

## Austin

**Café Josie** 1200 W. 6th (512-322-9226). Our most recent meal at this inviting spot may have been the best yet. The starter of delicious herb-crusted goat cheese with cilantro pesto and *bruschetta* indicated good things to come, a promise borne out by faultless mesquite-grilled beef tenderloin rubbed with *guajillo* chile. Smart, polished service. Beer & wine. Lunch Tue-Fri 11:30-2. Dinner Tue-Sat 6-10. Closed Sun & Mon. Moderate to expensive. AE, DC, DS, MC, V. ☞

**Curra's** 6801 N. Burnet (512-451-2560) and 614 E. Oltorf (512-444-0012). This new north-side sibling of the Oltorf original maintains the popular cafe's flair for interior Mexican cuisine and decor. Our companion relished every bite of her *cochinita pibil*—"barbecued" pork served atop a banana leaf. We did fine with the fish tacos, succulent pieces of grilled mahimahi tucked inside corn tortillas. Bar. Open Sun 9 a.m.-10 p.m., Mon-Fri 11-10, Sat 9-10. Call for hours at other location. Moderate to upper moderate. Cr. ☞

**UPDATE** **Hudson's on the Bend** 3509 Ranch Rd 620, 1.5 miles southwest of Mansfield Dam (512-266-1369). We began with the very good and very rich lobster-and-goat-cheese quesadillas. Our mixed grill entrée produced mixed results: the venison had an excellent flavor but was a bit too rare (as was the buffalo) and the venison sausage was a bit dry. No complaints, though, about the moist rabbit or the plump quail. If you like big portions, this is your place. Extensive wine list and helpful wine steward. Bar. Dinner Sun & Mon 6-9, Tue-Thu 6-10, Fri & Sat 5:30-10. Reservations recommended; a must weekends. Expensive. Cr. ☞

**Jean Luc's Bistro** 705 Colorado (512-494-0033). Jean Luc's has new owners and a new chef, Shawn Cirkiel, but the look—white tablecloths in a simple downtown space—remains the same. We lunched on a lovely combination of pulled chicken with potato salad in a mustardy vinaigrette, while our friend especially liked the vinegary-sweet roasted vegetables on her sandwich of *manchego* cheese. Dinner offers the likes of salmon with *gnocchi* and hangar steak. Bar. Lunch Tue-Fri 11:30-2. Dinner Tue-Thu 5:30-10, Fri & Sat 5:30-11. Closed Sun & Mon. Moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

★ **Jeffrey's** 1204 West Lynn (512-477-5584). On our last visit the kitchen dazzled us: A friend went for the tall crab cakes on a salad of mixed greens in pineapple-basil vinaigrette. We settled on duck in *porcini* sauce with shrimp, which arrived looking almost charred on the outside but proved to be moist and exceptionally flavorful within. Bar. Dinner Sun 6-9:30, Mon-Thu 6-10, Fri & Sat 5:30-10:30. Reservations recommended. Expensive to very expensive (tasting menus \$50 & \$75). Cr. ☞ *With assistance.*

**Los Comales** 2136 E. 7th (512-480-9358). Brush up on your *español* before you visit this spacious East Austin *taquería*. Our *camarones diablos* proved *muy deliciosos*, and the stewed-on-the-bone cabrito came smothered in an excellent smoky red-chile sauce. Festive atmosphere. Bar. Open Sun 7 a.m.-10 p.m., Mon-Fri 7-3, Sat 7-10. Inexpensive to moderate. MC, V. ☞

**Louie's 106** 106 E. 6th (512-476-2010). Distinctive mesquite-smoked salmon on a bed of baby field greens made a fine start to our lunch at this refined Mediterranean bistro. We were sated with the unconventional chicken Cobb salad (feta! balsamic vinaigrette!), while our companion smiled contentedly over his braised beef tenderloin tips. Bar. Open Sun 5:30-9:30, Mon-Thu 11:15-10:30, Fri 11:15-11, Sat 5:30-11. Moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

