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Austin eats: Everything from sushi to swine in Texan capital

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 Sunday, March 27, 2011

Linda Hayes
 Special to the Aspen Times Weekly
 Aspen, CO Colorado

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AUSTIN, Texas – Barbecue is a sport in the Lone Star State (and, make no mistake about it, the good stuff can be truly great). But on a recent trip to Austin, it was refreshing to find some players on the city's booming culinary scene gaining notoriety for their savvy approach to the local bounty, and for moving past the traditional pit and smoker drill. The following hot spots are a hoot. And, as the crowds will attest, the food is finger-lickin' good to boot.

Barley Swine

A brick-and-mortar version of the wildly popular Odd Duck Farm to Trailer, this small but bountiful start-up from chef-owner Bryce Gilmore is the bomb. Sip one of more than 30 draft or bottled brews from Austin and beyond while you await a seat at one of a pair of high-top communal tables, or the bar, from which the small but busy kitchen is in full view. Ogle the menu, watching plates (full or seemingly licked clean, depending) whizzing by in anticipation of your turn to order.

Barley Swine uses refined techniques on fresh, rustic ingredients, as shown by these grilled beef strips.
 Chuck H W

A barbecue fix (with all the fixins')

So you gotta have it. Killer 'cue at Franklin Barbecue, which recently moved out of its vintage trailer and into a brick-and-mortar store-front that's open daily from 11 a.m. "until it's gone." Get pit-smoked brisket, pork ribs, pulled pork and peppery sausage by the pound, plate or sandwich. Grab some potato salad, slaw or pinto beans, and a drink from the Coca-Cola cooler. Partake there or take it to go. 900 E. 11th St. 512-653-1187, franklinbarbecue.com

Gilmore's dishes, sourced mostly from local farms and purveyors, are hearty, satisfying and meant to share. Pig is prominent, from pork belly rubbed with jerk and plated with grilled sweet potatoes and kale salad to crispy stuffed trotters paired with a soft boiled egg, creamy mustard and mushrooms. You can also nibble on crisp potato fritters flavored with goat cheese, leek and espelette pepper, as you ponder choices like sweetbreads with garlic puree, Brussels sprouts and braised bacon; bacon-wrapped rabbit; and whole

stuffed quail. Save room for olive oil-almond cake with brown butter ice cream.

Uchiko

The buzz for Tyson Cole's newest restaurant, a sibling of the lauded Uchi, also in Austin, has reached far afield, earning him, executive chef Paul Qui and the restaurant nominations for James Beard Awards this year. Cole, who speaks fluent Japanese and spent 10 years training with master chefs in New York and Tokyo, creates inspired taste combinations that keep both places packed.

Beyond an ample bar, the edgy main room pairs natural wood floors with polished crimson tile walls. At the core, a cadre of sushi chefs lavishes care and skill on an abundance of fresh fish and other tasty bits at the brightly lit sushi bar. Land there, or at simple wood tables for piles of grilled shishito peppers followed by impeccable sushi and sashimi (Spanish white anchovy with bottarga and gremolata; Japanese bream with shiso leaf, olive oil and meyer lemon zest). Continue with savory rolls (katsu pork belly, egg yolk custard and espelette pepper) and creative entrees like Norwegian mackerel with juniper and huckleberry.

And pastry chef Philip Speer's sweet corn sorbet with polenta custard; and tobacco cream with maple budino are wondrous.

24 Diner

Yes, it's open 24 hours a day, and, yes, it's a diner. But beyond that, any preconceived notions you might have when you pull up to this happy, shiny place will get tossed out once you step inside. (Your first clue? Check the special boards, which tout things like collard greens and persimmons from local growers.)

Chef and Texas native Andrew Curren came through the New York City kitchens of Danny Meyer and Jonathan Waxman before partnering up to offer "chef-inspired comfort food." Slip into a snazzy booth or hop a stool at the rear counter/bar. Depending on the hour, sip a Texas Mule made with local Tito's vodka, ginger beer and fresh lime juice, or a mocha latte. Any time of day, order up heaping plates of waffles topped with crisp, tender fried chicken; country ham and Gruyere frittatas made with cage-free eggs and topped with arugula and lemon vinaigrette; or Nimon Ranch apple-wood smoked bacon-avocado burgers with charred poblanos and aioli. Roll out with a roasted banana and brown sugar milk shake.

La Condesa

In Austin's Second Street District, this hopping spot pays homage to Mexico's City's bohemian Condesa neighborhood. Everything about it is bold and colorful, from executive chef Rene Ortiz's modern regional

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Mexican cuisine to the floor-to-ceiling mural in the main dining room, where bare-bulb lights strung from the ceiling give the place a street-fair feel.

A native Texan, Ortiz came down from La Esquina in New York City to open La Condesa, and the restaurant was nominated for a James Beard Award for Best New Restaurant in the country last year. To see why, fill your table with Mexico City street food-style plates, like hongas y huitlacoche huaraches (wild mushrooms, huitlacoche, yellow corn, farmer's cheese, epazote, truffle oil), el califa taquitos (seared ribeye, crispy manchego, grilled jalapeno-tomato salsa) and atun tostadas (sashimi-grade yellowfin, pickled cukes, chipotle mayo, crispy shallots). More than 100 varieties of 100 percent blue agave tequila make for potent counterparts and an even livelier event.

The Driskill Grill

Tucked within The Driskill, a grand landmark hotel that pays homage to Austin's historic past, The Driskill Grill is a bastion of modern-day cuisine. Chef Jonathan Gelman is in charge and his culinary path is long and impressive. After school at California Culinary Academy and an apprenticeship with the U.S. Culinary Olympic Team, he passed through notable hotel kitchens including The Ritz-Carlton, Laguna-Niguel and the luxury L'Auberge de Sedona.

Book in for dinner, and you'll be treated to farm-to-table dishes -- house-cured charcuterie; Oak Hill Farms beet salad with local goat cheese; Maple Leaf Farms duck prepared two ways (seared breast with ancho peppers and seared foie gras); juniper-grilled wild boar chops; Wagyu flatiron steaks -- a la carte or as part of multi-course tasting menus with wine pairings. All are presented by a knowledgeable staff in a setting that strikes an elegant chord with dark wood, mirrored walls, an elaborate painted tin ceiling and leather banquettes.

Stop by the clubby Driskill Bar for a nightcap.

The details
<p>24 Diner \$-\$\$ 600 North Lamar Blvd. 512-472-5400, 24diner.com</p>
<p>La Condesa \$\$ 400 West 2nd Street 512-499-0300, lacondesaaustin.com</p>
<p>The Driskill Grill \$\$-\$\$\$ 604 Brazos Street 512-391-7162, driskillgrill.com</p>
<p>Barley Swine \$-\$\$ 2024 South Lamar Blvd. 512-394-8150, barleyswine.com</p>
<p>Uchiko \$\$-\$\$\$ 4200 North Lamar Blvd. 512-916-4808, uchiaustin.com/uchiko</p>


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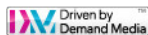
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