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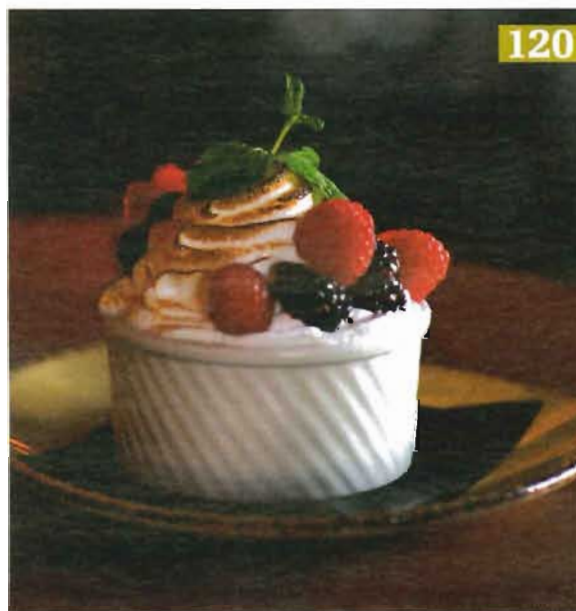
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### ON THE COVER

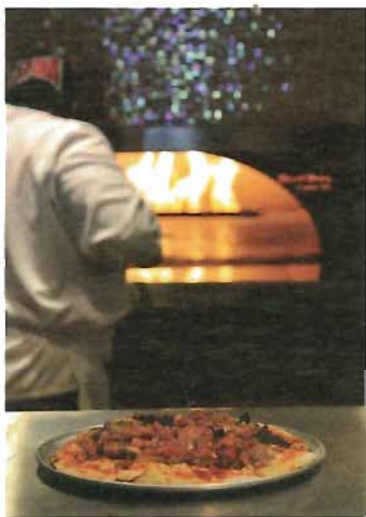
Julie Soefer's photograph of year-old condominium complex 2727 Kirby—shot from the pool deck of the Gables apartments in the West Ave development, many of whose buzzy retail and restaurant spaces are now opening—is a brand-new high-rise vista in Houston. Downtown twinkles on the eastern horizon.



# High Hopes!

Houston and Dallas' top toques are looking up, opening hot new Hill Country haunts

| By Robin Barr Sussman |



Austin's *Iron Chef* alum Tyson Cole, who's opening a second location of his Japanese stand-out Uchi in Houston this summer, isn't the only big-name chef jumping across Texas. Other celebrated culinary stars, including Houston's Robert Del Grande and Dallas' David Bull, are making their marks in Cole's home base with fab newbies.

Southwestern-cuisine innovator and RDG + Bar Annie chief Del Grande's **Soleil** (6550 Comanche Trail, 512.266.0600) just bowed adjacent to the Oasis restaurant and retail development—a Lake Austin landmark which was rebuilt recently due to a fire. “We’ve been talking with partners of the Oasis for years about the concept,” says Del Grande of his first non-Houston venture. “The blue water and the dramatic cliffs remind me of the Italian coast and the south of France.”

Soleil's open floor plan is full of windows boasting views of the



lake and surrounding hills. The interior is a wash of white, mint and pale blue hues, with touches of the Hill Country, like the faux deer heads on one wall. Del Grande's exec chef George Thomas dishes out a Medit-Italian seafood-savvy menu, including oysters and fresh rainbow trout crowned with crabmeat, plus a New York strip steak unpredictably cloaked with decadent fig sauce.

Meanwhile, an urbane restaurant duo by vaunted chef David Bull—who also has Bolla at the Stoneleigh hotel in Dallas—have debuted downtown. In the posh new Austonian high-rise, 10-table **Congress** (200 Congress Ave., 512.827.2760) is poised to be a foodie fave. There's prix-fixe dinner, and seasonal tasting menus with French, Caribbean and Japanese influences. Expect artful plates utilizing local delicacies like Strub Ranch wagyu beef, Houston Dairymaids cheese and Kocurek artisanal charcuterie.

Its masculine-chic Bar Congress—think metallic-colored leather banquettes and rock sconces, and artisan cocktails like the Congress GT, which is gin, with tonic water and Texas grapefruit bitters made in-house—serves as the corridor to **Second Bar + Kitchen** (512.827.2750). Casual-cool, rotisserie meats, pizza, arugula-beet salad and duck confit are on offer in the modern white-marble- and reclaimed-wood-wrapped spot. And Houstonians may recognize former Textile pastry chef Plinio Sandalio's ingenious sweet-and-savory stamp on the desserts—foie gras beignets, anyone?—at both restaurants.

For Bull, it already feels like home. “I’m excited to be cooking seasonal food that makes sense, in a multi-use culinary space, for the people of a city I love.” ■

**DEL GRANDE STAND**  
Arty driftwood floats above a community table at new seafood-and, per left, stone-oven-savvy Soleil on Lake Austin.

## Besh of the West

While some Lone Star chefs crash the capital, a New Orleans star shines in San Antonio



Lüke's pressed "cochon de lait" sandwich

Renowned Big Easy chef John Besh recently opened his seventh restaurant, a second location of his popular **Lüke** (125 E. Houston St., 210.227.5853), inside the new Embassy Suites hotel on San Antonio's River Walk—his first foray outside his native New Orleans.

Similar to the NOLA original, the new Lüke, named after Besh's eldest of four sons, has a stylish brasserie vibe with vintage Francophile flourishes like brass ceiling tiles and herringbone-patterned wood floors. The Old World menu—a little French, a little German and Cajun-Creole—executed by chef-partner Stephen McHugh, emphasizes ingredients emblematic of the place's surroundings. Think Texas-raised quail, wild boar, veal *barbacoa* and fragrant mesquite-smoked pork ribs—along with bistro specialties like house-made paté, shrimp-and-sausage gumbo, a *croque monsieur* sandwich and the fab fried-oyster salad. There's also a raw bar.

Does Besh have plans to come to Houston? Never say never. “My other sons keep asking when I’m going to open restaurants with their names,” he jokes. —RBS