**Peony Asian Cuisine** 5308 Balcones Dr (512-459-3341). We were pleasantly surprised by the selection of postmodern Asian dishes offered in a setting that matches the kitchen's creative bent. The star appetizer was a plump *lumpia* roll, a deep-fried Philippine-style egg roll. The special entrée of ginger lamb rewarded us with tender meat stir-fried with asparagus and snow peas. BYOB. Open Sun 11-9:30, Mon-Thu 11-10, Fri & Sat 11-10:30. Upper moderate to expensive. AE, DS, MC, V. ☞

**Ranch 616** 616 Nueces (512-479-7616). We arrived at this modern ranch-style spot (think neon cactus) in such good spirits that we didn't mind the boisterous folks at the huge table next to us. The grilled quail atop poblano mashers tasted just fine, but the standout of the evening was the jalapeño-crusted trout. Fun atmosphere and friendly servers. Bar. Lunch Mon-Fri 11-2. Dinner Sun-Wed 5-10, Thu-Sat 5:30-11. Upper moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

**Sarovar** 8440 Burnet Rd (512-454-8636). We avoided struggling through the many appetizers and à la carte items by ordering "dinner," which included a main course and *thali* (a platter filled with a curry plus soup, rice, and



## SHIPPING NEWS

**TOFFEE TO GO** Good things may come in small packages, especially during the holidays, but a shiny blue-and-gold tin holds the season's sweetest gift—**Texas Moon toffee**. Company founder Victoria White (right), a Tyler resident, got the recipe from her mother, Gail White (left), and named it for her grandmother, Sadie Moon Hudson. It improves upon toffee's classic combination of butter and caramelized sugar by adding pecans and a decadent layer of milk chocolate. The resulting candy far surpasses the many contenders that promote themselves as "famous" and "world's finest." Give this toffee for the holidays and your family and friends will be singing your praises—with their mouths full. An eight-ounce holiday gift tin is \$16.95 plus shipping from 903-581-0128 or [txmoon.com](http://txmoon.com) (the Web site also lists retail outlets). JENNIFER OLSEN

*naan*). Of the entrées, the lamb Sarovar was a better choice than the *tandoori* chicken. Beer & wine. Open Sun 11-10, Mon-Fri 11-2:30 & 5-10, Sat 11-10. Moderate. AE, DS, MC, V. ☞

**Siena** 6203 N. Capital of Texas Hwy (512-349-7667). The castle-like brick interior lends a surprisingly intimate ambience. From the many authentic Tuscan dishes, we chose a bountiful *bruschetta* of wild boar *ragù* with buttery grilled bread. The memory of wood-grilled salmon (with scallops and roasted-potato flan) is all but haunting. Bar. Lunch Mon-Fri 11:30-2. Dinner Sun 5:30-9, Mon-Sat 5:30-10. Moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

comer was buzzing—sometimes quite loudly—on a recent weeknight. We relished starters including a crab cake with roasted bell pepper *coulis* and *carpaccio* of kobe beef. Our entrée—incredible parsley-crusted lamb loin with chanterelles and fava beans in a *foie gras* pan sauce—was too good to share (and too small—a problem here). Beer & wine. Dinner Mon-Sat 6-11. Closed Sun. Reservations recommended. Moderate to lower expensive. AE, DC, DS, MC, V. ☞

★ **Zoot** 509 Hearn (512-477-6535). A cool evening at this cottage called for a bowl of puréed eggplant soup, a concoction more notable for velvety texture than for distinctive taste. An entrée of sliced duck breast *medallions* came with a timbale of excellent wilted chard and five-onion quinoa (a barleylike grain). Beer & wine. Dinner 7 days 5:30-10. Reservations recommended. Moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

