Houston 2015: A FOOD ODYSSEY

Houston’s expansive restaurant scene mirrors city’s diversity, innovative spirit.

By Matthew Odam
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Interstate 10 curves just outside of Katy and bends toward Houston. The freeway widens. Space City’s gravitational pull ensnares you. Thousands of cars charge at precarious speeds on a stretch of road wider than some Texas towns. The magnificent skyline appears in miniature on the horizon.

The pace, the enormity, the glistening monoliths... you don’t so much enter Houston as you get drawn into it. Like the Death Star locking a high-speed tractor beam onto your car. Whenever I visit Houston, I feel like I’m entering a world of science fiction, a sensation that makes sense as you peel back the concrete layers of the city and tap into Houston’s humanity and cultural diversity.

After several years of phenomenal economic and population growth, Houston’s evolving multicultural tapestry hints at the future of major American metropolitan areas. According to a study published by Rice University in 2012, Houston is the most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan area in the United States. Nowhere is that diversity more evident than in Houston’s exceptional food scene.

Houston continued on G2

Not only can you find almost any international cuisine imaginable in the city where more than 90 different languages are spoken, you can also find cross-pollination, with Indian restaurants serving fried chicken and Gulf seafood restaurants nodding to Vietnam.

Seasoned veterans and classically trained young chefs with impressive résumés are synthesizing Houston’s multitudinous influences with their own styles and points of view, and are finding a receptive audience hungry for innovation and creativity.

One of the ascendant stars of the Houston culinary scene is native Houstonian Justin Yu, a 30-year-old graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and son of immigrants from Hong Kong.

Yu’s imaginative cooking at his cozy and hip Oxheart defies classification, but he acknowledges that the herbaciousness, high acidity and umami in his dishes reflect his love for Asian food.

Yu serves a veggie-centric tasting menu at the restaurant he opened in March 2012, with the majority of the dishes highlighting one ingredient. That style was informed by Yu’s time working at Ubuntu in Napa (the first veggie-focused restaurant to receive a Michelin star) and his time interning at restaurants in Belgium and Copenhagen.

“I love cooking in a way where it’s a little more austere and stark to make a point with the ingredients,” Yu said. “When you’re doing an a la carte setting, you kind of have to put together a complete thought all the time, whereas with tasting menus you can do one ingredient cooked very well or very strongly one way with a simple sauce.”

He jokes that if he served a recent sunchoke and salted cream dish a la carte, people might revolt. I disagree. It was the best preparation I’ve had of the increasingly popular tuber. Knobby twirls of roasted and charred sunchoke took on a glazed, candied exterior, the light nuttiness of the root elevated by a fragrant sunchoke puree made with jasmine tea.

Yu didn’t intend to forge a career that focused so heavily on vegetables, but he found inspiration at veggie-centric places like Green Zebra in Chicago.

“I found it so much more interesting than cooking with meat. There are things you have to consider like ripeness and underripeness and seasonality and how things are grown and

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be very, very flexible.” Yu said. “I find it much more challenging to cook with vegetables. It’s pretty easy to cook a piece of meat and make it taste good, whereas with vegetables I think you have to have really solid basic techniques and you have to be a little more creative in creating flavors people care about.”

He displays his technique and appreciation for the alchemy of flavor layering with a beautiful dish of winter beets marinated in Japanese citrus, sliced thin and layered like rose petals atop the vegetal tingle of shiso peppers and the polite puckering of pickled tansy. The brick-walled Oxheart, located in a slowly developing neighborhood that sits in the shadow of a major freeway, seats about 30 people, with the centerpiece bar offering an excellent view of the wide-open kitchen. From that perch you can watch Yu and his team curl Kohlrabi into tubes and lay them like organ pipes across velvety tumbles of smoked Red Wattle pork and a bed of sweet and salty crumbled Thai pork. You can also catch a glimpse of Gulf snapper poached in grapeseed oil just before it gets cloaked by a ripple of warmed lettuce, a rare now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t sleight of hand from the thoughtful chef.

