

Best of the West

Get lured by the burgeoning gourmet scene. Venture out and explore San Antonio and the Hill Country.

By Carla Avolio

When it comes to getting away for the weekend, Austinites have often gone west, either down to San Antonio for out-and-out action at Six Flags, or across to Fredericksburg for boutique shopping and a hearty schnitzel. Although there will always be mandatory trips to the River Walk and the Alamo, and the region west of Austin will continue to draw us back with its reliable tourist attractions, now there's another great reason to make the drive: a thriving gourmet scene.



Nao

This is a food area on the move. A synergy between chefs and producers is leading a gastronomic boom that's rooted in the surrounding land.

"We have really evolved beyond the pervasive Tex-Mex," says David Kellaway, managing director of the Culinary Institute of America's campus in San Antonio. "Chefs are starting to

embrace the region's strong culture and excellent farm-to-table accessibility to the fertile Rio Grande Valley, offering diners world-class cuisine."

At San Antonio's iconic River Walk, a newly developed 1.3-mile stretch has created fertile ground for newly minted restaurants and cultural attractions like The Pearl. This converted

brewery—home to the CIA, boutique shops and eateries—has become a gourmet hotspot where high-end restaurants place a strong emphasis on locally sourced ingredients.

On Saturdays, the square in front of the beautifully restored 1881 Brewhouse comes alive with a producers-only market. Stalls are piled with a colorful mix of fruits and earthy

Vaudeville Bistro



vegetables that come and go with the seasons: fennel in January, figs in June, melons in September. Under a crisp blue sky, I spend a happy morning sampling locally roasted coffee and fresh goat cheese from Blanco as the sound of live jazz floats in the air. The produce here is the definition of local, coming from no more than 150 miles away.

Next door at the Boiler House, Chef Jeff White holds special dinners showcasing small farms in South Central Texas. Up next in January: beef brisket and root vegetables grown 30 miles away at My Father's Farm in Seguin. He says it's not just the superior quality of the

local produce—still in its peak freshness—that compels him to champion its use; it's also a sense of responsibility.

"These farmers work incredibly hard for us, so this is my way of supporting them," he says.

And it's not just small businesses making

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the most of the area's abundance; big-name hotels are cottoning on too. Driving northwest, San Antonio's cityscape melts in to gently sloping hills blanketed with gnarled oak trees. I soon find myself at La Cantera Hill

Country Resort, the ranch-style resort that sits at the foot of the Hill Country. At fine-dining establishment Francesca's at Sunset, Chef Dirk Troop uses fruits and vegetables grown within 100 miles and tweaks the menu every 10 days to ensure he features what's truly in season.

The same goes for the resort's drink selection. I fall in love with the scarlet-tinted sangria, which stars award-winning Cinco vodka from San Antonio, Duchman wine from Driftwood, about 20 miles out of Austin, and a smattering of berries. Plus, five nights a week, Head Sommelier Steven Kruger holds tastings of wines made



San Antonio's River Walk

from grapes grown entirely in this state, which reminds me that here in the Hill Country, I'm sitting in the best place on earth to appreciate Texan wine. This is the location of so-called Wine Road 290, a small stretch of Highway 290 near Fredericksburg with the highest density of wineries and tasting rooms in the state. Almost two dozen are clustered there alone.

I have dates with two of these wineries that have made headlines recently for winning gold and silver medals for viognier at a competition in France. Making my way to the first,

says Kuhlken as we tour their barrel cellar built in to a natural hill.

This means plenty of Spanish, Portuguese and Southern Rhone varietals that thrive under the blazing Texan sun. In the light-filled tasting room, I savor the subtle, fruit-tart notes of their Bingham Vineyards Moscato Giallo (sadly, the gold medal 2012 Viognier Reserve sold out within three months). With Kuhlken's affable conversation and the sweeping views of the golden countryside, I find it hard to leave, but push on knowing how much more awaits.

Pedernales Cellars, I turn off Highway 290 and drive to the top of a hill, where I'm greeted by Julie Kuhlken. A former philosophy professor, she teamed up with her winemaker brother and together, they started producing wine from their parents' 20-year-old vines in 2006.

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WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

SAN ANTONIO

Farmers Markets

303 Pearl Pkwy. #300 78215, 210.212.7260, atpearl.com

Boiler House

312 Pearl Pkwy. 78215, 210.354.4644, boilerhousesa.com, chefcooperatives.com (local farm dinners)

Nao

312 Pearl Pkwy. 78215, 210.554.6484, naorestaurant.com

Francesca's at Sunset

16641 La Cantera Pkwy. 78256, 210.558.6500, resortlacantera.com/dining/francescas_at_sunset

FREDERICKSBURG AND SURROUNDING AREA

Pedernales Cellars

2916 Upper Albert Road, Stonewall 78671, 830.644.2037, pedernalescellars.com

Becker Vineyards

464 Becker Farms Road, Stonewall 78671, 830.644.2681, beckervineyards.com

Fischer & Wieser's Das Peach Haus

1406 S. U.S. Hwy. 87 78624, 866.997.8969, daspeachhaus.com

Chocolat

251 W. Main St. 78624, 830.990.9382, chocolat-tx.us

Vaudeville

230 E. Main St. 78624, 830.992.3234, vaudeville-living.com

WHERE TO STAY

La Cantera Hill Country Resort

16641 La Cantera Pkwy. 78256, 210.558.6500, resortlacantera.com

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION

Local convention and visitors bureaus provide the best source of information. Call toll-free and visit their websites.

Fredericksburg CVB: 1.888.997.3600, visitfredericksburgtx.com

San Antonio CVB: 1.800.447.3372, visitsanantonio.com



Francesca's at Sunset