

Austin Restaurants Serve Up Local Flavor

Austin, a city proud of its small-town feel and unique nature, is growing up. The Capital City's increasingly complex, multifaceted persona now supports a dining scene that serves up burgers and barbecue while adding wine pairings and sushi to the restaurant realm.

Several distinguished restaurants offer the luxury of wine pairings with each course.

The venerable Driskill Grill, located in the historic Driskill Hotel on Sixth Street, offers sumptuous six-course and nine-course tasting menus, available with wine to match the New American cuisine. Another premier hotel restaurant, the new, hip and highly-touted Trio inside the Four Seasons Hotel Austin, is a steakhouse with a wine list of more than 300 bottles and 60 wines by the glass.

Wink Restaurant, considered one of the best in town, offers a relatively compact wine selection of 60 to 70 bottles that are culled two to three times a week.

For more low-key dining, visitors make a beeline for sleek Airstream trailers – the mobile kitchen of choice for many Austin cooks.

In the hip South Congress (SoCo) district, a line of sweet-toothed Austinites forms outside the sliding window of Hey Cupcake! six nights a week. Visitors shouldn't dilly-dally – these low-priced cupcakes, which come in vanilla, chocolate, red velvet and carrot cake – often sell out before closing time.

At another South Austin Airstream, Flip Happy Crepes, mid-day diners purchase both savory and sweet French pancakes.

Torchy's Tacos serves up "damn good tacos" from locations along South First and both ends of Sixth Street. A favorite choice is the Trailer Park, fried chicken tenders topped with green chile, vegetables and poblano ranch dressing.

For those searching for comfort foods like pot pie, chicken fried steak and mac-and-cheese, Austin deftly delivers. The city known for its nightlife adds a little glitz to mom's favorite recipes, making home cooking a high-end experience.

At Bess, a bistro owned by Hollywood starlet Sandra Bullock, meatloaf makes an appearance on Monday nights – costarring the upscale yet hearty parmesan mashed potatoes and hericort vert.

The Woodland on South Congress also serves up familiar foods with sophisticated flair. The pork tenderloin is served with fennel compote, while the soy and rosemary glazed salmon comes with toasted barley pilaf and wilted greens.

Conveniently located across the street from the Austin Convention Center, Moonshine Patio Bar & Grill serves up the comfort foods mom would have cooked – if she had a full kitchen staff to do her bidding. And, also downtown, the trendy Belmont on West Sixth Street spices up roasted chicken with lemon sage brown butter and watercress.

When visitors crave food from foreign shores, Austin offers a wide selection, including Japanese, Indian, Greek, Brazilian and numerous others.

Mexican restaurants rank as most plentiful (and perhaps popular) around town, much beloved for their fare as well as the zesty margaritas they serve in a variety of flavors and colors. Many locals name Guero's Taco Bar, the unofficial center of the SoCo scene, as home to the best margarita in Austin.

Other hot spots include El Sol Y La Luna, also on South Congress, and Curra's Grill, which serve interior Mexican food. Both restaurants were recently named among the "Top 50 Hispanic Restaurants" by *Hispanic Magazine*.

While Mexican food has long been an Austin staple, Japanese restaurants are fast becoming just as popular. Leading the way is Uchi, a Japanese-Latin-inspired fusion cuisine, where executive chef Tyson Cole has been named one of *Food & Wine* magazine's "Best New Chefs in America."

For Italian fare, Stortini makes for one of the hippest – and tastiest – spots in Austin, while Carmelo's, opened in 1985, maintains its reputation as a reliable eatery with a sumptuous dessert cart.

While ethnic dishes continue to gain popularity in Austin, good ol' Texas barbecue remains a favorite to eat – and fight about. "Who makes the best?" sparks a debate that will likely continue as long as people here eat meat, which means forever.

The Salt Lick in Driftwood, a 30-minute drive west into the Hill Country, is probably the most famous and respected in the Austin area. The classic order is the “family style,” which keeps all-you-can-eat pork ribs, sausage and beef coming to the table.

Closer to home, Stubb’s BBQ in downtown Austin is loved for its meat, fried green tomatoes and live music. Iron Works, a red tin restaurant next door to the Convention Center, is probably best known for its beef ribs and spicy barbecue sauce. Rounding out the downtown barbecue joints is Lambert’s, which serves “fancy barbecue,” including maple and coriander crusted pork ribs, and pesto rubbed lamb chops.

A decidedly less high-brow spot, Artz Rib House, serves its ‘cue on red-and white checkered tablecloths and hosts a bluegrass jam every Sunday afternoon.

For foodies looking for a great Texas steak and cool Southwestern cuisine, Ranch 616 is an appetizing option, as the dinner menu offers game, fish and steaks.

While Austin certainly pleases the meat lovers, it’s also a haven for vegetarians and Earth-friendly dining experiences.

Whole Foods, an Austin-originated health-food market gone national, is a mecca of upper-end organic and natural foods. The downtown store, one of two in Austin, is home to several small restaurants and buffet stations that serve sandwiches, pizza, sushi, soups, salads and more.

In north Austin, Mother’s, which recently returned from the ashes of a 2007 kitchen fire, has been serving vegetarian dishes like the Peasant’s Meal of brown rice, beans and a salad, since 1979.

Other vegetarian favorites include Casa de Luz near downtown and two health-food grocery stores with restaurant counters: Mr. Natural in South Austin and Wheatsville Co-op near the University of Texas at Austin®.

For those who want to eat green but also like meat – several Austin restaurants like Eastside Café, Asti Trattoria, Fino and Kerbey Lane Café grow their own greens or buy from local farmers.

And, many Austin restaurants and bars serve spirits made right here in the Hill Country. Vodkas include Tito’s, an award-winning favorite, as well as Savvy and Dripping Springs. Treaty Oak is a locally-made rum and Paula’s Texas Orange is a tasty liqueur handmade in Austin.

Several Austin restaurants offer great views of the city and surrounding landscapes.

At the Iron Cactus on Sixth Street, a restaurant known for its impressive tequila list, the lovely rooftop terrace is the top spot in town for people-watching.

About 30 minutes out of Austin, The Oasis on Lake Travis is one of the most popular tourist destinations around, thanks to its beautiful, panoramic view that stretches from Mansfield Dam on the left to hillside mansions on the right.

For a different kind of view – a movie screen – Austinites flock to the wacky Alamo Drafthouse, where moviegoers can drink beer and order from a burger-and-pizza menu while watching either a new release or a quirky classic. It's truly an Austin experience.