



WHERE TO EAT
*** NOW 2007 ***

THE BEST NEW
RESTAURANTS OF THE
YEAR ARE WHIPPING UP
EVERYTHING FROM
BEEF SHORT RIBS
AND PORK TENDERLOIN
TO SEA BASS AND
ROASTED DUCK.
AND THE SNAILS ARE
GOING FAST.

FEBXXXXXXXXXXXX2007
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X *Patricia Sharpe*
BY PATRICIA SHARPE



Our best new restaurant of the year:
Stephan Pyles, Dallas.

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PEOPLE ARE FOREVER CORNERING

me at parties and asking, "What's your favorite new restaurant?" That question is on my mind especially at this time of year, when we publish our annual roundup of the top new places to dine. Sometimes when asked I hem and haw and can't make up my mind, because so many recent openings are similar in style and quality. Not this time around. Except for two—a bistro and a brasserie—the choices for 2007 are apples and oranges and pomegranates. ¶ Another oddity of the year is that the restaurants grouped themselves by city. In the three previous years that we've published our ten best, the mix has been almost random. But Dallas had exceptional contenders this time, and it nailed the top three slots. Houston came on strong with the next three, and then Dallas jumped in again. Austin claimed the subsequent two places, and San Antonio chimed in with the last. (Five runners-up, including two more from Dallas, by the way, are listed under "The Best of the Rest" on page 115.) ¶ Now, down to business: To refresh your memory on the rules, the candidates must have opened between November 1, 2005, and October 31, 2006. As always, new means new: new owner, new chef, new name (thus Aries, in Houston, which changed its name to Pic and rejiggered its menu, was not in the running because chef-owner Scott Tycer is still at the helm). Second locations of Texas restaurants are not eligible (so the Austin edition of Dallas-based Taverna doesn't count). But we do consider the first Texas location of an out-of-town operator (a case in point being the Dallas edition of Craft, recently arrived from New York). In conclusion, let me just observe that competitive eating is a recognized sport. Go forth and see if you agree with my choices.



1. STEPHAN PYLES

DALLAS When the chef, who was a founding father of Southwestern cuisine and the creator of much-lauded Star Canyon, opened his eponymous new restaurant a little over a year ago, the ever-snarky food community was abuzz: Would he pull it off or fall on his face? The biggest doubter of all was Stephan Pyles himself, who had been out of the picture—traveling, consulting, and generally living the life of Riley—for five years. It took a few months to smooth out the rough spots, but the answer is clear: Pyles is back. Intellectually, his new place is as stimulating as anything he's done. He takes the original notion of Southwestern cuisine—Mexican flavors elevated by classical techniques—and sends it on a world cruise, hitting Hispanic ports of call from Spain to Peru. The dish I love, love, love is the tasting of three ceviches, a universe of novel and voluptuous tastes and textures, including silky Honduran tuna with coconut milk, ginger, and basil. It's fusion cuisine that works. In addition to surf, Pyles does turf quite nicely, as evidenced by his rack of lamb crusted with coriander and sided by a crispy Ecuadorian-potato cake. The menu brims with new dishes and specials, one being grilled halibut bedded on a hash of sweet potato, crisp corn, and pecans. But for longtime fans, Pyles has retained a few favorites from Star Canyon, like the humongous Cowboy Ribeye. Visually, the space knocks me out: The walls are stripped down to their terra-cotta-brick boxers, then jazzed up with arty touches like a gleaming copper screen. This is an exciting restaurant; I can't wait to go back.

