

# Meet Me on the Bayou

Innovative Houston has a long-held tradition of welcoming immigrants and embracing new ideas.

BY DAVID ARTAVIA

A unique culture exists within the bayou cities outlining the Gulf of Mexico. A mix of Mexican, Cajun, Creole, and African- and Native American traditions encapsulate a wide range of influences that have stood the tests of time, progress, and conservation. One of its brightest cities is a shining example of how design and vision come together without sacrificing heritage. Houston (dubbed the “Bayou City”) has a long-cherished Tejano culture, a mindset where Mexico and Texas merge, which continues to galvanize its residents to preserve all aspects of their shared identities.

The sense of Houston’s pride and forward-thinking attitude is palpable everywhere, but it’s especially visible in the bustling food and hospitality scene. Of course, that may be due to Houston being one of the most welcoming cities for refugees. Add that to its continuing efforts of nurturing young talent—no matter where they come from—the city has become a mecca for innovators looking to experiment.

Chef Hugo Ortega, for example, came to the U.S. from Mexico in 1984 and he found work as a dishwasher. Thirty-five years later, he is the executive chef and co-owner at four top Houston restaurants: Hugo’s, Backstreet Café, Xochi, and Caracol.

**Xochi** (XochiHouston.com), Ortega’s newest endeavor, located downtown near the George R. Brown Convention Center, is a must-visit for lovers of authentic Mexican food. Its Oaxaca-inspired dishes and cocktails are next level with endless varieties of moles, homemade chocolate, and some dishes topped with surprising critters like grasshoppers or other insects.

Anyone who knows Houston well will tell you some of its brightest leaders in both politics and hospitality have been women. I was blown away by the city’s newest luxury hotel, the **C. Baldwin** (CBaldwinHotel.com), named after Charlotte Baldwin, the wife of the city’s cofounder, Augustus Allen. Historians refer to Baldwin, an explorer, builder, and visionary of her time, as the “Mother of Houston.”

The new women-led hotel aims to honor Baldwin’s legacy while giving homage to other Houston women whose names grace its meeting rooms and ballrooms—like civil rights leader Barbara Jordan, historian Adina De Zavala, the first female Black aviator Bess Coleman, the first governor of Texas Miriam “Ma” Ferguson, legendary rock star Janis Joplin, and more.

The C. Baldwin is central to many of the city’s latest projects. Over \$1.39 billion in new downtown construction projects are underway and another \$2.58 billion are in pre-development or design phases.

One of them is **Bravery Chef Hall** (BraveryCheffHall.com), a 9,000-square-foot downtown food incubator changing the game by providing up-and-coming chefs and bartenders an opportunity to do a test run with the public without the commitment of opening a restaurant. The market has five restaurant concepts under one roof, each with its own chef-owners and dining experience, and is equipped with an array of future gamechangers—like **The Blind Goat** from Christine Ha, season three winner of *MasterChef*. Each chef deals with their own suppliers and signs individual leases, so there’s something new to find every few months.

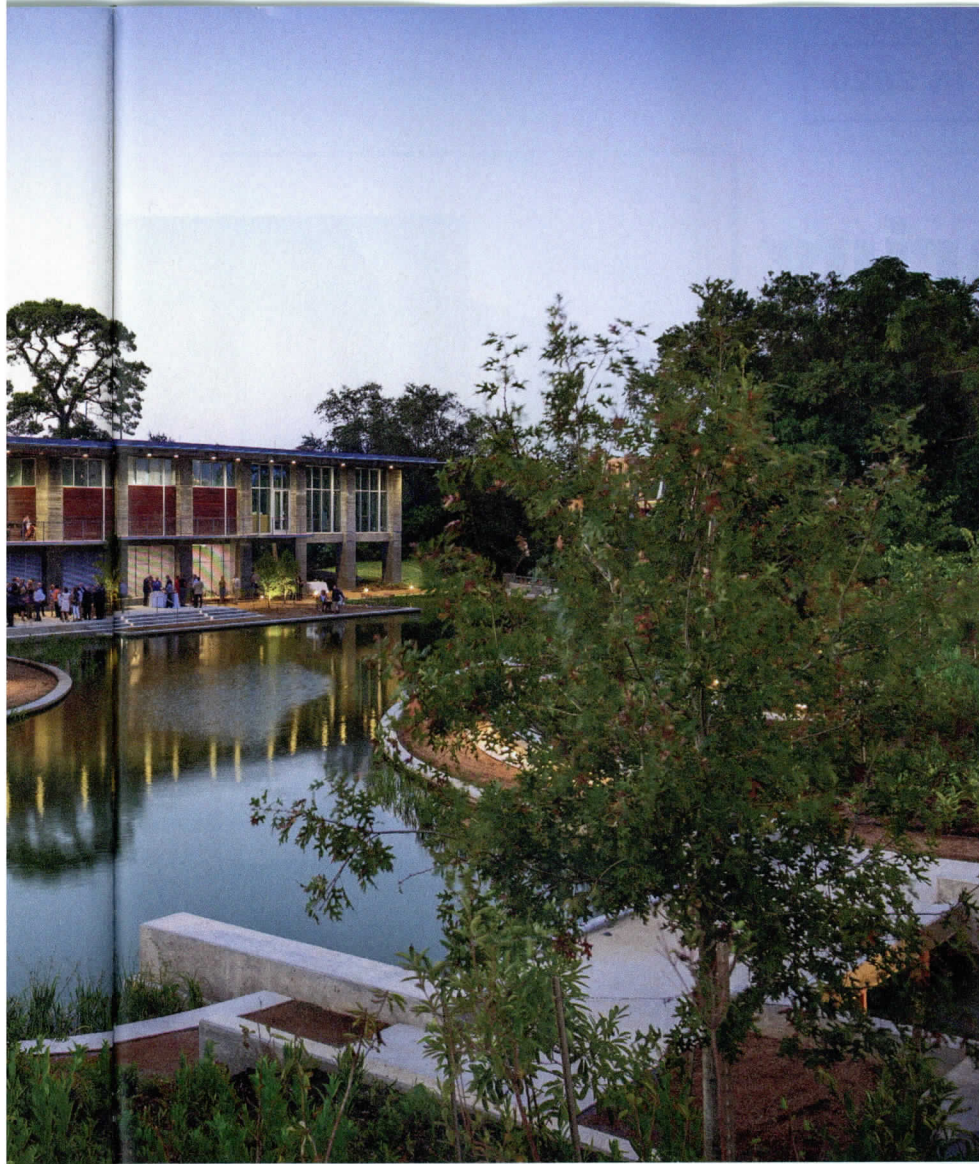
Of course, the city has strongly embraced LGBTQ movers and shakers including lesbian chef Monica Pope, a pioneer in the farm-to-table movement



