

Why Bush Won

by PAUL BURKA

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Some Like It *Picante*

ONCE UPON A TIME, WE WERE PART OF MEXICO, and if you look at what we like to eat, you would think we still are: Breakfast tacos get us going in the morning, fajitas sustain us at lunch, and truck-stop enchiladas restore us after a night on the town.

Some Like It Hot **Where to find the best**

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*With John Morthland (El Paso, Laredo), June Naylor (Dallas, Fort Worth), and **Robin Barr Sussman** (Houston). And with additional research by Costa Caloudas, Claire*

Canavan, Erin Gage, Leslie Higgs, Stirling Kelso, S. L. McDonald, Zach Smith, and Tim Taliaferro.

SIX MONTHS AGO our SWAT team of food writers fanned out across the state to find the spiciest salsa, freshest guacamole, deepest, darkest *mole poblano*, and much more. Along the way, we stumbled upon great recipes, learned a few tricks of the trade, and discovered the answers to some burning questions (what's the deal with menudo, anyway?). Read on for the last guide to Mexican food in Texas that you'll ever need.

Los Mejores—Where to find the best ...

Enchiladas

HOUSTON: ENCHILADAS

The spinach enchiladas at folksy, fun **Irma's** are unsurpassed: Spectacular homemade red ancho tortillas are stuffed with leafy greens, daubed with tart tomatillo sauce, lavished with chicken and mushrooms, and hit with queso blanco. At **Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen**, a pretty, brightly painted casa, the massive Donna enchilada, our runner-up, is bursting with savory ground beef and smothered in a spicy, soulful gravy made with freshly ground red chiles. **La Guadalupana Bakery and Café**, a little Montrose sleeper, serves elegant enchiladas verdes like those from Puebla, Mexico, the owner's home. Shredded chicken is bundled into ethereal corn tortillas and topped with avocado, thick, spicy tomatillo sauce, and crumbles of queso fresco. The crowds at upbeat **Jalapeño's**, with its boldly colored, art-splashed walls, keep this place hopping; the spinach enchiladas garner awards, but it's the corn enchiladas—filled with sweet corn kernels and nuggets of piquant poblano, covered with a decadent poblano cream—that shine. The stylishly Southwestern West niversity—neighborhood outpost of **Molina's Mexican Restaurant**, a Houston institution, is beloved of those who lap up Tex-Mex enchiladas; the classic Tejas version gently oozes yellow cheese into a swamp of cumin-spiked chile con carne.

HOUSTON: BEST ATMOSPHERE

Pull up a leather bar stool or plant yourself on **Hugo's** enchanting patio, with power fans and a serene fountain. The historic building has been beautifully restored, with tall, dramatic windows and industrial-chic copper-stained-concrete floors. Handwoven rugs in an earthy palette set off the smart decor. **Las Alamedas**, a *grande* Memorial-area mansion with shady bayou views, ornate Spanish colonial pieces, and soft flamenco music, has the feel of a private hacienda. Settle into the original **Ninfa's on Navigation** for a sweet-tart frozen Ninfarita, the only frozen margarita in town worth its salt, while you wait for a table in this aged *casita*, which was a tortilla factory in the forties. Dining nooks painted in electric blue and gold are fitted with old-fashioned vinyl chairs and faded photos of Mama Ninfa, and the waitresses wear elegant embroidered Mexican dresses. Nostalgia rules at pristinely preserved **Felix Mexican**, a testament to a bygone era. Hedges of pink and red hibiscus welcome regulars to this charming Spanish white-stucco-and-tile *casa* with soaring ceilings, Mexican

chandeliers, and chairs painted in bright piñata colors. Some prefer the architecture to the retro food. Nowhere but **Irma's** will you find twenty baby dolls in the ladies' room, whimsical tea sets in old armoires, dining-room chairs with heart-shaped backs, and a vintage refrigerator decoratively stocked with bottled Coca-Cola. Movers and shakers, politicians, and hungry downtowners just keep coming.

