



Vineyard workers and volunteers bring in the harvest at Messina Hof Winery near Bryan. Photo courtesy Texas Tourism

From Cattle Drives to Winery Trails: Food and Wine Traditions in the Lone Star State

Dawn Orsak

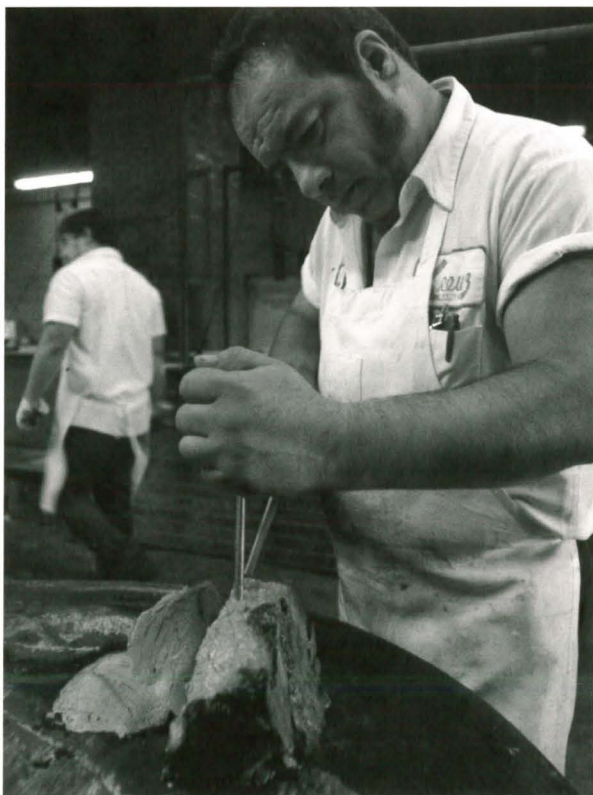
I was born in the months preceding the 1968 Smithsonian Folklife Festival, which featured my home state of Texas. Raised in the Houston area, I'm a fifth-generation Texan with a Czech and Polish background, who grew up eating *kolaches* (sweet pastries), strudels, sausage, and noodles at family reunions, church picnics, and holiday gatherings. I also spent countless weekends during junior high and high school at cook-offs where my dad's cooking team won awards for everything from barbecued brisket, chicken, and sausage to pots of chili, beans, and sauce. My parents were adventurous eaters and took my siblings and me to Kim Son and other Vietnamese restaurants owned by hardy, determined people who rode a wave of immigration to the Texas Gulf Coast in the 1970s. The very first Landry's Seafood House (now a national chain) opened on the edge of my suburban Katy neighborhood when I was thirteen. It introduced me to the joys of boiled crawfish and *boudin* (a spicy Cajun sausage) and reminded me just how close we were to Louisiana.

I ate whatever Texas bounty my modern hunter-gatherer family brought home, including the deer, quail, dove, duck, blue crabs, and flounder my father hunted or fished and the cucumbers, squash, tomatoes, beets, loquats, mustang grapes, dewberries, and persimmons my mother and grandmothers canned, pickled, or made into jams and jellies. I served as executive director of one of the state's oldest and largest wine and food festivals, which gave me a first-class education on the Texas wine industry. And, of course, we go through more tortillas at my house than loaves of bread because Tex-Mex is so delicious, accessible, and integrated into Texas cuisine that it feels like comfort food even to Texans with absolutely no Mexican heritage.

I give this glimpse of my very fortunate personal culinary history to illuminate the diversity of foods enjoyed every day in communities all over the Lone Star State. My experience reflects what many Texans eat. The question, "What is traditional Texas food?" has become more complex and interesting in 2008 than it was in 1968, due to cultural and demographic changes in the last forty years.

In 1968, the Festival focused on Texas barbecue, chili, tacos, and German horseshoe sausage. They well represented Texas's long, intertwined history with Mexico; the culture of the sizable German communities in Central Texas; and the state's dominance in cattle production. But the Festival only touched the surface of what Texans eat today. This huge state encompasses high plains, desert, gulf coast, mountains, and blackland prairies and produces foods as varied as grapefruit, shrimp, wheat, onions, pecans, oysters, rice, grapes, corn, and beef. Significant Mexican, African American, German, Cajun, Italian, Asian, East European, and Middle Eastern populations contribute to the flavors of Texas. The ranching, shrimping, fishing, wine, and technology industries likewise influence the Texas table.

