



STATE OF THE PLATE

Comfort Food's Contemporary Comeback

ESSAY BY
ROBB WALSH

Texas comfort foods come in an amazing array of flavors. They also trigger a wide range of emotions. From the first bite of mom's banana pudding with Nilla wafers at the family reunion to the welcome-home twang of cheese enchiladas in chili gravy after a trip out of state, Texas comfort food speaks to your soul.

Thanksgiving is not Thanksgiving without your particular comfort-food favorites. We might agree about some of them, like the church lady's homemade tamales. And we get into family feuds over others, like saltines spread with *parisa* (Texan steak *tartare*) and those green beans with the cream of mushroom soup and canned onions. To each his own, as the saying goes.

And of course, there are those who dismiss the entire category of comfort food as unworthy of all the attention it gets. Some chefs in cutting-edge restaurants mockingly refer to such standards as cheese grits and mashed potatoes with gravy as "glorified baby food." But other eateries, like Frank's Americana Revival in Houston, have made comfort-food classics like chicken pot pie and chicken-fried steak the stars of the menu—only they are serving them with crunchy just-picked green beans, heirloom tomato salads, and hand-cut French fries.

Since I moved to Galveston last spring, seafood has surged to the top of my comfort-food hit parade. Fried shrimp, or fish simply cooked on the grill or under the broiler, brings back memories of beach vacations and summer—it's often the sauce that makes the fish dish exciting. I still don't have the secret recipe for that incredible tartar sauce at King's Inn on Baffin Bay, but I keep getting closer. (For tartar sauce ideas, see texashighways.com/recipes-sides-sauces for the first two recipes in my cookbook *Texas Eats*.) I also like chef Bryan Caswell's Sriracha remoulade on crab cakes at Reef restaurant in Houston, and I love his idea of adding lime pickle to the Asiago bread crumbs on baked oysters—an exciting new spin on classic Oysters Rockefeller.

The popularity of the Americana music movement has encouraged the rise of an Americana food movement, too. Just as bands like Alabama Shakes and the Carolina Chocolate Drops are

creating a modern version of rhythm-and-blues and country music, young chefs in new Texas restaurants are updating heritage food classics and turning them into exciting contemporary dishes. The Taleggio and aged cheddar mac and cheese at Hillside Pharmacy in Austin, the coffee-cured barbecued brisket with roasted peppers at Smoke in Dallas, and the chicken wings with anchovies and wildflower honey at Pax Americana in Houston are all excellent examples.

As Texas becomes ever more multicultural, we are making room on our Thanksgiving tables (and our Black Friday leftover spreads) for newly familiar items that are becoming a part of our comfort food repertoire. Don't be surprised if you find turkey *mole*, Vietnamese turkey *pho*, or Anglo-Indian turkey curry on the menu this year. (Cranberry sauce is a great stand-in for chutney.)

In truth, comfort food has never been more popular in Texas, and Texas comfort foods have never been more widely admired in the rest of the country. Several Tex-Mex restaurants opened in New York this year, and Hill Country Chicken, a restaurant for those who crave Texas yardbird in the Big Apple, has expanded to two locations.

Austin pitmaster Aaron Franklin's version of Texas barbecue is now being imitated on both coasts. When Franklin won the James Beard Award for Best Chef: Southwest last spring, it was the first time a barbecue pitman had ever received such acclaim. The Beard award is usually reserved for chefs in the very top

echelon of fine dining restaurants, so the choice of Aaron Franklin by the Beard awards committee signaled a new respect for Texas barbecue as a culinary art form.

Franklin's is one of a new breed of "stand in line" joints that are raising the bar on barbecue in urban areas around the state. They are smoking a higher grade of brisket and seasoning the well-trimmed fat cap to create a spicy black bark that makes each bite crunchy. The long lines may be annoying, but they assure that every slice of brisket is fresh off the smoker. Killen's Barbecue in Pearland, CorkScrew BBQ, which just moved to a new location in Old Town Spring, and Pecan Lodge in Dallas' Deep Ellum neighborhood are a few worth trying (if you have the time to wait in line for your comfort food).

Texas' addictive breakfast tacos are also in the national spotlight. The Tex-Mex breakfast combo of fluffy flour tortillas, scrambled eggs, refried beans, bacon, and fiery salsa is spreading across the country, thanks in large part to the enthusiasm of breakfast-taco fans who attend the annual South by Southwest festival in Austin every spring.

