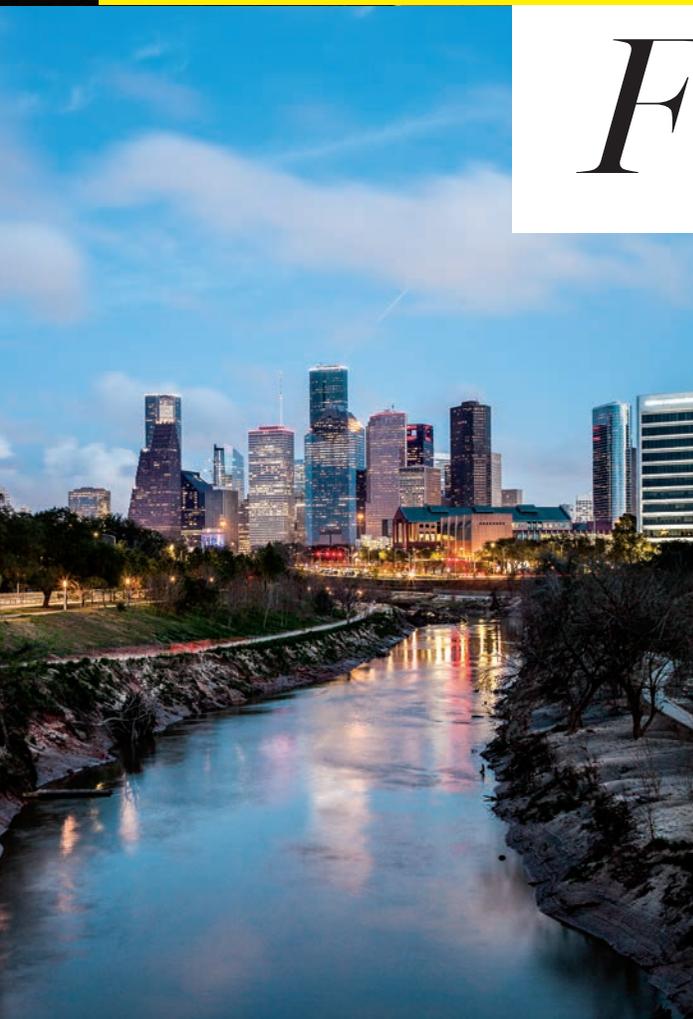




*AN*

*IMMOVABLE*

*FEAST*



A

*HOUSTON'S  
CULINARY  
COMMUNITY  
CAME  
TOGETHER  
IN A BIG  
WAY AFTER  
HARVEY, AND  
NOW MAY BE  
THE BEST TIME  
EVER TO VISIT  
THE GLOBAL  
FOOD MECCA*

*STORY BY  
MAI PHAM  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY  
ERIC W. POHL*

Ask Houstonians what they love about their city, and they're bound to bring up its first-rate dining scene. Houston's culinary offerings have been strong for a while but never more so than in recent years, with high-profile restaurants capturing attention on a national stage and the number of eateries in the Houston metro area swelling to a record of more than 12,000 featuring cuisines from about 75 countries.

However, the Houston foodie scene's proudest achievement may lie in the heart and grit of its close-knit chef community. In the wake of Hurricane Harvey, restaurateurs banded together, feeding thousands displaced by the floods.

Like so many individuals affected by Harvey, the city's restaurants struggled in the aftermath of one of the most costly natural disasters in U.S. history. This is the story of how four Houston-area restaurants weathered the storm.

## EYE OF THE STORM

**RAFFA'S WATERFRONT GRILL, KINGWOOD:** One of two Kingwood restaurants owned by Tony Raffa, the steak and seafood spot celebrated its 10-year anniversary a month before Harvey. A destination restaurant with floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the San Jacinto River, it's been considered one of Kingwood's best for years. It had also, until Harvey, seemed impervious to natural disasters. In 2008, Hurricane Ike had blown through without causing damage. So had the 2015 Memorial Day flood and the subsequent "Tax Day" flood of 2016. Raffa's did not sit on a floodplain. The normal water level lies 24 feet below the building; there had never been a need for flood insurance. But then again, Houston had never seen a hurricane like Harvey.