Aficionados know Texas is blessed with many variations of barbecue, but they all require meat, smoke, and heat. Beef brisket may still be king, but plenty of other meats are barbecued. There are also differences in rubs, woods used for smoking, types of cooking pits, and kinds of sauces (if any) served. A visitor might find pulled pork cooked in



Members of the extended Morkovsky family gather annually to make up to 1,000 pounds of Czech pork sausage. Photo by Valentino Mauricio

a pit loaded with hickory at an African American family reunion in East Texas; pork, beef, and venison sausages in Central Texas Czech and German meat markets; *barbacoa* (cow head smoked in a pit dug into the ground) in South Texas; or beef ribs cooked on open pits on a West Texas ranch. Even traditional sides of pinto beans, potato salad, coleslaw, bread, tortillas, and sauce reflect regional and personal tastes.

All barbecue styles can be sampled at the state's hundreds of annual cook-offs. Texans also compete for the best gumbo, steak, *pan de campo* (or "cowboy bread," the official bread of Texas), chicken noodle soup, *kolaches*, and, especially, chili. Part cooking contest, part fundraiser, and part performance, cook-offs cross ethnic, regional, and gender boundaries. In the late 1960s, "Bowl of Red" became another nickname for the dish because of the color chili powder imparts to the stewed beef. Some of the best-known names in chili, such as chili-seasoning manufacturer Wick Fowler and columnist and chili promoter Frank X. Tolbert, were associated with the Original Terlingua International Championship Chili Cookoff. The championship, the "granddaddy" of cook-offs, started in 1967. The Chili Appreciation Society International sanctions more than 500 statewide cook-offs every year.

Pit manager Roy Perez slices barbecued brisket at the historic Kreuz Market, which was established in 1900 in Lockhart, Texas.

Photo by Valentino Mauricio

Venison Black Bean Chili with Goat Cheese Crema and Slang Jang

From Stephan Pyles's cookbook *New Tastes from Texas*

CHILI

4 tablespoons olive oil
1 pound venison leg, well trimmed of fat and finely chopped
6 garlic cloves, finely chopped
1 onion, chopped
1 jalapeño, seeded and chopped
4 tablespoons ancho puree
2 chipotles in adobo, chopped
4 medium tomatoes, blanched, peeled, seeded and chopped
2 teaspoons ground cumin
1 quart chicken stock or vegetable stock, or more as needed to cover in cooking process
1 12-ounce bottle dark beer, such as Shiner Bock
1 cup black beans, soaked overnight and drained
1 teaspoon epazote
1 tablespoon masa harina
1 tablespoon chopped fresh cilantro
salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Heat the oil in a heavy stockpot or casserole until lightly smoking. Add the venison, garlic, onion, and jalapeño; cook over medium heat until the meat has browned, about 15 minutes. Add the ancho puree, chipotles, tomatoes, and cumin; cook for 10 minutes longer.

Add the stock and beer; bring to a boil. Add the black beans and epazote. Reduce the heat and let simmer for 1½ to 2 hours or until the meat and beans are perfectly tender, stirring occasionally. Add more stock throughout the cooking process, if necessary, to keep meat and beans covered. Whisk in the masa harina and cilantro. Season with salt and pepper to taste and garnish with Goat Cheese Crema and Slang Jang.

Yields 4 to 6 servings.

GOAT CHEESE CREMA

1 cup heavy cream
6 ounces fresh goat cheese, crumbled
2 tablespoons roasted garlic puree

Heat the cream in a small saucepan until just boiling. Place in a blender and slowly add the goat cheese and garlic, blending 2 to 3 minutes or until smooth. Serve at room temperature.

SLANG JANG

1 ear of corn, in husk
2 ripe tomatoes, seeded and diced into ¼-inch pieces
1 medium-size green bell pepper, seeded and diced into ¼-inch pieces
1 small onion, minced
2 stalks celery, peeled and diced into ¼-inch pieces
1 jalapeño, seeded and minced
2 teaspoons sugar
½ cup cider vinegar
2 tablespoons olive oil
salt and freshly ground black pepper to taste

Preheat the oven to 325°F.

Roast the ear of corn in its husk for 20 minutes. Let cool to room temperature and cut the kernels off the cob.

Combine corn and the remaining ingredients in a medium bowl; chill for 2 to 3 hours before serving. Serve chilled or at room temperature.



At hundreds of chili cook-offs all over the state, proud cooks offer passersby samples of their concoctions. Photo by Andy Reisberg

This one-dish meal was popularized in San Antonio—the veritable heart and soul of Tex-Mex cooking—in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Mexican women, dubbed “chili queens,” sold it at their street stands. Houston food writer and cookbook author Robb Walsh calls Tex-Mex “America’s oldest regional cuisine.” By including meats and other ingredients more available in Texas and by catering to non-Mexican patrons of restaurants that started opening in the early 1900s, Mexican Americans shaped a unique, informal, and nourishing fare. It is now the state’s most influential cuisine; even dishes generally assumed to be Mexican, such as fajitas and nachos, are actually Tex-Mex creations. From simple breakfast tacos of scrambled eggs and chorizo sausage made by a grandmother for her family in Refugio to fried oyster nachos served at Nuevo Tex-Mex restaurants in Austin or Dallas, Tex-Mex’s prevalence cannot be overstated. Patricia Sharpe, food editor of *Texas Monthly*, wrote in a December

2004 article, “Once upon a time, we were part of Mexico, and if you look at what we like to eat, you would think we still are.”

