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SAN ANTONIO DREAMING

Tasting a City on a Mission

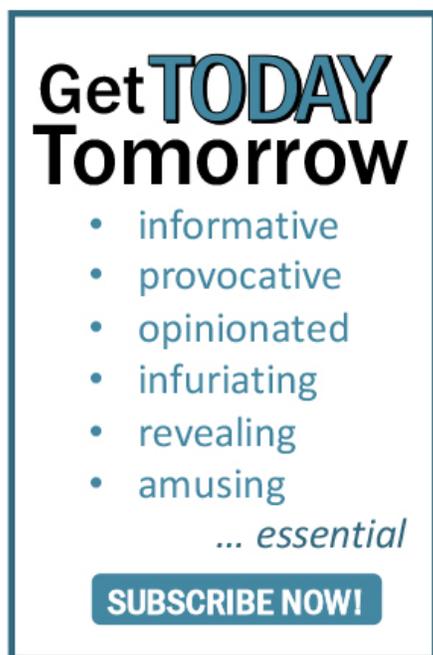
Steve Gillick

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22 AUG 2016: Zach Garza talks about El Sueno, the dream. As an instructor at the Culinary Institute of America as well as the Executive Chef of Nao Gastropub, both located in the trendy Pearl Brewery district of San Antonio, Zach brags, “I get to do what I love every day and share my dream with the next generation”. And what he does is an

exercise in passion for food and a celebration of his roots as a San Antonio native.



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Zach, who at 29 years of age still fits the ‘under 30’ category of ‘Millennial’ Chefs, is one of the leaders of San Antonio’s artisanal food movement, and the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) is located smack in the middle of this popular tourist area filled with line-up only restaurants, pubs, coffee shops and the weekend Pearl Farmers Market.

But Zach is quick to caution us not to stereotype San Antonio’s cuisine as ‘Tex-Mex’. A more accurate description is ‘Pan-Latin’, with dishes inspired by various cultures in Central and South America, in addition to a growing Asian influence. During our cooking class Zach prepared an imaginative dish of Peruvian Papa a la huancaína followed by Chilean sautéed Amberjack and a San Antonio Beet Salad that, excuse the expression, couldn’t be beat.

Outside the CIA is Botika, where former student, Chef Geronimo Lopez expresses his own love of

fusion cuisine. We were greeted with a choice of drinks: Pisco from Peru or Torrontés from Argentina, followed by a sampling of foods that included South American sushi (a nod to 'Nikkei', or Peruvian-Japanese creations), a Korean-inspired dish of braised pork jowls with pickled cabbage in hoisin sauce, and a dessert of Banana-Mango Egg Rolls. So much for San Antonio Tex-Mex!

And for those looking to further connect with the Pearl District, the ultra-chic Hotel Emma occupies one of the old brewery buildings. Its lobby is a stunning mix of plush, comfy leather couches, antiques, gears and machinery, with easy access to the Riverwalk, one of the city's iconic attractions.

Not far away at Brigid, an Asian Fusian/Texas Bistro/Mexican hot spot in the King William Historic District, millennial Chef Justin Richardson asserts that Texans are mavericks. "We hold true to who we are and what we do". He notes that while there are many unique flavours to taste in the city, "still, if you haven't had a breakfast taco then you haven't lived". But then he brings out a sample of his creations that include crispy baby octopus with seaweed, fried green tomatoes, seared sea bass and chicken fried quail. And to pair the dishes with a good craft beer, the Black Butte Porter from Oregon is recommended... and it works!

But San Antonio stands on its own feet as far as beers are concerned. At one time the Pearl Brewery was the largest in the State, and in the 19th Century, the city boasted upwards of 30 breweries. James Hudec, the Brewmaster at the Alamo Beer Company enthuses about reviving those glory days. His dream is that Alamo Beer will become a destination all its own as part of a

golden triangle of San Antonio must-visits: The Riverwalk, the Alamo, and the Alamo Brewery.

Hudec spoke about the popularity of craft beers as an evolution: “moving your palate away from beers that have been dumbed down” (i.e. the major breweries), to those that respond to the growing foodie locavore movement, where people are seeking out locally produced products and are cognizant of small businesses going out of their way to offer those products. Noting the uncomplicated, genuine quality of his own products, Hudec advised, “Like Texans, our beers are ‘please, howdy, thank you ma’am”.

But exploring the city of San Antonio reveals that the themes of artisanal creation are certainly not new. The city started on a Mission, or rather, was the end result of the four Missions that lie within San Antonio Missions National Historical Park, a UNESCO World Heritage site that includes Mission San Juan, San José, Conception and Espada. A fifth Mission, San Antonio de Valera, known as The Alamo, was the site of the 1835 battle that led to Texas independence from Mexico.

In the early 18th century, the Missions or religious settlements owed their success in large part to the system of ditches or acequias that connected them to the San Antonio River, several miles away. The idea was borrowed from the Moors in Spain, and allowed for the blocking and unblocking of irrigation canals that led from the so-called ‘mother ditch’ to the crop fields. This in turn allowed for the self-sufficiency of the Missions.

A visit to the fascinating sites of Mission San José and San Juan helped to put the city in perspective. In the 18th century, things were done in the spirit

of ‘necessity as the mother of invention’, but now in the 21st century, San Antonio excels in doing things proactively in the spirit of education, healthfulness, comfort and taste.

We stayed at La Cantera Resort and Spa on the outskirts of the city. This five star property (the lobby alone is pretty amazing) was the home of the 2016 Culinaria Festival with its goal of promoting the city’s food and wine creations and catering, literally, to “the real hunger for people to know about food”.

Culinaria events such as “Back to Bubbles” featured sparkling wines and champagnes along with the culinary creations of local chefs. “Tacos and Talk” provided inventive taco journeys (e.g. Lemon-Curry BBQ Shrimp Tacos) as well as pairings with wine, craft beer, tequila and mezcal. “Burgers, BBQ and Beer” featured brisket, lamb, wild boar and beef burgers with condiments that included blue cheese, mac and cheese, onion rings, sausage and Jalapeno.

And of course no visit to San Antonio would be complete without wandering on Riverwalk. This area consists of a series of promenades along the route of the San Antonio River, in the historic core of the city, where stone arched bridges, historic buildings, cafes, bars, restaurants, souvenir shops, flowers, trees, museums and boat rides characterize the fun, relaxing aspect of the area. It’s a laid back, stroll-as-you-please, take photos and enjoy the colourful scenery, kind of place.

On our last night, after a delicious dinner cruise on the river (yes, more eating and drinking), we gathered in front of San Fernando Cathedral to see The Saga, a brilliant sound and light show,

projected onto the façade of the historic Cathedral. The presentation recounts the 280 year journey of the city and its mission to celebrate its people, history and culture, along with the drive and passion to continue to grow in the same artisanal spirit that began on those 18th century Missions.

Tasting San Antonio is a fulfilling exercise for foodies, photographers, history buffs, families, beer and cocktail aficionados, shoppers, strollers, golfers, art lovers and those clients in your database who need an exciting place to escape for a week or a long weekend. It's a worthwhile mission to pursue.

San Antonio



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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