

August 2006

Texas Highways

“A Highland Lakes Quartet”

By June Naylor



The Yacht Club at Horseshoe Bay Resort offers lakeside dining. *Photo by Michael A. Murphy*

A FUNNY THING happened while we were preoccupied with the fabulous dining explosion in the epicenter of Hill Country gastronomy known as Fredericksburg. While we weren't looking, another remarkable cuisine boom was building just up the road in Marble Falls and nearby Horseshoe Bay. There, along the shorelines of two sparkling Highland Lakes reservoirs, a quartet of restaurants opened to serve up sizable portions of sizzle. But don't worry that this frenzied popularity could amount to quick flame-out; I think quite the opposite is true: In each case, these restaurants show long-lasting promise because they have lots of substance to back up all that style.

Yacht Club

Upon walking into the elegant spread of rooms known as the Yacht Club, I couldn't believe this was the same place that had once been a rather mundane country-club dining room on Lake LBJ. Overlooking a white-sand beach at the dramatically renovated Horseshoe Bay Resort, the Yacht Club resembles nothing of its forgettable past. A chic design scheme features oversize black-and-white photographs, potted palms, stainless-steel vases holding giant bunches of red roses, and a mixture of leather-covered chairs and rattan furniture across slate floors. The setting seems perfect for friends gathering over leisurely lunches and couples savoring romantic dinners.

And they'll get that in spades, thanks to the help of new executive chef John LaFond, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in New York and a veteran of such restaurants as Canyons Ski Resort in Park City, Utah, and Bishop's Lodge in Santa Fe. His work at the Yacht Club brings a stylish complexity to the palate in such goodies as yellow-tomato gazpacho with tequila and jalapeño accents; pan-roasted monkfish, which he pairs with an apple-turnip purée and sweetbreads in a pinot noir vinaigrette; and a burly double-cut pork chop, graced with roasted shallots and Swiss chard.

Lantana Grill & Bar

Just down the road from the Yacht Club, in Horseshoe Bay Resort's new Marriott, the casual Lantana Grill & Bar features food that chef Robbin Murphy calls "Trans-Pecos" cuisine. With a resumé that includes La Côte Basque in New York and the Polo Club in Boca Raton, Robbin finds ways to infuse Southwestern ingredients with classic treatments. The results speak for themselves on plates of chicken-fried lobster tail with potato hash; West Texas lamb chops with fig compote and green-chile mac and cheese; cowboy ribeye with portobello-cippolini onion hash and Shiner Bock demi glace; and buffalo burger with gorgonzola and onion jam.

Now's the time to put these dining rooms on your schedule for your next Hill Country wandering, but keep in mind the big crowds flocking to the Marble Falls area these days. You'll want to allow extra time for the additional traffic on this stretch of US 281 and westward on Ranch Road 2147, and you're likely to need reservations, just like you do in the big city.

Café 909

A few minutes into my conversation with owner-chef Mark Schmidt of Café 909, I realized it would be easier if he listed the important restaurants in Dallas and Santa Fe where he *hadn't* worked before moving to Marble Falls. Although the Texas native has a degree in geology, he always had a desire to cook, so some 20 years ago, he quit the petroleum business to learn the food field, toiling away in the kitchens of such beloved Dallas haunts as City Café, The Grape, and Jennivine. Armed with experience gained by working with several James Beard Award-winning chefs, including Stephan Pyles at the AquaKnox in Big D and Mark Kiffin at The Compound in Santa Fe, New Mexico, Mark arrived in this mellow lakeside town with more than enough culinary know-how to make a success of what many would have considered folly.

You see, most observers have always measured Marble Falls' foodie quotient by the raging success of the Blue Bonnet Cafe, a favorite among at least five generations of Texans for sensational home cooking. What were the odds that people who associated this town with exquisite meringue pies would be swept away by dishes such as pepper-crusting, grass-fed Australian beef, bathed in foie gras hollandaise? Better than you might have thought: Since opening the place with his wife, Shelly, in late 2003, Mark has made Café 909 a bonafide hit. Austin residents urged me to see why this place has become among their favorite places to dine in Central Texas, and one bite into the lovely meal, I was a convert.

On the "rustic gourmet" menu I sampled recently, I found ample thrills in the appetizer plate of sautéed veal sweetbreads with enoki mushrooms, crawfish tails, sweet and tiny cherry tomatoes, and a bit of earthy foie gras. I thought nothing would delight me more until I tasted my entrée, a plate of halibut seared in an iron skillet with Hatch chiles and paired with mellow posole and tart, grilled lime, with avocado and cilantro for accents. Combined with a smart selection of by-the-glass wines, each of which is chosen for particular dishes

on the seasonal menu, and the warmth of stone walls hung with bold paintings, it's a dinner experience I previously thought would only await me in big cities.

Patton's on Main

A scant block away from Café 909, at Patton's on Main, owner-chef Patton Robertson serves as further proof that Marble Falls is ready for fine-dining patrons. Patton, who grew up in nearby Horseshoe Bay, graduated from Le Cordon Bleu in London and made his mark in the food world by working in Las Vegas for Wolfgang Puck at Spago and then as executive chef at Cili on the Strip. A hankering for the good life of his hometown found him opening his own spot downtown in the summer of 2004, when he and his wife, Carrie, transformed an old filling station into a Central Texas showcase for fine food.

Exposed brick and pressed-tin ceilings give texture to rooms where Patton serves his "Texas Fusion" cuisine. He pairs pulled pork with black beans for a hearty soup, and teases the palate with smoked-brisket spring rolls and barbecue butter, a favorite among the appetizers. I found a winner in his Texas chop salad, which puts grilled portobellos, avocado, and buffalo mozzarella atop chopped greens with a red-wine vinaigrette. For a sumptuous taste of the South, I didn't need to look beyond Patton's shrimp and grits, an entrée that places sautéed Gulf crustaceans with smoked bacon and scallions over a pond of spicy cheese grits. Other homey dishes with a sophisticated spin include mustard-crusting catfish with black-eyed pea ragout and fried okra, and chicken-fried pork loin with creamed spinach and chipotle mashed potatoes. On the weekends, there's live music on the patio, the perfect place to get a kick from the Mexican martini, which combines gold tequila with Cointreau, Grand Marnier, and fresh lime and orange juice.