HOUSTONIZATION

REVISITED

How wildcatters, hot sauce, and multicultural neighborhoods created the ultimate Southern food frontier

BY ROBB WALSH

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WYNN MYERS
Houston is the city of the future. By about 2040, most Americans will trace their ancestry to somewhere other than Europe—that's already the case in Houston. The city's blend of Latinos, Anglos, and people of African and Asian descent is a glimpse into the nation's demographic destiny.

Perhaps more than anything, Houston's cuisine serves up a taste of things to come. New immigrants are reinterpreting fried chicken and finding new ways to barbecue in the backyard. The rapidly morphing multicultural food scene inspired John T. Edge, director of the Southern Foodways Alliance, to call Houston the "South's 21st-century Creole capital."

In the last few years, travel magazines have started recommending Houston as an exciting destination. Houstonians aren't used to such accolades. The last time this city was on the cutting edge was 50 years ago, when Mission Control seemed like the center of the universe.

In the February 1966 issue of Southern Living, Houston was described in a feature article as a "City of money, oil, building, and exciting people." Photos accompanying the story depicted the downtown skyline, a petrochemical plant on the ship channel, a moon vehicle at Space Center Houston, the Astrodome, Mayor Roy Hofheinz, and a pile of rubble from a demolished building in front of a modern skyscraper.

Those were heady days for Space City. Developers were hiring famous architects like I.M. Pei and Philip Johnson to design downtown skyscrapers. At his restaurant Maxim's, Camille "Frenchie" Berann, who once worked as a waiter at Le Pavillon in New York, served caviar and Champagne to international high rollers.

Houston's style, or lack thereof, was the subject of much national criticism in years past. It was (and still is) the only major city in America without any zoning laws. In a 1975 article in The New Yorker titled "On the Possibility of Houstonization," Calvin Trillin postulated that the Louisiana Superdome in New Orleans was part of a conspiracy by oil-rich Houston developers to build a Gulf Coast corridor from Houston to Mobile, Alabama, in the Texas city's flawed image. Trillin's coinage, "Houstonization," became a synonym for unchecked sprawl and other nightmares brought on by a lack of urban planning. Residents of Texas' capital city plastered "Don't Houstonize Austin" bumper stickers on their VW buses.
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The development frenzy came to an abrupt halt when the oil bust of the 1980s brought the city to its knees. One in every seven workers lost his or her job. Real estate developers sat on $8.5 billion in unsold new homes and 186 million square feet of brand-new, unrented office space.

But all that cheap real estate, along with the seaport culture, subtropical climate, and spicy cuisine, made Houston a magnet for immigrants from Latin America, Asia, and Africa. When the oil industry recovered and the money started flowing again, there were new jobs to be filled. However, Houston’s black-and-white racial fabric had been replaced by something new.

If food is a window on culture, then the emergence of Houston’s ethnic restaurants in the late 1970s and early 1980s is particularly telling. The city has always had tamale carts and taco stands, but around 1975, non-Hispanics began flocking to the East Side for Maria Nida’s now-famous mecate-grilled fajitas. In 1977, two years after the fall of Saigon, downtown office workers got their first taste of pho when a Vietnamese woman bought a coffee shop and introduced a new menu.

Today, the 6-square-mile expanse of Asiatown along Belaire Boulevard is home to countless Vietnamese sandwich stands and noodle shops. There’s also Korean barbecue. Thai food, Malaysian cuisine, and excellent Japanese-American ramen. Houstonians don’t think in terms of “the best Chinese restaurant,” but rather they argue about where to find the best dim sum or the best Hong Kong-style seafood.

A United Nations of condiments is crammed into the refrigerator doors of average Houstonians. They think nothing of putting sriracha on tacos, kimchi on burgers, and sake on hot dogs. Young chefs, like James Beard Award winner Chris Shepherd and former Jean-Georges Vongerichten protege Bryan Caswell, are coming up with reconceived takes on fine dining that astonish visitors.

The term “Houstonization” has even lost its pejorative sting. Urban planners who once derided “urban sprawl” have decided that Houston’s hodgepodge of competing city centers connected by a spiderweb of highways is actually a perfect example of a new concept called the “multicentered metropolitan region.” It seems that spreading population density among many interconnected, pedestrian-friendly centers is a more efficient transportation model than the gridlock-in-ducing, hub-and-spoke system found in cities built before the invention of the automobile.

