



SLICE OF LIFE
My Dee Dee's Pie Shoppe's Bella-Katherine Curtis in her kitchen, where she makes pies from scratch, such as her strawberry one, above.

Dives Alive!

Sparking interest in grassroots grub, top H-Town chefs pick their favorite hidden-away haunts

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| Photography by Julie Soefer |



HE'S JUST THAT INDIA 'Paneer tikka' with naan bread at London Sizzler, one of Catalan chef Chris Shepherd's fave off-the-radar restaurants

Houston's top fine-dining chefs are joining a movement to shine a spotlight on the city's best and most diverse dives, and so far it seems a smash. The very idea of their flagship effort—the “Where the Chefs Eat” series of chef-crafted food tours launching this month—was such a hit that it sold out almost overnight. And the hip haunts they're highlighting are hauling in big buzz as a result.

The eight toques involved—a who's who that includes such high-profile restaurateurs as T'afia's Monica Pope, Hugo Ortega of Hugo's and Reef's Bryan Caswell (for more on Caswell's new Stella Sola, see Food Drink Review)—hope to lay bare Houston's culinary diversity to the masses. “It's a chance to go out and see the city through our eyes,” says pork-savvy Spanish-inspired Catalan exec chef Chris Shepherd of the tours, during which 16 guests and two chefs zip around town in a limo bus to the chefs' hand-picked, off-the-radar joints.

Each tour—sponsored by the Houston Convention and Visitors Bureau and Whole Foods to benefit the Houston Food Bank—is themed. Think “Houston Barbecue Trail” and “Grocery Stores and Ethnic Markets.” Stops might range from family-run southern-fried staples like the decades-old Heights-area **Barbecue Inn** (116 W. Crosstimbers St., 713.695.8112), to Houston's only Polish restaurant **Polonia** (1900 Blalock Rd., 713.464.9900). At the latter, in an unassuming Longpoint Road-area shopping center, the restaurant's proprietors greet diners with a shot of chilled vodka before proffering fresh bread and spread—Shepherd loves the latter, which is really just jellied pork fat—and massive platters of cold cuts, *piergogi* and *kielbasa*.

While the woefully scarce \$180 tour tickets were snatched up fast, there's nothing to stop enterprising foodies from reaping the rewards of the chefs' research and trying out the places on their own. Consider the recommendations of passionate Shepherd and culinary-school pal Randy Evans (for more on Evans' new Haven restaurant, see this month's Best of the City feature) on their “Taste of Asia” Southwest Houston excursion. It highlights the **London Sizzler** (6690 Southwest Fwy., 713.783.2754), one of Shepherd's favorite restaurants. It's his go-to for a late Indian dinner with his wife, whose favorite dish, the goat *biryani*, a rich yellow curry laden with flavorful marrow bones, could easily stand up to authentic curries cooked up in England's famously curry-crazy capital.

On the “Southern Comfort” tour, Evans and Pesce chef-owner Mark Holley visit **My Dee Dee's Pie Shoppe** (301 W. Gulf Bank Rd., 281.448.5309). Run by the God-fearing, half-frazzled, hug-happy matron Bella-Katherine Curtis and her family (which lives on the premises), My Dee Dee's is named after Curtis' mother—and it bakes some of the city's best handmade pies. The usual suspects like pumpkin and apple are on offer, as are German chocolate and originals like Celestial pie, made with blueberries, bananas and cream.

For his part, Evans hopes especially that he and his colleagues will bring attention to eateries that have long been overlooked. “Everyone seems to forget that we're a port city, and port cities tend to always bring a lot of immigrants in,” he says. “And with that we get the benefit of having these great food spaces.” ■