There’s a decent chance chef Bryan Caswell knows the fisherman who hauled in that red snapper at Oxheart. When you walk into Reef, the restaurant Caswell owns with longtime Houston restaurant veteran Bill Floyd, you’re greeted by a chalkboard listing the marine report and bounty of locally sourced seafood, from American red snapper to yellowfin tuna.

“It’s got to be better if it was caught this morning,” Floyd says about Reef’s commitment to local sourcing.

The partners, who met while working at French chef Jean-Georges Vongerichten’s Bank in Houston, opened Reef in 2007.

“We felt Houston at that time was totally devoid of a great seafood restaurant,” Floyd said.

“You really weren’t tasting the fish. We wanted to let the ingredients speak for themselves.”

Seafoam-colored paint, a bank of floor-to-ceiling windows, a rippled white accent wall and chandeliers made with capiz shells give the sensation you’re eating inside a fish bowl, or, given the spaciousness of the 8,000-square-foot restaurant, the middle of the ocean.

Caswell, a Louisiana native who grew up in Houston, has crafted a menu that celebrates Texas (mussels soaked in a toasty broth of Shiner Bock and ancho peppers) while taking global cues (tempura-fried rock shrimp served with a Chinese XO sauce and kimchee remoulade).

The sport fisherman prone to wearing baseball caps owns an impressive globe-hopping résumé, but his Gulf coast sensibilities are at the heart of his cooking. Caswell’s redfish on a half-shell may be his signature dish. He seasons the fish with a mixture that leans on cayenne, paprika and mace, and then grills the redfish scales-down. He bastes and covers the fish repeatedly, leading to a technique that blends grilling, baking and smoking. The result is one of the most buttery and flavorful pieces of Gulf fish you’ll find.

Reef’s Asian influences reappear at dessert with an excellent Vietnamese coffee tart served with condensed milk ice cream and mint syrup. It shines as a culinary example of cross-cultural influence while nodding to the history of the building that once served as a Vietnamese mini-mall and pho shop.

Houston is home to one of the largest Vietnamese populations in the country, and Vietnamese cuisine can be found in iterations across the city. Vietnamese crawfish houses are a cross-cultural culinary phenomenon that started in Chinatown and now proliferate throughout the city. Restaurants like Cajun Kitchen, LA Crawfish, Crawfish House and Crawfish & Noodles take a traditional Cajun crawfish boil, add garlic and butter (and often secret blends of other aromatics and spices) to the steaming mix, and provide intense, rich and sometimes fiery dipping sauces like sweet and sour, Cajun, garlic butter and Thai seasonings. The result is a tangy, spicy, buttery, sweet, hot, flavorful and messy ordeal.

Some of the restaurants also serve more traditional Vietnamese dishes like pho, but for my pho fix in Houston, I headed down...
south toward Hobby Air-
port to Pho Binh Trailer. 
One of several locations 
around the city, this sit-

Houston continued on G3 
down restaurant, actu-
ally a reconstituted trail-
er, opened in 1983. The 
menu is small and limit-
ed to pho, but you need 
look no further than the 
first of the dozen or so 
items on the menu. The 
aromatic beef noodle 
soup has a silky consis-
tency and comes packed 
with the bristled edges 
of tripe, gelatinous ripples 
of beef tendon, pink 
steak and brisket that 
absorbs the soup’s fragrant 
juices. Layer the top of 
the soup with basil, mint, 
cilantro, bean sprouts 
and jalapeño slivers to 
elevate and enliven the 
flavored broth. And make 
sure to get to Pho Binh 
Trailer early; it was at ca-
pacity by the time I ar-
ived before noon on a 
recent Saturday.

