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## Where to Eat Now 2010

by [Patricia Sharpe](#)

[February 2010](#)

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Mussels in escabeche, Samar, Dallas  
Photograph by Samuel Solomon



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I don't know if it was the unsettled economy, climate change, the Saturn-Uranus opposition, or what, but the past year's new restaurants were a confounding mix of high highs and low lows. To start with the good tidings, five of Texas' star chefs launched new operations this year. Equally promising, four relative newcomers are causing a stir. And proving that Texas continues to grow as a player on the national food scene, two renowned out-of-state chefs—Wolfgang Puck being one—established beachheads here.

That said, my gut feeling (we restaurant critics tend to rely on that a lot) is that last year was pretty hit-and-miss. Yes, I had fantastic dishes, but I also encountered some that were outstandingly mediocre, occasionally at the same restaurant during the same meal. Likewise, menus could be all over the map. A few were highly focused, many more were eclectic, and some were just plain random (I mean, pulled-pork sandwiches and duck breast marinated in Galliano liqueur on the same bill of fare?). It was as if chefs were trying a little of everything, desperate to find dishes that would sell, never mind the logic.

So much for generalities—let's cut to the chase. To be eligible for this story, a restaurant must have officially opened between November 1, 2008, and November 1, 2009 (with a three-week grace period at the front end). We consider only restaurants that are new, under which rubric we also count establishments that have changed their name, moved to a new location, and are generally shaking things up. Second or third locations of Texas-based restaurants don't count, although we do permit the first Texas location of an out-of-state enterprise. But all this talk about restaurants must be making you hungry. It's time to see where you might want to make reservations this weekend.

### 1. RDG + Bar Annie, *Houston*

Seven months ago, überchef Robert Del Grande took the final step in a change that had been years in the making: He shuttered Cafe Annie, the acclaimed but aging restaurant that had been his home base for 29 years, and moved his operation lock, stock, and blender to a flashy redevelopment a block away. Unquestionably, many sleepless nights accompanied the decision, but from the minute newly christened RDG + Bar Annie opened, any lingering doubts vanished like bubbles in a glass of champagne. Del Grande is back in the game—and how.

Smart and sexy, RDG pulses with an energy that its predecessor had not enjoyed in ages. The crowd, always a bit bipolar in its division between haute and hip, has definitely expanded in the direction of the latter, as young Turks, stiletto wobblers, and other scenesters pack in nightly for drinks and nibbles in Bar Annie. (Incidentally, the restaurant's odd name becomes clear once you're there; RDG is the expansive, quieter rear area with gilt-framed mirrors; Bar Annie is the more casual space, with warm western-red-cedar walls and a fabulous bar made of Persian onyx.)

But the fascinating part of the move is how it has revitalized Del Grande and his chefs de cuisine, Elliott Kelly and Clint Davis. Classic dishes have a new lease on life; new ones pop. You might start with a seared sea scallop appetizer from 1992 (menu descriptions tell when most dishes were introduced, tracing the arc of Del Grande's cuisine through the years). The scallop's interior is as smooth as butter, and it sits atop bacon-studded grits crowned with a poached egg. From there, it's a giant leap forward to 2009's Texas quail, a big bruiser of a bird accompanied by a dusky fig-and-foie-gras jam. There's also a tempting selection of hors d'oeuvres, like the tasty Asian Nachos of yellowtail on jicama, that defy categorization, chronological or otherwise.

For the main event, sentimentalists might flash back to 1988's roasted redbfish veracruzana, a dish that validates Del Grande's role as a founding father of Southwestern cuisine; the translucent filet basks in a simple fresh tomato sauce set off by capers and sharp-flavored cilantro. Modernists will no doubt gravitate to 2009's extravagantly marbled lamb chops sided by pan-roasted white hominy and spicy tomato jelly. Wherever you choose to travel in time, there's a dish to suit your fancy. With the transition to RDG, the curtain has been lowered on one era in Houston restaurant history and raised on another. Long live the future.

1800 Post Oak Blvd., at Ambassador Way, 713-840-1111. Lunch Mon–Sat 11:30–2. Dinner Mon–Sat 6–10, Sun 5–9. [rdgbarannie.com](http://rdgbarannie.com)

### 2. Il Sogno, *San Antonio*

Andrew Weissman, the San Antonio chef who astonished the Texas restaurant world when he opened his extraordinary French restaurant Le Rêve eleven years ago, has fallen for the cuisine of Italy. Still, the Gallic habits that he and his chef de cuisine, Luca Dellacasa, honed at the now-closed endeavor have not gone gentle into that good night: In their Italian cooking, finesse trumps raw gusto, and the most successful dishes are those that involve kitchen craft rather than the simple antipasti and apps. The eyes feast first, on a glorious pile of golden scaloppine de maile (sautéed pork cutlets); setting off their meatiness are small roasted tomatoes, glazed with balsamic for a puckery sweet-sour effect. Equally compelling is the pan-roasted cod in a subtle saffron broth with leeks and a bristling whole prawn. Vases of red ginger lilies and an arty chandelier of wine bottles and teeny lights soften the stark white room, which somehow manages to be industrial and inviting at the same time.