2. CRAFT DALLAS

DALLAS Craft would like for you to believe that its food is simple. Ha. The publicity shtick from the New York-based restaurant is that young executive chef Kevin Maxey waltzes into the kitchen and juggles some heirloom tomatoes and a free-range chicken, following which a magnificent dish materializes. Only half of that is true: the last half. Craft Dallas is the first venture of Tom Colicchio's famous flagship outside Manhattan, and at its frequent best, the food is undeniably seductive. Seated on pewter-toned velvet, I have gazed with lust in my heart at a defenseless vegetable, roasted romanesco—a jewel-like green cousin of cauliflower—that has been so transformed with a pesto of minced capers, olive oil, and pine nuts that it transcends mere food. Almost every dish has validated the two other parts of the Craft canon: The kitchen is fanatical about buying the best of everything, and it showcases top local growers. I would even concede that Craft has thrown out the froufrou. But I disagree that it has banished complexity. The day I almost fainted with pleasure over the butter-soft, jammy fig gratin, I asked the smart, young maître d' how it was prepared. "Well," he said, "the figs are simmered in Sauternes, then roasted, then covered with a vanilla-bean sabayon and sprinkled with biscotti crumbs before being lightly broiled." Luscious? Yes. Simple? I don't think so.



3. BIJOUX

DALLAS Dining at Bijoux is like looking through a jeweler's loupe, where subtlety is the byword and tiny details loom like mountains. Bijoux is Bach rather than Bartók, *Swan Lake* instead of *Cirque du Soleil*. Chef and owner Scott Gottlich's classic but innovative menu reminds me of the heyday of nouvelle cuisine two decades ago, when precious plates ruled. Take the trio of Caraquet oysters, for instance. These Atlantic beauties have been poached in sake and then arranged (apparently with tweezers) on top of a miniature seaweed salad with teeny, almost tempura-like fried shallot rings on top. The Japanese flavors and techniques meld beautifully. There's even a culinary joke: Instead of rock salt, the oyster shells are held in place by white clouds of salted meringue. Oh, tee-hee. Even meaty, he-man dishes are refined, like the duo of pink, pan-roasted pork tenderloin and falling-off-the-bone braised pork shank, a study in contrasting textures, all napped with a glassy-smooth, sweet-sour apple cider sauce. Normally brawny, braised pork belly (above) gets an exotic treatment with red Thai curry. But for lapidary precision, nothing beats the gorgeous desserts, like the perfect dome of pumpkin chiboust (a fluffy custard) on top of spiced cake with a sweet spoonful of Japanese pumpkin-praline ice cream. The small room is a study in rich browns, and soft music wafts from unseen speakers. There's only one problem: Going back to the real world can be a terrible shock.



4. DOLCE VITA

HOUSTON You might want to loosen your tie at Dolce Vita. You definitely will want to loosen your belt, because you will not be able to resist eating a lot more than you strictly need to at this get-down "pizzeria and enoteca." I got into trouble right off the bat at the breezy old two-story house, located on the Rabelaisian stretches of Westheimer near downtown Houston, because I found it impossible not to eat every last crumb of the terrific pizza (above). Its crust was delicate and crackly from the wood-burning brick oven; its top was layered with Taleggio cheese, sweet sliced pears, and a haystack of fresh arugula. But cleaning my plate proved to have been a bad idea, because then chef-owner Marco Wiles' sea bass filet arrived, perched over sautéed rapini and doused with a captivating emulsion of butter and bittersweet grapefruit juice. And, of course, I wanted to eat all of it too. Which made it especially unfortunate that earlier, our group had wolfed down an order of the signature truffle egg toast, a sticky, grown-up Italian comfort food consisting of airy pugliese over which truffle oil and a warm egg yolk had been liberally drizzled. Skipping dessert was not an option, so I tasted the wonderful eggshell-thin cannoli and skipped their heavy, ricotta-rich filling (a rare descent into the ordinary here). Next time, a preprandial fast is in order.

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5. CATALAN

HOUSTON I don't mean to criticize, but Catalan has multiple personalities. First, there's the space, a soaring dining room formally paneled in dark woods and lit by sinuous modern chandeliers. Then there's the food, an exuberantly informal mishmash of rich, juicy dishes that nod in the direction of the Spanish region of Catalonia but actually globe-hop wherever they darn well please. The first time I visited, the disconnect bothered me. Then I tasted the crispy pork belly with cane syrup and decided I could live with the inconsistency. A shamelessly hedonistic dish, pork belly is a little like uncut bacon. Here, you smooth it around in syrup—think of it as breakfast after dark. Like a number of things at Catalan, the combo has little to do with Spanish cuisine and everything to do with good eats. For every dish with a traditional Spanish orientation, like the chunky tomato gazpacho, there's another that seems to be on the menu just because the chef, Chris Shepherd, and the two owners, Charles Clark and Grant Cooper, like it—for instance, the supremely silly and quite irresistible breaded-and-fried foie gras bonbons. Don't try to connect the dots; just eat. If you think about it too much, you'll drive yourself crazy.