Moving northwest 
from the southern edge 
of Houston to the Mon-
trose area in the cen-
ter of town, you also trek 
from Vietnam to India. At 
the white-tablecloth In-
dika, chef Anita Jaisingh-
ani delivers pan-Indi-
an flavors inspired by her 
Sindhi and Indian roots, 
hers time in Texas and her 
travels through Europe. 
She arrived in the States 
in the ’90s and, after a 
couple of years work-
ing as a pastry chef at the 
established Café Annie, 
helped change the face of 
Indian food in Houston 
when she opened Indika 
in 2001. The restaurant 
moved to its current loca-
tion a few years ago.

A fried okra salad bat-
tered with chickpeas and 
a juicy tandoori quail, 
slightly charred, stuffed 
with the sweet pop of 
caramelized onions and 
pine nuts and slathered 
with a breathy cumin yo-
gurt and electric cilan-
trito chutney, wed Tex-
as ingredients with In-
dian flavors. A mild vin-
daloo and floral saffron 
raita hummed their Indi-
an notes across a cowboy 
campfire song of grilled 
lamb crusted with black 
pepper and cumin in an-
other dish that straddled 
worlds.

Jaisinghani opened 
Pondicheri in a tony de-
velopment on Kirby 
Drive a few miles away 
in March 2011. Indika’s 
sleek, modern and more 
casual sister serves a va-
riety of popular street 
foods from around India 
and earned Jaisinghani 
two James Beard Award 
nominations in 2012. The 
restaurant’s bake shop 
also gives room for the 
former pastry chef to exhi-
bit her considerable skill 
with morning pastries, 
cookies, cakes and pies. 
(Try the chai-spiced cus-
tard pie.)

Pondicheri serves fa-
miliar curries (butter 
chicken in tomato sauce), 
dosas (curried potatoes), 
and samosas (goat ma-
sala), and puts an In-
dian spin on sandwiches 
with their Frankies, ro-
ti wraps filled with items 
like coarse lamb patties 
and ginger-garlic chicken. 
The familiar flavors 
of Texas get an Indian 
twist on a spicy shrimp 
chaat mellowed slight-
ly with hunks of avocado, 
and Tuesdays feature 
a quintessential intercon-
tinental mash-up, with a 
spiced-yogurt-marinated 
fried chicken breaded 
with chickpea flour.

A couple of miles away, 
chef Adam Dorris creates 
his own version of fried 
chicken at the boisterous 
and festive Pax America-
cana. The New American 
restaurant takes a more 
familiar approach to the 
dish, serving the moist, 
crunchy and tawny bird 
with creamy polenta, the 
snap of cabbage slaw and 
tang of pickled peppers.

If there was an interna-
tional influence, I would 
compare the cream-
zagged chicken to ver-
sions I’ve had from Co-
lombian food trailers.

Even a bistro like this 
one, opened last summer 
by Dorris, restaurateur 
Shepard Ross and part-
ners Dan and Mark Zimmer-
man, that looks tra-
ditional from the outside 
delivers unexpected sur-
prises (and I don’t just 
mean the original Andy 
Warhol painting of Mao 
Zedong in the main din-
ing room).

Roasted acorn squash 
sweetened with golden-
en raisin puree whispers 
with Indian spices. 
An American breakfast 
ning staple of toast and eggs 
takes on new multicultur-
al dimensions at dinner 
with fumy kimchee aioli 
piercing the viscous min-
erality of fluffy cast-iron 
eggs in a dish brightened 
by holy basil and stung 
with Thai chilies. And a 
ine-spice rub gives an 
Eastern accent to a Texas 
brisket.

Other highlights of the 
meal included tender oc-
topus tentacles served 
with the savory iron snap 
of bacon-braised kale 
and a dessert of orange 
icew with clementine granita and kum-
quat and mandarin marmalade that ended a rich 
dinner on a refreshingly 
light note.
The Houston restaurant scene has proven itself a dynamic, forward-facing, inclusive force. But the city's celebrated and eclectic scene will always have room for Mexican food. Nobody in Houston has received more acclaim for cultivating and spotlighting that country's cuisine in recent years than three-time James Beard Award finalist Hugo Ortega.

