

CITY PORTRAIT
Houston, Texas

Houston



Powers Up

Through busts or booms, Houston has always looked forward. And today, from food to fine art, the biggest city in Texas is humming

BY JULIA REED • Photographs by JODY HORTON



Local Energy
Chef Robert Del Grande and friends at RDG + Bar Annie. Opposite: One of the city's suspended chrome street signs

THE BIG PICTURE

Houston, Texas

In the spring of 1987, my editors at *U.S. News & World Report* sent me to Houston to get the reaction of that city's elite to a recent front-page piece in the *Wall Street Journal*. The city was still reeling from the oil bust, and the paper painted a grim picture—there was mention of a suicide, I think, as well as a description of a downtown so empty tumbleweeds might any minute be blowing through it. I'd barely landed when my good friends George and Nancy Peterkin whisked me off to the Contemporary Arts Museum's annual fund-raising gala. On the plane, I'd studied up by reading a pile of clips from the *Houston Chronicle*, one of which talked about the effect of the bust on the city's arts community: "It was the year the city bit the tarmac economically, but...there is no sign that anyone has turned in his track shoes." The CAMH's Balinese Ball was definitely a case in point.

There were Balinese dancers, models painted gold, and more orchids than I'd ever seen in my life. The invitation had said something like "sarong optional," and a great many of the well-toned women of Houston did, in fact, opt—combining artfully arranged bits of brightly colored silk with boatloads of diamonds. One woman whose brand-new ten-carat ring was for "ten years of marriage, honey," said she'd been so upset by the *WSJ* article—which she'd read a couple of days earlier on an Aspen ski lift—that she'd skied right off the mountain and flown directly home. It was the tumbleweed thing that had gotten her—lest anyone think the city was actually empty, she was duty bound to come back and add herself to the number of good citizens who were ready to stick around and fight in the face of adversity and, more important, bad press.

I had known my own story would write itself, and I'd also known I would find a populace raring to get back on its feet. Barely two years after my visit, a snarky piece about how the Houstonians had already managed to mythologize the bust, which they "served up larger than life," appeared in the *New York Times*. "The latest lore shapes up like this: The bust was a trial for Texans, who showed they could take it when it could have killed folks from a lesser state, and they came out of the experience better and stronger than ever."

The writer was clearly not from Houston—otherwise she would have known that the "lore" would prove to be pretty much on the money. Today, the city is the fourth largest in the country, but it may well become the third largest on the watch of the new mayor, Annise Parker, a popular former city councilwoman who is the first openly gay mayor of a major American city. Although Houston did indeed lose more than two hundred thousand jobs during the 1980s, it is once again a thriving capital of the oil and gas industry, and its port now ranks first in the nation in international commerce.

The city is also home to NASA's Johnson Space Center as well as the Texas Medical Center, which contains the world's largest concentration of research and health-care institutions—forty-nine not-for-profit entities in all, including the MD Anderson Cancer

Center, the Baylor College of Medicine, and Texas Children's Hospital. Established with a 1939 gift from Monroe Dunaway Anderson, who formed a foundation so his estate would not have to pay the taxes he feared would dissolve his cotton company (also, naturally, the world's largest) after his death, the medical center has been home to the world's two preeminent cardiac pioneers, Michael DeBakey and Denton Cooley, and its growth continues apace.

In 2005, Texas Children's announced a campaign for a \$1.5-billion expansion that would include the Jan and Dan Duncan Neurological Research Institute, a greatly enhanced program for basic science research, and the new Pavilion for Women. Not only was the money raised, but the new entities are already completed and up and running. "None of it even existed in theory in 2000," says Charles Fraser, the hospital's surgeon in chief. "That's the spirit of Houston. If you can make a good case for something, it will likely come to fruition."

