



TRIPS TO SAVOR

EAT YOUR WAY THROUGH THESE FOUR FANTASTIC FOOD TOWNS, WALLET INTACT. YOUR WAISTLINE IS ANOTHER MATTER.

BY STIRLING KELSO

 Taking a top-notch foodie vacation doesn't necessarily require hopping from one Michelin-starred restaurant to the next. In fact, getting a real feel for a place's culinary DNA also means seeking out those low-profile local spots where you may score a mind-bending meal for \$20 or less. Plus, you'll want to explore markets, visit favorite watering holes, and learn regional cooking techniques. Hungry yet? Here's a look at the affordable food scene in four cities—two well-known gourmet hotspots, and two that may surprise you.



HOUSTON MIGHT NOT BE the first place that comes to mind when you think culinary destination. But consider the city's stunning diversity: more than 80 languages are spoken in the public school system. Not surprisingly, this mix of cultures has created a unique and vibrant local cuisine. And while Houston remains a drivers' city, many of the best new restaurants are springing up in pedestrian- and bike-friendly areas, allowing travelers to explore at a leisurely pace and stumble upon unexpected finds.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: DINNER SERVICE IN FULL SWING AT UNDERBELLY; HOUSTON AT DUSK; GORO & GUN BAR MANAGER ALEX GREGG AT WORK; SCULPTOR BARNETT NEWMAN'S "BROKEN OBELISK" OUTSIDE THE ROTHKO CHAPEL; A SPICY MEAL AT CRAWFISH & NOODLES





★ **THE MUST-EAT** Korean braised goat and dumplings (\$14) is the dish to beat, says Houston-based food photographer Julie Soefer. You'll find it—and other similarly tasty fusion treats—at **Underbelly** in the hip and walkable Montrose neighborhood (the menu changes daily). Drop into the restaurant's airy, wood-paneled bar between 3 and 6:30 p.m. for half-price glasses of wine.

MORE TO TRY Ignore the generic strip-mall look: Bellaire Boulevard, which runs through Houston's Chinatown, is jammed with excellent Chinese, Korean, Malaysian, and other Asian restaurants. Chris Shepherd, chef at Underbelly, recommends the tiny **HK Dim Sum** (lunch, \$30) for crispy shrimp rolls and dumplings. **Crawfish & Noodles** (lunch, \$30) marries Vietnamese and Cajun cuisine, a tasty combo resulting from Vietnamese immigration to the Gulf Coast. Try the little crustaceans, tossed in spices and served by the pound. For more insider picks, book a **Where the Chefs Eat tour** (\$180, including meals, tips, and transportation). Led by local culinary pros, these outings revolve around an eatable theme, such as Indian food, Southern comfort, or barbecue.

Once all but abandoned after business hours, downtown's Main Street is experiencing a revival, led by trendy bars and eateries. Make happy hour (4 to

7 p.m. daily) at food truck turned brick-and-mortar newcomer **Goro & Gun**, suggests Bun B, a Houston-based rapper and YouGottaEatThis.com food blogger. You'll save up to 65% on select drinks, including the Expo, a tasty blend of Pimm's, lemon, cucumber, agave, and dry-hopped root beer.

DO Houston's arts scene often flies under the radar. Visit the Menil Collection museum and affiliated Cy Twombly Gallery, both designed by famed architect Renzo Piano. Don't miss the nearby Rothko Chapel, lined with the artist's large-scale canvases. (All complimentary admission).

STAY The sleek rooms at Modern B&B start at \$125 and live up to the property's name. Prefer full-service lodging? The swank Hotel Sorella (from \$169, breakfast included) is located on the city's west side.

THE LOGISTICS

✈️ **FLIGHT COST**
\$167 on Spirit

🚗 **RENTAL CAR**
\$27/day

🏠 **RECOMMENDED HOTELS**
\$125-\$169

NOTES: All prices based on travel from April 26 to May 3, and current as of Jan. 29. Flights originate in Chicago. Car rentals are compacts. Hotel rates are for spring at properties noted in the story.



THE DINING AREA AT MODERN B&B

PORTLAND OREGON



LUNCH HOUR, PRIME TIME FOR FOOD CARTS

YES, IT'S EASY to mock Portland's hipster foodie culture. The reality is, though, that the city has become a true culinary trendsetter, pumping out some of the most creative and affordable food and drink in the country.

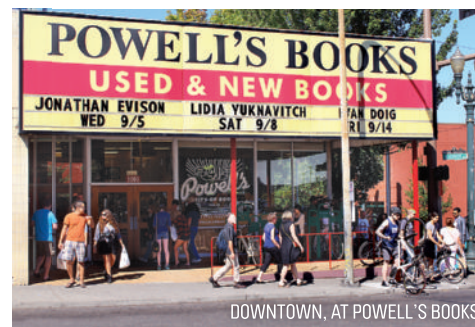
★ **THE MUST-EAT** Squid and olives tossed with house-made linguine at **Nonna** (\$13). Located at 30th and Killingsworth in the restaurant-packed Fox Chase district, this "cozy, casual" Italian small-plates spot is surprisingly affordable, says Jen Stevenson of local food blog Underthe-

TableWithJen. Plus, no dish costs more than \$13.