Raffa's was open the Friday evening Harvey was supposed to hit but closed on Saturday and Sunday due to severe flooding. By Monday, when the water had reached waist level on the streets, Tony, his wife, and some friends braved the waters in an effort to salvage whatever could be saved. Among other things, he put 40 cases of wine on tabletops. He thought the restaurant might get 12 inches of water, but the reality was much starker. Video footage from across the street showed water inundating the entire King's Harbor development at 6 p.m. that Monday, rising to about 5 feet. Everything stayed submerged for about 72 hours before the water began to recede, and he and his wife returned to a gut-wrenching sight.

Chairs were piled up, booths were overturned, and whole refrigerators were flipped over. Everything but the building's frame was destroyed. Over the course of the next several days, as many as 200 volunteers—from friends to members of Tony's church and volunteers from local businesses—showed up to help. The landlord had a restoration company on the ground within 24 hours. It took about a week just to remove the Sheetrock and debris.

**SAIGON HOUSE, MIDTOWN:** The trendy Vietnamese eatery debuted in the heart of Midtown in fall 2015. Owner Duc Dinh, who also owns Wrap & Roll in Pearland, hoped to attract theatergoers as well as nearby residents and Midtown professionals. But two years into the project, restaurant manager Lan Nguyen, Dinh's mom, was running ragged. The 12-hour workdays were taking a toll. She knew she couldn't keep it up and began looking for help.

When Hurricane Harvey hit, the floodwaters rose to approximately one foot inside the restaurant. Lan, whose home in Braeswood Place had taken on four-and-a-half feet of water, had enough things to worry about without the stress of what to do with the restaurant. By the time she got back into Saigon House three weeks later, the floodwaters had receded. With no flood insurance and little in the way of cash reserves, she



cleaned up, aired the place out as best she could, and reopened for business.

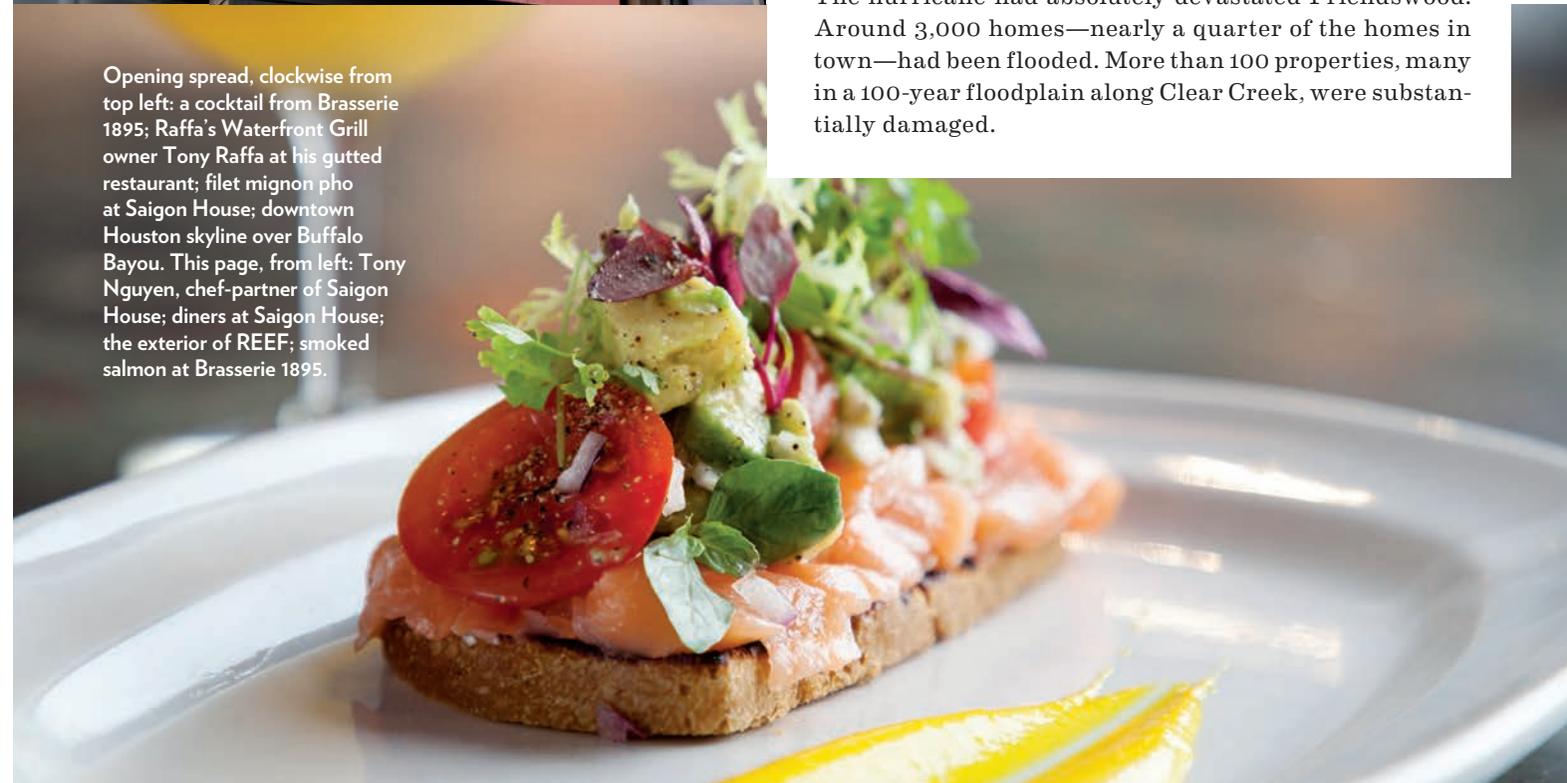
On Nov. 1, Tony Nguyen, one of the founding partners in the gourmet food truck Wokker TX Ranger, joined family friends Dinh and Lan as chef-partner of Saigon House. A few weeks after he started, the restaurant had to be completely gutted to remove mold climbing up the walls after the flood.

