

Austin Raises the Bar on Good Food

Young chefs have big ambitions for local ingredients and Tex-Mex traditions

By [KATY MCLAUGHLIN](#)

Austin, Texas

Austin has always been a great food city, famous for barbecue, Tex-Mex and breakfast tacos. Now, a new generation of chefs wants to make it a great restaurant city.

Chefs see opportunity in a city with a high-tech community, an influx of newcomers from the coasts and the headquarters of Whole Foods Markets. The Austin City Limits annual rock fest, which started in 2002 and has become one of the country's most popular live music events, has helped spread the word of Austin's burgeoning gourmet scene.

But turning Austin into a restaurant mecca is no cinch. It's hard to grow local food in a place where weather drama includes intense hot and cold, tornadoes, hurricanes and drought. Restaurants in Austin, which is both a college town and a state capital, have traditionally been bifurcated into quick, budget meals for students and expensive, fancy places for politicians. With so much good, cheap food—an outstanding *migas* breakfast taco (eggs scrambled with tortilla chips) is typically a \$2.50 investment—it's been a long path towards convincing the public that \$28 entrees have a place on the scene.

Today, though, excitement is emanating from three areas. One is the advent of restaurants specializing in produce, meats and artisanal products from local producers, in the vein of Berkeley's *Chez Panisse* or New York's *Blue Hill*, but with a Texas twist. Another is the crop of Mexican places serving new interpretations of Tex-Mex dishes, aiming to raise Texas' indigenous nachos, fajitas and crispy tacos to the level of respected cuisine.

And then there's *Uchi*, a nationally recognized sushi restaurant, opened in 2003, that gives Austin its strongest claim to a dining renaissance. Now, its young owner and chef, Tyson Cole, is expanding, with a second Austin branch, *Uchiko*, slated to open late next spring. He's also in talks to open a Spanish restaurant downtown and just signed with a publisher for his first cookbook, planned for fall 2010.

Mr. Cole apprenticed for 10 years at sushi restaurants in Austin and New York, learning fluent Japanese and earning rare credibility as a white American sushi chef. He did a stint on the Food Network's "Iron Chef America" and was named a Best New Chef by *Food & Wine* magazine in 2005. Mr. Cole says it is slightly more difficult and expensive to operate a sushi restaurant of this caliber in Austin than in, say, New York or Los Angeles, because he has to fly his fish in from distributors who bring in product from Japan and other points on the globe. On the coasts, many of the finest sushi restaurants get some fish from Japan and some at big local markets.

The term "Texas-style sushi" may conjure up the worst fusion nightmares, but Mr. Cole proves it can be done with finesse. The \$14 "pitchfork" roll, with Wagyu beef, avocado, leek crisps and *tonburi*, a boiled seed that resembles caviar, exemplifies the style. Another dish, a \$24 special of scallops sliced into thin disks and plated with long ribbons of white melon and thin medallions of radish, showcases Mr. Cole and his team's prowess with flavor combinations: Briny scallops, sweet melon and slightly spicy radish harmonize on the plate. Accents including "quinoa candy" on a flounder sashimi (\$18) and a grape-and-bacon garnish on arctic char (\$24) highlight Mr. Cole's boundary-pushing creativity.

A key to his success, Mr. Cole says, is rejecting a concept dear to many Austinites.

"'Keep Austin weird,'" Mr. Cole says, echoing the city's famous tagline, "really means 'Keep Austin mediocre,'" with a laid-back, hippie attitude used as an excuse for sloppiness. Mr. Cole's contribution to the scene is acting on the belief that a restaurant in Austin can stand shoulder-to-shoulder with or above a restaurant in New York, Chicago or San Francisco.

A maverick in the city when his restaurant opened, Mr. Cole now has more company from other food-obsessed Austinites as the gourmet ecosystem grows. The past couple of years have given rise to an active food-blogging community. The Austin Fearless Critic, a restaurant guide first published in 2006 by a Yale Law School graduate and now in its second edition, reviews 480 area restaurants. Wine bars, Asian restaurants and serious pizza parlors are creating more kinds of food around the city, says Fearless Critic founder Robin Goldstein.

Local farms and artisanal producers of cheese, honey and even vodka are providing more and better ingredients for chefs to work with. Gourmet catering trucks sell everything from deep-fried avocados to crêpes. Food-nerd events are raising the bar on creativity, from the Alamo Drafthouse Cinema, where meals are served with movies (the "Lord of the Rings" trilogy features a meal of favorite hobbit dishes) to Dai Due, a supper club featuring local products.

Olivia, which opened in August last year, is another restaurant receiving national acclaim. Chef James Holmes, who cooked at Craft and Picholine in New York and did a stint in France, is a high-profile exponent of local food, Texas style. His menu includes a treatise about buying from local farms, foragers and ranchers; prices hovering in the \$20 to \$30 range for entrees are a reflection of the expense of buying locally in a place where bad weather can ruin crops. Olivia specializes in less-common proteins and parts. The dinner menu currently includes a \$12 appetizer of fricasseed lamb's tongue in a mustard sauce, while the lunch menu offers a \$10 pickled-pig-ear sandwich.

Alice Waters, guru of the local movement, once famously served an unpeeled pluot in a bowl as dessert, an extreme take on simple and light California cuisine. The Texan take on garden-fresh food is decidedly richer. At Olivia, during a July week of 100-degree-plus weather, a \$28 smoked duck breast came in a dense, parmesan-rich risotto, and the \$19 veal tongue with ricotta-filled pasta and creamed corn was the epitome of rib-sticking.

'It drives me crazy to leave a restaurant hungry. I'm a Texas boy. I grew up eating chicken-fried steak hanging off the plate,' Mr. Holmes says.

One of Austin's most exciting innovations is the interpretation of Tex-Mex dishes with sophisticated recipes and excellent ingredients. At Garrido's, which opened in June, chef David Garrido marries his background as the longtime chef at Jeffrey's, one of the fanciest restaurants in Austin, to his Mexican and Texan heritage. In the Tex-Mex tradition of a groaning platter, tacos are served with rice and beans, but they're filled with mahi mahi, coffee-rubbed rib eye or lightly battered oysters (taco plates range from \$7.50 for chicken to \$9.50 for oyster). Salsas feature a variety of chilis, from habanero to ancho, but Mr. Garrido puts his haute-cuisine training to work creating complex sauces that are often sweet,

citric and spicy at once. Desserts, like flan with mango and habanero honey, are sophisticated; prices are modest, with no dish over \$11. At La Condesa, a stylish restaurant with soaring ceilings and modern art, Tex-Mex dishes like nachos, which bring out the snob in Mexican purists, are topped with chicken from a local farm and a variety of Mexican cheeses.

If Austin could export one part of its restaurant revolution to other cities, this should be it: Tex-Mex treated as important cuisine. In its home city, it is carefully scrutinized. Mr. Cole, whose restaurant isn't cheap, raised an eyebrow over a \$4 charge for organic tortilla chips and four kinds of salsa at La Condesa. "I know locals who won't eat here because they charge for chips and salsa," Mr. Cole says. "There are some things that are hard to pull off here in Austin."

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