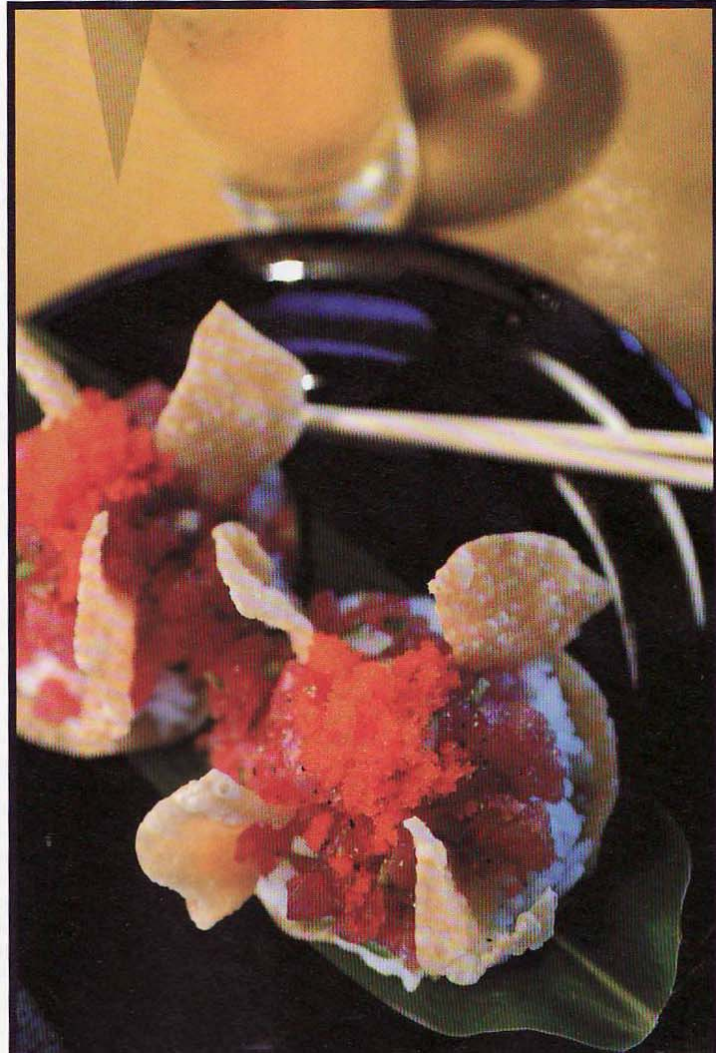
6. GLASS WALL

HOUSTON The Glass Wall is no place for itty-bitty flavors and finicky presentations. Tastes don't unfold, they pop. Take chef and co-owner Lance Fegen's wonderful duck breast, pink and unapologetically rimmed with fat. Most cooks would pair duck with a fruit sauce, maybe orange or cherry. Not Fegen. He whips up a jus-based concoction boosted with molasses and Tabasco that is totally in your face and totally spot-on. In the Glass Wall's kitchen, passion trumps reason. Of course, there's logic in a blend like the sauce he drizzles on the tuna tartare, an intelligent balance of sweet, salty, and tangy (brown sugar, soy sauce, and ginger), but here's the zinger: a shot of dusky, intense pomegranate molasses (I think I detect a trend here). That's why I like this little tawny-colored room with its exposed ductwork and black-rock wall, despite the deafening noise level when it's packed. (If, heaven forbid, you actually want to converse with your friends, be prepared to whistle and shout and call them by name.) But in a strange way, the intensity appeals to me. Sensory overload might strike, boredom never.