**BRASSERIE 1895, FRIENDSWOOD:** In late 2015, Kris Jakob—then a culinary instructor at French cooking school Culinary Institute LeNôtre and the man behind the Houston school's successful on-site restaurant, Kris Bistro—left his eight-year, tenured post to open his own restaurant. The first chef-driven restaurant to open in the

“**THE CITY IS STILL STRUGGLING, BUT PEOPLE STILL COME TO SUPPORT US, AND I'M REALLY GRATEFUL.**”



Opening spread, clockwise from top left: a cocktail from Brasserie 1895; Raffa's Waterfront Grill owner Tony Raffa at his gutted restaurant; filet mignon pho at Saigon House; downtown Houston skyline over Buffalo Bayou. This page, from left: Tony Nguyen, chef-partner of Saigon House; diners at Saigon House; the exterior of REEF; smoked salmon at Brasserie 1895.



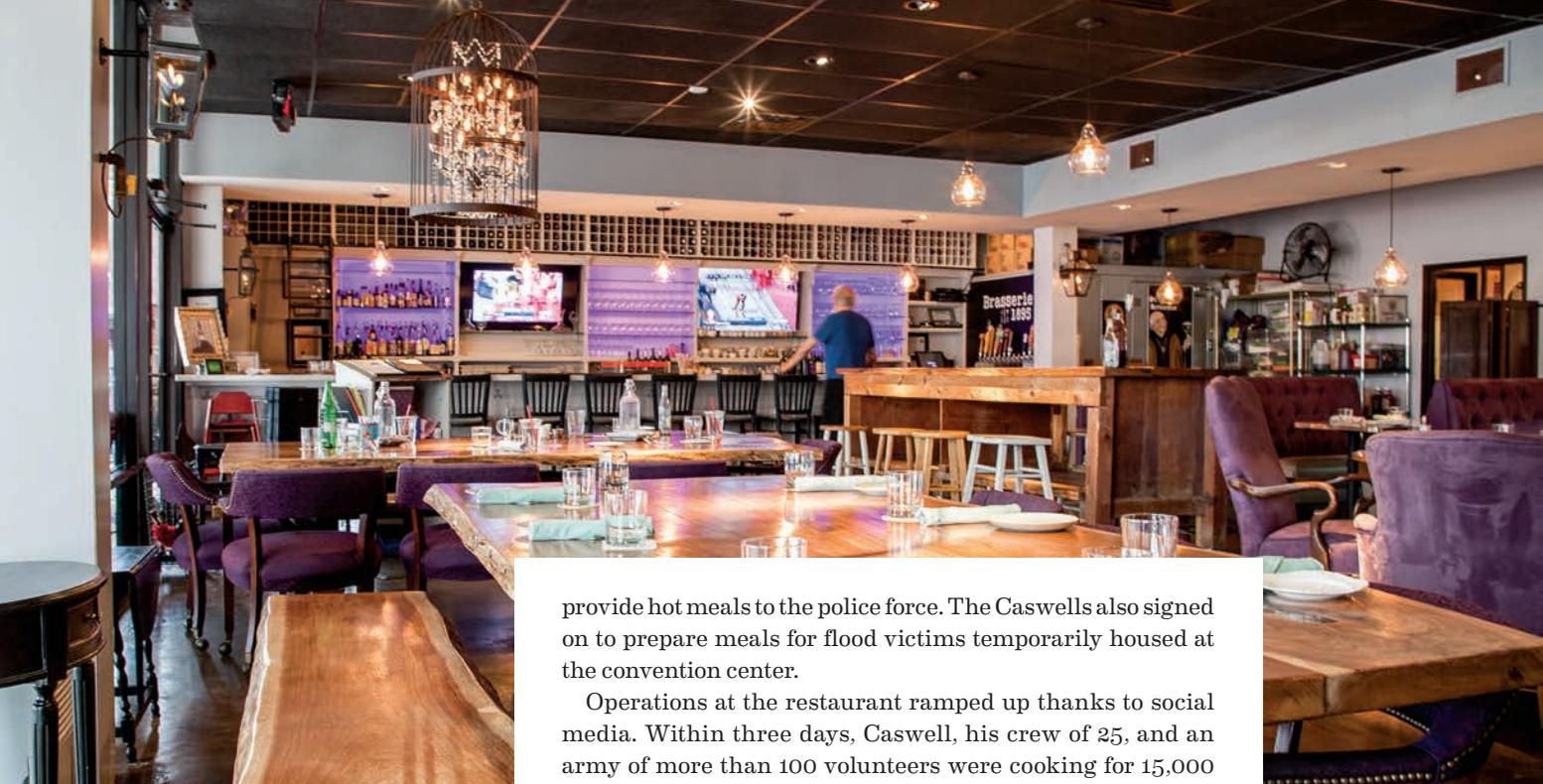
southeast Houston suburb of Friendswood, Brasserie 1895 was immediately embraced by the community as a scratch kitchen serving innovative global cuisine, with monthly rotating dishes ranging from nachos topped with cochinita pibil to curried wagyu beef tartare, and chicken-fried steak with foie gras cream gravy.

It was business as usual at Brasserie 1895 on Aug. 25. Jakob, who lives five minutes from his restaurant, drove home after closing. By the time he arrived, the water level had already risen up his driveway. "I could literally swim," he says. "I was swimming with my dog on the street. It was sometime between midnight and 1 a.m., but everybody was out on the streets and playing in the water."

The next morning, all the streets in Jakob's neighborhood were blocked, and the water kept rising. "It felt apocalyptic," he says. It was three days before he could drive to his restaurant, and even then, he had to take a roundabout route through the neighboring town of Alvin to get there.

