



More than 90 languages are spoken by the diverse population of Houston, America's fourth-largest city.



Houston, We Have Liftoff

Killer *banh mi*, crawfish boils, and a Tex-Mex revival are fueling this city's ethnic food boom. Just bring chopsticks—and your stretch pants

BY ANDREW KNOWLTON

Somewhere between sucking on the heads of Vietnamese-Cajun crawfish and licking clean a plate of Mexican-style roasted goat and house-made tortillas, I wondered: Is Houston's multicultural dining scene the country's best-kept food secret? I knew the city has its share of good Mexican, solid BBQ, and cool places with big-name chefs at the stove. But I didn't expect to find strip malls filled with the best Southeast Asian food I've ever eaten, Indian-inspired chicken wings that won a spot in my bar food hall of fame, or a \$14 value meal of pig's-ear cake and braised pork cheeks. Who knew that, dish after dish, I'd be scribbling "Wish I could

get this back home!" in my notebook?

Think I'm overhyping the place? The Vietnamese food alone will make you a believer. Full disclosure: It's my desert island cuisine, so when I found out the city is home to the third-largest Vietnamese population in the U.S., I plotted my crawl. Starting on Bellaire Boulevard, the epicenter of ethnic Houston, I dove in deep and got blissfully messy with a crawfish boil at **Crawfish & Noodles** (10613 Bellaire Blvd.; 281-988-8098), where the mudbugs were dressed in an addictive Vietnamese-Cajun spiced garlic-butter sauce. At **Que Huong** (8200 Wilcrest Dr.; 281-495-2814) I got dizzyingly lost in the 300 menu choices yet still hit a bull's-eye with each dish, from tempura soft-shell crab to spicy salad with grilled beef and shrimp. I finished with a *banh mi* sandwich—my first but definitely not my last of the trip—to shame all imitators at **Les Givral's Kahve** (4601 Washington Ave.; 832-582-7671).

Vietnamese not your thing? Houston's also got authentic Thai, seriously great Indian, dim sum to cure the worst hangover, and street tacos that would be at home in Oaxaca (see "A Cook's Tour"), not to mention a wealth of high-end, local-ingredient-driven spots where

SAIGON, U.S.A.



the Vietnamese-Cajun crawfish boil (above, at Crawfish & Noodles). *Banh mi* sandwiches (left, at Les Givral's Kahve) are everywhere and irresistible: One day I ate three—before noon. For the full Hanoi-meets-Houston experience, hit the Hong Kong City Mall (11205 Bellaire Blvd.), which is filled with restaurants and a giant market. The name doesn't make much sense, but it's all part of the "Where am I?" factor that Houston delivers.

There are reportedly 86,207 Vietnamese living in the metro area, and it seems like each one of them has opened a restaurant. The number of options can be paralyzing. To begin, find a place that serves

1 2



1. GOAT TACOS AT EL HIDALGUENSE. 2. ANVIL SERVES CREATIVE COCKTAILS IN A COOL SETTING. 3. KOLACHES: LOOK FOR THESE HOUSTON-BY-WAY-OF-EASTERN-EUROPE SAUSAGE-FILLED PASTRIES AT LOCAL DOUGHNUT SHOPS, LIKE CHRISTY'S DONUTS.

**H-TOWN'S
NEW
CLASSICS**

Gone Fishing

One of my goals in Houston was to eat as much super-fresh Gulf Coast seafood as possible. Chef Bryan Caswell's sleek, sophisticated Reef was my first stop for plump baked oysters, blue crabs, and Houston's menu stalwart: redfish. 2600 Travis St.; 713-526-8282

I ♥ Heart

I can't force you to try tongue, bone marrow, pig's ear, and all the other "nasty bits" associated with the nose-to-tail trend. But when you're ready, Feast will be waiting with a plate of black pudding. 219 Westheimer Rd.; 713-529-7788

Hammered

If you're like me, you'll spend way too much time at Anvil, the city's best bar for a well-mixed cocktail. The Golden Gate Swizzle and Maharaja Buck are house favorites; I just name my liquor and let the bartender improvise. 1424 Westheimer Rd.; 713-523-1622

the chef strolling the dining room may have been on TV the night before. And if you're looking for something a little more potent, the city's thriving artisanal cocktail scene will oblige.

In the middle of all this high/low culture-hopping is Tex-Mex, Houston's original take on fusion cuisine. This often overlooked stepchild of "authentic" Mexican cooking is being revived by Robb Walsh, a former restaurant critic and the author of *The Tex-Mex Cookbook: A History in Recipes and Photos*, and chef Bryan Caswell (who also cooks at Reef; see left). At **El Real Tex-Mex Café** (1201 Westheimer Rd.; 713-524-1201) they offer "vintage" Tex-Mex, with most everything made from scratch and incorporating lots of old-school lard. Fajitas, the Tex-Mex poster platter, caught their first wave in Houston. They're proudly on the menu, as are dishes from other parts of the state: shrimp entrées from Brownsville, puffy tacos from San Antonio. And in case you're wondering, frozen Margaritas are still the drink of choice.

What's not to love about a town where you can get a life-affirming bowl of pho in the morning, a stellar goat biryani at lunch, juicy soup dumplings as a snack, and the freshest Gulf seafood for dinner, then cap the evening with an expertly poured cocktail? Not at all what I expected from Houston. The one thing I do expect now: a return visit to the best dining destination in Texas. •

3



A COOK'S TOUR

Chefs eat a lot, they eat often, and they chase taste, not hype. So I asked **Chris Shepherd** of the soon-to-open Underbelly to share his favorite stops for Houston's ethnic eats.

STOP 1

"When I need my authentic Mexican kick, my wife and I head to **El Hidalguense** for a weekend blowout. There's live mariachi music, freshly made tortillas, cold beer, and insanely good baby goat spit-roasted before your eyes." 6917 Long Point Rd.; 713-680-1071

STOP 2

"**Vieng Thai** serves the best Thai in the city. And the place is BYOB. Order the raw-sausage-and-ginger salad called yum nheam and you're likely to hear, 'No, you can't have this. It is for Thai people. It will make you sick.' Insist on it." 6929 Long Point Rd.; 713-688-9910

STOP 3

"In Chinatown, **Fu Fu Café**—not to be confused with Fu Fu Restaurant nearby—does a version of soup dumplings that blows my mind. I've asked to see how they make them and I'm always denied. I'd keep that recipe secret, too." 9889 Bellaire Blvd.; 713-981-8818

STOP 4

"Sunday morning, and I'm a bit bleary-eyed from a busy Saturday night. It's dim sum time: specifically **Hong Kong Dim Sum**. Get there before noon or be prepared to wait. The steamed shrimp dumplings, steamed pork spareribs, and pork-and-preserved-

egg congee are my must-orders. You can be adventurous, since each dish costs about three bucks." 9889 Bellaire Blvd.; 713-777-7029

STOP 5

"**London Sizzler** is my favorite restaurant in town. This is Anglo-Indian at its finest. The smell of spices and curries mixes with Indian techno music, and the Boddingtons on tap is always cold. Ajay Patel plays the consummate owner-host while his parents turn out flavor bombs like goat biryani, spicy jeera wings, and handmade naan." 6690 Southwest Fwy.; 713-783-2754

