

RESTAURANT GUIDE TO DOWNTOWN AUSTIN

From The Logbook of the Saturday Dining Conspiracy (Lawrence Person & Dwight Brown)

Austin Java Cafe and Bar.

1206 Parkway, 476-1829

Though more of a coffee bar than a real restaurant, the food here is more than acceptable. The salads are adequate, as are the chicken quesadillas, and I enjoyed my crawfish linguini quite a bit. Where they really shine is in desserts; my white chocolate raspberry cake was very good, and they give you quite a generous slice. Even more amazing was the fact they employ people with the same slacker vibe as at, say, Kerbey Lane, but who, by contrast, actually seem to enjoy working there.

Austin Land & Cattle Company.

1205 N. Lamar Blvd., 472-1813

Austin Land & Cattle Company does what they do reasonably well. The high end steak is pretty good, but their salads seem disappointing for the price. Appetizers are a mixed bag; escargot is very good, but a stuffed pepper dish seemed uninspired. The steak at AL&CC is slightly less expensive than Fleming's or Ruth's Chris (and unlike Ruth's Chris, it comes with sides). Alas, much as I'd like to see the local guys top the chains, I think both Fleming's and Ruth's Chris do a better job in the High End Steakhouse Sweepstakes.

Boiling Pot

700 E. 6th Street, 472-0985

A simple idea, well executed. You have a very limited selection of things to order (crabs, shrimp, crawfish, sausage, and the occasional seasonal item, plus potatoes and corn), and whatever you order they put together in a big boiling pot. When it's ready, they drain it, and then dump it out on the white butcher paper on your table. That's it. I've had Alaskan king crab legs there that were utterly delicious. Also good was the sausage and the tangy sweet mustard that goes with it. It's not as fancy as Gumbo's, but for the portions and price, The Boiling Pot is hard to beat.

Cafe at the Four Seasons.

98 San Jacinto (inside the Four Seasons hotel), 478-4500

Certain posters on Austin.food have been singing praises to the heavens about this place being the best restaurant in Austin. And it's...very good. And very expensive. But not great. At these prices, I expect great. When we ate there, the place was almost deserted at 6 PM on a Saturday. It certainly looks nice, with a light, airy, open feel and a view of Town Lake (and I'm sure the outside seats provide a great vantage to watch the bats). And our waiter managed to provide excellent service without that strange air of obsequious condescension you frequently run into at fine dining establishments. Appetizers are good, small, and very pricey. The shrimp were good but not particularly large shrimp. Unfortunately, the Swedish meatballs, while adequate, were not worth \$2 a meatball; in fact, I've eaten much better out of a crock-pot at a FACT party. On the other hand, the free bread basket was one of the best I've had, especially the crispy flatbread. I

thought the gumbo was very good, but not great, and not up to that served at Gumbo's, though considerably pricier. The rib eye steak was excellent, a crispy char on the outside and a nicely red on the inside. However, quantity-wise, it just wasn't a \$40 steak, and Ruth's Chris and Fleming's offer you a better bang for your buck in the steak department. The crème brulee was very good, but not any better than that offered at a half-dozen other restaurants in town. Again, this was a very good meal. But not \$100 good meal, which is what I ended up paying. III Forks, Castle Hill, and even Jeffrey's offer you a much better bang for your fine dining buck.

Casino El Camino

517 E. 6th Street, 469-9330

Casino El Camino has a reputation for good burgers, and they are pretty good. But basically we're talking a bar here, with all the ambiance (or lack thereof) that implies. Worth trying if you stumble out of a club at midnight with the munchies, but it's a dive rather than a destination.

Castle Hill Cafe

1101 W. 5th Street, 476-0728

Castle Hill has a well-earned reputation as one of the premier dining establishments in Austin, with ample justification. Just about all the appetizers I've had there (empanadas, gumbo, dumplings, etc) have been excellent. The entrees can be more of a mixed bag; I've had excellent beef medallions there, but there are occasions when the entree wasn't that interesting, or the portions were markedly undersized. But the desserts are pretty consistently among the best in town... The largest caveat is that the entrees tend to lean pretty heavily on a few seasonal ingredients: if you don't care for them (on one visit, almost everything had asparagus or peanuts), your choices are whittled down to two or three dishes. The menu changes week by week, so those ingredients vary.