Chili *con carne*, that Texas comfort food of the cowboy era, has lately been making a comeback across the country—it never went out of style at my house. But according to people who keep track of these things, "chili" has been among the top recipe requests on internet search engines for the past few years.

My new tome, *The Chili Cookbook*, which came out last month, offers a whole lot of variations on chili including New Mexican green chile and red chile stews, Cincinnati chili with spaghetti, and modern versions with and without *frijoles*. I was astonished to discover while researching the book that there is a connection between Texas cowboy chili and Hungarian goulash. So I have lately added goulash to my family's list of favorite comfort foods. (My kids call it chili and noodles.)

Just in time for the holidays, I'm also celebrating the return of one of my all-time-favorite comfort foods, now that Blue Bell Homemade Vanilla once again graces the bottom shelf of my freezer. Homemade pie just doesn't taste the same without it. ★

A co-founder of Foodways Texas (www.foodwaystexas.com), James Beard Award-winning writer and culinary historian Robb Walsh co-owns El Real Tex-Mex restaurant in Houston.



Koffee Kup Family Restaurant, Hico

PHOTO: Michael Amador



READERS' CHOICE

COMFORT COMES IN MANY FLAVORS

Asking readers for their favorite comfort foods

seems a lot like asking someone to name a favorite grandchild—the answers frequently come in a flood of options, as they have since we put out the call early this year. It's nearly impossible to name one place for a great piece of pie when you love several, right? In your travels across the bountiful culinary map that is the great state of Texas, you've made profound dining discoveries while also falling in love, again and again, with tried-and-true edible legends. When we asked you to tell us about your favorite barbecue, burgers, chicken-fried steak, kolaches, fish, mac and cheese, pie, and Tex-Mex, thousands of you rose to the occasion. You took to Facebook and our website to share your comfort food passions, and you even sent us several hundred votes in the mail. Here, we share your delicious results.

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TEXT BY JUNE NAYLOR



Barbecue

Few topics in the Texas food world get people more excited than barbecue. First and foremost, it has to be true Texas-style 'cue and not any of that nonsense from beyond the Lone Star State lines. Smoked low and slow in a pit over a wood fire (whether that's hickory, mesquite, pecan, or oak is fodder for another whole round of lively dialogue), Texas barbecue is a breed of cuisine unto itself. Its history and various styles trace to German settlers in Central Texas, ranchers and *vaqueros* in South Texas, and to African-American pitmasters in East Texas. Flavoring the layers of discussion are the meats available, from beef brisket and ribs to jalapeño sausage, hot links, and pork ribs, shoulder, and chops. Although readers cast votes for a number of barbecue spots in such places as San Angelo, Pampa, Big Spring, Emory, Huntsville, Tyler, Rockport, Dallas, and Fort Worth, the top four barbecue places beloved by *TH* readers sit solidly in Central Texas. The fifth is a dark horse from Northeast Texas.



Black's Barbecue

LOCKHART

OPEN SINCE 1932, this smokehouse claims to be the state's oldest barbecue joint owned by the same family. The pit used today was built in 1949 by Edgar Black Jr. and can hold 500 pounds of meat at once. If you're a stickler for tradition, you'll eat your 'cue from sheets of butcher paper, rather than a plate. Smoked over post-oak wood, meats at Black's include sliced and chopped brisket, pork spare ribs and baby back ribs, turkey breast, chicken, pork chops, and meaty beef ribs that weigh roughly a pound each. What makes it the best? Facebook poster Chris Rogers says, "While they give a nod to those who think they need to ruin good Texas barbecue with sauce, [Black's] awesome meats are melt-in-your-mouth tender, juicy, and delicious just as they come off the fire! No additions needed, 'cept maybe some onions." www.blackssbbq.com.



MORE ONLINE

From Ellinger to Galveston, and San Leon to Lake Whitney, check out *TH* readers' favorite stops for kolaches, mac and cheese, and fish and shrimp online at www.texashighways.com/comfort.



Burgers

If you're a recent arrival in Texas, you may not have heard that our state gave birth to the hamburger, but now you know: Allegedly created in the late 1880s at an East Texas café owned by a man named Fletcher Davis, the hamburger was introduced to a larger audience at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair—and the rest, as they say, is history. Need proof? It's right there on a historical marker on a building on the north side of the Henderson County Courthouse square in Athens. Certainly, the burger has evolved in marvelous ways since then, now enjoying toppings that range from Stilton cheese to pineapple slices, Hatch green chiles, and avocados. East Texas continues to make a strong showing among your five favorite burger joints in the state, while San Antonio and Hill Country towns do themselves proud, too.



