

College Station/Bryan Dining & Entertainment Guide

Compiled by Cary Nederman and Peyton Wofford

While, Lord knows, our fair city has more than its share of chain restaurants, there are some opportunities to sample good or even first-rate cuisine. The price ratings are relative to College Station, so some of you big-town folks might find these places bargains. The following are a few suggestions worthy of consideration.

Walking distance from the Hilton:

Veritas Wine Bar and Bistro. 830 University Drive Suite 100 (979) 492-1552. Veritas is more wine than dine, with a large bar and relatively limited dinner seating. The menu is served tapas-style, but what comes out of the kitchen is noteworthy, if pricey. This place has rapidly become a favorite of serious foodies and winos around these parts. The wine list would be top-notch pretty much anywhere and there are definite bargains to be had; the wide selection of half-bottles is especially recommended. Also, the wine bar has a pretty decent selection of wines by the glass. \$\$\$.

Cenare. 404 University Avenue East (979) 696-731. Featuring traditional Italian fare, Cenare is about the best our city has to offer of this style of cuisine. A competent (if uninspired) wine list, better than average service and everything you'd expect of an Italian menu. The Mr. G's pizza is especially delicious. \$\$.

Republic Steakhouse. 701 University Drive East suite 406 (Chimney Hill Shopping Center) (979) 260-4120. Steak and whiskey? You bet! (And a darn good wine list, too.) The emphasis here is on supplies from local farms and ranches, and the Republic has become a leading advocate of sustainable, community-supported agriculture in the region. (This does NOT apply to the whiskey, however.) You are not going to get out cheap, but the food is fresh and the chef, Wade Barkman, is serious about his beef. There is usually live entertainment on the weekends. \$\$\$.

Eccell Steakhouse. 980 University Drive East (University Towne Center) (979) 268-4101. Several notable characteristics lend a metropolitan and lively feeling to this restaurant. But, hey, it's Texas and it's really all about the beef, isn't it? The steaks are prepared in a state of the art infrared broiler, importing texture and flavor that's not easily duplicated. Not for those watching cholesterol or weight. A superb bar selection and wine list. (And my good friend Kelsey Taylor, with her group The Greg Tivis Trio, perform wonderful standards (American songbook) and jazz there regularly.) \$\$\$.

Blue Baker. 800 University Dr East (979) 268-3096. Blue Baker is a College Station institution, featuring custom made sandwiches, pizzas, soup and salads. A self-described "artisan bakery," these folks mix bread dough and pastries from scratch every day and bake their breads and pizzas in a brick oven. This location remains open from early morning until 10 p.m. \$.

In addition, the Hilton itself has a decent hotel restaurant, and there are several, more generic, restaurants in the plazas across either University Drive or Tarrow, including Abuelo's (Tex-Mex), Boston's Gourmet Pizza, Atami Japanese, and Haiku Japanese and Korean.

Driving distance for adventurers:

Little Blue Heron. 1507 Texas Avenue South (979) 695-7700. Since this is a fish place—and I have a deathly allergy to iodine, hence sea food—I can't talk from experience. But I do know that many academic departments

are now using Blue Heron for interview dinners and the fish-heads with whom I have spoken has been laudatory. Again, it's a newcomer to College Station, but looks to be a keeper. \$\$.

Café Eccell. 101 Church Avenue (979) 846-7908. Eccell has long been the default around here for foodies. Located in the old city hall, the atmosphere is relatively informal, the service is good, the wine list solid and diverse (if overpriced). The steaks are long-time favorites and the sea food is well regarded. Try a cup of the corn chowder as a starter. The desserts (all home made) are to die for—save room! \$\$.

La Bodega 102 Church Avenue (979) 691-8226. More a lunch place, but open for dinner as well, this is soft taco heaven. It's owned by the Café Eccell folks, who do a nice job of presenting fresh local ingredients and moving toward a Southwest fusion conception. The décor is stainless steel mixed with rustic. La Bodega is an inexpensive alternative to Eccell and often easier to get into (although the same desserts as Eccell are available). If going there, I'd stick to beer—the wine list is a pared-down version of Eccell and uninspired. But beer actually suits the cuisine better. \$.

Christopher's World Grille. 5001 Boonville Road, Bryan (979) 776-2181. Christopher's is pretty much the top end of dining in the area. A New French/New American menu rotates regularly with many daily specials. I am a big fan of their rack of lamb, which is usually on the list. While not stuffy, it is definitely more formal than most other local eateries; business casual dress is recommended, as are reservations. The wine list is updated frequently and there are always interesting selections (especially from California and France) to be had. Some people think that Christopher's is overpriced for what it is, but I have always had excellent meals there, and it beats driving to Houston. The venue itself is quite striking—an old farm house that has been converted into an elegant facility. \$\$\$.

Madden's Causal Gourmet. 202 S. Bryan Avenue, Bryan (979) 779-2558. Peter and Tara Madden have created a restaurant that lives up to the "casual gourmet" label. Peter used to be the resident chef at Café Eccell and has converted a space in old downtown Bryan into a very appealing dining experience. The cuisine is New American, the menu tends toward the experimental. The crowd is mixed—university people, local professionals, grad students. The service is efficient and friendly but not overbearing. The wine list tends to rotate pretty regularly, although the Pheasant Grove Viognier is usually to be found and is highly recommended as an opening gambit in the white range. I rate it a bargain for what it is. Alas, two caveats: dinner is only served Thursday-Saturday and it is a bit of a haul from the university area. \$\$.

