

BEER, TX

Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. remains the craft-beer industry standard.

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Houston Chronicle @HoustonChron Houston Chronicle

Wednesday, November 5, 2014 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

RESTAURANT REVIEW

Southern fare, with a nod to the Asian community

By Alison Cook

Mark Holley's style has never been simple. He emerged from the heated baroque depths of the Brennan's Houston kitchen and went on to lead his own troops at the late Pesce, where dishes tended to have an abundance of moving parts.

Too many moving parts, often. I remember wishing fervently for some calculated subtraction to take place. That happened a couple of times at Holley's ambitious new Midtown restaurant, too, but in general his cuisine seems better marshaled on this corner of Elgin and Louisiana, with welcome islands of simplicity amid the bustle of ingredients.

Consider the perfect wedge salad of baby iceberg hearts — so diminutive as to startle — in a ranch dressing thrumming with buttermilk tang and peppercorn depth. An exemplary slab of crisp bacon rides on top, along with crisp rods of fried pickled okra. A crouton here; a bouncy ring of seared onion there; a scatter of cherry tomato halves chiming in from the perimeter.

It's a smart, grownup version of a local favorite too often put together on automatic pilot. So are the buttery benne seed (that's sesame by its Deep Southern Carolinas name) Parker House rolls, baked in-house and served with accessories that make them seem more like a little party than a first course. There's a subtle mousse of smoked drum, a poblano-spiked pimento cheese, and a fistful of the lovingly pickled items (green beans, enoki, fennel, grapes) that the kitchen does so well here.

I could come here and

FLAVOR

BOOK

'The Baking Bible' contains recipes for those who make desserts from the heart.

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Section F ★★★



Melissa Phillip / Houston Chronicle

Tamale traditions, all wrapped up

Holidays are the time for learning how to make batches of the warm corn dish

By Greg Morago

I can see my tia drop a small ball of masa in a glass of water. It sinks to the bottom. She gets back

Americans. Although I left home three decades ago, I still vividly recall my Mexican grandmother, mother and my tias going through the many steps of



Specialty stores aim to boost flavors

By Rebecca Hennes

From the top of a villa overlooking the foothills of Tuscany, Ben Meinen enjoyed a six-course meal made from ingredients all grown or produced within a mile of Armando Morettini's olive mill.

Morettini founded The Olive Mill Toscana Morettini there in 1950 with his wife, Elvia Finamori. The two have worked for years with Vom Fass, a brand well known in Europe for its spices, oils and vinegars.

Vom Fass just opened its first Houston store — its second Texas location — in Rice Village. It is among a handful of new specialty stores for spices, oils and vinegars that have opened recently in the area.

Brian and Larita Moorhead own the new Vom Fass store, which sells products from countries such as Italy, France, Greece and Spain.

"It's a Mediterranean-inspired concept that allows people to taste the product before they buy it," Moorhead said. "That's just something that's so new for everyone."

First-time customers are offered tasting tours through the store's "liquid to lips" service. Moorhead stressed the importance of testing the products and learning how to use them.

"It is truly a unique tasting experience when you walk into the store," Moorhead said. "And it's fun versus running into the grocery store and standing in line."

Wayde Burt, owner of Olive & Vine in CityCentre, said consumers are simply demanding better, all-natural ingredients.

"There is a huge difference in the quality of what is available," Burt said. "For decades, standard olive oil has been sold in the grocery stores, and there was never a particular great taste for it because it was all so bad and nobody ever knew because it's all they ever had. Once importers started to bring in fresh, high-quality oil, things started to change."

Specialty products that Vom Fass and Olive & Vine sell are not only for culinary experts. Home cooks will be interested in ingredients that can enhance the flavor of meals they already make for their families.

"Flavor-wise, it's a night-and-day difference," Meinen said. "I think it's so important because the quality of the product really makes a huge difference in the outcome of your dish."