**Jucys
Hamburgers**
LONGVIEW, MARSHALL
AND TYLER

ORIGINATING IN LONGVIEW IN 1980, Jucys outpaces its competition with a devoted population of followers. Now with five stores, Jucys is a power to be reckoned with. At each location, beef is ground daily for the hamburger patties and French fries are cut every morning from russet potatoes. When you bite into a burger hot off the griddle, the taste and texture attest to handcrafting that you don't find in a uniform patty from a box. You'll need two hands

to eat this bad boy, and a generous appetite to match. Among topping temptations, the bacon and blue cheese combination is hard to resist, but you can't go wrong with the burger laden with grilled onions and melted cheddar cheese. Oh, and the buns are always toasty-warm from the grill, too. Loyal fan Amanda Hayes McCary writes, "Jucys' are by far the best in Texas. You'd be hard-pressed to find a better burger." www.jucyshamburgers.com.



Chicken-Fried Steak

The most popular dish among cowboys driving cattle to market, the chicken-fried steak began as a simple pounded steak—usually a cheap cut that the chuck-wagon cook tenderized with a good walloping—that was cloaked in flour, salt, and pepper, and then fried in a skillet. If milk were available, the steak would be dipped in the liquid before battering and frying. Today's version hasn't changed too much in theory, though cooks sometimes use heavy cream instead of milk, add paprika or other spices to the seasoning mix, or serve the steak with chili or a fried egg instead of cream gravy. Some fancy restaurants make this Texas standard with rib-eye or another high-quality cut of beef. Readers nearly unanimously picked a near-West Texas café as serving their favorite version, but restaurants in San Antonio, Tomball, Irving, and San Angelo also won votes.



Mary's Cafe

STRAWN

THOUGH MARY'S OPENED IN 1986, this landmark in the hamlet about an hour west of Fort Worth feels as though it were plucked out of the 1950s. People traveling across North and West Texas often plan their trips to coincide with meals at Mary's, and specifically to eat the renowned CFS. It's not as pretty as some—it's not encased in a billowy, golden-fried jacket of crust—but it is breaded, pan-fried, and extremely tasty. The small portion can feed a small family, the medium might suit a football team, and we cannot imagine who could tackle the large order, which spills from the plate. (As Don Reeves of Bedford says, "Newcomers usually gasp at the first sight of it. Even regulars laugh at its monstrosity, even though they've seen it a thousand times.") Ask for gravy on the side to swirl each bite in as you see fit, or for dunking pieces of your grilled Texas toast. Frank Woodall of Pflugerville puts it best, "The crispiness of the crust, tenderness of the meat (cuts with a fork), with gravy and a side of French fries, just makes you feel good inside." Call 254/672-5741.





Tex-Mex

It's a Texan birthright to argue for a favorite Tex-Mex plate and place. What all Texans seem to agree on is that Tex-Mex is simply the finest variation of Mexican food in existence. The folks west of here from New Mexico to California can have their versions—just give us our cheese enchiladas, fajitas, puffy tacos, and chips and salsa, please. It's certainly worth noting that credit for inventing the combination plate goes to El Fenix, a Dallas landmark since 1918. Why we crave this food is simple, according to the late and much-missed Tex-Mex ambassador and restaurateur Matt Martinez Jr. of Austin: It was Matt's belief that the combination of protein, carbs, and fat just makes us feel so good, we want to eat it everyday—and so we do. The food his family made famous is in your top five, of course.



Joe T. Garcia's Mexican Restaurant

FORT WORTH

NOW 80 YEARS STRONG, Joe T's remains a larger-than-life Texas legend. Grown from a tiny dining room in the Garcia family home to a sprawling series of lively rooms and gardens that can seat up to 1,000 at a time, this institution has customers lined up and down the block several times a week, waiting for a table.

Known primarily for combination dinners of enchiladas, tacos, guacamole, and rice and beans, as well as sizzling fajitas platters, Joe T's is a favorite spot for sitting on the beautiful patio and sipping strong margaritas. Still run by the founding family, the restaurant does a good Sunday brunch, too. www.joets.com.