MORE TO TRY Take a moment to digest this: Portland now has over 400 food trucks. Navigate them with the help of **Portland Walking Tours' Flavor Street outing**. You'll save a few bucks on spring tickets, which include food and drink, if you buy in advance (\$46). To explore on your own, download the Food Carts Portland app for 99¢.

A half-dozen urban wineries, which make their own vino using grapes from area vineyards, have opened over the past two

years. To sample the trend, stop by Division Street's **SE Wine Collective**, home to seven distinctive winemakers, says Mike Thelin, co-founder of food and drink festival Feast Portland.



DOWNTOWN, AT POWELL'S BOOKS

THE LOGISTICS

✈️ **FLIGHT COST**
\$295 on Frontier

🚗 **RENTAL CAR**
\$37/day

🏠 **RECOMMENDED HOTELS**
\$122-\$159

Tastings are a steal: Three half-glasses start at \$8; a flight of four is \$10. While you sip, snack on a \$12 sampler from cheesemonger Steve Jones of Cheese Bar.

Supper clubs—experimental set-menu dinners often served in other restaurants or temporary pop-up locations—are a big thing in Portland. Make reservations for the **Thali Supper Club** (\$65), where chef Leena Ezekiel focuses on a different regional Indian food, like coconut-curry-rich

Parsi or meat-heavy Kashmiri cuisines, each month, says Zach Dundas, executive editor of *Portland Monthly*. For something a little sweeter, try **Flight Dessert Bar's** six-course supper-club menu, priced at \$35.

DO Book lovers can't miss a trip to Powell's City of Books, the flagship of the world's largest independent chain of bookstores. The massive shop ranges over a full city block, so grab a free map

before you explore the endless rows of shelves.

STAY It pays to visit Portland before summer, when hotel prices rise an average of 5% to 8%, according to travel research firm STR. Book a room at Hotel Lucia (from \$159) and have the latest city obsession, Salt & Straw ice cream, delivered to your door, says Thelin. You'll also get 15% off for becoming a fan of the property on Facebook.

For more smart ways to save on travel, follow @Money_Traveler on Twitter.



FROM TOP: SIPS AND SNACKS AT SE WINE COLLECTIVE; CHEF LEENA EZEKIEL HOSTING THALI SUPPER CLUB





FROM TOP: LUNCH AT THE BUTCHER & BEE; HUSK RESTAURANT (LEFT) AND NEXT-DOOR BAR.



CHARLESTON

SOUTH CAROLINA

WITH SOUTHERN FOOD becoming increasingly popular in cities like New York and L.A., chefs in Charleston are drawing nationwide attention. Come for their South Carolina classics, as well as the new riffs on old favorites.



SIP A SOUTHERN SCREWDRIVER AT HUSK BAR.

★ **THE MUST-EAT** The \$35 Sunday Fish Fry at **Ordinary**, which includes soup or salad, seasonal veggies, and dessert. The restaurant is a favorite of Matt and Ted Lee, authors of *The Lee Bros. Charleston Kitchen* cookbook.

MORE TO TRY Take the Taste of the Lowcountry cooking class (\$25, including food and wine) at **Charleston Cooks**, a kitchen shop and classroom. Learn to make shrimp and grits while the head cook talks you through the region's diverse food influences. To practice at home, pick up a bag of stone-ground Carolina Plantation Grits (\$9) and Tiverton Farms' Low Country Seafood Seasoning (\$8).

Cocktail hour is sacred in Charleston, so pay your respects

at **Husk Bar**, says *Garden & Gun* magazine deputy editor Dave Mezz. You're in bourbon heaven—50 types line the shelves—so try a cocktail like A Yard Too Far, a mix of vanilla- and ginger-infused bourbon, pecan orgeat syrup, and bitters. For an affordable nosh, order a round of not-so-small plates (from \$6). You could also head next door to **Husk** restaurant, located in a restored 19th-century house. Dinner there is a splurge, about \$110 for two, but the nose-to-tail pork dishes, such as crispy pig ears topped with cucumbers marinated in sweet vinegar, are well worth it, says Mezz.

Need a casual lunch spot? It's tough to beat BYOB café **Butcher & Bee**. The menu changes daily, offering a range of tempting plates such as locally grown squash and smoked slaw or tender pork belly sandwiches starting at \$9.