HOUSTON: TEQUILA SELECTION

Stylish **Hugo's** has Houston's most comprehensive tequila menu, with detailed descriptions, special flights, and complex mescals on the list. Of the 50 choices, Gran Centenario and Corralejo are labels known for extraordinarily high quality. Hand-shaken margaritas are served in cool Mexican glassware here; watch for tequila-tasting dinners. Tropical **Pico's**, home of the wildly popular shaker margarita made with smooth Herradura silver, stocks about 40 tequilas divided into the usual *blancos*, *reposados*, and *añejos*; prestigious labels include Patrón, Don Julio, and the rare Hacienda del Cristero. **Taco Milagro** was a pioneer in offering a large tequila selection in a casual dining setting; its palapa tequila bar displays about 35 varieties, including such fine sipping tequilas as Herradura Selección Suprema, Corralejo, and Casa Noble *añejo*. The cocktail crowd migrates to the shabby-chic, plant-filled patio at **Maria Selma**, which claims to pour 70 tequilas; Casa Noble *añejo*, 1942 Don Julio, and Patrón Platinum are rare—and pricey—options. Downtown, the luxurious and roomy lobby bar of the **Hilton Americas** carries 27 selections ranging from crisp and pungent to full and mellow. Aficionados will enjoy these fine sipping tequilas, including Patrón *añejo*, Don Eduardo *plata*, and Espolón *reposado*.

HOUSTON: CAMARONES AL MOJO DE AJO

Little cafes along the beaches of the Mexican Gulf Coast are known for this simple dish of shrimp, fresh-plucked from the ocean and sautéed with lots of garlic and olive oil. Handsome Montrose-area **Noche Cocina y Bar** serves the most impressive version in the Bayou City: six large, luscious shrimp encircle a pool of garlicky herb sauce and, in the center of the dazzling plate, a refreshing timbale of al dente corn, asparagus, and green beans. Less garlic and bigger shrimp is the style at laid-back **Pico's**, where sea-fresh butterflied *camarones* are delicately fried and presented beautifully with the shell on.

HOUSTON: GUACAMOLE

Tableside preparation of guacamole is catching on in Houston. The common thread: The avocado is real, freshly mashed, and flavored just the way you want it—but be prepared to pay more. Dark and clubby **El Tiempo** probably started the customizing trend, and it has the best version in town: with your choice of cilantro and finely diced jalapeños, tomatoes, onions, and—the kicker—raw garlic. Playful **Cadillac Bar** also scoops whole avocados tableside, but with chunkier add-ins, like cubes of the mandatory onion and tomato, plus roasted jalapeño. As for made-in-the-kitchen guacamole, you'll find the best—a pure avocado version (no fillers) that consistently tastes nutty and fresh—at bare-bones **Don Carlos Cantina**, although there's never enough of it on the entrée plates. No mystery goo at whimsically decorated **Irma's** either, where the

guacamole is thick with pieces of avocado, minced white onion, leafy cilantro, and jalapeño (beware—it's spicy).

HOUSTON: MIGAS

Migas means “crumbs” in Spanish, but the version at refined **Rustika Cafe and Bakery** is nothing to throw to the birds. *Grande* in size, the mound of well-scrambled eggs is laced with sweet onions, peppers, and tomatoes and topped with a restrained sprinkle of crisp tortilla strips and cheddar. At tiny **La Guadalupana Bakery and Café** spicy chorizo revs up the chips-heavy migas, which are blessedly light on the oil and savory with sautéed onions and peppers. Wash them down with a Mexican milk shake or some freshly squeezed juice.

HOUSTON: CEVICHE

The chilled ceviche at bright, bustling **Tampico Seafood & Cocina Mexicana** is the freshest in town, as invigorating as an ocean breeze. Tender chopped mahimahi and shrimp are “cooked” in tangy lime juice then served in a tall sundae glass spilling over with vibrant pico de gallo and avocado. Almost as wonderful is the spicier version, with snapper, whole shrimp and scallops, zesty pico de gallo, and *muchos* sliced avocados, at the original **Pico's**, on Bellaire Boulevard; relax by the gurgling patio fountain or at the palapa bar indoors and pretend you're in Puerto Vallarta.