The Clay Pit

1601 Guadalupe Street, 322-5131

A clear winner for Best Indian Food in Austin. The first thing you should do after sitting down is order at least one (and preferably several) orders of the calamari, which is easily The Best Calamari I've Ever Had. Seriously, we ordered one plate of this along with some other appetizers, and after we tried it we immediately ordered two more plates. It's that good. The entrees are also quite solid. I've had good lamb with a great mango chutney sauce, decent na'an, and they do a very credible mixed grill plate. The Clay Pit is in a nice old stone building, and the service tends to be pretty good. By and large this is your only source for Indian food downtown, so be thankful it's this good.

Fado's Irish Pub

214 W. 4th Street, 457-0172

An Irish pub and restaurant, evidently part of a chain. They do a reasonably good job. Appetizers' are adequately tasty, but the portions were far from generous. My steak sandwich was fine (though avoid the "Irish Cheddar"), and the fries were nicely seasoned. Dwight's cheesecake was also very good. Drawbacks: No Dr Pepper and Coke comes in those teenie weenie rip-offs- size bottles. Refills also seemed a bit slow. Fado's leaves me

with no strong impressions. I like the idea of Irish ethnic cuisine, but the menu seems a bit vegetable heavy for my tastes. I can't quite shake the impression that Fado's is missing something, but I can't quite lay my finger on what it is.

Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar

320 E. 2nd St. 457-1500

(Note: This is not to be confused with Reid Fleming's Steakhouse, home of the World's Toughest Steak.) Fleming's, part of an upscale steakhouse chain, is located a short stones throw from the Convention Center, the better to capture all that expense account business. It certainly looks upscale, being decorated in elegant wood and understated lighting, with the glass enclosed wine rooms making a very attractive touch, giving them the edge over Ruth's Chris in the decoration sweepstakes. Salads are a bit on the bland side, but most of the appetizers I've tried (calamari, Cajun grilled shrimp, shoestring potatoes) have been satisfactory. The rib eye I had was very good Prime steak, well prepared and tender, but not quite as delicious or "vertical" as that offered at Ruth's Chris. My crème brulee was excellent. Service was uniformly excellent. However, at \$80 a pop it's pretty much in the "special occasions or expense accounts only" category, though I do think your money goes a bit further here now than it does at Ruth's Chris. In the Fleming's vs. Ruth's Chris war, the tally is: Decor, Appetizers, and Sides, Price: Advantage Fleming's; Parking, Salads, Steaks: Advantage Ruth's Chris. (Dessert is a draw.)

The Hoffbrau

613 W. 6th St., 472-0822

I don't think "hanger steak" is generally supposed to mean "large and thin and hanging off the side of the plate." But that's what you get here. This is good, cheap steak, with wedge fries large enough to prop open a door (note: this is not an exaggeration; they really are that big; alas, I prefer my fries crispier), and miles and mile downscale of the other steak places mentioned here. Open Monday through Friday only, and next door to the late, lamented Adventures in Crime and Space bookstore.

Iron Cactus

606 Trinity St., 472-9240

From the outside, Iron Cactus closely resembles the callow yuppie theme bars that line the rest of Sixth Street. However, on the inside, it looks like...every other callow yuppie theme bar on Sixth Street. Fortunately, the food is a bit better. The nachos seem a tad better than usual; the beef fajitas are good, but no better than a half-dozen other TexMex places. You can get a decent vanilla shake, which is a nice, uncommon touch for a TexMex place There's nothing wrong with the food at Iron Cactus, but they haven't done anything (at least for non barflies) to distinguish themselves from the pack. Both Jazz and Louie's 106 offer better food a couple of blocks walk in either direction. Finally, this location doesn't seem to be as good as the one up north that the 2006 WFC precon dinner was held at.

The Iron Works BBQ

100 Red River, 478-4855

The closest you're going to get to classic Texas BBQ in downtown Austin. The ribs tend to be pretty good, the brisket and sausage less so. And the building (which was literally an iron works in its heyday) has a nice ambiance about it. If you're from a part of the country without a strong BBQ tradition, the Iron Works is probably better than anything in your neck of the woods. Just keep in mind that you have to travel out to Lockhart (Kreuz Market) or Llano (Cooper's) for really great Texas BBQ.

