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Houston's best fine dining restaurants: The 10 top spots for a special night out

By Jodie Eisenhardt

Think "fine dining" and what comes to mind? For me, it was something to ponder.

I've become so accustomed to discovering and enjoying fantastic cuisine at casual eateries, food trucks or taco stands, I don't consider the category as often as I once did. I realize the term itself sounds snooty and off-putting to some. But the more I thought about it, the more I enjoyed the contemplation of what creates an actual fine dining experience and what separates that from a meal at any number of "fine" restaurants in Houston?

To make my best fine dining in Houston list, a restaurant has to provide a level of attention to detail in everything from the valet and initial greeting to the complete dining experience. It goes well beyond providing cuisine of superior quality to also include a high level of service, a top-notch wine program and the kind of atmosphere conducive to the overall experience.

These are places you can look towards for a night on the town — you know, in your grown-up clothes.

It might be for a special occasion or it might be just to remind you of the value of the total experience, beyond "just" great food, which is in no short supply in this great food town.

Here are my picks:

Tony's

The venerable Tony's is an obvi-

ous choice for the list, but new James Beard-nominated chef Grant Gordon is the key element within a "full team" approach emphasizing balance in every dish. With a tasting menu that changes almost constantly, I'm reminded that this is not the Tony's of yesteryear.

Consider the "Bistecca" — prime New York strip with rhubarb, bresaola and aged balsamic — or the Cappelletti — mussel-stuffed pasta, saffron shellfish veloute and crispy chicken skin. Service is impeccable and the atmosphere is just what you'd expect in terms of lighting and every other detail.

Owner Tony Vallone teaches a course on fine dining at the University of Houston's Conrad N. Hilton College of Hotel & Restaurant Management. He says, that in short, fine dining is a combination of product, technique and delivery with the common denominator being quality.

"You can't have fine dining with without an ownership team in action, on location," Vallone says.

Cinq

CIA-trained chef German Mosquera caused a stir at Roots Bistro when it first opened (well before its unfortunate demise). The historic Fondren mansion built in 1923 that became the boutique hotel La Colombe d'Or provides a decidedly more dramatic backdrop for Mosquera to fulfill his potential.

Dishes like fresh chorizo stuffed dates with three cucumber salad,

crème fraîche and black garlic or braised goat (from nearby Black Hill Ranch) served with squash blossoms, baby arugula and a "garlic butter froth" have diners abuzz. Plus, the daily tasting menu, with Mosquera's inspired and often bold choices, make Cinq worth checking out.

RDG + Bar Annie

Chef Robert Del Grande is a Houston legend as is his former restaurant Cafe Annie, where he became known as one of the godfathers of southwestern cuisine. Del Grande's evolution is now housed in dramatic fashion in a gleaming structure on Post Oak Boulevard, complete with an outside terrace.

With wife Mimi helping mind the front of the house, RDG lives up its heritage with dishes like Colorado lamb chops and braised lamb shank in a banana leaf served with corona beans and a pasilla chile sauce, and sea scallops served with a clever green mole sauce, toasted pumpkin seeds and caramelized yucca.

Kiran's

I've been a fan of chef Kiran Verma's Indian cuisine since her more casual Ashiana days. She designed this upscale Highland Village dining room with the highest level of service and attention in mind.

Verma is obsessed with using high-quality ingredients and there are plenty of farm-to-table "American" dishes on her menu, but her effort to provide a fresh, authentic and innovative take

on true Indian cuisine is where her talents shine brightest. The tandoori dishes (meat, fish and poultry items marinated in a spicy yogurt mixture cooked in a clay oven at high heat) are inspired as are the many vegetarian options.

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There's also high-tea service Saturday afternoons.

Philippe Restaurant + Lounge

The perfectly lovely dining room on Post Oak is just the right setting for chef Philippe Schmidt's inspired execution of French cuisine with a Texas twist. Schmidt holds the designation of "Master Chef of France" — one of the most sought-after awards given to chefs dedicated to French cuisine — but he is just as proud of his French Cowboy nickname.



Philippe Restaurant + Lounge

Dishes like the Long Island "duo of duck" (crispy magret with Texas grapefruit sauce, duck leg confit bread pudding served with yellow baby beets, red beet puree with ginger) or the roasted brook trout lightly "hay-smoked" and served with creamy lentils and a Houston-brewed Karbach beer sauce are standouts.

Da Marco

Marco Wiles' dining room is still one of the most moving places to eat in Houston and for me, the closest thing to I'll get to Italy anytime soon. The dining room isn't especially grand or over the top, rather it feels like the kind of understated, cozy spot you might find in New York City or Chicago.

Sans daily specials the menu doesn't seem to change and that's fine with me. The pappardelle with rabbit is a favorite and the roasted Texas quail served with braised favas is perfect this time of year.

The Pass

Seth Siegel Gardner and Terrence Gallivan have received plenty of press for their efforts to take their globe-trotting careers and create a unique respite in Houston. The building on Taft is the original location of Antone's Deli (and later Gravitas) but on the "fancier" side of this new dual restaurant, guests can look to experience "the essence of the kitchen" via multi-course tasting menus.

The constantly evolving menu and item descriptions are intriguing, but they rarely do justice to the wonder that actually appears at the table. These are visually astonishing dishes.

Brennan's

For more than 43 years, Brennan's has been a mainstay of special meals in Houston and it was particularly heartwarming to see the iconic restaurant return after the destruction of the Hurricane Ike fire in 2008. Executive chef Danny Trace continues a tradition of fine talent at the helm of a kitchen that still serves the traditional Creole favorites everyone expects along with many interesting daily specials that offer more of a glimpse into the chef's own distinctive style.

Consider the Texas watermelon salad with Pure Luck feta, red radishes, cayenne-spiced sunflower seeds, Vidalia onions and a honey/wine buttermilk dressing or the Creole mustard-crusted Colorado lamb chops served with jalapeno cornbread pudding, roasted garlic lamb sausage, asparagus and mint julep chimichurri sauce. These are no ordinary dishes.

Mockingbird Bistro

Chef John Sheely's cozy space on Welch may not be the newest or most buzzed-about restaurant, but its "country French meets American market" cuisine is consistently delicious — and there's impeccable service. Seasonal menu changes are inspired by the freshest ingredients with current menu highlights including the ruby red trout with new potato confit, almond haricot verts, and a "royal red shrimp beurre noisette" (a clarified brown butter sauce) as well as a seared breast and roasted leg of duck served with creamy wild rice, broccolini and a Texas orange gastrique.

Sheely is in the process of opening Osteria Mazzantini on Post Oak with executive chef Paul Lewis at the helm in the kitchen. The new eatery will pay homage to Sheely's Italian roots.

Pappas Bros Steakhouse

Often times, "special occasion/fine dining" means steak. With its huge, high dollar wine list and over the top prime, dry-aged in house steaks like the 32-ounce bone-in New York strip, the 40-ounce porterhouse, along with live Maine lobster and fresh oysters, Pappas brings the wows.

The dining room also provides the essential full-on VIP, see and be seen vibe.