In contrast to the seminal influence of Mexican cooking, Vietnamese cuisine is recent in its effect on the Texas table. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, a wave of refugees escaped to Texas, with another following in the late 1970s. Some found work in urban centers like Austin, Dallas, and, especially, Houston. Others settled in coastal areas, where the shrimping industry was similar to that of their homeland. Through ethnic shopping centers, restaurants, and celebrations of holidays and ceremonies, these communities maintain their traditional foods and heritage. Fresh vegetables and herbs, noodle soups, stir-fry dishes, and soy and fish sauces epitomize Vietnamese cuisine. Restaurants like Kim Son and Mai’s in Houston, frequented by non-Vietnamese diners, have fused traditional dishes with popular “Texan” items to create specialties like Vietnamese fajitas and fish tacos.

From the 1960s through the 1980s, many Cajuns (descendants of French-speakers who were expelled from Nova Scotia in the late 1700s) left southern Louisiana to take oil industry jobs on the upper Texas coast, especially in the “Golden Triangle” area of Beaumont-Port Arthur-Orange. Cajun cooking consists largely of stewed meats, seafood, and gravies combined with rice. Sharing a coastline, state line, and love of fresh seafood, Texans embraced Cajun specialties like crawfish étouffée, blackened snapper, and seafood gumbo. The online dining guide b4-U-eat.com lists more than seventy Cajun restaurants in the Houston area alone. Hurricane Katrina recently blurred the boundary between the two states even more—thousands of Louisiana refugees relocated to Texas and reinvigorated Cajun culture in the Lone Star State.

Pedernales River Chili

From Mrs. Lyndon B. “Lady Bird” Johnson

4 pounds chili meat (coarsely ground round steak or well-trimmed chuck)
 1 large onion, chopped
 2 garlic cloves
 1 teaspoon ground oregano
 1 teaspoon ground cumin
 6 teaspoons chili powder (more, if needed)
 1½ cups canned whole tomatoes and their liquid
 2 to 6 generous dashes liquid hot sauce
 2 cups hot water
 salt to taste

Place the meat, onion, and garlic in a large, heavy pan or Dutch oven. Cook over medium-high heat until light in color. Add the oregano, cumin, chili powder, tomatoes, hot sauce, and 2 cups hot water. Bring to a boil, lower the heat, and simmer for about 1 hour. Skim off the fat during cooking. Salt to taste.



(Upper) The Vietnamese-owned Donut Palace in Port Aransas caters to the multicultural community of the Texas Gulf Coast by offering Czech *kolaches* (pastries), Mexican American breakfast tacos, southern donuts, and croissants, which reflect the French influence on traditional Vietnamese cuisine. Photo by Steve Orsak

(Lower) In Dripping Springs in the Texas Hill Country, the Reyes family gathers a week or two before Christmas to make dozens of tamales for their Christmas Eve dinner. In the past, the family made pork tamales only, but as tastes changed, they added corn, cheese, and *rajas* (poblano peppers) tamales for vegetarian relatives. Photo by Ella Gant, courtesy Texas Folklife

Deb's Hot Rod Chili

From Debbie Ashman
2007 Terlingua International Chili Champion

2 pounds coarsely ground beef
8-ounce can tomato sauce
5-ounce can of beef broth

Mix the following spices for Step 1

1 teaspoon onion powder
2 teaspoons garlic powder
2 teaspoons beef crystals
1 teaspoon chicken crystals
1 tablespoon paprika
1 tablespoon Mexene Chili Powder
½ teaspoon cayenne
¼ teaspoon black pepper
1 package Sazon Goya

Mix the following spices for Step 2

1 tablespoon Mexene Chili Powder
1 tablespoon Hatch Mild Chili Powder
2 tablespoons light chili powder
1 tablespoon dark chili powder
¼ teaspoon white pepper

Mix the following spices for Step 3

1 teaspoon onion powder
1 teaspoon garlic salt
¼ teaspoon cayenne
¾ tablespoon Mexene Chili Powder
1 tablespoon cumin
"Original" Louisiana Brand Hot Sauce to taste

Cooking the chili:

1. Cook the meat over medium-high heat until light in color and drain the grease.
2. Slow boil the meat in the beef broth and one equal can of distilled water for 10 minutes.
3. Add Step 1 and medium boil for 60 minutes.
4. Add Step 2 and medium boil for 45 minutes.
5. Add Step 3 and medium boil for 15 minutes.