In the days leading to his return, his partner, Sky Lyn Gibbons, had turned Brasserie 1895—which sits on a hill and was spared the widespread flooding in the area—into a makeshift shelter. Air mattresses covered the dining room floor, along with trash bags filled with personal belongings. The patio outside the restaurant served as a pet kennel. The temporary residents had made the kitchen their own, using the restaurant's on-hand resources to cook for themselves. It was a disaster but a harmonious one. People had shelter. They had food—and each other.

When the water receded, the restaurant cleared as people returned home and began to tear out all the wet Sheetrock and address the physical damage left in Harvey's wake. The hurricane had absolutely devastated Friendswood. Around 3,000 homes—nearly a quarter of the homes in town—had been flooded. More than 100 properties, many in a 100-year floodplain along Clear Creek, were substantially damaged.



**REEF, MIDTOWN:** One of Houston's first bona fide "celebrity chefs," the 6-foot-5 Bryan Caswell gained national attention when he famously competed on season three of Food Network's *The Next Iron Chef*. The busy restaurateur oversees REEF, Little Bigs, Third Bar, El Real Tex-Mex, Bryan Caswell Catering, and El Real in Terminal B at Houston Bush Intercontinental Airport. Caswell and his wife, Jennifer Caswell, co-owner and chief operating officer of his restaurant group, closed all of the restaurants in potentially affected areas on Aug. 24 and kept tabs on them as Harvey ravaged not just Houston but areas like Seadrift and Rockport, where they had close ties.

