

RAISING THE STEAKS



A road trip from Dallas to San Antonio reveals the pioneering chefs who are pushing Texan cuisine far beyond the barbecue

WORDS **FIONA SIMS**

Texas is not the most obvious choice for a gastronomic trip to America. The Lone Star State is still famed for its endearingly fanatical barbecue culture and is the world capital for waist-expanding Tex-Mex but an increasing number of Texan chefs, fuelled by a proliferation of artisan producers, are fostering a new style of cuisine which sets this state apart from the rest of America.

We're sitting on an outside terrace on a leafy boulevard with a view of Dallas' glittering skyscrapers all around us. A faint whiff of barbecue wafts out of the smart glass-fronted kitchen. The chefs are busying themselves preparing their starters such as tamale tart with roast garlic, peekytoe crab and smoked tomato sauce. We're at Stephan Pyles' eponymous flagship restaurant and we've been eyeing up a giant steak to share – a 21oz prime bone-in 'cowboy' rib-eye with red chilli onion rings and a pinto and wild mushroom ragout that a large



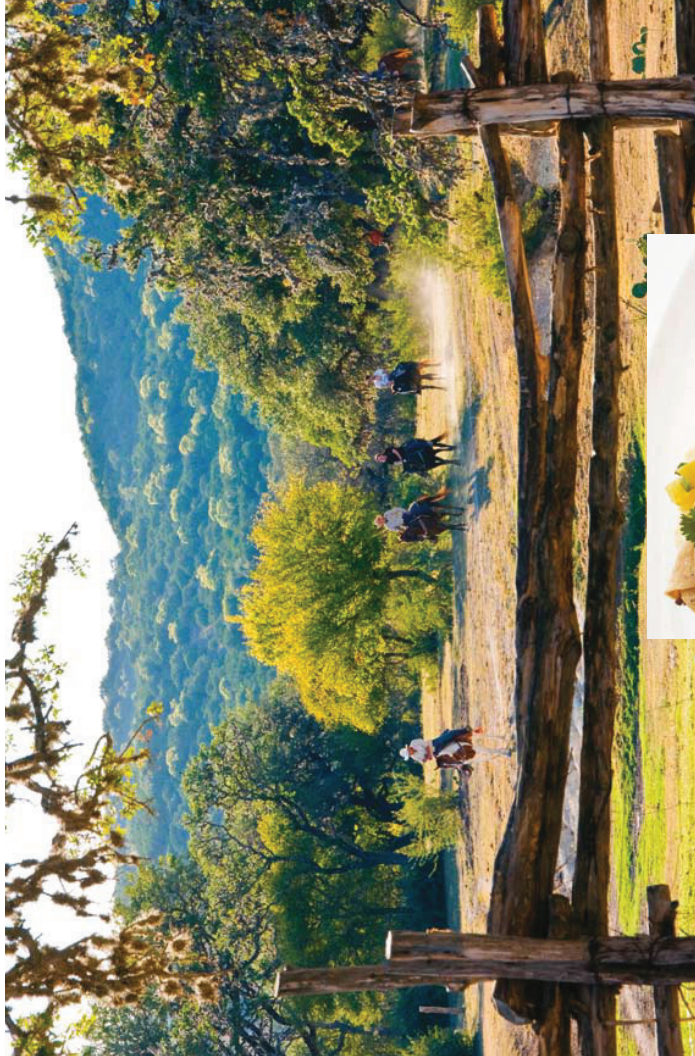
CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Locals in San Antonio. White Rock Lake, Dallas. Eggs and bacon at Abacus. Stephan Pyles Restaurant

man to our left is tucking into solo. We decide against the steak – there'll be plenty of time for that later – and opt instead for some lighter options, such as Pyles' twist on a classic Caesar salad, with jalapeño polenta croutons, and a parmigiano-reggiano chicharrón (a fried pork dish).