The same breathtaking largesse is found in the cultural arena. At a time when major museums in other cities are either closing or struggling, Houston's continue to flourish. DiverseWorks, a contemporary arts center whose mission is to present new visual, performing, and literary art, proclaims itself "distinguished" from similar centers around the country by its "financial stability." The Museum of Fine Arts has a new director, Houston native and Met veteran Gary Tinterow. One of his first jobs will be overseeing the construction of a new building to house the museum's collection of twentieth- and twenty-first-century art.

The Museum District, an association of eighteen wildly diverse museums and galleries, attracts around nine million visitors a year, and it doesn't even include such notable spaces as James and Ann Harithas's Station Museum, the Orange Show, or the enormous breadth and depth of the city's commercial gallery scene. "Houston has the sharpest, most vibrant art scene in the country right now," says the artist John Alexander, who began his career there.

The art scene is by no means the only bright spot on the cultural map. Houston has permanent companies in all the performing arts disciplines, and then there is an entirely different sort of culture in the form of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, a twenty-day annual event straddling February and March that is the largest of its kind anywhere in the world.

It is the juxtapositions of things like, say, the livestock show against the Balinese Ball that defines the place. Houston is what you might get if you took everything that is really, really great and slightly irritating and crazy in a good way about the South and about America and threw it in one of those rock-polishing tumblers for a spin or two before dumping it all out and leaving everything where it lay. Unlike most of Texas, there's almost as big an African-American population (more than 25 percent) as there is Hispanic. Houston's location on the Gulf attracted two different waves of Vietnamese immigrants (the first were largely shrimpers), which means there are some great Vietnamese restaurants, and its close

Big Fun

Opposite: Fresh oysters at Captain Benny's; one of the Menil Collection's varied exhibits



proximity to Louisiana means that Cajun- and Creole-influenced cuisine comes close to rivaling Tex-Mex and barbecue. It is entirely Southern in its graciousness, but decidedly un-Southern in that it is almost devoid of the habit of looking back.

Houston is also the only city remotely close to its size in the country that has no zoning. So instead of one mandated central business district, for example, major clusters of commerce are spread all over town, with leafy residential areas, huge parks, and lots of shops and bodegas and art galleries and check-cashing services and whatever else thrown in between. All this means that whatever you need—one of the forty thousand different labels of booze or wine at Spec's, a spiffy and extraordinarily speedy car wash at Dr. Gleem, or a four-dollar margarita from La Mexicana—is almost immediately at hand. You can see some highly charged political art at the Station Museum or enjoy an afternoon of quiet reflection at the Rothko Chapel; you listen to blues in a gritty club or dress up for a night at the opera.

Whatever you choose to do, people will generally be really nice to you. Houston is all about enthusiasm and service—the traffic might be terrible, but you'll be happy when you get where you're going. There's live music while you grocery shop, after all, white wine while

you try on shoes at Tootsies. The fur man at Saks is so persuasive he almost convinced a friend of mine and me to go in halves on a chinchilla stole neither of us could afford. He draped it around us, he gave us champagne, he pronounced fake fur "so unwonderful."

Which leads us back to the top and my CAMH friend with the ten-carat diamond. Well-heeled Houstonians are not afraid to show off their very real furs and their very large rocks, but when they say bigger is better, they follow through. The city has always been known for its socialites (think Joanne Herring, who funded Charlie Wilson's War, or Lynn Wyatt, whose sculpted arms are by now a local landmark), but even the silliest among them rally behind the institutions so important to the life of the city.

The night I was there twenty-five years ago, despite the dire assessment of the *Wall Street Journal*, the CAMH made a lot of money. In my own article, I reported that the bust had not dimmed the spirit of the citizenry and would likely be but a speed bump on the city's historically forward-looking road. It's like what an executive told the woman from the *Times*: "We did get our comeuppance. But we didn't whine about it, and I think the rest of the country respects that. Other places would have had an 'oh me' type of attitude. I never did hear that down here."