HOUSTON: SALSA

Of the myriad salsas vying for the best first impression in Houston, the one at relaxing, traditional **Otilia's** is tops. It's an aromatic garden of just-plucked jalapeños, onions, cilantro, and tangy ripe tomatoes, whirled to a thick purée, and it tastes just like Mexico. The salsa at fancy, inner-loop **Rustika Café & Bakery** is similarly sublime but devilishly spicy, a smooth mélange of uncooked tomatoes, jalapeños, onions, and cilantro that adds electricity to the café's stellar Mexican breakfasts. Retro **Spanish Village** also starts right with tongue-stinging red salsa, a full-bodied tomato type starring jalapeños and their seeds. Sneak past the young-and-crazy bar crowd at upscale, Spanish Colonial **El Tiempo** and start your meal with its trademark green salsa, originally created by owner Roland Laurenzo's mother, Ninfa Laurenzo. Roland's version is a creamier, more luxurious potion of puréed avocados, sharp tomatillos, garlic, cilantro, and kicking-fresh jalapeños. The most-exotic award goes to the pineapple salsa flecked with jalapeño and cilantro at **El Pueblito**, an adorable restaurant with hand-painted booths and many Mexican crosses; the lush back patio, with its candles and tiki torches, is a happy-hour hot spot.

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TEXAS MONTHLY

September 2004

Great Small Towns for... Food

PECAN-CRUSTED TROUT, LAMB CHOPS WITH SALSA VERDE— AND SALADS WEARING FRESH FLOWERS.

Previously in Reporter

[Orange Crush](#) [August 2004]

[Greg Ott, Free](#) [July 2004]

Fredericksburg

The cheek-by-jowl shops lining Main Street make this Central Texas town look like Christmas year-round. Though the community was founded by German settlers, its best restaurants have nothing to do with the Black Forest. **The Nest**, in a remodeled old house, is serene in basic buff, accessorized with a few judiciously placed black and white photographs. Diners who can tear themselves away from the signature steamed mussels in a buttery, cilantro-tinged sauce find plenty of variety in dishes like mahimahi in ginger-lime beurre blanc or a half-chicken stuffed with spinach and portobellos in a rosemary demi-glace (607 S. Washington, 830-990-8383; dinner Thursday-Monday). Dressy but never stuffy, the **Navajo Grill** has moved to a restored house just east of downtown, but the menu still emphasizes Southwestern dishes like breast of chicken Chimayó, marinated with New Mexico chiles and topped with chipotle aioli. A sumptuous Stilton-stuffed filet sounds an international note (803 E. Main, 830-990-8289; dinner daily, Sunday brunch). At the **Fredericksburg Herb Farm**, you can dine casually in a little converted greenhouse or under the trees next to a honeysuckle-covered arbor. Delicious lunchtime salads and sandwiches come adorned with fresh flowers. So do midday entrées like tender grilled shrimp with wonderful, bright-tasting guacamole. Dinner might be juicy quail with roasted-garlic mashed potatoes (405 Whitney, 830-997-8615; lunch daily, dinner Friday and Saturday).

Jefferson

Only twenty or so miles from Louisiana, Jefferson exudes Southern gentility like a whiff of White Shoulders. Its antebellum mansions and Victorian cottages are the real thing, not Disney re-creations. At the helm of the lovely, high-ceilinged **Stillwater Inn Restaurant** for twenty years, chef and co-owner Bill Stewart is as skilled at sautéing a pecan-crusted trout filet as he is at roasting a breast of