Stephan is a fifth-generation Texan, who has done stints with French greats such as Paul Bocuse, and he was the first gourmet in the American Southwest to win a James Beard Foundation award for best chef. He is credited for almost single-handedly changing the cooking scene in Texas, though he shares

his Southwestern 'Founding Father' status with three other chefs – Dean Fearing, Kent Rathbun and Robert del Grande. The first three chefs are based in Dallas; the latter cooks at RDG + Bar Annie, the new evolution of the legendary Café Annie in Houston.

At its rustic core, Southwestern cuisine covers the likes of chilli con carne and fajitas, nachos and tacos, reflecting its Mexican, Spanish and ►



Native American heritage. Recipes at the gourmet end of the marker are lighter and more refined versions of the traditional, with the occasional outside influence thrown in (Asian is the current trend).

But barbecuing is still very big here. Real barbecuing isn't grilling stuff, I've learned. In Texas it means cooking over indirect heat on a charcoal or gas grill, and is more akin to smoking the meat than grilling it. Cooking over direct heat is what Texans call grilling – it's fast and hot. Grilling is fine for burgers, steaks and chicken breasts but not for roasts, ribs, whole chickens and other large cuts.

Dean Fearing loves his barbecue – and his fried food. The son of a Kentucky innkeeper, he grew up with grandmothers who taught him the finer details of southern cuisine. His Fearing's Restaurant at The Ritz-Carlton has been voted Texas's best, and is famed for its 'bold flavours with no borders' (his words).

The restaurant sprawls over seven different rooms, each with a different feel, but all relaxed with a capital 'R' – there's Queen playing on the sound system; jeans and teetering heels is the dress code. We worked our way guiltily through his signature barbecued shrimp tacos, his Texas-style surf-and-turf of chicken-fried lobster and local filler of beef, followed by delicious deep-fried chocolate pies.

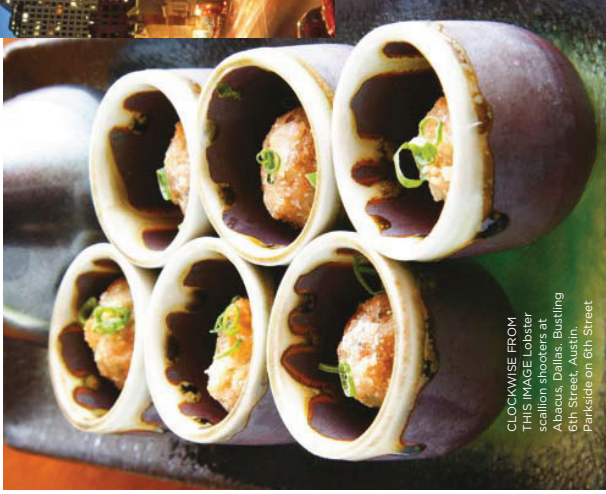
Things didn't get any less calorific at Abacus, owned by Kent Rathbun, who completes the Dallas triumvirate, as we downed lobster-scalion shooters, followed by hickory-grilled Colorado rack of lamb, apple mustard salsify, roasted garlic potato mousseline and Galvados jus.



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: San Antonio's cowboy country. Fearing's Restaurant in Dallas. Buffalo on the menu at Fearing's



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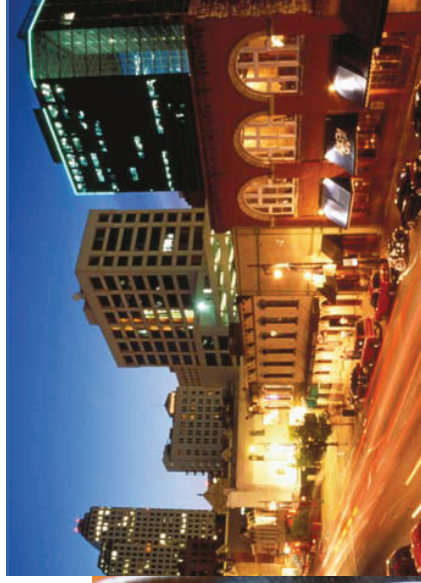
CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE: Lobster scallion shooters at Abacus, Dallas. Bustling 6th Street, Austin. Parkside on 6th Street