In last five minutes, taste for spiciness and adjust as required.

Although the modern Texas wine industry emerged in the last forty years, the state has a rich and colorful wine heritage that goes back 300 years. In the late seventeenth century, one hundred years before Californians or Virginians, Spanish missionaries planted grape vines near present-day El Paso to produce sacramental wines. Texas is perhaps the oldest wine-producing state in the Union.

European settlers from countries with well-established wine-making traditions brought their own grapevine rootstock in the 1800s. For many years, their small vineyards produced wine solely for home or local use. Later, under their influence and that of Texan T.V. Munson, a world-renowned horticulturist and authority on grapevines, grape culture expanded into a fledgling industry. By the early 1900s, the state boasted more than twenty commercial wineries.

The enactment of Prohibition in 1919 forced all but one winery to close, effectively wiping out the industry until the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1935. The lone holdout, Val Verde Winery in Del Rio, is now the oldest Texas winery. Established in 1883 by Italian immigrant Frank Qualia and still family-owned and operated, Val Verde is stronger than ever. But the state wine industry has continued to feel the effects of Prohibition; many of Texas's 254 counties still enforce dry laws that inhibit the ability of growers to sell their wine or set up tasting rooms.

The revival of the Texas wine industry began in the 1970s with the founding of the Llano Estacado and Pheasant Ridge wineries in the High Plains, where farmers turned from cotton to grapes because they required less water and yielded more. By 1975, Lubbock, Fredericksburg, Fort Worth, and



Fort Stockton were centers of viticulture. Grapes were grown throughout the state by the early 1980s; wineries naturally followed. Fueled by a long tradition of viticulture and experimentation, the Texas Agricultural Experiment Station and the University of Texas identified appropriate varieties and regions most conducive to growing grapes.

The worldwide interest in wines inspired some Texans to change careers in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Susan and Ed Auler became the first to plant vines in the Hill Country west of Austin and San Antonio, where they converted their cattle ranch into a vineyard after an eye-opening trip to the Bordeaux region of France. Initially, grape growers felt compelled to emulate France and California by importing vines and producing commercially accepted wines, such as Chardonnay and Burgundy. But much of Texas was not suited to the popular French and California wine varieties. By trial and error, Texas wine growers gradually began



(Upper) Brennan Vineyards in Comanche, Texas, grows Cabernet, Syrah and Viognier grapes, among others, for their award-winning wines. Photo by Bob Daemmrich, courtesy Texas Department of Agriculture

(Lower) Second- and third-generation owners of Val Verde Winery, Louis and Tommy Qualia, pose in the winery's cellar in the 1970s. Frank Qualia founded Val Verde in 1883. It is the oldest winery in Texas and is still family-owned. Photo courtesy Val Verde Winery

Texas wines reflect “wide open places, a love of tradition, independence, and the joy that comes from being larger than life.”

to make the most of the state’s unique terrain and weather conditions. They focused in some areas on Mediterranean-style varietals similar to those of Italy, Spain, and southern France.

Today, the state has eight federally approved wine grape-growing regions, or “appellations,” from the Panhandle to the Gulf Coast. The Hill Country has become America’s second-largest viticulture area, while the High Plains and Far West regions have proved most productive. (Other areas have battled Pierce’s disease, black rot, and severe weather conditions.) Each region has its own *terroir* (climate, soil, and unique characteristics), enabling Texas, as a whole, to produce an unusually diverse group of varietals with unique flavors and vintages. Joshua Coffee of Llano Estacado Winery in Lubbock says Texas wines reflect “wide open places, a love of tradition, independence, and the joy that comes from being larger than life.”

Though many come from wine-making families, Texas grape growers and winemakers are generally considered mavericks, who stubbornly confront the

elements, government regulations, and consumer tastes. They judge their success by sales, national attention to the industry, satisfaction with their own product, and the awards that Texas wines increasingly garner. Texas is now the fifth-leading wine-producing state in the nation; the industry employs about 8,000 people and contributes more than \$1 billion annually to the state’s economy. With their tasting rooms and picturesque atmospheres, wineries have become tourist destinations. Along with new immigrant communities, they are changing the culinary landscape of the state. They add a new dimension to the Texas dinner table and help expand the perception of Texas cuisine.

Dawn Orsak has spent the last fifteen years working in the areas of food and culture, first for Texas Folklife Resources and most recently as executive director of the Texas Hill Country Wine & Food Festival. She has curated over fifty foodways presentations and has been a presenter at the Smithsonian Folklife Festival and the Louisiana Folklife Festival, among other events.

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