Living Large

Big-time destinations in the Lone Star State's metropolis

by JULIA REED

Eat & Drink

Captain Benny's Seafood

Whenever I set foot in Captain Benny's oyster boat-cum-restaurant docked in the middle of a scruffy parking lot, my well-being soars. That's because I know I'm about to enjoy some of the Gulf's freshest raw oysters, gorgeous (and remarkably greaseless) fried shrimp, and the world's coldest beer. **8506 S. Main St.; captbennys.com**

El Real Tex-Mex Café

Set on reviving authentic Tex-Mex traditions and flavors, award-winning chef Bryan Caswell of REEF and longtime business partner Bill Floyd teamed up with food writer Robb Walsh to open El Real. The menu includes traditional puffy tacos, old-school enchilada plates topped with homemade sauces, and of

course, killer margaritas. **1201 Westheimer Rd.; elrealtexmex.com**

La Mexicana

This popular spot began life thirty years ago in a former corner store and has since expanded to include a patio and doors that open at 7 a.m. Start the day with huevos rancheros and a \$4 "rita" (happy hour is from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m. and again in the afternoon). Famous for its beef tip fajitas, La Mexicana also has the best enchiladas with green sauce in town. **1018 Fairview St.; lamexicanarestaurant.com**

Ouisie's Table

After a stint on L.A.'s Sunset Boulevard, Elouise ("Ouisie") Adams Jones came home to Houston and brought her enormous charm and great Gulf South cooking with her. Breakfast includes biscuits topped with pepper-milk gravy, lunch features

a crab Cobb salad, and at dinner there are to-die-for brandied oysters—all in a homey atmosphere incorporating an herb garden and communal table. **3939 San Felipe Rd.; ouisiestable.com**

Philippe Restaurant + Lounge

This glam two-story space is the latest creation of equally glam chef Philippe Schmit, the city's self-appointed French Cowboy. The lounge has a drink of the same name (Bulleit bourbon, Lillet, and agave syrup) along with excellent tapas, and the dinner menu reflects a similar cultural mix in the form of duck confit tamales but also a classic roast duck with clementine-cognac sauce. **1800 Post Oak Blvd.; philippehouston.com**

RDG + Bar Annie

When Robert Del Grande took over operation of Café Annie in 1980, he changed the face of Houston fine dining—and Texas cooking—forever. A San Francisco native with a PhD in biochemistry, Del Grande created a temple of sophisticated Southwestern cuisine, including a crabmeat tostada that became a local institution. These days the place to be is RDG + Bar Annie, a less clubby version of the original in a great new space (think red cedar and green onyx instead of mahogany). **1800 Post Oak Blvd.; rdgbarannie.com**

t'afia

The driving force behind the Mid-town Farmer's Market, Monica Pope extends her ethos to t'afia's restaurant and bar. Tasty fortified wine drinks called ratafias are augmented with seasonal produce, as are divine champagne cocktails. Equally divine bar snacks include "red-neck" pimento mac and cheese and cremini mushroom sliders. **3701 Travis St.; tafia.com**

Sleep

The Houstonian Hotel

For a time, this resort hotel on eighteen magically secluded acres in the heart of the city was best known for being the permanent address of President George H. W. and Barbara Bush. But a renovation in 2008 gave it added grandeur and a lodgelike vibe. In addition to the discreet service, the main attraction is the luxe spa and health club, complete with rock-climbing wall, boxing ring, three heated pools, and tennis, racquetball, and squash courts. **111 N. Post Oak Lane; houstonian.com**

La Colombe d'Or

The Fondren mansion, built in 1923 for the founder of Humble Oil, is now a luxury hotel with five one-bedroom suites, a great restaurant, and adjacent villas for long-term stays. You're minutes away

from the Menil Collection, the Texas Medical Center, and Hermann Park, but you'll feel a bit like you've landed in the South of France, where the owner has a house. **3410 Montrose Blvd.; lacolombedor.com**

St. Regis

The St. Regis was built by Caroline Rose Hunt as a follow-up to Dallas's Mansion on Turtle Creek in 1982 and originally called the Remington. Tucked away on a wooded lot between River Oaks and the Galleria, it's an insulated shrine to great service and sumptuous decor. The clubby bar now bears the Remington name—as well as an actual Remington sculpture. **1919 Briar Oaks Lane; starwoodhotels.com**

