



SAN ANTONIO

SPREADS ITS CULINARY WINGS

Ashley Day | USA TODAY

Clouds cover San Antonio on a chilly Saturday morning in April. Beneath the sounds of trees and tents rustling in the wind, the streets of Pearl Brewery begin to fill a mere 12 minutes after the farmers market's 9 a.m. opening.

This appealing district of restaurants, shops, apartments, and now the landmark Hotel Emma, was the city's first trendy alternative to the crowded River Walk when it debuted almost nine years ago. And now, people still come to try something new. Lines for Merit Roasting Co. coffee and French-style pastries snake to the doors at Local Coffee and Bakery Lorraine, and parking fills fast. Young, hip visitors, older locals and families browse the tables of produce, honey, bread and finger foods, from empanadas to Indian pakora.

"Everybody goes to Mexican restaurants, and they think that's what San Antonio is only," says Luis Morales, who runs the market's Humble House Foods tent, which sources all of its ingredients for sauces, dips and dishes from the surrounding market. He points out the pork belly hash a customer is picking up. "This is more of an expression of what San Antonio tastes like, because the eggs are from here, the meat



PHOTOS BY ASHLEY DAY, USA TODAY

Fresh produce and creative purveyors draw shoppers to the Pearl Brewery district farmer's market.

ere. The terroir is true to what we do."

Morales started with weekly cooking demos, much like chef Johnny Hernandez, who began shopping at the market and cooking on the lawn before opening La Gloria, one of Pearl's two inaugural restaurants (along with Andrew Weissman's Il Sogno Osteria), which celebrated seven years on Cinco de Mayo. Today, the district has more than 15 bars and restaurants.

Hernandez is nationally known for his Mexican cooking, thanks to the success of La Gloria's authentic street food (now in San Antonio International Airport), yet he, too, notes the other influences in the city's modern food scene, including Native American hunters and gatherers, Texas cattle trails and German beer making.

Pearl was a local pioneer in craft brewing, influencing several local breweries, from trendy Alamo Brewing Company to the city's first "brewstillery," Ranger Creek, one of five local distilleries. Patrons enjoy Alamo's outdoor beer garden, with games on sunny days, more than 20 beers on tap and a full menu sourced from local farms, and the Texas Gulf at Southerleigh, which opened inside the former Pearl Brewhouse in 2015. Most San Antonio eateries serve Lone Star Beer from Texas' first mechanized brewery, established here in 1883.

"We're a community that feels culturally grounded," Hernandez says. "It's not youthful Austin, it's not the glamour and glitz of Dallas. ... The culture, heritage and hospitality is what creates the destination. Food is culture, right?"

No one's defined a single restaurant's culture quite like chef Steve McHugh, a two-time James Beard Foundation Award finalist for Best Chef: Southwest, who helms Cured in Pearl Brewery's original administration building. The eatery incorporates reclaimed and repurposed elements of the former site into its design, earning a 2016 San Antonio Conservation Society Award.

Celebrating "the beauty of aging," as general manager Robert



The Humble House Foods tent offers custom salsa blends.



One of the most diverse charcuterie platters you'll find in the United States is served at Cured.

Rodriguez puts it, McHugh practices ancient curing and preserving techniques. Cured serves one of the most diverse charcuterie platters you'll find in America — lamb and citrus terrine, six-month pork culatello, 30-day tuna lomo — and the walls are lined with colorful jars of fermenting fruits and vegetables. Pair both with plenty of Texas beers, including an exclusive list of hard-to-find bottles.

"When people come here, they're surprised not just by the food, but by the feel and the culture," says McHugh. "We take everything we love about San Antonio and just combine it."

A champion of San Antonio

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Johnny Hernandez,
La Gloria restaurant

sourcing, chef Michael Sohocki brought his hyper-local emphasis to Neapolitan pizzeria, Il Forno, where he grows more than 20 ingredients onsite and sources the rest from local farms. Enter through a garden of citrus trees, spice plants, lettuce and vegeta-

bles for wood-fired, thin-crust garden-to-table pies on which greens, zucchini, butternut squash and "verdura" star.

The latest openings combine global flavors with Alamo City's famous barbecue and Tex-Mex. New 2M Smokehouse and renovated El Mirador debuted in December; chef Jason Dady revisits shareable Spanish fare at The Bin; and chef Bowers' Italian eatery, Battalion, opened in February. Hernandez will open Burgerteca and seafood restaurant Villa Rica in Southtown this year.

"There are several neighborhoods that are now just evolving into something really special," Hernandez says, citing up-and-coming Southtown.

For a self-guided sample, start on South Alamo where The Friendly Spot's colorful chair-filled yard beckons passersby. The only non-relaxing thing here is choosing from more than 300 beers. Across the street, unassuming B&D Ice House smokes tasty brisket and more meat to enjoy at the bar or picnic tables.

Dady's sister restaurants — Tre Trattoria, Tre Enoteca, Two Bros. BBQ Market, Shuck Shack and The Bin — reflect San Antonio's diversity, from Italian to Spanish to oysters from the Atlantic, Gulf and Pacific coasts. And he, Hernandez and Weissman's mini-empires show the area's appeal to entrepreneurial chefs.

"There are amazing ingredients, recipes and chefs here," says McHugh. "People from other parts of the country are coming here ... to open new restaurants."

After all, San Antonio is now home to four culinary institutions, including a Culinary Institute of America (CIA) campus — the school from which Hernandez, McHugh, Sohocki and Weissman all graduated — which operates a restaurant and seasonal pop-ups at Pearl.

McHugh says the energy from Pearl and development in the surrounding neighborhood are "a catalyst for what's happening in the city."

"San Antonio is 300 years old. It's the same age as New Orleans, so there's a history of good food and culture, and we're kind of just getting our due now."