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HIGH ON HOUSTON

There's a whole lot of truth behind the "big" moniker, but as Becca Hensley discovers, Houston is America's biggest small town. Just don't forget to bring a Texan-sized appetite

Houston's skyscrapers (here and previous page) reach heights as lofty as 75 stories, and the city's lack of zoning restrictions means that developers can build the giants in whichever part of town they feel best suits the building



Chef Chris Shepherd (right) of Underbelly

Colourful servings of ingredients from local sources fill the "new-American Creole" menu at Underbelly (below)

The Asia Society Texas Center (bottom) nurtures partnerships, education and understanding between the United States and Asia



“IT DEFINES THE PIONEER SPIRIT, AN IDEOLOGY THAT ADVOCATES INDIVIDUALITY, FEARLESSNESS AND ORIGINALITY”

Everything's bigger in Texas? That's a whale of a legend. But sometimes lore has legs – and don't doubt that elephantine is a size Texans embrace with gusto. As the Lone Star State's most populated city, strapping Houston leads the monster-sized mythos with its walloping zest for life.

Once the domain of 10-gallon hats and plate-sized belt buckles, the Space City now has an edgier vibe. These days you're just as likely to glimpse suede Gucci driving loafers, Lilliputian pocket squares and fedoras as you are cowboy-dude regalia. Groundbreaking chefs, pioneering artists, hipster farmers and denizens with a yen for ecology stir life into the mix. However, it's H-Town's newly trumpeted reputation as a culinary capital that beguiles me on a recent visit.

Sizzling with humid summer heat, Houston, a port city on the state's south-east coast, brings to mind a stove bursting with flaming pans. There's actually steam rising from the pavement when I walk into Underbelly (1100 Westheimer Rd.; +1 713 528 9800; www.underbellyhouston.com), the gastronomic domain of recent James Beard Foundation award recipient, Chris Shepherd. Creatively adorned with jam jars and old-time cooking accoutrements, the buzzing restaurant is mobbed with diners. I see Shepherd, himself a teddy bear of a man, ushering a satisfied customer to the door. “Don't come back,” he says, a statement which stops her (and me) in our tracks. Knowingly, she grins. A regular, the customer waits for what comes next. “Don't come back until you've visited at least one of these restaurants owned by my friends,” Shepherd says, his grin as wide as Galveston Bay. Enamoured, she

nods her head obediently. Houstonians, it seems, will do just about anything that the venerable Shepherd suggests.

A man on a mission, Shepherd has become Houston's unofficial champion of the city's rich, cultural diversity. He tells me about it over lunch, where I sample his indigenous, Houston-inspired cuisine. I nibble crunchy Korean-braised goat dumplings, armoured with a treacley topcoat that bursts in splinters of caramel flavours. I tuck into buttery biscuits, sopped in chicken gravy – the sort of dish every Texan's grandmother attempted back in the day, but where those earnest grandmas failed, Shepherd nobly succeeds. His airy biscuits, light enough to take flight, make a sinful dipping partner with the creamy gravy. Finally, we share a slice of acidic, pudding-like vinegar pie, born from a recipe retrofitted from a vintage cookbook and bejewelled with Shepherd pizzazz.





A wall of jarred preserves and pickled vegetables (left), direct from Underbelly's kitchen, are available to purchase

Underbelly's menu changes daily, dependant on what ingredients are available from local purveyors (below)



Shepherd relishes the opportunity to showcase the diversity of the United States' fourth-largest metropolis, a bustling port city, to tourists and locals alike. He calls it "a gumbo" – a fusion of myriad cultures. "Do you know Houston has no ethnic majority?" he says, as we head next door to The Hay Merchant (1100 Westheimer Rd.; +1 713 528 9805; www.haymerchant.com), a popular bar for a hearty craft beer. "So many cultures live here together. We learn from each other. We combine to make a whole." Then, as though to point out that nearly two-century-old Houston isn't a Western U.S. city rife with cowboys or a Southern U.S. city awash in genteel nostalgia, he adds: "We have Vietnamese, Korean, Mexican, Nicaraguan, Indian, Chinese, Northerners, Southerners and more."