Jaime's Spanish Village

802 Red River, 476-5149

A restaurant that's been in Austin forever, and which seems to be better known for its margaritas than the middle-of-the-road TexMex it serves up. Average fajitas, average nachos, average hot sauce. Average average average. Service was reasonably attentive, though. OK but un compelling.

Jazz

214 E. 6th Street, 479-0474

Located in the heart of Sixth Street; Jazz is an adequate but unexceptional Cajun place. The onion rings and the Cajun popcorn shrimp are pretty good, and use appropriately light and tasty batters. The gumbo is also good, though not as good as Gumbo's version. The "blackened fish" (which, when I had it, turned out to be red snapper) is pretty satisfactory (especially covered with the drawn butter sauce served on the side), but not in the same league as Austin stalwarts like Pappadeaux and Gumbo's. The fruit-filled beignet are also tasty, though more like a fried pie than the light crust beignets served up at the Cafe du Monde. Bottom Line: Jazz isn't as good as Gumbo's or Pappadeaux's. However, if you're looking for good Cajun food at a reasonable price, Jazz fits the bill.

Jean Luc's French Bistro

705 Colorado, 494-0033

The food at Jean Luc's French Bistro is very good, very pricey, and on the small side. Imagine that! At a French restaurant! Will wonders never cease?

The shrimp and escargot are both very good, but could use more garlic and butter. The Caesar salad is among the best I've had in town and quite artfully presented, with crisp full leaves of romaine lettuce laid out on a plate. The duck is also excellent, and also among the best duck I've had (the side fries considerably less so). Service is attentive, but the courses themselves come out quite slowly.

Nothing here is so overwhelmingly good that you need to put up with these prices and portions, and III Forks, Jeffrey's and The Roaring Fork all do a better job in this range.

Jeffrey's

1204 West Lynn, 477-5584

Jeffrey's was purported to be George W. Bush's favorite restaurant when he was Governor, and it's easy to see why. It's upscale food some five minutes away from the Governor's mansion. But for those of us who aren't highly-paid members of the state bureaucracy, I'm not sure Jeffrey's quite justifies its considerable cost.

Appetizers ranged from excellent to unimpressive. I will say that the crispy fried oysters were palatable, which is an achievement for me, and I liked the green habanero sauce (though it wasn't nearly as hot as I like it), but the yucca chips they came with seemed rather bland. On the other hand, the foie gras is delicious, perhaps due to the smoked bacon they cooked it in. I could really get behind chowing down on this stuff if it weren't so damn expensive. The bacon-wrapped scallops are also quite delicious, but since there are only two of them on the plate for something like \$10, I can't really recommend it from a bang-for-buck ratio.

The beef tenderloin is very good, but there isn't any better than the steak at Ruth's Chris, costs as much, and there is considerably less of it on your plate. The celeric parsley potatoes ("not one garnish, but two!") on the side are pretty dull; a serious garlic infusion would have improved them considerably. The Banana Fosters Crème Brulee was delicious, but not quite as transcendent as I would hope from something that combined two of my favorite desserts, and I think Ruth's Chris Steak House's crème brulees are a touch better.

Service was uniformly excellent and unobtrusive and the atmosphere carried off the elegant-but-understated tone quite well.

While the food is generally excellent, I just don't think it's good enough to justify the prices they charge. In the same general area, Castle Hill Cafe is about as good, the food is cheaper, and the portions are usually more generous. If I want to pay this much, Ruth's Chris and Fleming's offer food as good or better with far more generous portions. That's not to say I wouldn't go back to Jeffrey's, especially if someone else was picking up the bill. As it is, despite its manifest virtues, I'm not rushing back.

[Katz's Deli](#)

618 W. Sixth, 472-2037

Open 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and something of an Austin institution. Alas, there's no end to people who have had bad experiences at Katz's. Personally, I've never had a bad meal there, and they do a fine breakfast all day long, as well as pretty good burgers and pastrami sandwiches. And if you have a craving for a blintz at 3 AM, this is your destination. And if you're a native New Yorker, just think about the sheer joy you'll have after eating at Katz's, when you get to kvetch to anyone within earshot about how what a poor excuse for a deli it is, and how the one just around the corner from your apartment is *so* much better...

