THE NEW RETIREMENT

5 REASONS IT'LL BE SO MUCH BETTER THAN YOU THINK

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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 of 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: DINER SERVICE IN FULL SWING AT UNDERBELLY; HOUSTON AT DUSK; BONO & GUN BAR MANAGER ALEX GREIG AT WORK; SCULPTOR BARNETT NEWMAN’S “BROKEN OBELISK” OUTSIDE THE ROTHKO CHAPEL; A SPICY MEAL AT CRAYFISH & NOODLES.
THE MUST-EAT Korean braised goat and dumplings ($14) is the dish to beat, says Houston-based food photographer Julie Seefle. 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 graced with excellent Chinese, Korean, Malaysian, and other Asian restaurants. Chris Shepherd, chef at Underbelly, recommends the try HK Dim Sum (lunch, $30) for crispy shrimp rolls and dumplings. Crawfish & Noodles (lunch, $30) serves Vietnamese and Cajun cuisine, a tasty combo resulting from Vietnamese immigration to the Gulf Coast. Try the little crustaceans, tossed in spices and served in the shell. 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 edible 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 Explo, 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 Merit 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 $225 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

TableWithJen Plus, no dish costs more than $13.

MORE TO TRY Take a moment to digest: Portland 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 $0.99. A half-dozen urban wineries, which make their own wine using grapes from area vineyards, have opened over the past two years.
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.

**THE LOGISTICS**

Flights are a steal. Three half-glasses start at $8; a flight of four is $10. While you sip, snack on a $12 sampler from cheese monger 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.

**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 ($359) 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.

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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 ($65, 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 Farm’s 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—with 50 types on the shelves—so try a cocktail like A’Yard Too Far, a mix of vanilla- and ginger-infused bourbon, pecan orgeat syrup, and bitters. 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 EYOB cafe Butcher & Bee. The menu changes daily, offering a range of tempting plates such as locally grown squash and smoked slow or tender pork belly sandwiches starting at $9. 

Dine on wheels at the Bicycle Shophoe on Meeting Street (from $7) and with a visit to the City Market (from $5). Make a stop at the Charleston Farmers Market (by appointment) for locally grown and handmade items. To get around, consider a bike share subscription ($15 per day) or a car rental ($36 per day). 

Stay The Lee brothers recommend Zero George hotel, which offers free breakfast and weeknight cooking classes (from $359). Or, for a more affordable option, drive 15 minutes out of town to the Inn at 1000 (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

PLAYA DEL CARMEN, located 35 miles south of the Cancun 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 creamy slaw, avocado, and poppy seeds from Los Agachales (dine-in, $20), an open-air eatery located in the city center. And don't skimp on the fresh fried salsas, says Coty Villarreal, founder of a local cooking school—you have nine to choose from.
- ENJOY WITH A CERVEZA AND TACOS AT LOS AGACHALES.
- 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 Cucina Cosmopolita Culinary School. A four-hour, hands-on cooking class is $125.
- At Rincon yucateco (dinner, $25), a cool respite under a 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 Cucina Cosmopolita Culinary School. A four-hour, hands-on cooking class is $125.
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Jetzel Roga, executive chef at the nearby Viceroy Riviera Maya hotel. "Pair a fresh basil margarita with the wood-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 island'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 $350 for four people).

STAY
- At Hotel Xxv (from $240), 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.

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

WHEN IN ROME...
- Every country has different tipping expectations. Check an app like Globe Tipping (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 OpenTable.com and ResTours.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 Cucina Cosmopolita Culinary School, though it's always welcome.