This gumbo, perhaps best known as the location from where men rocketed to the moon, remains an oil-money-layered, immigrant-thronged, industry-packed, far-reaching megacity that hums with intensity. With no zoning regulations, it defines the pioneer spirit, an ideology that advocates individuality, fearlessness and originality. Both picturesque and suburban, it comprises manifold architectural styles, ambiances and personalities. Within the Inner Loop, where Underbelly occupies an eclectic street in the trendy neighbourhood of Montrose, and a variety of other vibrant neighbourhoods thrive, the city seems fuelled by the creative spirit.

"WITH IMMENSE POCKETBOOKS AND A CARING SPIRIT, HOUSTON REIGNS AS THE MOST PHILANTHROPIC CITY"

At the helm of a number of other Houston eateries, and a partner in a few more, Shepherd has become the poster child for a city that's rising like a cool kid's shooting star. Abundant with generosity, he just wants the world to know how plunging into the vast cultural fabric of Houston enriched his life. Today, Shepherd's innovative dishes blend Old South traditions with exotic spices, and far-flung techniques with Texas sensibilities – an homage to the city and its many cultures.

As I stand to leave, he starts to say his signature phrase: "Don't come back." "I know," I reply, grabbing the pamphlet that lists his favourite Houston eateries, farmers and even one of the city's bespoke family-run shirt makers, Hamilton Shirts, which has made custom shirts since 1883. "I can't wait to try them all."

I've learned that visiting Houston requires careful meal planning. I usually tell visitors to begin at Underbelly for lunch, then move over to the gentrified Warehouse District, set in the shadows of the roaring freeway, for dinner at Oxheart (1302 Nance St.; +1 832 830 8592; www.oxheart.com).



Hugo's specialises in dishes made from fresh, colourful ingredients, such as seasonal tostadas (here) and roasted fish (bottom centre), served in a comfortable space with touches of Old Mexico (bottom right)



oxheart.houston.com). Here, wunderkind Jason Yu turns out a clever, garden-inspired tasting menu, which (hopefully) includes his signature, nearly indescribable, sunflower soup. In swanky River Oaks, I enjoy Anita Jaisinghani's glamorous version of Indian street food at Pondicheri (2800 Kirby Dr., B132; +1 713 522 2022; www.pondichericafe.com), where the casual daytime scene transforms to elegance at night. Interior-style Mexican-food aficionados agree that Hugo Ortega's eponymous Hugo's (1600 Westheimer Rd.; +1 713 524 7744; www.hugosrestaurant.net) conjures chilli-pepper magic. I like to end the night at OKRA Charity Saloon (924 Congress Ave.; +1 713 237 8828; www.friedokra.org), in the historic downtown, founded and run by a coterie of conscientious restaurateurs and bar owners. I imbibe here, knowing that the price paid for each libation tumbled counts; the hip bar donates 100 percent of its profits to an evolving list of local charities. No matter how much I've eaten, I end every stay at El Bolillo Bakery (2421 South Wayside Dr.; +1 713 921 3500; www.elbolillo.com), a classic *panadería* (Mexican bakery). There, I load

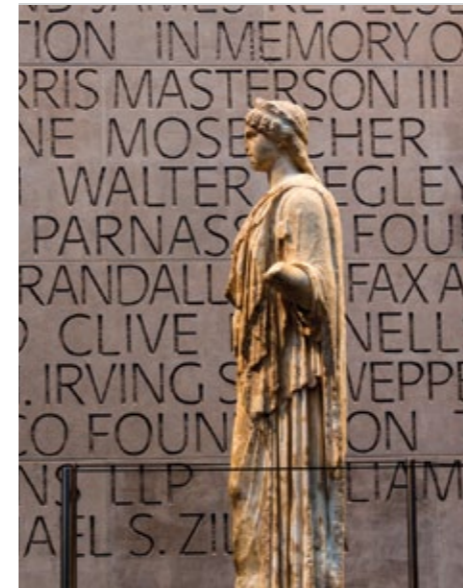




The elegant lobby at Four Seasons Hotel Houston (right)

The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston features a collection of more than 56,000 works, ranging from antiquities (below) to present-day pieces

Buffalo Bayou is marked with ample hiking and biking trails (bottom), including Sandy Reed Memorial Trail and Kinder Footpath



The Menil Collection (above) includes work from the abstract (top) to the ancient, and modern sculptures by artists such as Jim Love (left)

up on sweet Mexican wedding cookies, sugary empanadas and spongy *tres leches* cake, which I take home for friends.