photographs this spread by ARTIE LIMMER

7. SHINSEI

DALLAS At first, no doubt, the star power of the owners' names had Dallas chowhounds and social animals scurrying to check out Shinsei. But Lynae Fearing and Tracy Rathbun, wives of über-chefs Dean and Kent, respectively, have proved they can make it on their own. The dramatically lit chocolate-brown room with its splashy abstract art has become quite the trendy, and loud, venue. The theme is pan-Asian, with sushi and such making up about half the menu. You *must* have Elvis' Tuna Tartare, a blend of pristine chopped ahi, jalapeño, and cucumber tossed with sesame seeds and served on a big, crisp wonton wrapper like a Japanese chalupa (below). Why in the world is it named for Elvis Presley? Check out the raven-black pompadour of the dish's creator, head sushi chef Shuji Sugawara. And do not miss the sumptuous tenderloin in a shiitake mushroom-black bean sauce, courtesy of executive chef Casey Thompson, who once cooked at the Mansion on Turtle Creek under—guess who—Dean Fearing. Small world, isn't it?





8. CAPITOL BRASSERIE

AUSTIN When I visited Capitol Brasserie, I took along two friends who had lived in Paris for a year. "How authentic is the menu?" I asked them. They immediately nixed the spinach tagliatelle and the salmon with hollandaise ("Not in *our* arrondissement," they declared). Other than that, chef Geoff Nunez's bill of fare looked fine to them. Moreover, it tasted fine too. "Great escargots bourguignons," said one friend, with her mouth full. "Nice pommes frites," mumbled the other. We all liked the tender New York strip steak au poivre, with a green-peppercorn sauce that made us sit up and take notice. We were less thrilled with the mushy green lentils under the lamb T-bones and with the room-temperature profiteroles sandwiched around pistachio ice cream. But overall, we gave the Texas brasserie a thumbs-up, and that was without ordering two excellent dishes I had liked earlier: the meaty Moulard duck confit and the fragrant almond tart. We agreed that the decor—burgundy walls, dark paneling, French posters—was a bit of a cliché, but we applauded the late-night hours and weekend brunch. After all, there aren't too many places in Austin you can go when you have your mouth set for a nice, juicy snail.

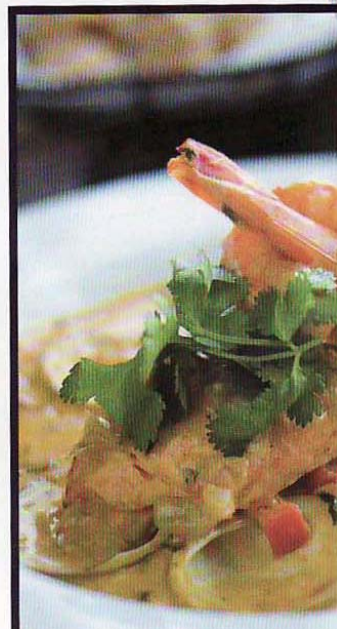
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Capitol Brasserie photograph by ARTIE LIMMER

9. SAMPAIO'S

AUSTIN Aside from feijoada, which can be thought of as the chili of Brazil, most Americans know little of that vast country's cuisine. Luckily for Austin, help is at hand. Hardly the funky ethnic cafe that I (for one) expected, Sampaio's consists of a well-appointed dining room and a mojito-perfect patio with swags of white fabric floating overhead. The menu, courtesy of Brazilian-born owner Magna Sampaio and American chef Johnny Romo, offers plenty of mainstream entrées along with unusual vegetables such as yuca, a.k.a. manioc (the potato of Brazil), and garnishes like farofa (the seasoned bread crumbs of Brazil). One terrific dish was the flatiron steak atop fresh collard greens. Doused in chimichurri, similar to a robust, herbal vinaigrette, it also came with fantastic yuca fries. A close runner-up was the coffee-crusted pork tenderloin in a spicy cherry sauce. Seafood makes an appearance in dishes like the peixada nordestina (below), a popular Brazilian combo of fish and shellfish in coconut cream sauce. But to sample the food of the people, ask for feijoada (black beans stewed with smoked meats and sausage) and farofa (coarse, salty toasted yuca flour and bacon bits). You'll know more about Brazilian cuisine than you did and still have a world to learn.