Pearl Brewery complex, 200 E. Grayson, 210-223-3900. Breakfast Tue–Fri 7:30–10, Sat 8:30–10. Lunch Tue–Sun 11:30–2. Dinner Tue–Sun 5:45–9. Closed Mon.

### 3. Samar by Stephan Pyles, *Dallas*

Talk about whiplash: The setting is a monolithic Dallas skyscraper; the menu is a sensuous stroll through an international food bazaar where you can grab small bites from Spain, India, and the Middle East. With a couple nods to the exotic, like Moroccan hanging lamps and a crimson-draped alcove next to the bar, Dallas chef Stephan Pyles has opened a dining venue aimed at the theater and museum crowds. If you have an hour before curtain time, you might start with a dish inspired by India, like a tiger prawn with spiced pear chutney sided by a quick-fry of salty, papery julienned okra (think slim green potato chips). Your second course could be Spanish-style mussels cooked in a briny, citrusy broth mellowed with swoon-worthy additions of cream, sherry, and pear. For dessert, finish with a hypnotic Syrian dessert of pistachio-and-rose-water ice cream incorporating the velvety, pungent resin of the mastic tree. Have a Turkish coffee if there's time, then head for the show.

2100 Ross Ave., 214-922-9922. Lunch Mon–Fri 11–2. Dinner Mon–Sat 5–11. Closed Sun.

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#### 4. Perla's, *Austin*

One of the best things about Perla's Seafood and Oyster Bar is that you can show up any old time and order a platterful of raw oysters and clams, from strident, briny Lady Chatterleys (from Nova Scotia) to sweet, mild Malpeques (from Prince Edward Island). Don't even bother with the vinegary mignonette; you won't want to compromise the flavor of these satiny bivalves. The daily changing "Market" section of co-owners and chefs Larry McGuire and Tommy Moorman's menu avoids fancy preps in favor of mix-and-match fish and sauce. One of the best choices is wreckfish, an Atlantic native that likes to hang around rocks and shipwrecks and tastes similar to grouper; order it roasted, accompanied by the feisty verde (green herbs, garlic, and jalapeño). Although the tall plate-glass windows at Perla's look out on live oaks and grackles instead of palms and seagulls, the effect is strangely coastal. From the big, breezy deck, you can almost imagine that the sea of cars on South Congress is waiting for the ferry back to the mainland.

1400 S. Congress Ave., 512-291-7300. Lunch Mon–Fri 11:30–3, Sat & Sun 11–3. Dinner 7 days 5:30–11. [www.perlasaustin.com](http://www.perlasaustin.com)

#### 5. La Condesa, *Austin*

The controversy over this style-conscious, cutting-edge Mexican restaurant is so hot you could dip a chip in it. One contingent bellows, "Too exotic, too pricey!" The other side roars, "Delicious and worth every centavo!" Inspired by both street food and fine dining, Texas-born, New York-seasoned chef Rene Ortiz has gone way out on a limb. Of his four ceviches, for instance, only one resembles the familiar chunky, lime-cooked seafood. His hamachi version, recalling a Peruvian tiradito, is abstract art: slices of raw fish are lightly spritzed with lime juice that's been infused with cilantro and grilled habanero, then crowned with fresh fried chicharrones. In his tostadas de cangrejo, gorgeous, pearly lump crab gets edgy with sharp green mango and a silky chipotle mayo. A duo of lamb chops and shoulder comes with a sassy mint-and-jalapeño garnish, a sly nod to the mint jelly of yore. Get with it, people. Mexican food isn't just for hangovers anymore.

400 W. Second, 512-499-0300. Dinner Sun–Wed 5–10, Thur–Sat 5–11. Brunch Sat & Sun 11–3. [lacondesaaustin.com](http://lacondesaaustin.com)

#### 6. Five Sixty, *Dallas*

In the evening, a twinklefest of city lights unfurls before your wondering eyes as your table does a 360 from 560 feet in the air. Last year, the Wolfgang Puck empire took over and remodeled venerable Antares restaurant on the rotating top floor of Dallas's Reunion Tower. And once 33-year-old chef Sara Johannes stepped into the executive chef's clogs, the venue sprang back to life. The menu trends Asian, like Puck's Chinois concept,

with robust appetizers such as seductive nuggets of suckling pig in a sweet reduced-plum purée. A crispy wok-fried whole sea bass arrives dramatically posed in two sauces: a light citrus-soy ponzu and a hearty gingery Thai chile. Wisely, desserts exit the Orient express: An individual baked Alaska features ginger ice cream and cake sheathed in toasted meringue, an American classic if ever there was one.  
300 Reunion Blvd. East, 214-741-5560. Dinner Mon–Thur 5:30–9:30, Fri & Sat 5:30–10. Closed Sun. [wolfgangpuck.com](http://wolfgangpuck.com)

