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TEXAS TOQUES

BY BECCA HENSLEY ★ PHOTOGRAPHY BY JODY HORTON

# AUSTIN'S TOP CHEFS

DREW CURREN // BRYCE GILMORE  
ALLISON JENKINS // SHAWN CIRKIEL

**BLUES MUSICIAN LEEANN ATHERTON** said Austin, Texas, is “a vortex where people collide to create.” That’s never been more true than right now. Though Austin’s renowned music scene has always been a buffet of sounds, some superstar chefs are now doing their part by making beautiful music in the city’s kitchens.

These culinary masters are catering to the youthful, song-loving, hip populace of the music-centric capital city, as well as to the visitors who throng there for the rollicking live music and festival scene.

A number of successful restaurants are opening one after the other and steering away from the sacred Tex-Mex and barbecue fare in favor of more contemporary creations. They’re making their marks with seasonal menus, a commitment to forging relationships with farmers, and bold interpretations of world gastronomy. Having earned a smorgasbord of awards, four chefs and their restaurants stand out. Who needs record deals? These aces can plate.

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**NO. 1 DREW CURREN**  
OWNER OF:  
24 DINER, EASY TIGER BAKE SHOP & BEER GARDEN, ARRO

**CHEF DREW CURREN WANTED** to be a veterinarian, but time spent studying abroad in Tuscany awakened his passion for food and *la dolce vita*.

"Being immersed in that culture of food, family and wine changed my focus from saving animals to cooking them," he jokes. Accordingly, he exchanged his lab coat for a toque, and enrolled in The Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., where he met his future wife, pastry chef Mary Catherine Curren.

Now at the helm of three successful restaurants (24 Diner, Easy Tiger Bake Shop & Beer Garden, and Arro), with a fourth—yet unnamed Italian trattoria—debuting this summer, this

talented chef shows why he has been lauded by peers in *Best Chefs America* (2013–14) and was both a *Bravo Top Chef* competitor and a *FOOD & WINE* The People's Best New Chef nominee in 2011 and 2012.

Describing his cooking style as "honest and approachable," Curren says he is driven by authenticity.

With 24 Diner, Curren brought Austin that innovative 24/7 hangout craved by late-hour music buffs. Set at the bustling crossroads of W. 6th Street and Lamar, this happening hangout speaks to food-obsessed hipsters with a hankering for dishes like the Bacon Avocado Burger, stacked with all-natural Angus brisket, charred poblanos, smoked aioli and an Easy Tiger-baked pain au lait bun.

In a historic building steps from the boozy 6th Street scene, Easy Tiger Bake Shop & Beer Garden opens to a street-level bakery. Below, its rowdy beer pub and outdoor "suds" garden pour 30 craft beers.

Meanwhile, Curren's newly opened Arro delivers a decidedly French accent, with bistro-style renditions.

"I create from my heart—that's what drives me," says Curren.



**TOP:** CHEF DREW CURREN FIRES MUSSELS FOR SEAFOOD STEW. **ABOVE:** CURREN FINISHES THE SEAFOOD STEW WITH SCALLIONS AND SERVES IT WITH A PIECE OF CRUSTY BREAD.



**NO. 2 BRYCE GILMORE**  
OWNER OF:  
ODD DUCK, BARLEY SWINE

**IN 2009, BRYCE GILMORE** opened Odd Duck Trailer "to feed the people of Austin responsible, locally sourced food." Inspired by the best nearby farms, Gilmore dished out bold flavors and dishes with a rustic edge. When the eatery closed in 2011, his devotees were heartbroken.

Gilmore reopened in December with Odd Duck, a brick-and-mortar ode to the original, and diners came back, looking for the unexpected combinations that were the order of the day at the first Odd Duck.

A native of Austin, Gilmore grew up among restaurateurs and cites his father, a well-known local chef, as his key role model.

Gilmore's second eatery, Barley Swine, is a small love song to micro-brewed beer and locally raised pork, two of his obsessions.

While Barley Swine, located in South Austin, continues to pack in gourmards and meat lovers, Austin is really aflutter over the return of Odd Duck, where Gilmore's fare proves edgier than ever. He's been twice nominated for James Beard awards, received *FOOD & WINE*'s Best New Chef nod, and was honored by *GQ*.

"My restaurants are come-as-you-are. We are not fancy guys, and don't expect our guests to be," Gilmore says. "We're not curing disease here—we're feeding people, so we like to keep that in perspective."



**TOP:** BRYCE GILMORE, RIGHT, TALKS WITH A LINE COOK. **CENTER:** GRILLED GLAZED LOCAL QUAIL ON A BLACK BEAN PUREE. **BOTTOM:** THE NEW ODD DUCK.

NO. 3 ALLISON JENKINS  
CHEF AT:  
LA V RESTAURANT



**OWNER RALPH EADS CALLS** LaV, Austin's hottest new restaurant, his "field of dreams."

He'd thought originally of creating a modest wine bar. But when he recruited much lauded Texas-born chef Allison Jenkins, things took a turn for the posh—but in an understated, Austin way.