Which is to say: Hooray for Houstonization!
THE NEW TASTE OF THE SOUTH

The 10 best places to sample Houston's melting-pot cuisine

PONDICHERI is James Beard Award Semi-Finalist chef Anita Jaisinghani's Indian street-food cafe. Her amazing take on breakfast tacos—the Morning Thali—pairs little dishes of potato curry, upma, and keema (which tastes like chili) with a fried egg on flatbread. For lunch, try the Lamb Mint Burger with onion masala and cilantro chutney on a brioche bun. There's also a huge selection of vegan fare. 2800 Kirby Drive; pondichericafe.com

CARACOL has got to be the best Mexican seafood restaurant in the country. Consider ordering the wood-smoked Gulf oysters and the Sopa de Mariscos flavored with guajillo and costeño amarillo peppers served here by James Beard Award nominee Hugo Ortega. Munching on the stunning Petalos de Huachinango with its artfully arranged slices of red snapper, cucumber, jalapeno wheels, and tangerine sections, you might think you're eating sushi. Also try the craft tequila cocktails. 2200 Post Oak Blvd; caracol.net

UNDERBELLY is the home of James Beard Award-winning chef Chris Shepherd's new Creole cuisine—a mash-up of Asian seasonings, Gulf seafood, and Latino forms (like tacos and tamales). If Korean Braised Goat and Dumplings doesn't suit you, try the down-home lunch meat charcuterie plate with Shepherd's house-made bologna. 1100 Westheimer Road; underbellyhouston.com

MALA SICHUAN BISTRO is run by Cori Xiong and partner Heng Chen, two young University of Texas at Austin grads who grew up in China. Their menu features cutting-edge Chinese charcuterie, like the Garlic Bacon rolls; modern riffs, like the Funky Stick Chicken; and classic Szechuan favorites. 1201 Westheimer Road; 832/767-0911

REEF was named the top seafood restaurant by Bon Appetit in 2008. James Beard Award-nominee chef Bryan Caswell performs a multicultural take on Gulf seafood, including a classic French-style raw seafood tower, baked oysters seasoned with Indian lime pickle, and a Thai-style whole fish. Don't miss the gumbo (from Caswell's Cajun family recipe) or the amazing crispy-skinned red snapper. 2600 Travis Street; reffhouston.com
LA CRAWFISH might have a name that's inspired by Louisiana, but its owners are actually Vietnamese-Americans. The Viet-Cajun crawfish craze started in Houston's Chinatown. Asian-style mudbugs are boiled in lemongrass, ginger, and peppery broth. Then they're drained and shaken in a plastic bag with melted butter, garlic, and your choice of mild, medium, or fiery spices. 1005 Blalock Road; thelocrawfish.com

WEIGHTS AND MEASURES has a menu that reads like it came from one of Fergus Henderson's London bakeries and cafes: Mushroom Toast with poached eggs, House Smoked Salmon with truffle egg salad on pumpernickel. "Breads" appetizers that combine fresh breads with bold-flavored spreads. The Love & Squalor bar stops serving martinis when the last customer leaves. 2808 Caroline Street; weights-measures.com

FRENCH RIVIERA BAKERY & CAFE serves up flaky croissants and fluffy scrambled œufs (eggs) for breakfast; jambon (ham) sandwiches on crusty baguettes for lunch, and creamy chocolate éclairs for dessert. The years that pastry chef Louis Wu spent in Paris bakeries explain the European ambience. He and his co-owner brother, Robert, are Chinese-French-African-Americans who grew up in Madagascar. 3100 Chimney Rock Road, Suite B; 713/783-3264

LATIN BITES is a Peruvian restaurant that has become justly famous for its cured-fish appetizers. The popular Fisherman Cebiche is served Peruvian style in a bowl with seasonal fish, the quick-cured fish Tirasitos are paintings on a plate, and the succulent Sashimi Tiradito Tres Sabores merges Japanese sushi with Latin flavors. Meat eaters invariably opt for the delicious South American Lomo Saltado (beef tenderloin) and savory meat-and-potato towers, which are called Causitas. Be sure to order one of the bar's specialty pisco cocktails. 5709 Woodway Drive; latinbitescafe.com

POUR SOCIETY is a gastropub created by celebrity chef Bradley Ogden. The menu of Houstonized Southern food includes Catfish Schnitzel with Dirty Rice; the Texas Banh Mi (a local spin on a Vietnamese sandwich that features chicken liver mousse, smoked chicken, and a barbecue vinaigrette on a toasted baguette); and the Kim-Cheese, a sandwich stuffed with pimiento cheese and house-made kimchi. For dessert, you can't go wrong with Frito Pie, a chocolate pie in a crushed-corn-chip crust. Beer lovers will delight in the 48 craft brews on tap, while sports fans can appreciate the 17 television screens. 947 Gessner Road; poursociety.com