### 7. Ellerbe Fine Foods, Fort Worth

Ellerbe does the aw-shucks thing with consummate skill. The restaurant is located in a recycled service station decorated with colorful aprons hanging on one wall and tabletop milk bottles filled with fresh herbs. Its menu is dotted with homey ingredients and dishes like spoon bread, mustard greens, and Dad’s Dirty Rice. But read the descriptions more closely and—wait a minute. You’ve been had! Ellerbe is anything but country. Chef Molly McCook’s delicately crusted sautéed grouper is topped with perfect lump crabmeat and a stuffed mirliton—a.k.a. chayote. A seasonal salad combines sweet Mexia peaches with tart chèvre and nutty toasted pecans. Evidence of her Louisiana origins appears in an appetizer of spicy New Orleans–style barbecued shrimp, the sweet flesh of the whole crustaceans complemented by crusty, biscuitlike spoon bread. Her mixed grill is a smart version of the popular two-meat entrée, neatly playing off the differences between a wild-boar chop (loose-grained and mild) and a noisette of axis venison (tight-textured, almost beefy). Seldom has deception made so many people so happy.  
1501 W. Magnolia Ave., 817-926-3663. Lunch Tue–Fri 11–2. Dinner Tue–Thur 5:30–9, Fri & Sat 5:30–10. Closed Sun & Mon. [ellerbefinefoods.com](http://ellerbefinefoods.com)

### 8. Pavil, San Antonio

Towering Pavil could easily be mistaken for a museum blockbuster exhibit titled “French Brasserie!” so anatomically correct are its eighteen-foot-tall ceilings, its polished booth dividers topped by brass and glass, and its servers scurrying about in long aprons. Chef Scott Cohen, who made his mark at Las Canarias, is betting that he can lure San Antonians from their tacos and tostadas by tempting them with classics like garlicky, butter-soused escargots under puff pastry; moist hunks of duck confit; and generous pepper steak in a fragrant cognac-peppercorn sauce. All the obligatory dishes are in place, from petite frisée salads with lardons to golden pommes frites in paper cones, but the most memorable dish on the menu may well be the vegetable cassoulet, a miraculously flavorful, long-simmered stew of white beans, artichoke hearts, tomatoes, and wild mushrooms.  
1818 N. Loop 1604, at Huebner, southeast corner, 210-479-5000. Open Mon–Wed 11–10, Thur–Sat 11–11, Sun 10:30–10. [brasseriepavil.com](http://brasseriepavil.com)

### 9. Valentino, Houston

When a restaurant’s color scheme is red and black and shiny all over, your heart sinks a little. But at Valentino, a smart, sophisticated menu will counter those doubts. The latest eating place to inhabit the Hotel Derek is the first Texas outpost from well-known restaurateur Piero Selvaggio, who created the concept in Santa Monica in 1972 and expanded it to Las Vegas in 1999. He’s banking on Houston’s being hungry for something besides polenta and pasta—crudo, for instance, Italy’s answer to sashimi. Laser-precise cuts of meaty red ahi tuna are balanced superbly by vincotto, a pungent grape-must reduction. (Vincotto also appears in the dressing on a salad of warm asparagus and medallions of quail.) Chef Cunningham West has undeniably brilliant moments, for instance his smashing creamy goat-cheese flan accessorized with sweet, earthy roasted beets. The occasional flub (tired roast duck with fig demi) is surprising, given his deft hand with dishes like the startlingly tender and flavorful buffalo tenderloin with, but of course, vincotto.  
Hotel Derek, 2525 West Loop South (Loop 610), 713-850-9200. Dinner Mon–Sat 5–10. Closed Sun. [pieroselvaggio.com](http://pieroselvaggio.com)

### 10. Vinoteca Poscol, Houston

The scrungy east end of Westheimer is rife with tattoo parlors, tarot readers, and spy gadget stores. Yet fans of chef-restaurateur Marco Wiles happily gather in two low-ceilinged, candlelit rooms to talk and laugh at Poscol, the newest and most downscale of the maestro’s three Italian restaurants. Wine is the first order of business, chosen from a concise list that offers three-ounce pours for those who want to explore. That should be followed by a salad, perhaps the celery root and apple, its skinny matchsticks topped with a sharp vinaigrette. Next, consider a cured meat and salumi board; the house bresaola—air-dried salted beef—must be one of your choices. You could supplement it with an unconventional red-wine risotto covered in drifts of snowy Parmesan. Or you could finish up with the two specialties of the house: wine and good cheer.  
1609 Westheimer Rd., 713-529-2797. Dinner Tue–Sat 5–midnight, Sun 5–10. Closed Mon. ➔

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