The chef and his wife, Tracy Vaught, opened Hugo's in the Montrose area in 2002 and the Puebla native has consistently drawn raves for his takes on Mexican classics like duck in mole poblano and cochinita pibil.

The couple, who also own the stalwart Backstreet Café, opened the seafood-inspired Mexican restaurant Caracol in December 2013 in the Galleria area. I stopped into the massive, bright space for a Sunday brunch buffet that resembled the kind of spread you'd expect from a four-star Mexican beachside resort. Tables snaked through the room stacked with rejuvenating shrimp cocktail, vibrant ceviche, roasted oysters and fish, an assortment of tamales, plant chili rellenos stuffed with meat, smoky brisket, crunchy taquitos and a giant bowl of chilaquiles draped with sunny eggs. With freshness, execution and flavoring at a high level for what can be a mundane meal, I'm excited to return to Caracol for lunch or dinner.

Chef Ortega's successes with Hugo's and Caracol are not just proof of Houstonians' love of great Mexican food (and food in general); they are a testament to the chef's personal resilience and the city's wealth of opportunity. The former factory worker immigrated to Houston 31 years ago and took a job working as a dishwasher and bus boy at Backstreet Café. Over the next two decades, he worked as a cook, trained at Houston Community College, married Backstreet owner Vaught, became a United States citizen and opened one of the city's most popular restaurants.

The chef's inspiring story is one of what must be thousands spread across the sprawling metropolis. I want to go back for more food, and more stories. To travel west Houston to find the Cuban restaurant my Vietnamese friend raves about, to test my fortitude at the lustily praised Mala Sichuan Bistro, and to stroll down memory lane with a cheese Coney from James Coney Island.

In a city of more than 600 square miles – large enough to encompass Manhattan, Boston, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis and Miami combined – one could spend years on an anthropological mission of culinary discovery.

Fortunately, as chef Yu told me, "People in Houston have no trouble driving for great food."

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RESTAURANTS HIGHLIGHTED

Caracol. 2200 Post Oak Blvd. 713-622-9996, caracol.net

Indika. 516 Westheimer Road. 713-524-2170, indikausa.com

LA Crawfish. 3957 Richmond Ave. 832-767-1533, thelacrawfish.com

Oxheart. 1302 Nance St. 832-830-8592, oxhearthoustontx.com

Pax Americana. 4319 Montrose Blvd. 713-239-0228, paxamericanahtx.com

Pondicheri. 2800 Kirby Drive. 713-522-2022, pondichericafe.com

Pho Binh Trailer. 10928 Beamer Road. 281-484-3963, phobinh.com/trailer

Reef. 2600 Travis St. 713-526-8282, reefhoustontx.com
JUSTIN YU'S GUIDE TO GOING INTERNATIONAL IN HOUSTON

1. Himalaya for Pakistani cuisine
   “Himalaya doesn’t hold back on the spices; it’s aggressive and bold. It also has the best naan I’ve ever had. Both crisp and pillowy at the same time.”
   6652 Southwest Freeway. 713-532-2837, himalayarestauranthouston.com

2. Thien Thanh for bánh cuon
   “Thien Thanh’s bánh cuon has really nice, aggressively charred meats wrapped in sheen, slick handmade steamed rice wrapping. The texture is awesome. The whole place kind of gives off light funky fish sauce flavor, which is comforting to me.”
   11210 Bellaire Blvd. 281-564-0419

3. Bon Ga for Korean
   “Bon Ga is your quintessential mom and pop restaurant (although I think the owners are brother and sister, not sure). Their Korean barbecue is fine, but their cooked dishes are where it’s at. A classic, simple kimchee jjigae. Unctuous beef dumplings and a light beef broth. Seafood pancake with a really even, crisp char. They do things classically. And well.”
   9861 Long Point Road. 713-461-5265