REEF, Caswell's flagship restaurant in Midtown Houston, sustained significant damage from water that broke through the ceiling. An estimated 4 inches of water sat in the restaurant for five days.

When the rains stopped, the Caswells went to the George R. Brown Convention Center—which functioned as a temporary housing shelter—to donate supplies. Jennifer, whose brother is a firefighter, wanted to help. The water damage at REEF had spared the kitchen, so, after conferring with the downtown division of the Houston Police Department, the Caswells offered to

provide hot meals to the police force. The Caswells also signed on to prepare meals for flood victims temporarily housed at the convention center.

Operations at the restaurant ramped up thanks to social media. Within three days, Caswell, his crew of 25, and an army of more than 100 volunteers were cooking for 15,000 people from Rockport to Port Arthur, from victims stranded in makeshift shelters to Houston police and other first responders. Donations poured in from purveyors like Brothers Produce, D'Artagnan, and Matin Preferred Foods.

José Andrés, whose nonprofit World Central Kitchen had helped with disaster relief in countries such as Haiti, was one of the first of several celebrity chefs on the ground, arriving while Houston was still flooded, and people were scrambling.

Other celebrity chefs who joined the Caswells in their relief effort included Ming Tsai, who flew in from Boston, bringing 20,000 pounds of donated chicken from Perdue Farms. James Beard award-winning chef John Currence from Oxford, Mississippi, and chef Kelly English from Memphis, Tennessee, borrowed a trailer, filled it with food and supplies, and made the drive to Houston.

## HOPE FLOATS

**SAIGON HOUSE:** On Thanksgiving week, Tony Nguyen shut down the 3,300-foot restaurant and began the laborious task of mold remediation. With no assistance coming from FEMA or their insurance company, he and his mom, with a few helpers, rolled up their sleeves and got to work. His mom's experience buying and flipping houses proved invaluable. They tore out the molded Sheetrock, applying bleach and anti-mold solution, then closed everything back up—in just nine days.

Saigon House reopened for business the Monday after Thanksgiving. Tony, a self-taught cook, revamped the menu. His first order of business was rolling out a specialty pho menu.

Tony's pho—made by simmering beef marrow bones, chicken bones, and oxtails for 24 hours—is a thing of beauty. An elevated version of the bowls found around Houston, Nguyen sought to differentiate his product not on price (his bowls range from \$9-\$12) but on quality. His pho filet mignon,

“**THERE'S MORE POSITIVE THAT CAME FROM THE FLOOD THAN NEGATIVE, IN MY OPINION.**”

Clockwise from top left: the interior of Brasserie 1885; Kris Jakob of Brasserie 1895; filet mignon pho from Saigon House.



which features a sliced, 6-ounce slab of seared tenderloin steak, is the first of its kind in Houston. Another first is his smoked brisket pho, a sort of barbecue-meets-Vietnamese-noodle-soup combo wherein applewood-smoked, melt-in-your-mouth barbecue brisket is served atop steaming-hot bowls of anise and cardamom-scented rice noodle soup.

Tony has also capitalized on Houston's obsession with Viet-Cajun crawfish, and through social media and word of mouth, Saigon House has become a Midtown go-to for tasty mudbugs in distinctive flavors like Saigon Heat, with garlic butter and citrus onion, and Thai Surprise, which is reminiscent of Thai sweet and sour tom yum soup.

**RAFFA'S WATERFRONT GRILL:** The restaurant was a total loss, somewhere in the order of half a million dollars in damages. In the days after the flood, it was unclear whether Raffa's could ever reopen. Tony knew he would need help and to somehow find funding to even consider reopening. But luck—buoyed by the goodwill of friends and strangers—was on his side. An online fundraiser started by his cousin in Massachusetts raised close to \$45,000. Insperty, a Kingwood-based company that organized the Lake Houston Area Relief Fund to help restore local businesses, granted Raffa's \$10,000. Spearheaded by Harriet and Matt Kee, two of Raffa's former employees, a fundraising dinner called RaffaStrong raised \$95,000. Tony was also approved for a U.S. Small Business Administration disaster relief loan for \$200,000 within four months of Harvey.

