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The Houston Dining Scene Is the Most Exciting It's Ever Been



Brad Japhe

The city is a breeding ground for the type of whimsical experimentation that's been priced out of most major American markets.

BRAD JAPHE April 26th, 2018

Houston food has some high-profile fans. David Chang just coronated it the most exciting food city in America, and Anthony Bourdain recently discovered the city's exceptionalism went far beyond good barbecue. Although welcoming the recognition, one local chef, Jean-Philippe Gaston, is determined to turn the camera towards the lesser-told virtues of his hometown.

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"The food in Houston is so unique because it's built by immigrants," says the French-Mexican chef who settled in southeast Texas twenty years ago. "They bring recipes from their motherland. You can find food from all over the world prepared by first-generation cooks. These aren't generic corporate transplants."

As a tasteful demonstration, Gaston often drags out-of-towners to **Kim Chau**. The Vietnamese landmark is tucked inside a rundown strip mall. Inside is checkered linoleum flooring, chalkboard specials, and the best Bún bò huế in all of Houston. Pungent in umami and pepper spice, its rich broth coats vermicelli, slow-cooked beef, raw onions, and congealed pork blood.

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Despite being home to one of the largest Vietnamese populations outside of southeast Asia, the preparations found at Kim Chau are hardly commonplace. Gaston appreciates the distinction: “They stayed true to some of the best old-school dishes that you won’t see very often because they’re time-consuming and hard to mass-produce at the volume with which this city devours Vietnamese food.” Recipes from the forty-year-old restaurant have inspired plenty of copycats across town, Gaston contends, but never realized with the same devotion to detail found here.

“When I moved here 20 years ago, I felt right at home,” Gaston recalls. “For the first time since I was a kid, I arrived into a place where I wasn’t alone; everyone else was a newcomer like me. Whether they came from a different state or from a different continent, we all became a group. And that group became ‘us’, not ‘them.’”

Only in a landscape like this can Hugo Ortega rise the ranks from undocumented dishwasher to James Beard Award-winning chef and restaurateur. “When they make the movie about his life, I just hope he takes me with him to the Oscars,” Gaston says of his longtime friend and colleague.



Jean-Philippe Gaston and Hugo Ortega Brad Japhe

Of the five eateries now helmed by Ortega, Gaston is particularly smitten by **Xochi**, where the chef riffs on recipes from the Mexican state of Oaxaca. Inspired by his grandmother's cooking,

Ortega orchestrates a truly transportive dining experience. Antojitos are highlighted by quesillo-stuffed tetela and tamales de huitlacoche. The backbar features dozens of obscure mezcal bottles. For dessert, white chocolate is hand-painted and sculpted into a cacao pod, hiding a trove of postres within.

As Gaston points out, Houston is a fertile breeding ground for the whimsical experimentation that's been priced out of most other major American markets. "Our ever-growing food industry is partly due to the fact that there are no zoning laws or restrictions," he explains. "This eliminates ridiculous leases and grandfather laws. You can build anywhere and however you would like." Combine that with some of the country's lowest intra-urban real estate prices, and you're looking at a singularly attractive destination for any aspiring chef.



"All these factors make Houston a place where — not only can you build your dream — but you don't have to worry about competition," he says. "Since there is so much variety, and so much space, literally anyone in the world can find a comfortable place to thrive here."

And many do, aided more recently by the city's trending food hall scene. In the heart of downtown, Conservatory — a subterranean gourmet hub and beer garden, just off Main Street — kicked-started the phenomenon in 2016. Co-owner Anh Mai enticed upstart chefs with an opportunity to split ownership in their own stalls. "It's a unique opportunity for a young entrepreneur to showcase their talent," says Gaston. "They get to make it on their own for the first time and see how the beast truly works."

Mai is ready to replicate the template on a larger scale at **Bravery**, opening later this fall. The concept allows chefs to offer upscale fare at affordable price points by eliminating table service; the people preparing the food are the very same ones plating it. Five separate island kitchens will be buoyed by a somm-directed wine program and an outdoor cocktail bar.

With relatively few impediments to entry, though, many first time chef-owners are willing to go it alone. Since opening **Izakaya** in 2015, Gaston has already seen a handful of former line cooks venture off on their own. Ryan Lachaine is a recent example. A former professional hockey player out of Manitoba, he just opened **Riel** — imbuing Gulf Coast cuisine with his Ukrainian and French-Canadian roots. So you can order frog legs, but they'll arrive on an herbed waffle, under Creole cream cheese. You can get hangar steak, but it's accompanied with potato and cheddar-stuffed pierogi. Battered and fried alligator bites? They're smothered in ranch.

It's an ambitious playbook for a rookie, particularly in the gastronomically dense neighborhood of Montrose. But Houston rewards the bold. Above all, the city is a testament to the delicious possibilities that result when you remain open to what others have to offer. "The people here just have a natural curiosity to blend flavors, techniques and experiences together to create something different," maintains Gaston. "What people call 'fusion cooking' was a thing happening here since God-knows-how-long. It just came naturally. There isn't one style of cooking in Houston; there is only Houston food."

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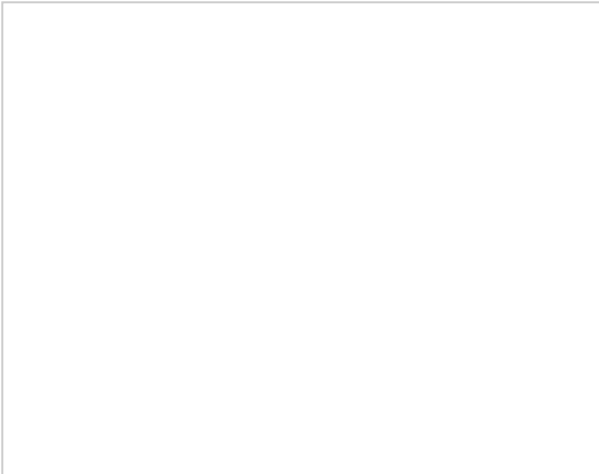
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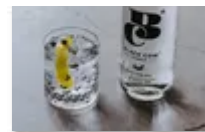


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