[Lambert's](#)

401 W. 2nd Street, 494-1500

Once you can get over the fact that Lambert's BBQ:

1. Isn't really a BBQ place
2. Is downtown and difficult to park near (hint: evidently the parking garage across the street can be used on weekends)
3. Has a jazz bar upstairs populated by Urban Hipsters and Their Ubiquitous Black

Plastic Elvis Costello Glasses; and
4. Is pretty pricy;

It's actually pretty good. They're sort of a meat-heavy Fine Dining place with a number of unusual items, an idea I can firmly get behind. Their boar ribs are easily the best boar ribs I've had; of course, they were the only boar ribs I'd ever had, but they're quite tasty none the less. I also like the deviled eggs, which had just the right touch of caviar on top to add zest without overpowering the taste. I wasn't impressed with the prime rib I had their once, but the more exotic items

The biggest drawback to Lambert's is the tendency to not explain several key details. Like failing to mention a certain soup was served cold, or that the "Warm Carmelita with Cajeta Caramel" was more like a brownie than anything else (and, it turns out, a little dry). Still worth visiting, but they could certainly do a better job communicating exactly what each dish is like to avoid such unpleasant surprises.

Louie's 106

a Mediterranean tapas place, has dwelt near the top of the Austin Chronicle Restaurant Poll since shortly after opening. If you haven't had them before, tapas are theoretically like mini- appetizer trays, but Louie's 106's tapas are big enough to serve as appetizers at lesser establishments, while the appetizers themselves were enormous. (There are many dishes available as both tapas and (in larger portions) as appetizers. Unless you're going to be splitting it among three or four people, go for the tapas.) Among the best tapas are the mussels, the escargot, the chicken sausage, the beef tenderloin bits, grilled garlic bread, the quail, and the calamari (avoid the salmon ribbon and the pepper seared tuna). However, when comes to the main entrees, Louie's 106 slides from outstanding to merely good. The pallea valencia with saffron rice had was adequate but not nearly tasty enough to justify the price tag. The Prime Rib is better, but it doesn't stand out from that offered by other restaurants. The Crème Brulee is first rank. You might consider ordering lots of tapas and skipping the main course.

[Mekong River](#)

215 East Sixth St., 236-8878

If you happen to find yourself hungry on Sixth Street, you could do a lot worse than Mekong Delta, which serves up quite passable Thai and Vietnamese food. The Tom Kha Guy soup is credible, the fried rolls are tasty and inexpensive, and the Thai Basil Chicken is just fine (if not as hot as I like it). But it's more a "I'm hungry for cheap Asian food right now" sort of place than a destination.

Roaring Fork

701 Congress Avenue (located in the Stephen F. Austin Hotel Inter- Continental, corner of 7th and Congress), 583-0000

If you can drop the dough, the fare at the Roaring Fork is pretty impressive, and the tasting menu, (\$25 a pop for a four-course menu the last time I tried it), is a nice deal. I like the venison and the iron skillet "campo" plate (which is actually a small pizza, though that's not at all obvious from the description) quite a bit, and the fried banana

empanada with ice cream is excellent. The calamari is excellent, on par even with that at The Clay Pit (if a bit pricier), as are the Dr Pepper ribs, which sounds odd but is actually quite delicious. The fritters are the best (of the admittedly few) I've ever had. Scallops are good, and the crab cakes are nice, but seemed undersized for the price. Both of the salmon dishes seemed to have problems: the salmon salad seemed to feature chunk salmon straight from the can, while cold salmon on nachos just seems like a bad idea. Salads seem unimaginative and overpriced, which is a bad combination. Their bread basket is pretty tasty. Entrees tend to be a little more hit and miss. I've had duck that was very good; they seem to do a better job with the steak and pork tenderloin. The green chili macaroni and cheese side is also quite good. Still, overall the food is excellent, and for high end dining options, I like this a little better than Jeffrey's and Castle Hill.