Shop

Brazos Bookstore

One of the country's last great independents and a mecca for touring authors, Brazos is so beloved that when hard times threatened to shut it down in 2006, a group of fourteen loyal customers and private investors banded together to keep it open. Now its deep inventory also includes a rare book gallery, and an annual Poets and Writers Ball raises money for Brazos-sponsored scholarships to the University of Houston's Creative

Writing Program. **2421 Bissonnet St.; brazosbookstore.com**

Found

Found is full of everything from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century antiques to repurposed industrial pieces. Designers love the juxtaposition of, say, a vintage theater spotlight or a modern resin table against a faux bois garden bench or a crusty gilt mirror. **2422 Bartlett St.; foundforthehome.com**

Hamilton Shirts

Still owned by the family that started the business in 1883, Hamilton specializes in beautiful bespoke shirts. Hand cut from Italian and Swiss fabrics, the shirts are made at the Richmond Avenue store by tailors whom you can watch work through a picture window. **5700 Richmond Ave.; hamiltonshirts.com**

Leap

Susan Silverman has created by far the chicest and best-edited boutique in town, including shoes, bags, clothes, and jewelry from hard-to-find designers like Orla Kiely, Isabel Marant, Vena Cava, and edgy Italian brand ReSet. **2314 Bissonnet St.; 713-526-4580**

McClain Gallery

Since 1980, Robert and Cynthia Cage McClain have focused on the acquisi-

tion and exhibition of museum-quality contemporary and twentieth-century art. Greats like James Rosenquist, Donald Baechler, and John Alexander are included in their stable, but the McClains are also committed to a younger generation of primarily Texas-based artists. **2242 Richmond Ave.; mcclaingallery.com**

Spec's

Spec's began life in 1962 when Spec and Carolyn Jackson opened a small store selling pints and half pints. Now the flagship carries more than 40,000 labels over 80,000 square feet and may well be the only destination liquor store in the world. There's also a walk-in humidor, an enormous gourmet food selection, barware and glassware, and daily lunch specials with yummy stuff like chicken pot pie and crawfish burgers. Most days, vendors crowd the floor, offering enough samples to get a buzz on. **2410 Smith St.; specsonline.com**

Tootsies

When Mickey Rosmarin opened Tootsies some thirty-five years ago, it instantly became Houston's most talked-about women's specialty store. Now he's reinvigorated his brand with a move to a dazzling 35,000-square-foot location bathed in natural light and accented with his own art and furniture.

New designers joining the store's already haute stable include Givenchy, Celine, Rick Owens, and Nina Ricci. **2601 Westheimer Rd.; tootsies.com**

See & Do

Contemporary Arts Museum Houston

The museum was founded in 1948 by seven locals who wanted to present new art and document its role in modern life. Early exhibitions included the work of Van Gogh and Miró, as well as the great African-American Houston artist John Biggers. In 1972, it moved into its current home, designed by Gunnar Birkets, where it has continued to stage Houston's most avant-garde exhibitions. **5216 Montrose Blvd.; camh.org**

The Menil Collection

Dominique de Menil was an heir to the Schlumberger oil-drilling fortune, and her husband John was a Schlumberger exec. Together they amassed one of the most important private twentieth-century art collections in the world (including works by Magritte, Ernst, Picasso, and Rauschenberg), as well as collections of antiquities and Byzantine and tribal art. Housed in Renzo Piano's first American building, the collections rotate through in ever-changing incarnations in accordance with Dominique's belief that "habit blunts vision." Included on "campus" are the Cy Twombly Gallery, the Byzantine Fresco Chapel, and the Rothko Chapel. **1515 Sul Ross St.; menil.org**