10. LA FRITE BELGIAN BISTRO

SAN ANTONIO Nobody's reinventing the wheel at La Frite. No, this is an utterly predictable bistro shoehorned into a quirky old storefront near downtown San Antonio. You've got your mussels in white-wine broth (right), your skinny fries served in paper cones, your crêpes, your flaky vol-au-vent shells brimming with savory fillings, and your assorted dessert tarts. If La Frite were in any other large Texas city, it would be no big deal. But San Antonio doesn't have another Belgian bistro, so locals have welcomed it with open arms. In fact, with its casual stained-plywood tabletops and fun paintings of a goggle-eyed dog, La Frite has even become a bit of a hangout for artistes and other bohemians. At lunch and dinner, you'll find neighborhood regulars and downtown office workers filling the two narrow rooms, happily munching on the handiwork of chefs José Luga and Adrian Moore, including an appetizer of crêpes filled with duck in a sassy red-wine vinaigrette (a special) and an entrée of fork-tender hanger steak in a knock-you-upside-the-head green-peppercorn sauce. Occasionally you might find a customer picking at some atypically dull tarragon chicken in puff pastry, but more often than not, people are delighted that local restaurateur Damien Watel decided to whisk them away to Belgium.



✿ THE BEST OF THE REST

AUSTIN Unless you arrive before about eleven o'clock in the morning for the excellent coffee and chocolate biscotti (which I do about five days a week), you may have to fight the crowds at **Mandola's Italian Market**. Fine dining this is not, but the quality and value are great for a place where you order at a brick-faced counter and have pizzas, pasta, panini, and desserts swiftly delivered to your table. The eggplant-and-olive-tapenade pizza is *fantastico*, and the cheesy lasagne (with homemade mozzarella) is better than decent. Restaurant owner and PBS-cooking-show personality Damian Mandola emigrated from Houston only recently, but he knows what Austin likes.

DALLAS Throw a dart at the menu at **Central 214** and almost any dish it lands on will be good. But for ultimate satisfaction, start with chef Tom Fleming's grilled romaine salad (crisp within, lightly charred without) in a kicky oregano vinaigrette. Then move on to heavenly Maryland-style crab cakes, bursting with pure lump crab. Your side dish should be mac and cheese, even though it's really rigatoni in a lush roasted-garlic-and-Parmesan cream sauce. For dessert, have the cannoli, fragile mille-feuille tubes encasing a light lemon custard. Enjoy it all in the stylish contemporary dining room with its square white pillars, dark tabletops, and twinkly modern light fixtures.

It costs to go first-class at **Trece**, but that's part of the allure of this big, sexy, noisy scene. First, there are the \$10 top-shelf margaritas; then there is the fine signature guacamole, made tableside at \$11 for two. After this, the rest will almost seem like a bargain. Interior Mexican food, updated and upscaled, is the hallmark of chef Amador Mora, whose twenty-year-plus career at the Mansion on Turtle Creek finally led to this well-deserved place in the limelight. Many dishes are so elaborate they defy human understanding, but the grilled-green-tomato Mexican gazpacho served during the spring and summer is delicious, as is the skewer of garlicky, tequila-marinated shrimp.

FORT WORTH The hardest table to get in Fort Worth may well be one of the six in **Nonna Tata's** minuscule cinder-block dining room, the domain of chef and owner Donatella Trotti. Eating here is like being invited to the home of your Italian neighbor, who happens to be a very good cook. On any given day, most of the tall stools are staked out early by regulars, who come for pastas like gemelli in a sprightly basil pesto; specials such as crisp, lemon-spritzed breaded chicken outlets; and desserts like the torta Ciotola, an aromatic apple-and-pear crumb cake. Evenings offer more-elaborate entrées such as herbed pork loin. Nonna Tata reminds you that simple pleasures can be the best.