[Roy's Restaurant](#)

340 E. 2nd St., 391-1500

Roy's part of a chain of high end Hawaiian/Asian fusion restaurants, and there is much to like here. The interior is very attractive, the service is generally fine, and everything I've had is very good to excellent. But there are a few things that keep me from giving Roy's a whole-hearted rave. Though pricey, all of the appetizers are quite tasty. The calamari is just a hair less delicious than perennial favorite The Clay Pit, but made up for it with an excellent chili and lime dipping sauce that had a pronounced (and very welcome) kick to it. Likewise, the Szechuan Baby Back Ribs that come with the appetizer sampler plate are probably the best Chinese-style ribs I've had. The sushi and salads are also pretty good. But for my entree I had the Surfer Platter because it had offered three different kinds of fish (Ahi, Salmon, and Butterfish), which proved to be a mistake. Evidently Roy's doesn't think that surfing works up much of an appetite, since there was about two ounces of each on the plate, along with equally tiny portions of the accompanying sides. All of it was quite delicious, but there was even less of it than the entrees on the prix fixe menu. Even for a high- end restaurant this was way too little food for the money. Opt for one of the three fish, but not this sampler. The pineapple upside down cake is fine, but not nearly memorable enough for a dessert you have to order 20 minutes in advance. I'd certainly be willing to make a return trip to Roy's, but I'll steer clear of the Surfer sampler.

Ruth's Chris Steak House

6th Street and Congress Avenue, 477-7884

Ruth's Chris is a high end steak chain. And by "high end," I mean expect to drop \$80-100 per person once you add everything up (and that's without a bar tab). The surroundings are very elegant, and the food is excellent.

But every year the prices get a little higher, while the steak stays the same. It is, too be sure, still excellent steak, but it also seems less "vertical" than in years past, and not sufficiently better than that served at Fleming's to justify the price difference.

Make no mistake: I would still be more than happy to take a return trip to Ruth's Chris if someone else is picking up the bill. But I no longer see it as a viable contender for my own dining dollars.

The Spaghetti Warehouse

117 W 4th St., 476-4069

Chain Italian restaurant. Good sourdough bread, otherwise undistinguished. Keep in mind, however, that I have not eaten at this restaurant since the Reagan administration, they could be offering every patron a bar of gold bullion and a free slave girl as they came in and I'd never know.

Stubbs's BBQ

801 Red River, 480-8341

I'll say this for Stubbs's: The appetizers and sides are generally pretty good and plentiful (especially the Texas fries and chicken wings), the pork ribs are a tad better than average, and they're housed in a great old stone building.

Unfortunately, both the BBQ sauce and the beef it covers are pretty bland; the brisket in particular is nearly tasteless. Plus the BBQ portions were much smaller than their appetizer and side dish brethren.

Only worth visiting if there's someone playing the club that night you want to catch.

Sullivan's

300 Colorado, 495-6504

For the price you pay, Sullivan's is pretty disappointing. While it has some virtues, I have to rank it as the least interesting (behind Fleming's, Ruth's Chris, and Austin Land and Cattle) of Austin downtown high end steak dining choices. For appetizers, they have tasty but hideously overpriced crab claws (did they swipe this idea from Truluck's?), as well as escargot, calamari, and a Cajun crab cake. The escargot was very good and quite large, thought it could have used more garlic. The crab cake was also fairly tasty. The calamari was fine, but I'm afraid that The Clay Pit's numinous offering has ruined me for merely competent calamari. I also like the hash browns (real hash browns, not which cubed potato crap lazy restaurants try to pass off as hash browns these days) and the wedge salads.

The porterhouse is tasty enough, but still disappointing, being neither as generous nor "vertical" as that offered at Ruth's Chris, nor as flavorful as either Ruth's Chris or Fleming's offerings. The crème brulee is good, but the caramelized topping is a bit on the thick side.

Service was reasonably attentive but a bit "average" by high end steak house standards; an unwelcome contrast to the hyper-attentive service offered at other restaurants in this price range.

All in all, there's nothing particularly wrong with Sullivan's. While a bit more affordable ("affordable" being a relative term) than its swanky competitors, it seems to lack those special touches that elevate the fine dining experience. It lacks sizzle, at these prices, I expect sizzle.

Thai Passion

620 Congress Avenue, 472-1244

There are several good Thai restaurants in Austin. Alas, Thai Passion is not among them. They do credible Tod Mun fish fritters and Tom Yum soup, but the beef entree I had there was stringy and dry.

