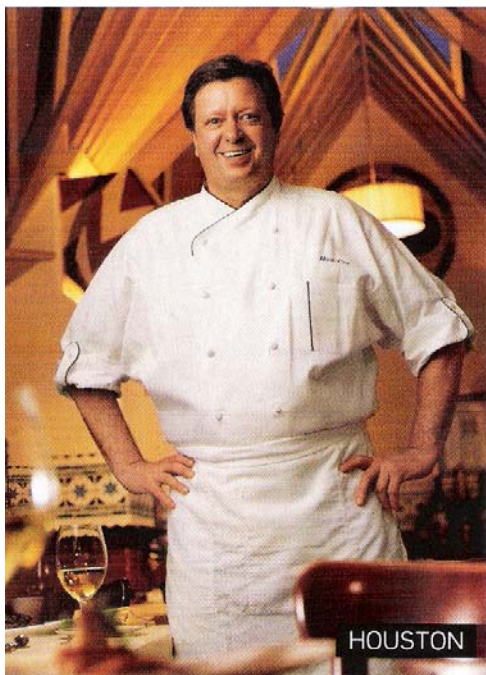


GO EAT

Haute Enough

Chef Mark Cox brings four-star sizzle to Houston's dining scene

By Gracie Cavnar



MAYBE IT'S BECAUSE it makes its home in an old church in Houston's Montrose museum district, but patrons have a hard time avoiding the phrase "temple of food" when rhapsodizing about **Mark's American Cuisine** (1658 Westheimer Road, 713.523.3800; marks1658.com). The reverence for ingredients here gets your attention the minute a dish like foie gras and quail with glazed Texas sugar figs and peaches, baby arugula, sweet Vidalia onions, and berries hits the table.

In this age of rock star chefs and personality-driven restaurants, you might expect a big ego to be attached to an extravagant dish like this, but owner/chef **Mark Cox** comes off as just a regular guy — albeit one with a penchant for adventure. After all, at 25 he moved from Washington, D.C., to Houston — without a job lined up

— to follow the woman who would become his wife. His timing was perfect; in 1982, haute cuisine was also making its way to Houston. Alex Brennan Martin (part of the famous Commander's Palace clan) had just relocated from New Orleans to breathe some life into Brennan's of Houston, the family's local outpost, and Cox joined him to boost things up a notch or two.

He had to adjust to local palates and learn how to introduce new foods to his customers. "Washington was caviar, champagne, and pâtés. In Houston, they weren't really ready for that. I had to rethink," explains Cox. "My wild game terrine just sat there — no one wanted it. I changed it to wild game ravioli and it flew out the door. That was my starting point of getting more food friendly, making haute cuisine accessible."

In a way, Cox, 50, has come full circle since his childhood in West Virginia. His food experimentation began with Chef Boyardee Pizza Kits at home. His first summer job was making popcorn and selling it at a local park, and eventually he became the cook for big parties at the park's lodge. But the big leagues were calling. After graduating from the Culinary Institute of America (CIA) in New York, Cox returned to West Virginia to work at the Greenbrier resort in White Sulphur Springs and then migrated to D.C. to shine at the Four Seasons.

five to try

1 Brennan's of Houston. 3300 Smith St., 713.522.9711. This family-owned Houston fine-dining spot is more than an outpost of its venerable New Orleans cousin, Commander's Palace. Count on a continually evolving interpretation of traditional Southern cuisine.

2 Monarch. 5701 Main St., 713.527.1800. Located within the just-opened Hotel ZaZa, this newcomer serves up glitz, while the constantly changing menu offers fare to satisfy the most demanding gastronome.

3 Reef. 2600 Travis St., 713.526.8282. Chef and owner Bryan Caswell offers every sort of seafood imaginable from near and far. Autumn is a good time to order grilled scallops, truffled polenta, and mushroom ragout.

4 Shade. 250 West 19th St., 713.863.7500. A crisp, mid-century modern interior complements a homey feel-good menu prepared with a modern touch.

5 SoVino. 507 Westheimer Road, 713.524.1000. This new wine bar and café serves a sumptuous bistro menu in a crisp, clean-lined setting organized to encourage conviviality. — G.C.

"I thought I knew a lot about cooking until I went to chef school," laughs Cox. "I had been a meat and potatoes man, [CIA] exposed me to European food, sauces, methods — it really elevated me."

Cox's training has helped him put his stamp on Houston. After his stint at