

# world eats

## SAN ANTONIO, TEXAS

by Jeff Heilman

**M**y first taste of culinary San Antonio, on a hot summer afternoon in 2008, was a life-saving prickly pear margarita and the famed tableside-made guacamole at “Texas bistro” **Boudro’s** on the Paseo del Rio, or River Walk. The visit also included classic Mexican fare at **Rosario’s** in Southtown, historic **Mi Tierra Café** (1941) on Market Square, and **Aldaco’s**, highlighted by a memorable avocado margarita.

Once the province of conquistadors and Spanish missionaries, Alamo City (1718) is grounded in Tex-Mex food heritage. Yet this culinary capital of 4,000-plus restaurants is global in scope.

German settlement in the mid-1800’s added a Teutonic twist to the cuisine, further accented by area Czech and Irish arrivals. Italian and French fine-dining gems brought international flair to the scene in the 1930’s. The ensuing decades saw continuing expansion and evolution, culminating in 2017 with UNESCO designation as a Creative City of Gastronomy. For gourmands, the confluence of culinary cultures in this welcoming and inclusive city translates into dining discoveries galore.

**E**dging historic Tobin Hill just north of downtown, St. Mary’s Strip was San Antonio’s go-to entertainment corridor in the early 1980’s. Today, the reener-



Photo: Sean Pavone

gized Strip rocks anew with youthful energy, vibrant street art, nightclubs, bars, and exceptional eateries like breakfast and brunch beacon **Cullum’s Attaboy** (111 Kings Court. Tel: 210-688-0506. cullum-sattaboy.com).

Housed in a converted 1940’s cottage, self-taught chef-owner Christopher Cullum’s transporting diner-meets-bistro is about homages, starting with his late grandfather and father, Jim Cullum, Sr. and Jr., respectively. Both were jazz legends who put San Antonio on the national map. They

brought live jazz to the River Walk in 1963 at The Landing, where Cullum washed dishes as his kid. “Attaboy,” replied his father when Cullum, at 15, expressed interest in the restaurant business.

Jazz music and a photo of the late Cullums with Louie Armstrong on the wall set an atmospheric tone, with more tributes on the menu. Seated at the counter facing the white-tiled kitchen, I was serenaded by Chef de Cuisine Alysha Reyes, a 2017 graduate of the Culinary Institute of America’s (CIA) San Antonio campus as she sang-talked at the fire and led the team in their soda jerk hats.

Drawn from a French-driven menu inspired in part by late local legend La Louisiane (1935-1995), or La Lou, my unexpected breakfast started with Champagne and the “Swell Life” combo of prized osetra caviar and smoked trout roe on crema, chive, and blini. Then, plump, juicy escargots in herbs and compound butter, and the Eric Ripert-worthy omelet with Hollandaise sauce. I don’t remember Spudnuts, the national potato-made doughnut chain launched in Salt Lake City in 1940, but that’s how Cullum’s father courted his mother, rendered here as a sugar-powdered beignet. Next time, it will be the pancakes, truffle



Photo: Al Remdon

eggs and toast, and other surprisingly affordable menu items.

Steps away, **Cullum Attagirl** (726 East Mistletoe Avenue. Tel: 210-437-4263. cullumsattagirl.com) is Christopher's fried chicken homage to his grandmother, a butcher who ran a chicken shack out of a double-wide trailer on the Texas Gulf Coast.

Around the corner, **Nola Brunch & Beignets** (720 E Mistletoe Ave. Tel: 210-957-1086. eatatnola.com) is New Orleans-born Chef Pieter Sypsteyn's tribute, with wife Susan, to his hometown.

In 2020, Texas got its own James Beard category for Best Chef. Semifinalists for 2023 included Andrew Ho, Sean Wen, and Andrew Samia for **Curry Boys BBQ** (536 E Courtland Place. Tel: 210-560-2763. curryboysbbq.com). Ho and Wen, of Southeast Asian-driven Pinch Boil House seafood restaurant in ritzy Alamo Heights, and Samia, of smoked meats go-to South BBQ & Kitchen in the Mission neighborhood south of downtown, partnered on this Thailand-meets-Texas concept. Crazy good mash-ups include the Missing Link, pairing peppery smoked sausage with Penang curry.

**D**ating to 1883, the Pearl, just north of downtown, was once the largest brewery in Texas. Following closure in 2001, local businessman and salsa king Christopher "Kit" Goldsbury began redeveloping the 22-acre site into a live-work-play neighborhood. Centered around food, his investment directive included creating the Latin-focused CIA campus. Realized as the hopping **Pearl District** (atpearl.com), this walkable urban hub integrates a fiesta of some two-dozen compelling dining draws.