If you have a car, drive up just Guadalupe just past UT and go to Thai Kitchen instead.

III Forks

111 Lavaca Street, 474-1776

Though not as wholly focused on steak the way Ruth's Chris or Fleming's does, III Forks does serve up quality steak at pretty hefty prices.

There are, however, a few improvements over Ruth's Chris. For one thing, they didn't nickel-and-dime you to death; your entree actually included sides. The sampler platter is pretty tasty, though a bit more customization had been possible. My porterhouse was right up there in Ruth's Chris/Fleming's territory (with a price to match), tender and delicious. The yellow cake was also very nice. Service was excellent, with a small army of waitstaff bringing drinks, extra bread, etc.

However, you are going to pay out the wazoo for the privilege, in my case \$90 for my own meal (and no drinks). Certainly opting for the porterhouse ups the cost, but expect to drop a good \$60-70, even without alcoholic drinks. But if you can drop that much on a meal, III Forks is a pretty good "special occasions" restaurant.

Truluck's

400 Colorado, 482-9000

Truluck's offers upscale seafood dining. The decor is very well done indeed, in wood, black and silver, giving it an elegant ambiance, and the service is excellent.

The calamari is fine. The stone crab claws are expensive (at \$44.95 for six large claws the last time I was there) and, to my mind, just not worth the price. For one thing they're served cold with a sort of thick dijonaise sauce on the side. The sauce is fine, but I much prefer my crab served steaming hot with drawn butter. Unless you're really a stone crab fanatic, it's really hard to justify the price here.

On the other hand, everything else seems reasonably priced for the Fine Dining continuum. The hot and crunchy trout is very tasty. The only real disappointment was the gumbo, which was too expensive (\$4.95 a cup) and way too thin (heavy on the okra and light on everything else, especially meat). The crème brulee is good except for a bittersweet chocolate tinge to the caramelized layer.

I have never ordered the infamous Chocolate Sac, the latest in ultra- decadent chocolate desserts, but I hear it's quite the thing if you're a chocoholic...

Dining reviews from AT Campbell

Iron Works BBQ

100 Red River, 478-4855

<http://www.ironworksbbq.com>

The best barbecue restaurant in the Austin city limits is conveniently located downtown. It's been open since 1978, and popular ever since. Their beef ribs made them famous, but the brisket, turkey, chicken, and homemade sausage are also excellent. If you find it hard to choose, try the 3-meat sampler plate. Don't forget the beans and potato salad. They offer excellent pies and cobblers for dessert. The restaurant is in the former site of a historical ironsmith shop, so the atmosphere is unique but not fancy. You owe it to yourself to visit.

Aquarelle

606 Rio Grande, 479-8117

<http://www.aquarellerestaurant.com/>

Aquarelle is one of Austin's premier gourmet French restaurants. It has an extensive menu of traditional items and a pricy-but-wonderful tasting menu that offers diners a chance to try a variety of dishes. Highlights include the Classic French Onion Soup, Trilogy of Duck Foie Gras, Pan Seared Chilean Sea Bass with Poached Oyster, Grilled Young Hen, Duo of Locally Raised Duck, and Duo of Lamb Chop and Top Loin. The wine list offers a large selection of French and American wines. The fabulous desserts include Caramelized Pears and Passion Fruit Crème Brulee.

Fogo de Chao

309 E. 3rd St., 472-0220

<http://www.fogodechao.com/>

Fogo de Chao opened in Austin in late 2007. It is a Brazilian steakhouse. The concept is new to many people, so here's how it works... First you enter a beautiful restaurant and your waiter seats you. You help yourself to an amazing salad bar filled with wonderful and fresh vegetables, fruits, and cheeses. Then an assortment of warm side's dishes and breads is delivered to your table to be served family style. Each diner is issued a small card that is red on one side and green on the other. When you put your card on the table green side up, the fun begins! Charming waiters dressed like South American cowboys will swarm to your table with huge chunks of grilled meat on skewers. There are over a dozen varieties and cuts of meat, all seasoned and cooked to perfection. The waiters will gladly slice portions of any or all of these meats onto your plate. They keep coming until you turn your card red side up. If you finish eating and want more food, just turn the card's green side up again and the swarm of meats will resume. This is a great place for a group. Prices are a little high for some people. Lunch is at least \$35 per person, and dinner is at least \$50. If the concept sounds at all interesting, I urge you to give it a try.