The restaurant's landlord also had flood and business interruption insurance, which helped to abate rent during the months Raffa's has been out of business. The flood insurance would restore the building, but it wasn't until seven months later—on March 10—that the final coverage determination came through.

**BRASSERIE 1895:** Though he could have resumed business after the restaurant was no longer needed as a makeshift shelter, Jakob wouldn't countenance it. The Friendswood community remained in a state of emergency. Military-grade amphibious tanks, brought in for the rescue effort, rolled down the streets. Volunteers and relief agencies had descended on the community en masse. Large piles of debris accumulated on lawns everywhere he looked. In lieu of reopening, Jakob spent the first weeks after Harvey cooking comfort food like chicken and dumplings, big vats of jambalaya, and huge pots of Mexican pozole—everything from scratch—so Friendswood flood victims and volunteers could come in after an exhausting day's worth of hard labor and enjoy a hot meal for free. Brasserie 1895 became a safe haven the community could count on.

Even after the restaurant resumed operations, it was evident the community still had a massive need for family meals. So Jakob added an affordable "Harvey Relief" section to the menu so displaced families had a place to count on for hot, wholesome family meals. As people got back on their feet, the



## HOUSTON'S CULINARY CACHET

Houston has more than **75 categories of cuisine**, **600 vegan-friendly restaurants**, and **150 farm-to-table restaurants**, as of 2017.

The number of Houston-based restaurant and chef semifinalists for the **James Beard Foundation awards** has been rising each year since 2015: That year, it received five nominees. In 2016, eight. In 2017, nine and in 2018, 12.

Houston chefs won James Beard's **Best Chef Southwest** competition the last three out of four years\*, taking home the region's top prize in 2014 (Chris Shepherd), 2016 (Justin Yu), and 2017 (Hugo Ortega).

Houstonians dine out **almost more than any other city**—6.9 times per week, compared with the national average of 4.9, according to Zagat.

Houston has more than **700 food trucks** and is ranked among the top 10 food truck cities in the U.S., according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

\*2018 honorees were announced May 7, after press time.



community. Without it, we would have never ventured into this sector of prepared meals.”

Jakob has had to change his business to keep up with demand. As of March, he made a decision to forgo lunch and dinner service on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, focusing instead on family meal production. Brasserie 1895 now opens for regular dinner service Thursday through Saturday only. Starting the week after Easter, Jakob began offering a Sunday barbecue pop-up service, with plans to open a barbecue joint in the near future.

“There’s more positive that came from the flood than negative, in my opinion,” Jakob says. “Yes, people had damage to their property, but the amazing amount of people that flooded Friendswood to help do the demolition and construction—it was just incredible. To this day, I still have people that come to buy meals from us who donate to other people who don’t have kitchens.”

Jakob continues, “The community is trying to help people get back on their feet. No one is complaining. No one is in the dumps. Friendswood, as

a community, is stronger than ever before, and it’s thanks to Harvey.”

**RAFFA'S WATERFRONT GRILL:** After months of not knowing what would happen, Tony Raffa says he finally sees a light at the end of the tunnel.

“They just started putting Sheet-rock up in my space,” he says. “I’m actually feeling pretty damn good. Where my position was on Sept. 1 compared to now is extremely different. So I’m feeling very optimistic about the future.”

The construction effort to repair the existing structure is underway. If all goes well, a new and improved Raffa’s Waterfront Grill will debut in late August, one year after the flood.

“My wife and I have been spending hours in the design center looking over granite and tile. That part—trying to make Raffa’s Waterfront Grill more than it was before—taking a bad situation and turning it positive by updating some of our finishes in the restaurant—is exciting, too.”

Tony is also immensely thankful. “A lot of people that I did not expect to show up and offer assistance did. People came to spend eight hours a day cleaning out the space. My hometown really had a big punch in the eye, but it is finally coming back to be its old self again.”

**REEF:** After months of waiting for insurance payments, REEF held a pop-up wine dinner with Matthiasson Wines on March 5 as a lead-up to its eventual reopening, slated for May as of press time. The new REEF, once reopened, will feature a chef’s table capable of serving 12 to 16 guests per evening. Through fundraising dinners and other events spearheaded by the Caswells, the Southern Salt Foundation will continue its mission to promote a holistic approach to Gulf Coast conservation.