Square One. 211 W. Wm J. Bryan Parkway, Bryan (979) 361-0264. Another downtown Bryan eatery of note, Square One has a much more bohemian feel than Madden's. I personally love the decor, which has made the most of the 100-year-old commercial building in which it is housed, but with the high ceilings and wood floors, it is LOUD. Again, New American cuisine at a reasonable price. My sense is that the clientele is younger than Madden's. Square One features a lot of blackboard specials and a competent, if unexciting, wine list that, pity, stays pretty much the same from visit to visit. \$\$.

Caffe Capri. 222 N. Main Street. Bryan. Aggie owned and operated, Caffe Capri features comforting Italian food – everything from the owner's family recipes to their signature dish, tortellini filled with cheese, garlic, and crab in creamy pesto sauce. To satisfy your sweet tooth, save room for the cannoli. The owner, Rami Cerone, remodeled a pharmacy and soda shop in 1995 to create Caffe Capri's intimate dining experience. \$\$

The Village. 210 W. 26th Street. Bryan. The Village is a vegetarian friendly eatery in historic Downtown Bryan with great Happy Hour specials, and a cozy atmosphere. Poetry readings and live music add to the ambiance. \$\$

And if you are hankering for Texas Barbeque, the recommended spots—all a drive from the Hilton—are:

C&J. 1010 South Texas Avenue (Bryan); 4304 Harvey Rd. (aka TX 30); 105 Southwest Parkway (College Station). Scrumptious bar-b-que served Texas style including brisket, sausage, potato salad, and pecan pie. The cafeteria style service is quick and easy – perfect for large groups. \$

J Cody's. 3610 South College Ave (Bryan) A casual environment offering mesquite-grilled steaks, brisket, and mesquite-smoked ham and turkey to name a few; order your meat at the counter and grab homemade bread from the vegetable buffet. If you're especially hungry, the chicken fried steak is another Texas favorite! \$

Rudy's. 504 Harvey Road (College Station). A Texas original (although it has branched out to Oklahoma), Rudy's offers a variety of meats cooked low and slow. The barbecue turkey and pulled pork are especially delicious. Obviously not for vegans or vegetarians; the atmosphere is quintessential Texas with long picnic tables, beer by the bucket, and sweet tea by the gallon. \$

For late night fun, here are a few local spots to relax Texas-style:

Northgate, the famous strip of bars, dancehalls, and clubs across from A&M's main campus, is the place to be for a taste of the late-night Texas experience. Down to earth, casual, and inexpensive describe this mile long stretch of University Drive. If you're looking for a glimpse of real live Aggies (including actual cowboys), swing by!

A word about parking, Northgate is the place to be for most Aggies, so be prepared for some sort of a crowd depending on the hour (later = more crowded). Parking isn't too bad, though. There's a pay-by-the-hour parking lot directly behind Northgate and a parking garage one block

The Dixie Chicken (aka The Chicken). Northgate. 307 University Dr. A local landmark featuring a live rattlesnake (in a glass case, of course!), pool, and dominoes; drop by, grab a 'chugger' of domestic beer (or better yet order a Lone Star, the *National* Beer of Texas), carve your name in the wood on the back porch, listen to some classic country music, and step into the heart of Aggieland! Texas toothpicks (i.e., deep fried jalapenos with ranch dressing) are a favorite if you're in the mood to indulge. Fair warning: The Chicken only serves domestic beer and sangria, and the fine work of taxidermists state-wide covers the walls. \$

O'Bannon's. Northgate. 103 Boyett. Irish pub offering an impressive (for College Station anyway) selection of domestics and imports. O'Bannon's offers a casual atmosphere and comfortable seating; great for conversation if it's not too packed. This place is also a little less intense than the Chicken when it comes to the Aggie spirit. You'll see all types in here. \$

Fitzwilly's. Northgate. 303 University Dr. A two-story bar very similar to the Chicken; offers a larger selection of beer than the Chicken, and serves liquor. Fitzwilly's often hosts up-and-coming Texas country artists on its patio. \$

The Corner. Northgate. 401 University Dr. A casual hangout known for its drink specials and roof top bar. If the weather permits, head up to the third floor and catch a glimpse of the Texas sky! \$

A few places off Northgate:

Fox and Hound. 505 University Dr. As a chain, Fox and Hound offers a predictable sports bar atmosphere with a varied selection of beers, and a full menu. \$\$

Murphy's Law and Brauhaus. 109 N. Main St. Bryan. Off the beaten path in Downtown Bryan, Murphy's Law serves a variety of German beers. The bar is connected to Brauhaus, a warm, inviting German restaurant serving authentic Bavarian food. \$\$

Muldoon's Coffee House. 1517 S. Texas Ave. A new spot in College Station, Muldoon's is a spacious, quiet place to enjoy great conversation, free Wi-Fi, and organic, fair trade coffee in an old world classic atmosphere. \$\$

Terrazzo Coffee and Wine. 405 E. University Dr. Enjoy Italian coffee, wine, wi-fi, and live music on the porch of the town's namesake, the College (railway) Station. Adjacent to the Benjamin Knox Art Gallery, home of Aggieland's official artist. \$\$

Revolutions Café & Bar: 211 B S. Main St. Bryan. A laid back, diverse atmosphere with unique live music in the heart of Downtown Bryan. Unlike any other place in Bryan or College Station. The patio couches are great for conversation. \$\$