Manuel's

319 Congress Ave., 472-7555

<http://www.manuels.com/>

Manuel's is an interior Mexican restaurant, which means that its food is different from the popular notion of Tex-Mex. The menu emphasizes seafood, pork, enchiladas with rich sauces, and wonderfully grilled meats. Highly recommended items are the Sopa de Tortilla (chicken tortilla soup), Camerones a la Veracruzana (sautéed Gulf shrimp on rice), Enchiladas de Mole (enchiladas covered with a fabulous sauce of chili, nuts, and chocolate), and Enchiladas Bandera (enchiladas covered with samples of three different sauces, striped like the Mexican flag). I've tried most of the entrees on the menu, and have yet to be disappointed.

The Shoreline Grill

98 San Jacinto Blvd., 477-3300

<http://www.shorelinegrill.com/>

The Shoreline Grill is one of the city's premier "special event" restaurants, regularly finishing at or near the top of restaurant polls. This is a wonderful seafood restaurant with a nice view of Lady Bird Lake and the city's infamous bats. It has the best crab cakes in Austin. Menu favorites include the Crab Cakes and Grilled Shrimp, Seared Tuna with Sake Ginger Butter and Wasabi Potato, and Beef Tenderloin with Jumbo Lump Crab. This is a great place to take people you're trying to impress, like your parents or your publisher or that impressive up-and-coming writer.

Z' Teas Grill

1110 W. 6th St., 478-5355

<http://www.ztejas.com/>

Z' Tejas Grill offers Southwestern fusion cuisine. Its food is good and different. Many items on the menu are things you won't find anywhere else, like Catfish Beignets and Fish Tacos. They also offer fine enchiladas, burgers, and steaks. For those who need it, there is a special gluten-free menu. This is a great place to go for brunch, with exotic offerings like Bananas Foster French Toast and Baracoa Beef Breakfast Enchiladas.

Dining guide by Sara Felix:

I work in the Omni on the business side of the building. When I get to the first floor and am trying to decide where to go to lunch, the first question is always what kind of food we would like to eat. When we can't figure that out, which happens way more than I care to admit, the second question is which exit we should go out. Most of the time, that is what decides the restaurant we will be eating at for lunch. This is a short list of places in the area, there are many more downtown to choose from, but these are the regular haunts for the people that I tend to eat lunch with during the week. Next to the name of the restaurant I have listed the direction to go to get to all these different places to eat. I did list a few places that were not open I know but I just wanted to throw those in there.

6th Street:

Habana Calle: 6 SE go to 6th and go left: A Cuban restaurant which is known more for their drinks (their Mojitos) than their food. People have very mixed reviews of the place; generally I have been there for their appetizers and enjoyed the Papa Rellanas, a ball of potatoes with beef inside. They have a wonderful patio out back. Just recently at SXSW Elijah Wood was the DJ for a cool craft party, but that has nothing to do with the food....

Casino El Camino: SE go to 6th and go left This is a great dive bar on the famous 6th street, and has really great hamburgers. However they are not open for lunch and the wait for a burger is 20 minutes to an hour and a half, and after an hour and a half wait probably a bad hamburger would taste good.

Torchys: SE go to 6th and go left: A small taco stand, there is a small bar to sit at inside. I blush thinking about the names of some of the tacos they serve, but they are definitely worth it. The trailer trash taco and green chili tacos are excellent.

Daddy's: SE go to 6th and go left: If there are sports on, this is the place to go. General bar fare, there is a lot of fried food available on the menu. Eh.

Roux: SE go to 6th and go left: The restaurant has a tagline of "Cajun Con-fusion", and while I don't know what that means, it is a good lunch place. The sammich's are pretty tasty.

Mekong River: SW go to 6th and go left Vietnamese restaurant, right next to where the duck tours begin. Sometimes the service is slow, and there is nothing that really stands out about this place to me. If you would like some noodles it is the place to go in the area.

B.D. Riley's: SW go to 6th and go left: Another bar on 6th street, the fish and chips are pretty tasty. On the weekdays they have live music at lunch.