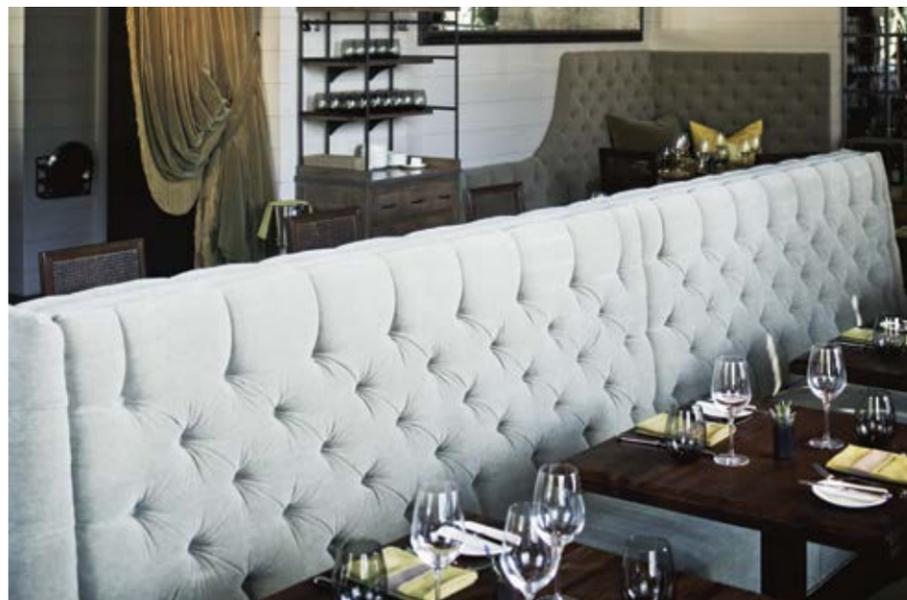
Originally, Jenkins had run Ajax Tavern in tony Aspen, Colo., and Eads knew she could bring an earthy sophistication to play—which would fit LaV's hip, but emerging, East Austin location, and the vibe of the people there.

Lithuanian-born sommelier Vilma Mazaite (also a fixture in Aspen) and pastry dynamo Janina O'Leary—a James Beard semifinalist—joined the team. The trio set LaV's timbre, planning a menu and wine library that evoke the cozy glamour of Provence between the wars.

Putting out dishes she describes as "refined rustic," Jenkins never tires of her house-made chicken liver pâté or the earthy, wood-oven bouillabaisse with squid, clams, blue prawn and rouille. Chock-full of languor-enticing nooks and crannies, the new-built restaurant's French Country mood was envisioned by designer/architect dream team Susan Ferrier and Bobby McAlpine, who aimed for the air of a moldering Provençal manse.

"At LaV, we simply want to welcome you to our home," Jenkins says.

**TOP:** CHEF ALLISON JENKINS SETS UP SOME BOUILLABAISSE (**CENTER**) THAT FEATURES SQUID, CLAMS AND BLUE PRAWN. **BOTTOM:** LA V.



NO. 4 SHAWN CIRKIEL  
OWNER OF:  
PARKSIDE, OLIVE & JUNE,  
THE BACKSPACE, CHAVEZ



**TOP:** THE DINNER CROWD AT CHAVEZ OVERLOOKING LADY BIRD LAKE. **ABOVE:** CHEF SHAWN CIRKIEL PUTS THE FINISHING TOUCHES ON A DISH OF CHARRED GREEN BEANS OVER HOUSEMADE QUESO FRESCO.

"I JUST SERVED SOMETHING simple," says Shawn Cirkiel of the time that he cooked for the James Beard Foundation, shortly after he opened his gastro-pub, Parkside, in 2008.

For Cirkiel, an Austin native, "simple" meant braised short ribs and doughnut holes with brandy cream—a meal that received rave reviews from the foodie crowd in attendance.

While Cirkiel's version of simplicity may be the cornerstone of his culinary repertoire, the chef is best known for smart, sustainable cookery, which he interprets distinctly in each of his four popular eateries. Cirkiel has a fifth culinary bun in the oven, but he's mum on the details until later this year.

Raised on a farm by parents who owned a cafe, Cirkiel hails from a food-driven heritage. His grandparents cooked all their meals on a wood-burning stove. "I'd truly love to cook for both sets of grandparents. I think they would have been really proud of me," says this graduate of The Culinary Institute of America.

Cirkiel's second restaurant delves into those roots. "I named Olive & June for my grandmothers," he says. "Here, I pay homage to my father's South Bronx, Italian-American heritage." With its central location, the neighborhood favorite serves up plates of homemade pasta and countrified cuisine.

At downtown's tiny The Backspace, Cirkiel focuses on stellar Neapolitan pizza in a family-friendly setting.

Partnering with Radisson Hotel and Suites, Cirkiel established his fourth eatery, Chavez. Here, the menu offers sophisticated versions of Southwestern cuisine near the city's attractions.

"What I enjoy about Austin diners and fellow chefs," Cirkiel says, "is their willingness to come together to support local businesses, farmers, and one another." ●