If a hectic dining itinerary threatens indigestion, consider joining a gastronomic tour. I sign up for a guided walk through Chinatown with Houston Culinary Tours (www.houstonculinarytours.com), sampling cuisine at a variety of cafés, then learning to make egg rolls as a grand finale. Often led by ardent chefs, the tours meander through neighbourhoods or focus on a certain type of cuisine. The most popular adventure, called “Where the Chefs Eat”, takes participants into the little black books of local gourmands to explore farmers’ markets, the wharfs, organic gardens, the back rooms of bakeries, bars and tiny, unsung cafés redolent with

ethnic flair. Hands-on activities, such as oyster shucking, charcuterie making or tortilla pressing only add to the fun.

Though Houston’s recent gourmet renaissance has captured worldwide attention, I’ve visited the city in the past for the exquisite art scene. With immense pocketbooks and a caring spirit, Houston reigns as the most philanthropic city in the United States, according to data compiled by Charity Navigator. That translates to hefty donations – sums which generously underwrite and support both the Museum District’s 19 varied collections (+1 713 715 1939; www.houmuse.com), and the Performing Arts District, highly regarded for its ballet, opera and symphony. The intimate Alley Theater has just reopened after renovation, and the Goliath-sized Jones Hall are just two of the notable venues.

Most people have a mandatory ritual when visiting a favourite city. For me, that means an afternoon at the stunning Menil Collection (1533 Sul Ross St.; +1 713 525 9400; www.menil.org). Like a treasure chest flung open, this multi-block-long, tree-lined complex holds a melange of precious objects. Set on leafy grounds, the private collection vaunts a Renzo Piano-designed gallery, abundant with works that range from Byzantine altar pieces to Jackson Pollock abstract canvasses. A free-standing Cy Twombly gallery is one of a kind, and a non-denominational chapel quickens the heart with ruminative interiors by Mark Rothko. A Drawing Institute is currently under construction.

Shopping too lives up to those “big” Texan expectations. You’ll need a map to navigate Kuhl-Linscomb (2424 W Alabama St.; +1 713 526

6000; www.kuhl-linscomb.com). Houston’s largest, privately owned lifestyle and design haven. With 5,181 sqm of display space, it occupies every inch of five separate buildings, three of them retrofitted old houses full of soul. Italian antiques, fine china, linens, pet supplies, stationery, music, skincare and more fill the artfully edited shelves, which glean bounty as tempting as pirate treasure. Expect to leave with items you weren’t planning to purchase.

Defining modern urbanity, Houston’s jagged cityscape bursts with skyscrapers, freeways and gleaming steel edifices, yet, slicing through its centre, Buffalo Bayou (+1 713 752 0314; www.buffalobayou.org) unravels like a green carpet carefully unrolled. Composed of 64 hectares of prime parkland in the heart of Houston, this

just-refurbished green space includes public art, mazes of bike paths, pedestrian bridges, concert venues, picnic spots and perennial commons. A swamp-turned-social-scene, it embraces sloping hills, ravines and nearly one hectare of dedicated canine-romping space. At Crosby Outfall, a major entry point to the bayou, I study John Runnell’s six-metre, stainless-steel canoe sculpture dubbed “It Wasn’t a Dream It Was a Flood”. It awakens some guilt about all the eating I’ve done, so I vow to fight back. I rent a kayak, and travel for five undulating kilometres right through downtown. It takes two hours of paddling, but at last I reach the finish line. Tired, hungry – and ready to eat all over again – I muse over the possibilities. ☺

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