**Savor** (200 E Grayson Street, Suite #117. Tel: 210-554-6484. savorcia.com), where CIA student-chefs culminate their training in the kitchen and as servers, is for morning coffee and pastries and nighttime dinner service. The former student restaurant, Latin-themed NAO New World Flavors, is where I first met globetrotting chef Geronimo Lopez.

Born in Caracas, Venezuela, Lopez held culinary and management positions at luxury resorts around the world before coming to San Antonio to work as a CIA executive chef and instructor. His cross-border talent shines at **Botika** (303 Pearl Parkway #111. Tel: 210-670-7684. botikapearl.com), his award-winning Asian-South American fusion of Nikkei (Japanese-Peruvian) and Chifa (Chinese-

Peruvian) cuisine.

Starting with kicking house-made kimchi, tuna sashimi, and pickled vegetables, I segued into steam buns housing rich pork belly balanced with pickled red cabbage, cucumbers, and mint in a caramelized onion hoisin sauce. His version of Peruvian beef stir-fry standard *lomo saltado* featured wok stir-fried tenderloin with pickled aji, salsa criolla, and sweet plantains. Bedded on wedge potatoes, it was a bowlful of flavor. Caribbean influences have a say in the mouthwatering Cebiche (ceviche) Caribe, Gulf white fish marinated in *leche de tigre* and pickled peppers.

The global lens shifts to the Middle East, Mediterranean, and Balkans at **Ladino** (200 E Grayson St Ste 100. Tel: 210-325-6007. ladinosatx.com). Born and raised in Israel to an American-Hungarian father and Turkish mother, Executive Chef Berty Richter honors his Sephardic roots (Ladino, or Judeo-Spanish, describes a mix of Mediterranean and Middle Eastern languages) at this grill-centered winner.

Richter's experience from past stints, including top NYC restaurants Montrachet and Tribeca Grill, along with the top-class service, are evident throughout. Seated on couches on the second-floor outdoor patio, I went with the Mezas de Alegria (Tables of Joy) tasting menu, a steal at \$60 per person. Served with sourdough pita, delicious dips included *taramasalata* of carp roe and smoked whitefish caviar and classic red pepper *muhammara* with the Texas twist of pecans. The refreshing citrus salad preceded the perfectly grilled Wagyu Denver Steak with escarole and pita crumbs. Dessert finales included the Kabak Tatlısi, candied

acorn squash ice cream flavored with North African Ras el hanout ("top shelf" in Arabic) spice, and tahini.

Updating the historic Pearl brewhouse, **Hotel Emma** (136 E. Grayson Street. Tel: 844-845-7384. thehotelemma.com) features preserved machinery and culinary concepts overseen by San Antonio-born executive chef Jorge Luis Hernández. Formerly with José Andrés' ThinkFoodGroup in D.C., where he won a second Michelin star for minibar, Hernández elevates the hotel's Supper restaurant, Sternewirth cocktail bar (book the banquettes inside former cast-iron fermentation tanks), curated guest experiences, and more.

Housed in historic former Pearl buildings, other standouts include Chef Steve McHugh's charcuterie-led **Cured** (curedatpearl.com), and 2023 James Beard "Emerging Chef" nominee Jennifer Dobbertin's joyous Asian-American fusion restaurant **Best Quality Daughter** (bestqualitydaughter.com).

**C**onceived in 1991 as an urban revitalization project, Southtown encompasses five neighborhoods just south of downtown. Located on former Alamo farmland, majestic King William, originally "Sauerkraut Bend" and renamed for Prussian ruler Wilhelm I, reigns as one of the city's prettiest pockets. Developed by German settlers, this idyllic neighborhood of Greek Revival, Victorian, and Italianate homes became San Antonio's first historic district in 1968 and was listed as a National Register Historic District in 1972. In 2011, King William was designated a Cultural Arts District.



City Councilman Manny Pelaez at 2023 Paella Challenge

Photo: Jon Alonzo



Team Oaxaca at 2023 Paella Challenge

Photo: Jon Alonzo

Southtown's vogue includes lively corridors of fashionable and laid-back restaurants, bars, coffee shops, and boutiques mainly along South Alamo and South St. Mary's Streets. Opened in 1992 by San Antonio-born restaurateur and entrepreneur Lisa Wong, perennial Tex-Mex favorite **Rosario's** (722 S. South St. Mary's Street. Tel: 210-223-1806, rosariosa.com) is a vanguard mainstay.