Museum of Fine Arts Houston

One of the country's most respected museums, Houston's largest cultural institution has a collection that is spread between two stunning buildings—one by Mies van der Rohe, the other by Rafael Moneo—as well as an Isamu Noguchi-designed sculpture garden. When beloved longtime director Peter Marzio died, in 2010, the international art world mourned. Since then, Gary Tinterow, a Houston native and Metropolitan Museum Art veteran, has taken the reins. **1001 Bissonnet St.; mfah.org**





THE LOCALS
Houston, Texas

Power Players

Four Houstonians who continue to prove that the city has a very big heart

Charles Fraser Lifesaver

Though Charles Fraser grew up in Midland, and he married into Houston medical royalty (his wife, Helen, is the daughter of legendary heart surgeon Denton Cooley), he'd planned to live out his career at the Cleveland Clinic—until he was offered “an unparalleled opportunity to build a program at Texas Children’s,” now the largest pediatric hospital in the United States. Fraser, surgeon in chief, chief of congenital heart surgery, and cardiac surgeon in charge, arrived in 1995. Now the heart center’s team has five hundred full-time employees, performs almost a thousand heart surgeries a year, and developed the nation’s largest pediatric lung transplant program. “I view myself as a surgeon first,” says Fraser, who operates at least three days a week. “When you’re operating on little babies, the outcome of the operation is viewed in terms of decades of life. That keeps you coming back.”

Marilyn Oshman Arts Patron

Marilyn Oshman’s father, Jake, opened the first Oshman’s Sporting Goods store in Houston in 1931, and Marilyn herself was closely involved in the business. But art was always her passion. In the early 1970s as board chair of the Contemporary Arts Museum, she was instrumental in the hiring of director James Harithas, an often provocative former curator at D.C.’s Corcoran Gallery of Art who was a great champion of emerging artists and helped change the face of art in Texas. Since its inception thirty years ago, she has also been among the staunchest supporters of the Orange Show Center for Visionary Art, an entity that preserves such treasures as the Orange Show Monument, the Beer Can House, and the Art Car Museum and Parade, an event that attracts 250,000 people each year. The Orange Show mottoes, “Art for the sake of art” and “Art for everyone,” are the mantras she lives by.

George H. W. and Barbara Bush First Couple

Most folks think of George H. W. and Barbara Bush’s Texas lives as based in Midland, but in truth it is Houston that has long been their actual as well as spiritual home. “Through all the storms of political life, no matter what happened, Houston was always where they returned,” says Jon Meacham, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author who is at work on a biography of the forty-first president.

“It was often suggested that we would go back east,” says Barbara Bush. “No way! We were sent to Washington, China, the UN.” At the end of each stint, she adds, they were invariably lured back by the city’s energy and the “big hearts” of its citizens: “George always felt like the future was in Houston.”

The Bushes arrived in 1959, and George Bush began his political career in Houston, first as chairman of the Harris County Republican Party and later as the first Republican to represent Houston in Congress. After his 1992 presidential defeat, the couple built a townhouse in the Tanglewood neighborhood. They’ve since more than embodied Houston’s much-vaunted spirit of giving back. In 2004, Bush’s weekend-long eightieth birthday celebration, attended by the likes of Mikhail Gorbachev, John Major, and Nolan Ryan, raised a whopping \$58 million for his three favorite charities: the MD Anderson Cancer Center, the Points of Light Foundation, and the George Bush Presidential Library Foundation. The George and Barbara Bush Endowment for Innovative Cancer Research at MD Anderson has raised more than \$50 million since its founding in 1998; at the celebration officials thanked the Bushes by unveiling the Robin Bush Child and Adolescent Clinic, named for the couple’s daughter who died from leukemia at age three.

Each April since 1995, one of the most popular events on the Houston social calendar has been A Celebration of Reading. The festive evening, for which members of the extended clan always gather, features readings by best-selling authors and raises millions annually for the Barbara Bush Foundation for Family Literacy. ●

Houston Royalty
President George H. W. and Barbara Bush, photographed at their Houston townhouse on November 14, 2011