It was time to hit the road south. The Texas landscape on the road to Austin was not the tough cowboy country and rolling tumbweed of our imagination. It's densely wooded, with rolling hills, glittering lakes and an abundance of wild flowers (the best time to visit is spring and late autumn). The state capital, Austin, has more in common with San Francisco and this quirky city has attracted many who wouldn't consider living anywhere else in Texas. Its slogan, which you'll see displayed rather self-consciously on bumper stickers, is 'Keep Austin Weird'.

As well as enjoying an explosion of gourmet food trailers that have sprung up all over the city – a trend that looks set to spread across the country – Austin has thriving restaurant scene, with culinary nominations galore. Uchi has had more than its fair share, with chef-owner Tyson Cole nominated for best chef in the southwestern region this year, a new restaurant, Uchiko, and the first Uchi cookbook about to hit the shelves. The best way to describe his food is Japan-meets-Southwest. Dishes include *hirame isasuzukuri* (thinly sliced flounder with smoked sea salt) and *machi care* (maple wood-smoked baby yellowtail with Asian pear, marcona almonds and garlic brittle), all expertly paired with wine from a list put together by the sommelier.

Texan wine does deserve a quick mention. Yes, they do make it here, but no, we didn't find any on local wine lists and the sommelier whispered that it still has a way to go before being compared with anything decent coming out of California.

Shawn Girkel has been a star of the Austin restaurant scene since 2002, when he took over the wildly popular Jean Luc's Bistro and made it his own. His commitment then and now to local ingredients and creative presentation have garnered him much praise. His latest



THE SMELL OF HUEVOS RANCHEROS SCENTS THE AIR WHILE MARIACHI MUSIC DRIFTS UP FROM THE RIVER

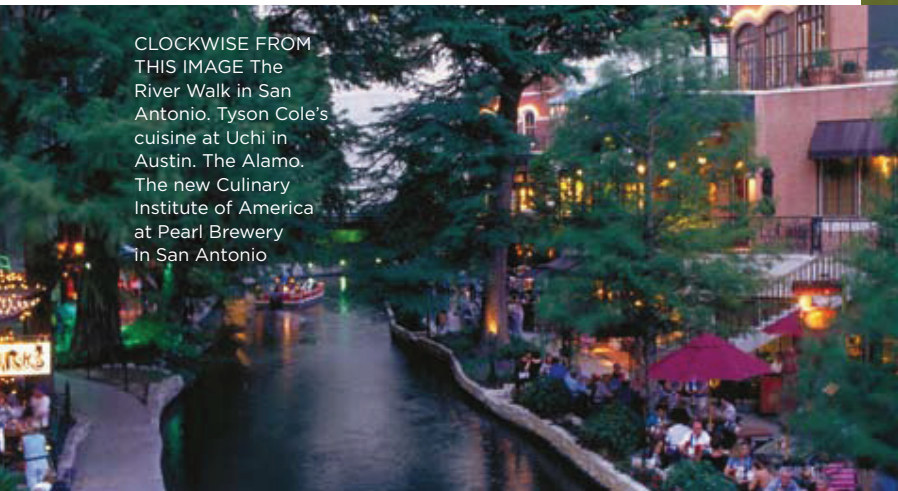


restaurant, Parkside, showcases his take on New American Cuisine. Dishes we tried included succulent braised baby back ribs, jalapeño, sofrito, cilantro onion salad and crab fritters with a ravigote sauce.

For the full rock-and-roll treatment stay at the newly-opened Hotel Saint Cecilia, where you can build your own Bloody Mary and spin the decks in your individually designed rooms (one has a piano). Created by owner Liz Lambert, a lawyer turned hotelier-cum-interior designer, she has also opened a sister hotel in San Antonio, where we were heading next.