duck, and his perfectly balanced vinaigrette should be bottled (203 E. Broadway, 903-665-8415; dinner Monday-Saturday). Even though it's in the 1851 Jefferson Hotel, busy **Lamache's Italian Restaurant** feels more twenty-first century than nineteenth. Standbys like lasagne share menu space with dishes like lobster and artichoke hearts in a dauntingly rich white-wine cream sauce (124 W. Austin, 903-665-6177; lunch and dinner Wednesday-Sunday). The historic **Excelsior House** dining room serves only breakfast, but what a breakfast. As you sit at a long table amid antique furniture—feasting on a set menu of scrambled eggs, fried ham, grits, fruit, biscuits, miniature orange-and-pecan muffins, and a champagne flute of orange juice—time stands still (211 W. Austin, 903-665-2513; breakfast daily; reserve a day ahead).

Port Aransas

No Texas city is more shorts-and-sandals casual than sun-drenched Port Aransas. Because tourists visit in droves, you'll eat far better here than in most small towns. Eclectic bites, affordable prices, a cool ambience, and a patio herb garden—no wonder tiny **Shells Pasta and Seafood** is always packed. Pick pesto goat cheese crostini, seared amberjack with chile-lime salsa, or creamy farfalle with shrimp and bacon. And say yes if you're offered the focaccia sirloin burger. Reservations aren't taken, so come early (522 E. Avenue G, 361-749-7621; lunch Monday, lunch and dinner Wednesday-Sunday). Ignore the unprepossessing exterior of tiny **Venetian Hot Plate**. Instead, enjoy its exceptional Italian food, both traditional and modern—grilled amberjack with cumin and pineapple-pear salsa, lamb chops with salsa verde, salmon steak in Key lime beurre blanc—in a casual but classy atmosphere of rustic wooden tables, red-tile floors, and soft lights. The signature dish—filet mignon in a creamy Gorgonzola sauce—will wow you (232 Beach, 361-749-7617; dinner Tuesday-Sunday). At **La Playa Mexican Grille**, a bright, arty Mexican bungalow, you can nosh on fajitas or opt for more creative cuisine like the terrific pepper-crusted tuna steak with aioli and smoky portobellos or enchiladas marisco with a roasted-poblano sauce, all served on colorful Fiestaware. The guacamole, prepared tableside, is quite a show (222 Beach, 361-749-0022; lunch and dinner daily; no credit cards).

By Robin Barr Sussman.

Cool Quaff



LEMON



LIME



GRAPES



CANTALOUPE

If any drink is identified with the Fourth of July, it's lemonade. And the best "lemonade" in Texas comes from famously quirky Houston Mexican restaurant Irma's. This rustic pink refresher is made from fresh fruit—just about every variety in the universe—and while owner Irma N. Galvan's exact recipe remains a closely guarded secret, she does reveal that it calls for watermelon juice blended with lemon, pineapple, strawberry, cantaloupe, grape, orange, and lime, plus guava, papaya, mango, and honeydew. The flavor is both sublimely tropical and strikingly sweet. As Irma says: "When life gives you extra fruit, make lemonade—every day!" ROBIN BARR SUSSMAN



PINEAPPLE



ORANGE



STRAWBERRIES

Our Approximation of Irma's Fresh Fruit Lemonade

- 3 cups watermelon
- 1 cup pineapple
- 1 cup strawberries
- 1 cup cantaloupe
- 1 cup green or red grapes
- $\frac{3}{4}$ cup orange juice (1 large orange)
- $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 cup lemon, lime, or Mexican lime juice
- $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 cup sugar to taste

Cut fruit into roughly bite-size pieces, then blend each separately with an equal amount of water (strain the pineapple, cantaloupe, and grape juices to make them a bit less cloudy).

Add orange and lemon or lime juices. Add sugar (dissolve it first in a little hot water to reduce stirring time). Add a drop or two of red food coloring if you like, and chill. Feel free to substitute any favorite fruit, and cut some up to float in the lemonade. Makes about 10 cups.

Easier still, just order it to go (\$6.50 a half gallon) from Irma's, 22 N. Chenevert, Houston (713-222-0767). ♣



WATERMELON