**Z'Tejas** 9400 Arboretum Blvd (512-346-3506) and 1110 W. 6th (512-478-5355). A sweeping vista lends the Arboretum location extra appeal. The best part of our meal came at the beginning: a fabulous special of tuna and salmon ceviche. Our expectation level had been upped by that, so we were surprised that the pork tenderloin in red-wine sauce was nothing special. Bar. Open Sun 10-10, Mon-Thu 11-10, Fri 11-11, Sat 10-11. Call for hours at other location. Upper moderate to expensive. Cr. ☞

## SMALL, NEW, OR OFFBEAT

**Ped's LemonGrass** 601 W. 6th (512-457-1233). Despite overly leisurely, ill-timed service at lunch, this spare, modern spot on the edge of downtown offers some of the best Thai cuisine in the area. Golden Cups—crisply cooked filo filled with savory chicken and vegetables—proved to be a wonderful start. Flavorful lemongrass chicken with zucchini and mushrooms in peanut sauce elicited raves from us, while the spicy Jumping Shrimp with mushrooms, tomato, lemongrass, and zucchini in *tom yum* sauce sated our companion. Beer & wine. Open Sun noon-3 & 5-10, Mon-Thu 11-10, Fri 11-11, Sat 5-11. Moderate. AE, DS, MC, V. ☞

**John Mueller's B-B-Q** 1917 Manor Rd (512-236-0283). Yes, the last name's the same, but don't mention this new place at famed Louie Mueller's in Taylor. (What *is* it with feuding barbecue families? Can't they get along for more than one generation?) Even so, Louie's grandson John seems to have inherited the knack. All the food is sold individually (no platters), so we created our own masterpiece of spicy sausage, smoky ribs, and exceptionally righteous brisket, with pinto beans and mustardy potato salad for good measure. Picnic tables and beer signs add atmosphere. Get there early, before they sell out. Beer. Open Mon-Sat 10-6:30, Sun 10-2 (or until they run out of meat). Inexpensive. MC, V. ☞

## Beaumont- Port Arthur

**Al-T's Seafood and Steakhouse** Texas Hwy 124 and Spur 5, Winnie (409-296-9818). The sportsman's home away from home, Al-T's opens early for breakfast, but even late risers can indulge in a cajun-style *boudin* and cheese omelet with homemade link sausage (till 10:30). After a day on the bay or in the duck blinds, chow down on spicy crawfish étouffée or a plate of the excellent fried seafood. Bar. Open Sun 7 a.m.-10 p.m., Mon-Thu 6-10, Fri & Sat 6-11. Moderate. AE, DC, DS, MC, V. ☞

**UPDATE** **Don's Seafood and Steak House** 2290 I-10S, Beaumont (409-842-0686). It's hard to fault Don's expertise with cajun-style seafood. But a recent daily special—shrimp scampi with too much oil and a powdery green seasoning in the sauce that looked and tasted like filé—came up short. Better to stick with the tried-and-true, in this case an order of delectable bacon-wrapped, deep-fried shrimp and oysters *en brochette*. Or go for the simple and good grilled filet of fresh red snapper. Bar. Open Sun & Mon 11-9, Tue-Sat 11-10. Moderate. Cr. ☞

**Esther's Seafood and Oyster Bar** 7237 Rainbow Lane; from Texas Hwy 87N, follow signs for restaurants and marinas at Rainbow Bridge, Port Arthur (409-962-6268). This waterfront restaurant, towed here from Louisiana more than a decade ago, retains its bayou-country roots. Appetizers include such delights as barbecued crabs and cajun-style fried alligator. For an entrée, try the fried shrimp or crawfish tails with zingy *remoulade* sauce. Beer & wine. Open Sun-Thu 11-9, Fri 11-10, Sat 5-10. Reservations recommended. Moderate. AE, DC, DS, MC, V. ☞ *Call ahead*

**UPDATE** **Pine Tree Lodge** LaBelle Rd & Garner, LaBelle (409-796-1600). A recent new addition here is a covered bayou-side patio, with picnic tables, cell-

# TexasMonthly