SAN ANTONIO Wunderkind Jason Dady—the thirty-year-old chef and owner who mans the kitchen at both the Lodge at Castle Hill and its newer sibling, **Bin 555**—needs to step away from the saltshaker. The cooking is excellent in dishes like his rich shrimp bisque with a swirl of curried sour cream and in the daily special of coastal fish (such as mahimahi) in a fragrant lemon-thyme fumet surrounded by oven-dried tomatoes and baby artichokes. But excess salt has marred too many other dishes I've tried here, detracting from innovative ingredients like farro, a nutty-flavored Italian grain. Dady's odd, eclectic menu (meatballs, a lump-crab napoleon, blue-cheese cheesecake) intrigues foodies and neighborhood fans alike, who regularly fill the clean-lined, hazelnut-hued main dining room. ♣

La Frite Belgian Bistro photograph by **TRANG DUONG**

RESTAURANT DIRECTORY

All restaurants accept major credit cards unless otherwise noted.

AUSTIN

CAPITOL BRASSERIE, 310 Colorado, 512-472-6770. Mon 11-midnight, Tue-Thur 11-1 a.m., Fri & Sat 11-3 a.m., Sun 10-3 & 5-midnight. **MANDOLA'S ITALIAN MARKET**, 4700 W. Guadalupe at N. Lamar Blvd., 512-419-9700. Mon-Fri 8-10, Sat 9-10, Sun 9-9. **SAMPAIO'S**, 4800 Burnet Rd., 512-469-9988. Sun-Thur 11-10, Fri & Sat 11-11.

DALLAS

BIJOUX, 5450 W. Lovers Ln. at Inwood Rd., 214-350-6100. Tue-Sat 5:30-10. Closed Sun & Mon. **CENTRAL 214**, in Hotel Palomar, 5680 N. Central Expy. (U.S. 75), 214-443-9339. Breakfast Mon-Fri 7-10:30. Lunch Mon-Fri 11:30-3. Dinner Sun-Wed 5-10, Thur-Sat 5-10:30. Brunch Sat & Sun 8-3. **CRAFT DALLAS**, in W Dallas-Victory Hotel, 2440 Victory Park Ln., near N. Houston and Olive streets, 214-397-4111. Breakfast & lunch daily 6:30-2:30. Dinner Sun-Thur 5:30-10:30, Fri & Sat 5:30-11. **SHINSEI**, 7713 Inwood Rd., 214-352-0005. Mon-Sat 5-11. Closed Sun. **STEPHAN PYLES**, 1807 Ross Ave., 214-580-7000. Lunch Mon-Fri 11:30-2. Dinner Mon-Sat 6-10:30. Closed Sun. **TRECE**, 4513 Travis, 214-780-1900. Lunch Wed-Fri 11-2:30. Dinner Sun & Mon 5-10, Tue & Wed 5-11, Thur-Sat 5-midnight. Brunch Sat & Sun 10:30-3.

FORT WORTH

NONNA TATA, 1400 W. Magnolia, 817-332-0250. Lunch Tue-Fri 11-3. Dinner Mon-Thur 5:30-9, Fri 5:30-10. Closed Sat & Sun. Cash & checks only.

HOUSTON

CATALAN, 5555 Washington Ave., 713-426-4260. Tue-Thur 11-10, Fri 11-11, Sat 5-11, Sun 11-3. Closed Mon. **DOLCE VITA**, 500 Westheimer Rd., 713-520-8222. Tue-Thur 5-10, Fri & Sat 5-11, Sun 5-10. Closed Mon. **GLASS WALL**, 933 Studewood, 713-868-7930. Tue-Sat 5:30-10. Closed Sun & Mon.

SAN ANTONIO

BIN 555, 555 W. Bitters Rd., in Artisans Alley, northeast rear corner, 210-496-0555. Mon-Thur 11-midnight, Fri & Sat 11-2 a.m. Closed Sun. **LA FRITE BELGIAN BISTRO**, 728 S. Alamo, 210-224-7555. Lunch Tue-Fri 11:30-2. Dinner Tue-Fri 6-10:30, Sat 5-10:30. Closed Sun & Mon.