

Current Event September 2011: Culinary

Houston Food Tours Go Whole Hog

Austin American Statesman By: Greg Helen Anders 8-8-2011

HOUSTON — This will not be a day of nibbling little bites of this piled atop that, drizzled with a reduction of whatever and topped with an adorable foam.

"Today," intones chef Chris Shepherd, "is all about the pig." Dressed in a T-shirt imprinted with a pig marked up into cuts of meat, Shepherd means business.

Shepherd is the former chef of Houston's Catalan. He plans to open a restaurant called Underbelly and craft beer bar Hay Merchant this fall in the old Chances bar space on Westheimer Road. He and fellow chefs Seth Siegel-Gardner and Terrence Gallivan (also planning to open an as-yet-unnamed restaurant next year) are our guides on Tour Pig: an example of Houston's hottest new tourist lure - five-hour culinary bus expeditions.

The idea of Houston Culinary Tours is for Houston chefs to show us where they like to eat. These three like to eat pigs.

We'll spend the bulk of a day learning about pigs and ingesting hogs that have been cured, fried, put in a sandwich, suspended in gelatin and even baked into a cookie (and, yes, our bodies will spend the next couple of days reminding us that's something we really shouldn't do very often). But there'll be no fancy food here. The preparations are all pretty basic.

Up-and-coming chefs in Houston, like those elsewhere, seem to be reveling in unadorned comfort food these days. The example that comes up on the bus: Houston chef Bryan Caswell, famous for his seafood at Reef, recently opened El Real, a Tex-Mex restaurant - albeit with valet parking - that has raised Houstonian eyebrows because it does absolutely nothing to elevate basic Tex-Mex.

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We drive way out in Southwest Houston and pull into a strip mall, where we pile off the bus and into Viet Hoa Market (8300 W. Sam Houston Parkway, 832-448-8828), an Asian supermarket. And it is super.

Owner Teresa Tan, whose father founded the store 27 years ago, proudly walks us through long aisles of various noodles and sauces, beautiful displays of seafood and

rows and rows of arcane produce of the sort that winds up in the mystery baskets on Food Network's "Chopped."

Then she presents us with a display of delicious pig to eat. One tray holds Crispy Pork - deep-fried, succulent bites with puckered skin.

"We sell 300 pounds of this a day," she says, and I don't doubt it. We also devour some pork riblets and a little tender braised pork belly with hard-boiled eggs. We're off to a fine swine start.

During the half-hour drive to our next stop... we arrive at Revival Market (550 Heights Blvd., 713-880-8463) in a Houston neighborhood northwest of downtown called the Heights.

Urban markets are big everywhere, but this one's a step beyond the usual. It has a good variety of fresh fruits, vegetables, cheeses and meats, many produced locally.

It makes its own Worcestershire sauce, chocolate syrup and barbecue sauce. It offers not only bulk spices, but also bulk olive oil, which you may decant into little glass jars.

Most important on this day: Revival raises its own pigs in Yoakum, east of San Antonio. It dries and cures its own meats. We dig into two trays of various charcuterie, all of it bursting with Texas pig flavor, along with fresh, tasty cucumber and potato salads.

Now, it's time for the main event: Revival butcher Adam Garcia is going to break down half a pig for us.

We troop into the back, and there it lies: one half of a formerly 425-pound, 14-month-old, barley-fed, mulefoot pig. The head's been removed, but two trotters and a tail remain. Around the outside of the pig is a good two inches of fat. Mmmmm-mmm.

Garcia reaches into the pig, wrestling out great handfuls of fat. But don't worry: He leaves plenty on the pig. He starts by dividing the pig into thirds: the butt, the belly and the shoulder area. (Both Garcia and Shepherd, by the way, say the collar is the yummiest part of a pig.)

Then Garcia extracts the tenderloin. One half of a pig yields but one tenderloin; that's why they're pricey.

For the next half hour, Garcia, wearing a metal mesh glove, pulls, cuts and saws (sometimes with the help of Revival co-owner Ryan Pera) the pig. At some point, plates of pulled pork sliders with red cabbage make their way around. Yeah, we needed those.

On our way out, we're each given a Revival Market Couch Potato Cookie. These are made with bacon, pretzels and potato chips, and the saltiness of those ingredients, combined with the usual butter and sugar, make for a delicious cookie.

We're on the roll again, this time to the western edge of Houston, stopping at a tiny Polish restaurant called Polonia ... and owner Sharon Szpak proceeds to bring forth course after course of porcine pleasure.

"Anywhere you'd normally use butter, they use bacon fat," Shepherd says. We smear our bread with bacon fat and gaze at pork aspic: a savory gelatin in which pork is suspended with some carrots. It reads pig, but it's unusual.

"I have issues with the texture," the guy to my left says. Pork aspic, I believe, is an acquired taste.

What follows is a parade of pork: mushroom-stuffed pork cutlets, a hearty and moist pork meatloaf, roasted pork shoulder, Polish kielbasa sausage and massive pork shanks braised in beer, paprika, onion, carrots and spices.

After eating all this ... We roll ourselves back onto the bus - after six hours, not the standard tour's five, for the drive back to Central Market.

A clearly pigged-out Shepherd plops himself into a seat, fielding one more question about his restaurant.

"I'm done with pork bellies," he declares. "I'm doing goat."

Current Event September 2011 Reading Guide - Culinary

1. Who are the three guides on the tour?
2. According to the article, what type of food do up-and-coming chefs seem to be reveling in these days?
3. In the paragraph about Teresa Tan, what does the author mean when using the word arcane? If you don't know the definition of the word already, use the context to define it.
4. What three products does Revival Market make itself?
5. While visiting Revival Market, they see a pig being butchered. What are the three sections the butcher cuts the pig into first?
6. What ingredients are in the River Market Couch Potato Cookie?
7. Why is the tenderloin cut of a pig so expensive?

8. What is the name of the final restaurant they visit on the tour?

9. Name three of the pork dishes they have at the Polish Restaurant.

10. In this article chef Shepherd discusses the idea of creating a restaurant around one specific animal rather than a style of cuisine. Using your creative culinary skills, imagine you are a chef or restaurateur who wants to start a restaurant based around one specific animal or protein (besides pork). What would you choose and why?

11. Using the scenario above, list and describe four of the signature dishes you would create with your chosen ingredient.

Article TEKS Alignment

Restaurant Management 130.224

1A, 1B

Culinary Arts 130.226

1A, 1F, 2A, 6B, 6D, 6F

Practicum in Culinary Arts 130.227

8A, 8B, 10B, 10D

Food Science 130.230

27A, 27C