Marisco Grill: SW go to 6th and go left A little tex mex restaurant on sixth, there is friendly wait staff. It is the closest Mexican place from the Omni, and it can really be hit or miss. While there will be people who disagree, I do like their salsa and the nachos, which is enough for a meal.

Jimmy Johns: SW go to 6th and go right: A chain sandwich place that is fast and easy.

Congress:

Starbucks at 9th: NW go to Congress and go right: I don't have to explain this one do I?

Marakesh: NW go to Congress and go right: A charming little Middle Eastern restaurant on Congress, only open on Saturday for lunch. I enjoy their falafels, but they have over 20 different sandwiches at lunchtime and usually the service is pretty fast.

Little City: NW go to Congress and go right I have not eaten at Little City, but when I mentioned to my coworkers that I was listing places to eat, many of them said Little City

had to be on the list. A coffee shop, at lunch they have sandwiches on the menu. With their organic greens in the sandwiches and the salads, the menu is fresh and light.

Hickory Street: NW on the corner at Congress The salad bar is what drives me to Hickory Street for lunch... as well as the outside patio. A nice place to sit and relax and people watch the Congress Avenue foot traffic.

Subway: NW go to Congress and go right A chain, you need a quick sandwich, and it is there.

Roaring Fork: SW on the corner at Congress No lunch on the weekends. In the bar they have really good guacamole though.

Silhouette: SW go to Congress and turn left Another place that has mixed reviews. Monday is all day sushi happy hour, and I can be seen there pretty much every week unfortunately it does not have a weekend lunch.

Pita Pit: SW on the corner at Congress Another fast cheap lunch alternative to traditional sandwiches.

Hideout: SW go to Congress and turn left Frankly I go to the Hideout for the breakfast tacos, they are delivered from other eateries in town. They do however have sandwiches and occasionally soups on the menu.

Wiki Wiki Teriyaki: SW go to Congress and turn left A fast place to get an edible chicken teriyaki or bowl of meat and rice.

Jamba Juice: SW go to Congress and turn left Chain. Smoothies and snacks like soft pretzels, chips, and Pirate Booty.

Starbucks at 6th: S SW go to Congress and turn left Yes, two Starbucks on Congress in walking distance... surprise, surprise.

Manuels: SW go to Congress and turn left Interior Mexican food, there are a few things I really enjoy at Manuel's. One of which is the Chile Poblano soup. It is quite spicy, but it has a lot of flavor. Manuel's has won a number of "best of" awards for the Austin Chronicle.

La Traviata: SW go to Congress and turn left La Traviata is not open for lunch on the weekends. I have been there a number of times, and the restaurant is quite small but the specials are always worth it. The chicken picata has been a favorite with many of the co-workers.

Kyoto: SW go to Congress and turn left No lunch on weekends, great lunch menu on weekdays.

Las Manitas: SW go to Congress and turn left Every time I hear about Las Manitas, there is something new happening. An important landmark on Congress, they are talking about knocking this place down. Probably the longest walk of all the restaurants listed, this place serves a wonderful breakfast, and is always full at lunch time and weekend breakfast.

7th Street:

1886: SW enter through the Driskill within the Driskill, the 1886 is a nice little restaurant with a nice patio that is also nice for people watching when the weather is right. I love their HUGE Crispy Chicken Cobb Salad and their Mama's meatloaf. In a hotel, the food is a little pricy.

Thai Passion: SW past Congress on the left, A great Thai place downtown that is easy to get to from the Omni. There hasn't been anything I have ordered that I haven't liked.

Koriente: SE go left on 7th A healthy Korean food restaurant, not open for lunch on the weekends.

8th street:

Amsterdam Café: Pizza and sandwiches (and alcoholic beverages).

Gumbo's: No lunch on weekends. Pretty pricey for dinner.

Red River:

Jamie's Spanish Village: NE go to Red River and make a left A true Tex Mex experience. You walk up to Jamie's and the first thing you notice is the glass on the top of the wall. It is a strange building with short ceilings, but if you want smothered chile con carne enchiladas/tamales you have come to the right place.

Stubbs's: NE go to Red River and make a left A great place for listening to music, Stubbs is a barbeque place as well and good for a quick bbq meal in walking distance. I like their chopped beef brisket sandwiches.....