**SAIGON HOUSE:** Thanks to Tony Nguyen’s leadership both on the culinary and operational front, Saigon House has

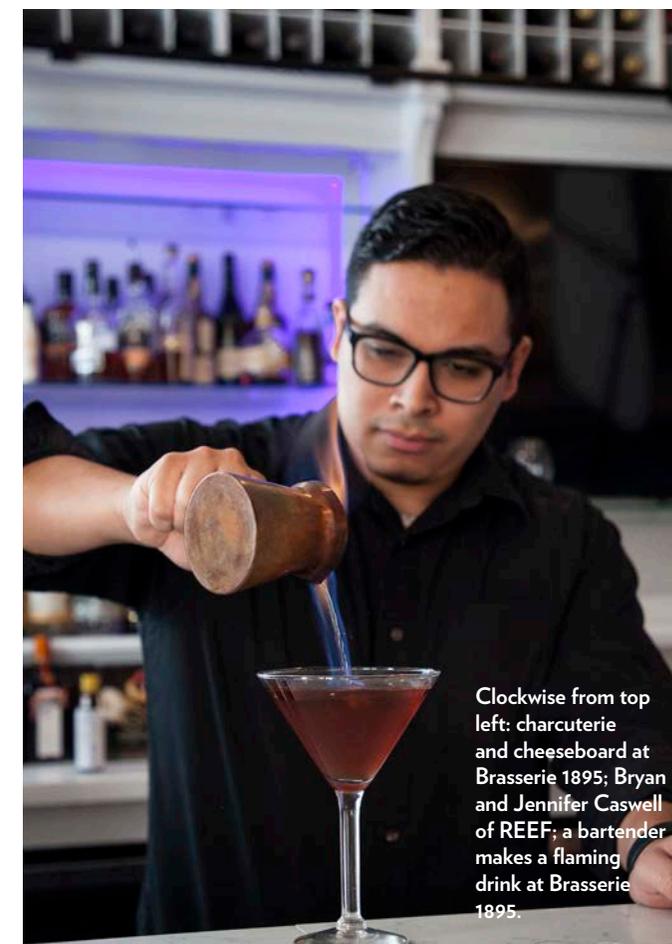
gained a reputation not only for its high-quality pho and Vietnamese food but as one of the best Viet-Cajun crawfish spots in town. The clientele, which had previously come mainly from nearby businesses and residences, now drive from all parts of the city to sample Saigon House’s cuisine.

“I’m very overwhelmed from the Houston community,” Tony says. “I know that the city is still struggling, but people still come to support us, and I’m really grateful.”

Tony is working on systemization of operations so he can let go of day-to-day tasks and possibly develop Saigon House into a franchise model. He is also hoping to engage the local community through art. As part of the rebuild and redesign, he is commissioning local artists to paint four murals above the booths in the main dining room.

“It was very difficult at the beginning,” Tony reflects. “But I think now that the labor-intensive stuff is out of the way, we can just focus on the food.”

*Houston-based freelance writer Mai Pham specializes in food, wine, and travel. Follow her on Instagram @femme\_foodie. Photographer and native Houstonian Eric W. Pohl relished the chance to revisit his hometown to help tell the story of Houston’s comeback from Harvey.*



Clockwise from top left: charcuterie and cheeseboard at Brasserie 1895; Bryan and Jennifer Caswell of REEF; a bartender makes a flaming drink at Brasserie 1895.

## SAIGON HOUSE

3101 MAIN ST,  
HOUSTON  
713-529-1100;  
SAIGONHOUSE  
FOOD.COM

## BRASSERIE 1895

607 S.  
FRIENDSWOOD  
DRIVE, STE. 11,  
FRIENDSWOOD  
832-385-2278;  
BRASSERIE1895.  
COM

## RAFFA'S WATERFRONT GRILL

1660 W. LAKE  
HOUSTON PARKWAY,  
STE. 103, KINGWOOD  
281-360-1436;  
RAFFAS.NET

## REEF

2600 TRAVIS ST.,  
HOUSTON  
REEFHOUSTON.  
COM

## REINVENTION

**BRASSERIE 1895:** Since introducing a \$10 take-home family meal service, the restaurant’s daily demand for the meals ranges from 100-200 portions. Customers who had purchased the meals out of need now do so for convenience. Weekly menus are posted through social media and sell out within hours.

“Harvey actually turned out to be a good thing for our business,” Jakob says. “The family meals became a positive revenue stream for us and a positive service for the