Instead of the I-35 interstate we decided to take the longer, prettier, Hill Country route to San Antonio. The region is etched with dramatic slopes and vast plains, with endless roads stretching to the horizon. People come for the Texas Wine Trail, to sample fruit at roadside stands or to become a cowpoke for the weekend at one of the local dude ranches. San Antonio couldn't be more different to Austin. We're only a couple of hours from the Mexican border and the smell of *huevos rancheros* (a Mexican breakfast dish) scents the air while mariachi music drifts up from the city's famous River Walk. At first glance you might be wondering why it's included on a gastronomic trip – cheesy tourist ▶

SAN ANTONIO IS THE PLACE FOR TEX-MEX, BUT A GROWING NUMBER OF SERIOUS RESTAURANTS IS OPENING UP



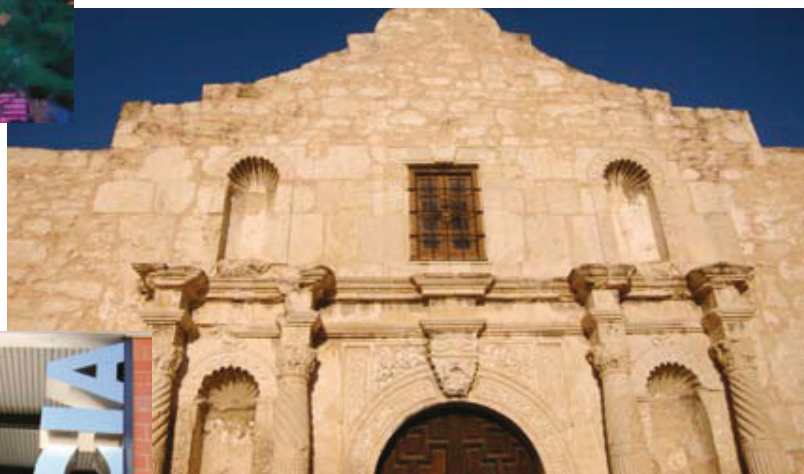
CLOCKWISE FROM THIS IMAGE The River Walk in San Antonio. Tyson Cole's cuisine at Uchi in Austin. The Alamo. The new Culinary Institute of America at Pearl Brewery in San Antonio

restaurants abound and fast food rules, catering for the hordes that visit The Alamo annually. Tex-Mex, if you are so inclined, is at its best here, but there are a growing number of serious restaurants opening up that are putting the city on the map.


Insignia is the latest opening from 33-year-old chef Jason Dady and is well sited in the boutique Fairmont Hotel, on a wide cobbled boulevard five minutes' walk from the city centre. We're talking comfort food with knobs on – chicken and waffles, brisket burger, slow-braised pork belly with blueberry pancakes. Jason, who now has five restaurants, saw San Antonio as the best chance to make an impact as a chef – there wasn't much competition when he opened his first eatery in 2001, The Lodge Restaurant, in Castle Hills.

And now look at the city. The latest gastronomic sensation is the Pearl Brewery. The landmark building already has a thriving farmers' market and will have 10 smart restaurants once it's in full swing, including two that have already opened from the city's most respected chef, Andrew Weissman.

Andrew ditched the starched white-linen at La Reve, where he made his name, and opened the more casual-chic Il Sogno



and The Sandbar Fish House & Restaurant. 'People saw us as a bit hick compared to the big money in Dallas,' he predicts 'but I think we'll see many high-profile openings in the next five years.'

The Pearl Brewery's crowning glory, though, is the Culinary Institute of America. This is the third outpost of one of the world's most famous cooking schools. It aims to increase interest in Latin American cuisine and become a magnet for its best-known chefs, pushing San Antonio – and Texas – further into the gastronomic limelight. 

TEXAS ADDRESS BOOK

AUSTIN

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