DO Rent wheels at the Bicycle Shoppe on Meeting Street (from



OYSTER SHUCKING AT THE ORDINARY

THE LOGISTICS

FLIGHT COST
\$292 on United

RENTAL CAR
\$36/day

RECOMMENDED HOTELS
\$140-\$359

\$7 an hour) and zigzag through charming streets in the South of Broad neighborhood and along the waterfront Battery. Guides with the new Free Tours by Foot also lead themed walks for discretionary donations.

STAY The Lee brothers recommend Zero George hotel, which offers free breakfast and biweekly cooking classes (from \$359). Or, for a more affordable option, drive 15 minutes out of town to the Inn at l'On (from \$140, including breakfast), where you can start your day with the Wagyu beef hash and orange vanilla French toast.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN

MEXICO

THE LOGISTICS

FLIGHT COST
\$447 on American

RENTAL CAR
\$15/day

RECOMMENDED HOTELS
\$55-\$140

NOTES: Flight to Cancún. Rental-car price includes mandatory car insurance.

PLAYA DEL CARMEN, located 35 miles south of the Cancún airport, has grown in recent years, attracting a wave of new residents from all over Mexico, the U.S., and Europe. The influx has radically changed the city's culinary profile, diversifying the food and prompting a surge of new restaurants located off the main tourist strip.

★ **THE MUST-EAT** Mixed fish tacos topped with crunchy slaw, avocado, and poppy seeds from **Los Aguachiles** (lunch, \$20), an open-air eatery located in the city center. And don't skimp on the freshly made salsas, says Coty Villarreal, founder of a local cooking school—you have nine to choose from.

MORE TO TRY Steak lovers should beeline for the buttery *arrachera*, or skirt steak, from northern Mexico, which the no-frills **HC de Monterrey** (dinner, \$25) serves alongside avocado and grilled onions. Wash it down with a spicy *Michelada*, or beer mixed with lime and hot sauce.

At **Rincón Yucateco** (dinner, \$25), a cool respite under a



UNWIND WITH A CERVEZA AND TACO TRIO AT LOS AGUACHILES.

thatched *palapa*, you'll find more Mayan-influenced food. Try the *cochinita pibil*, pork simmered in banana leaves. You can also learn to make regional dishes, like chicken with pumpkin seed salsa, at Villarreal's **Cocina Cosmopolita Culinary School**. A four-hour, hands-on cooking class is \$115. The evening sessions include a lesson on Mexican peppers and end with a mescal and tequila tasting.

Here's a twist: Try the city's growing Little Italy section. For a romantic dinner, visit **La Piola** (\$40), where twinkling lights hang over sidewalk café tables, says

Jetzabel Rojas, executive chef at the nearby Viceroy Riviera Maya hotel. "Pair a fresh basil margarita with the wood-oven-fired pizzas," she says.

DO Travelers are often surprised to learn that the island of Cozumel—a popular cruise destination across the water from Playa del Carmen—is more than 90% uninhabited. Jump on the half-hour ferry (\$12) to visit the isle's Punta Sur Ecological Reserve (admission, \$12), home to flamingos and crocodiles. Or indulge in a four-hour snorkeling trip to El Cielo, a breeding ground for starfish, with Deluxe Private Boat Tours (from \$360 for four people).

STAY At Hotel Deseo (from \$140), two blocks from the beach, minimalist whitewashed rooms with hammocks have a slick South Beach-style look. Or save up to 60% by booking one of the 625 Playa-area properties available on HomeAway.com; double-occupancy rates start at just \$55 per night. Some rentals offer a splurge-worthy perk: Private chef services are available for an extra fee.



COZUMEL'S PRISTINE PUNTA SUR RESERVE

EATERS' ETIQUETTE

CONFUSED ABOUT TIPPING, WHEN TO MENTION YOUR ALLERGIES, OR OTHER DINING QUANDARIES? FOLLOW THESE TIPS TO AVOID FOODIE FAUX PAS.

WHEN IN ROME ...

Every country has different tipping expectations. Check an app like GlobeTipping (iPhone; free) to assess local standards.

BE UPFRONT ABOUT RESTRICTIONS

If you have dietary limitations or allergies, let the staff know ASAP. It's often possible to work around the issue, says Keith Wallace, author of *Corked & Forked*, though chefs may not be willing to alter a dish just because you don't like an ingredient.

SCORE A LAST-MINUTE TABLE

All booked up? Call 45 minutes before opening, when the manager is most likely to answer, says Wallace. Get on his good side and you may be able to sneak in. You might also try sites like Open Table.com and RezHound.com for 11th-hour openings.

BEYOND THE DINING ROOM

Walking-tour organizers suggest tipping your guide at least 10% of the cost of the outing, or, for gratis tours, about \$10 to \$15 per person. Don't feel obligated to tip in a cooking class, says Coty Villarreal, owner of Cocina Cosmopolita Culinary School, though it's always welcome.