Meinen described his recent trip to tour Morettini's property: "It really was eye opening to walk through the groves where our olives are grown and to see the product that's going to be on our shelves. He explained everything from the age of the trees



Johnny Hanson photos / Houston Chronicle

Brian Moorhead and his wife, Larita, own the new Vom Fass store in Rice Village that offers cask-aged vinegars, oils, select wines, and spirits and liqueurs, spices and gourmet foods.

to how they harvest it — the whole bit."

Meinen said that their olive oils are placed in food-safe "bladders" within 24 hours of being pressed. The quick bagging is critical to avoid exposure to light and air, which can break down the oil and make it taste more acidic.

Vom Fass' most popular vinegars include fruit vinegars, which are processed in huge wooden casks in Germany.

"You could literally drink this out of the bottle," he added. "You

could even put it on ice cream — I mean it's crazy how good this stuff is."

Vom Fass also carries infused oils and nut and seed oils. Moorhead said the pumpkin-seed oil is one of his favorites and is a popular fall product. For new customers, the easiest place to start using these specialty ingredients is in salads.

"I'll be honest with you, I was never a huge salad eater," Moorhead said. "But the pumpkin-seed oil combined with the pomegranate vinegar (on a salad) is an incredible taste. What I've learned from those two products is the depth you can use them in; drizzle them on vegetables, on a pumpkin pie, use them in desserts."

Meinen said calamansi vinegar is another popular product. It also works well on salad with basil and can make a refreshing "shrub" (sparkling water with vinegar drink) mixed with mint. You can use the same vinegar to marinate salmon or sprinkle it on strawberries for dessert, he said.

There's a health angle, too.

The stores

Vom Fass Houston: at 2424 Times in Rice Village; 832-742-6100; vomfasshouston.com. The store opened Saturday and will hold a grand opening Nov. 20. Hours: 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Monday-Friday, 9 a.m.-8 p.m. Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday
Olive & Vine: 795 Town and Country, Suite 146, in CityCentre; 832-377-1610; oliveandvineshop.com. Hours: 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Monday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-7 p.m. Friday-Saturday, noon-5 p.m. Sunday

"When you're talking about fresh olive oil, you're talking about a product full of antioxidants," Burt said. "But those antioxidants only exist when it's fresh because they deteriorate over time, so you're getting a much healthier product if you're buying fresh olive oil."

Spices are a relatively new component of the Vom Fass product line. Moorhead said the company has focused on special blends — ranging

from Argentina barbecue, Cajun, fish, chicken spice and vegetable spice — that make life easier for home cooks. And they offer advice for pairing the spice blends with oils and vinegars.

Olive & Vine also sells spice blends and displays them by geography, from North African to Indian and Latin.

James Wreck owns iBurn, a relatively new specialty spice, rub and hot-sauce company. He urges people to be creative with favorite flavor combinations. Wreck said one of his favorite combinations is sprinkling his Kentucky Bourbon Infused Salt on a chocolate sundae for the ultimate sweet-salty treat.

"Limiting your selection to only one ingredient is a travesty when you have such a variety at your disposal," Wreck said. "There's a big, bold world of food outside of what you find at your neighborhood grocery store. You should venture outside the norm and live a little."

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The new Vom Fass store in Rice Village offers gift baskets.

BEER, TX By Ronnie Crocker

Sierra Nevada the industry standard for a reason

The evening was October-perfect at Liberty Station, with top-shelf company and a round of wet hop India pale ales from Sierra Nevada Brewing Co. set out before us. Our beers were poured into special IPA glasses that were designed with input from the brewery itself.

"I think Sierra Nevada

introduction to craft beer," Preston said, hailing it as an approachably hoppy beer that appeals to newcomers and "gets them into the game."

I agreed with both men and, even though Sierra Nevada has grown into one of the nation's very largest crafts, I feel an obligation to spread the word to the upcoming



knowing which beers they can rely on.

"When I'm at home and wanting to drink a beer on my porch, I'm going to drink a beer that I like," he said. "And that doesn't change very often. ... I guess I'm past the exploratory stage."

Sprechen sie craft beer?

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