In February 2023, she unveiled the acclaimed restaurant's expansive new "forever home" in a contemporary two-story structure just minutes from the original location. Incorporating a colorful main dining room, scenic rooftop terrace and bar, patio seating, and adjacent standalone Casa Isabel (after Wong's late mother), the striking venue continues her tradition of scratch-made Mexican dishes and house originals. Bring a big appetite for margaritas, fresh guacamole, and fire-roasted salsa followed by ceviche, enchiladas, the hometown puffy taco, and other satisfying plates.

The original Liberty Bar has even longer local lineage. From 1985 to 2010, this fabled heirloom resided in a famously leaning 1890 former saloon by the Pearl. That building was later uprooted, righted, and relocated a block away, where it now houses **Carriqui** (239 E. Grayson Street. Tel: 210-910-5547. carriquitx.com).

Named for the indigenous Carriqui bird, or green jay, of South Texas, this chic and lively restaurant serves regional favorites

inspired by the bird's northerly flightpath from the Rio Grande Valley to San Antonio. Highlights include ceviche and pit-cooked barbacoa and brisket.

Reestablished by present owner (or Head Woodchuck, as he prefers) Dwight Hobart, the current **Liberty Bar** (1111 S. Alamo Street. Tel: 210-227-1187. liberty-bar.com) itself now resides in a former Benedictine nunnery in King William. Fronted by an outdoor patio with palm trees, the pink-painted past convent, locally the "Pink Church," evokes the tropics. The whimsy continues with evocative interiors and a playful menu that dances from Mexico, the Mediterranean and Middle East to comfort food, "empowered" sourdough pizza, and pasta. Call it eccentric epicurean—and it's all good.

In the 1970's, the Beauregard Café was a hotspot for live music and emerging Texas talent including Townes Van Zandt and Lyle Lovett before becoming Madhatter's Tea House. In 2021, this storied spot remerged as **Bar Loretta** (320 Beauregard St. Tel: 210-757-3607. barloretta.com).

Naming the eatery after Van Zandt's song "Loretta" that Lovett later covered, owner Roger Herr, a San Antonio native who spent 23 years tending and then running bars in NYC, strikes a stylish upscale-casual balance at his welcoming, homey concept.

From his wife Sarah's Victorian-style makeover to Executive Chef Paul

Petersen's seasonal interpretations of modern Texas cuisine and Michael Neff's masterful mixology, "creative invention" rules the roost. Succulent Texas and regional tastes included the whiskey-braised pork belly, chili-glazed Hill Country quail, and maple-glazed crispy Brussel sprouts with queso fresco and toasted pecans.

**M**y March 2023 visit for this story included my eighth turn as a judge at the annual Paella Challenge. Organized by nationally renowned local chef-restaurateur **Johnny Hernandez** (chefjohnnyhernandez.com), the 13th edition of this popular public event featured nearly 40 professional chefs from South Texas, Mexico, and from Ecuador, first-timer Luis Balda, plus 12 local high school teams, in a competitive cookoff of Spain's traditional dish. Proceeds benefit Kitchen Campus, founded by Hernandez in 2014 to support culinary opportunities for youth through education and advocacy.

Local participants from San Antonio's tight-knit culinary community further demonstrated the city's dining diversity. Kristina Zhao, chef-owner of popular Chinese eatery Sichuan House, was there representing her new rave-reviewed **DASHI Chinese Bar + Kitchen** in ritzy Alamo Heights.

Nicola Blaque was also there. She earned a 2023 Beard "Best Chef" nomination for her West Side Jamaican-style **The Jerk Shack**. I did not make it there, but I did enjoy a zesty jerk chicken wrap at **Mi Roti** (312 Pearl Pkwy., Building 6. Tel: 210-564-9140. miroti210.com), her Caribbean street food restaurant inside the Pearl's multi-vendor Food Hall.

Winners included Zhao, the CIA/Savor team, and Balda, whose exuberant trophy acceptance elevated the festival crowd.

When visiting San Antonio, you will find enticing menus around every corner, from pretty pink and white **Little Em's Oyster Bar** in Southtown and sexy Texas/Mexico/Cuba-inspired **Ocho** at transporting Hotel Havana to Southern-style **Restaurant Claudine** at the Pearl, and 2023 Beard "Best Chef" finalist Jeff Russ' **Clementine** in the Castle Hills neighborhood.

As Chef Geronimo said, "it's always good to leave a little hungry," knowing San Antonio has plenty in store for repeat visits. ■