

Special Issue: **MATCHING WINE AND FOOD**

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Austin's New Hot Spots

BY JENNIFER FIEDLER

Texas' laid-back state capital, tucked on the banks of the Colorado River at the foot of Hill Country, has much to offer food and wine lovers: balmy weather, easy access to Texas' thriving wine country, a righteous music and nightlife scene, and a patchwork quilt of top-notch dining destinations, from serious tacos all the way up to white tablecloth. A recent smattering of notable restaurant openings downtown adds to the appeal.

If walking proximity to downtown Austin is a priority, three accommodations fit the bill, including The Intercontinental (701 Congress Ave.; 512-457-8800; www.intercontinental.com; rooms from \$270). The recently renovated Four Seasons sits on the water (98 San Jacinto Blvd.; 512-478-4500; www.fourseasons.com; rooms from \$299). The Driskill Hotel is a landmark property (604 Brazos St.; 512-474-5911; www.driskillhotel.com; rooms from \$249).

Across the river in the South Congress district, three-year-old boutique hotel St. Cecilia, is done up a little rock 'n' roll, for the visiting recording industry exec. (112 Academy Drive; (512) 852-2400; www.hotelstcecilia.com; rooms from \$235).

CONGRESS

200 Congress Ave. Telephone (512) 827-2760 Website www.congressaustin.com
Open Dinner, Tuesday to Saturday

Chef David Bull built a following at the Driskill Grill then decamped to Dallas four years ago. Now he's back, with a trio of restaurants at the base of a condo development just off the nightly carnival on W. Sixth Street. Congress, the most formal and ambitious of the three, is decked in cream-colored club chairs and dripping crystal chandeliers that are more J.R. Ewing than Willie Nelson (a semiprivate nook off the front of the room is the place to sit).

An eclectic mix of rock music from the owner's iPod and a young, smart staff keep the atmosphere buoyant. Ask for more detail about which items to choose off the cryptic prix-fixe menu, which comes in two versions: three or seven courses. Brave combinations of flavors result in hits (beef tartare with fried oysters; veal sweetbreads with pickled ramps) as well as some wackiness (medallions of white fish wrapped in crisp chicken skin), but the artfully composed plates are uniformly interesting. Ace sommelier June Rodil, formerly of Austin sushi hot spot Uchi, has built a list of 500 selections, padded with weightier reds to match Bull's bold menu. Go big with a Jean-Louis Chave Hermitage 2005 (\$435), or have Rodil steer you to one of the many values on the list, including Casa Ferreirinha Vinha Grande Douro 2006 (\$42).



Haddington's is a hopping new restaurant downtown.



Austin is thriving while also maintaining its character.

HADDINGTON'S

601 W. Sixth St. Telephone (512) 992-0204 Website www.haddingtonsrestaurant.com
Open Lunch, Monday to Saturday; dinner, daily

From the owner of wine bars Mulberry, in Austin, and New York's Bin 71, comes a hip take on an English pub tucked into a stand-alone building on W. Sixth Street. Inside, the black-lacquered wood, Victoriana wallpaper and gold-plated knickknacks join a retro soundtrack of Johnny Cash and the Rolling Stones to add up to a real scene.

Some of Austin's plaid-clad cool kids hold court in padded booths while others sip on aggressively creative cocktails at the bar (think duck fat-infused rye in a Sazerac). Toast pots—duck liver mousse or pork rilletes served with whole-wheat toast—make fun starters or bar snacks. Skip the salads and play to the restaurant's strengths in whole-animal butchery. A double bone-in pork chop, 3-inches thick, is brined and grilled, then braised, and comes out supertender. British influences peep through in upscale comfort food dishes such as braised rabbit with pea cream sauce and Gruyère mashed potatoes.

The mostly European wine list is smart, vibrant and as au courant as the crowd, with a focus on small producers, including a Domaine de Montbourgeau Crémant de Jura NV (\$48) and a Domaine Joseph Voillot Vieilles Vignes Pommard 2007 (\$88).

PARKSIDE

301 E. Sixth St. Telephone (512) 474-9898 Website www.parkside-austin.com
Open Dinner, daily

Situated on a primo downtown block and just across the street from the landmark Alamo Drafthouse—a movie theater, bar and restaurant—and a few skips from the Austin convention center, this three-year-old local favorite is done up in the trappings of industrial chic, with brick walls, bare lightbulbs and no tablecloths. The cavernous ground floor interior is a playground for the after-work crowd, meaning a bumping cocktail scene and a well-stocked raw bar, including an around-the-continent offering of oysters.

Elsewhere on the New American-oriented menu there are nice call-outs to local products, including Texas lamb served two ways, grilled and braised, over a stew of farro and olives. Crisp-skinned roast chicken served with peas, artichokes and baby potatoes in a light chicken broth is a neat study in texture.

The wine list is compact, but strong on European wines, featuring crisp, bivalve-friendly whites, such as the Hippolyte Reverdy Sancerre 2009 (\$64), and offbeat reds, including the Huber Zweigelt Austria 2006 (\$42). □