, and cumin. It's served with mashed pinto beans, rice, and salad. So delicious, I mop up the plate with the soft and pillowy flour tortillas." [210-432-1400](tel:210-432-1400)



GEORGE FOREMAN

"**Pappas Bar-B-Q** in Houston reigns supreme as far as I'm concerned. When I eat barbecue, that's how I know I'm in Texas. I like the ribs, of course, but if I can have **homemade link barbecue sausage, folded with a piece of bread**, I know I'm home." pappasbbq.com



TIFFANY DERRY

veteran of TV's *Top Chef* competitions, owner-chef at *Roots Southern Table* in *Farmers Branch*, and *Roots Chicken Shak* in *Plano* and *Austin*

"Just outside of Beaumont, where I grew up, Lumberton is home to **Catfish Cabin**, a place that's been around since the 1990s and is still going strong. It's some of the best seafood you can find. Best is the combination **fried catfish and oysters with hush puppies**." [409-755-6800](tel:409-755-6800)



RAY BENSON

Austin-based leader of the *Western swing band* *Asleep at the Wheel*

"Anything at **The Salt Lick BBQ** in Driftwood. They have the most unique barbecue sauce ever. Owner Scott Roberts' mother is from Hawaii, and her sauce is not like any other in America. It makes the barbecue experience more exotic. I love their **pork ribs and the sauce**, but it goes on brisket or sausages or anything." saltlickbbq.com



ALI KHAN

AUSTIN-BASED HOST OF *CHEAP EATS* ON THE COOKING CHANNEL

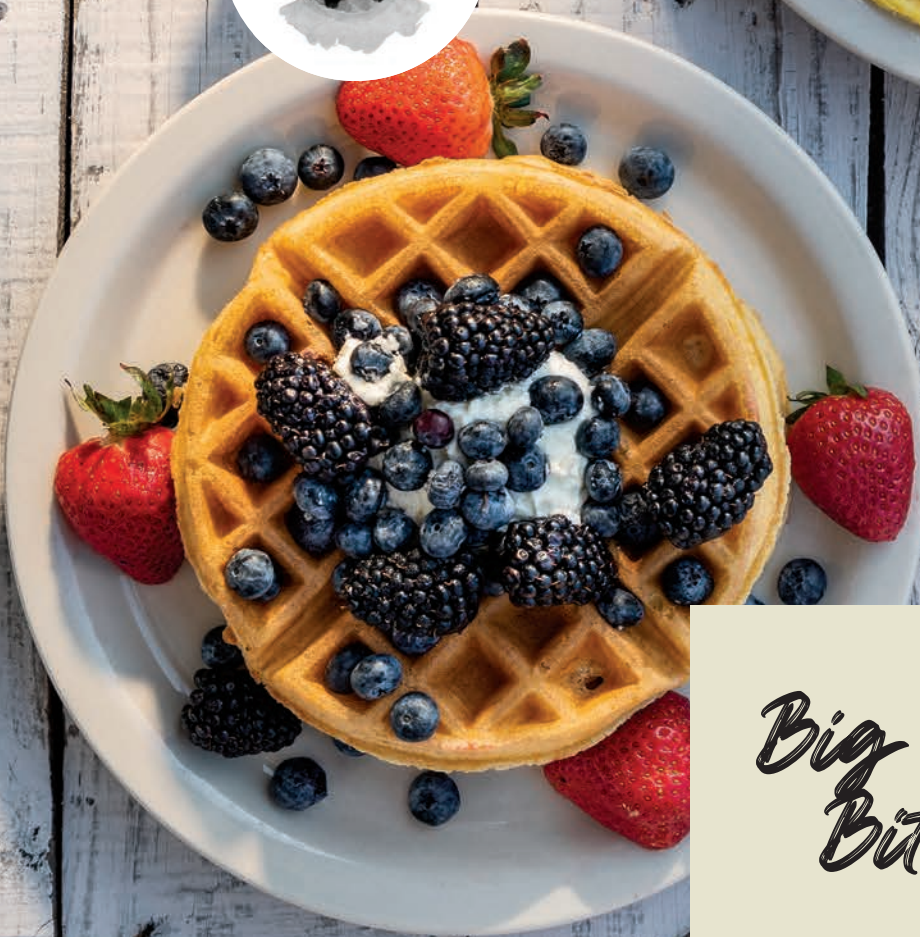
"I love the **tonkotsu original** at **Ramen Tatsu-ya** because it single-handedly started my entire interest in ramen. It is the gold standard. It has the classic style tonkotsu broth—that rich pork fatty broth. And it comes with everything I need—the pork belly, the egg, some mushroom, and scallions." ramen-tatsuya.com

The mi-so-hot ramen at **Ramen Tatsu-ya** in Austin

MIKAILA ULMER

AUSTIN-BASED FOUNDER OF
ME & THE BEES LEMONADE

"I went to Galveston earlier this summer, and I ordered the **Belgian waffles with berries** and the **crab meat omelet** at the **Sunflower Bakery and Cafe**. Both were so wonderful and so fresh. The waffle was perfectly crisp on the outside and pillowy on the inside. Having two dishes to share with my mom gave us the perfect balance of savory and sweet." thesunflowerbakeryandcafe.com



Big City Bites

VIETNAMESE CHICKEN WINGS at **Vietnam Gardens** in San Antonio. vietnamgardens.com
-Andrea "Vocab" Sanderson, San Antonio poet

BLUE CRAB CARBONARA at **Rosie Cannonball** in Houston. rosiecannonball.com
-Alba Huerta, owner of Julep cocktail bar in Houston

MI QUANG, special yellow rice noodles with pork, shrimp, fish cake, shredded cabbage, and banana blossom, tossed with a lightly spicy broth, at **Huynh** in Houston. huynhrestauranthouston.com
-Manabu "Hori" Horiuchi, owner-chef at Kata Robata in Houston

THE CHICKEN HARA MASALA from **Himalaya Restaurant** in Houston. himalayarrestaurant-houston.com
-Chet Garner

THE CHICKEN PHO WITH GRILLED LEMONGRASS SKEWERS at **Elizabeth Street Café** in Austin. elizabethstreetcafe.com
-Mikaila Ulmer



CHET GARNER

GEORGETOWN-BASED HOST OF
THE DAYTRIPPER TV SHOW

"**Barbecue crabs** from **The Schooner**. I was raised in Port Neches and technically this restaurant belongs to our bitter cross-town rivals in Nederland, but even I'm willing to cross city lines to eat these crabs. These deep-fried crabs are dredged in zesty flour and seasoning, and licking your fingers with each bite is the best part." theschoonerrestaurant.com