HOUSTON BRIDGES PROJECT (BRIDGE PAINTER JONNU SINGLETON/SWA GROUP | BATOU)

COURTESY DAVID ARTAVIA (BIRD CLAW GAY MURAL); HOUSTON BRIDGES PROJECT (HOUSTON MURAL)

ABON a a H R a d X fe n



Above: The view of Buffalo Bayou Park. Opposite: One of the many colorful bridges on a Houston freeway (top); a loveable painter at the Houston Mural Festival. Right: A mural upstairs at The Eagle bar (top); delicious cuisine at Xochi (middle); a fabulous Insta-worthy mural (bottom).

and the chef-owner of restaurants **Sparrow Bar + Cookshop** and **Beaver's**. Another one to watch is Brandi Key, partner-chef at LMN Hospitality, who oversaw construction and menu development for **The Dunlavy** (@DunlavyHouston), the city's premier restaurant known as the "jewelry box on the bayou."

With over 365 miles of biking lanes, there is no better way to explore Houston than on bike. You would regret not wheeling through **Allen's Landing**, located downtown at the southern bank of the Buffalo Bayou, known to be the birthplace of Houston.

After a scenic ride through the bayou, you're going to want to take a disco nap before diving into what Montrose, Houston's eclectic gayborhood, has to offer. Your first stop should be at the historic bar **The Eagle** (EagleHouston.com), where upstairs you'll find displays curated by J.D. Doyle, a local historian whose collections of old newspaper and magazine clippings (including *The Advocate* covers) are pinned in the halls and ceilings.

Across the way on Pacific Street is **Postino** (@PostinoWineCafe), once home to the Montrose Mining Company, the city's longest-running gay bar. Its owner, Lauren Bailey, designed the building to reflect Montrose's history by decorating a whole wall with old photos and archival material. It's loaded with Instagram-worthy visuals.

A 10-minute car ride will take you to the Heights neighborhood, an eclectic bohemia with shops like **Manready Mercantile** (@ManreadyMerc), where you can enjoy a glass of whiskey while shopping for your favorite vintage leather home goods. Oh, and you can also make a personalized scented candle—a perfect place for a fun romantic outing.



Before you head out, though, it's vital to get brunch at **Boheme** (@BohemeHouston), an unpretentious laid-back spot with a post-college crowd that comes in for happy hour specials, free WiFi, and live jazz music. Its Sunday brunch has Houston's best drag queens on full display, alongside a buffet wrapping around the entire front room (everything is bigger in Texas).

It's easy for coast-dwellers to have a stiff lip about Texas, a state with a not-so-clean LGBTQ record. After all, *Lawrence v. Texas* (the case that led the Supreme Court to declare prohibitions on private queer sex unconstitutional in 2003) began in Houston. But an exciting new wave of thinkers and doers are reimagining the city for a new "woke" generation.

The Bayou City has a history as rich as its soil, and thanks to an incredible blue wave of reimagined hospitality, its future will be, too.

# THE ADVOCATE

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10 BEST  
DESTINATIONS  
FOR 2020

BOYS  
ON  
THE  
SIDE

**HALSEY** JOINS THE  
PANTHEON OF ROCK GODS  
BY CHANNELLING BOWIE,  
HENDRIX, DYLAN, AND JAGGER