



From top: Though the decor at L.A.'s Sona is restrained, the food comes in enticing fresh pairings; tending tortillas in the kitchen at Guelaguetza, the city's best bet for traditional Oaxacan cuisine.

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HOUSTON

What's cooking here beyond Tex-Mex, barbecue, and all those expense account lunches at fancy hotels? Lately, Houston has begun serving up urbane modern cuisine that highlights homegrown produce. (If you still crave fajitas and barbecued brisket, they've got that, too.)

■ **THE COOL PLACE** *Bistro Moderne*

2525 West Loop S.; 713-297-4383
Philippe Schmit's superb modern French food is available for lunch and dinner in the sleek and comfortable dining room and adjoining café. Try the crab bomb with avocado and cilantro vinaigrette, or the most classic bouillabaisse in Texas. Dinner for two, \$90.

■ **FOODIE'S CHOICE** *Ibiza Food & Wine Bar*

2450 Louisiana St.; 713-524-0004
In a striking room, chef Charles Clark combines Spanish flair with Texan largesse. His tapas, such as piquillo peppers stuffed with smoked duck breast, are satisfying; the six-hour braised lamb shank with mint oil is unforgettable. Dinner for two, \$80.

■ **LOCAL FLAVOR** *Ninfa's*

2704 Navigation Blvd.; 713-228-1175
The late Mama Ninfa founded a Tex-Mex empire on her excellent pork tacos and handmade tortillas. Locals still gravitate to her original spot near downtown for delicious tacos musicos (filled with spicy carnitas, avocado, and pico de gallo). Lunch for two, \$25.



great food

The experimental food gets raves at WD-50, a casual dining room on New York's Lower East Side.

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■ **LOCAL FLAVOR** *Father's Office*
1018 Montana Ave., Santa Monica;
310-393-2337

Angelenos tend to argue endlessly about hamburgers, comparing the Apple Pan's hickory burgers, say, to the chili burgers at Tommy's. In the end, many give the nod to the Office Burger served at this dark and clubby Santa Monica bar. The generous patty of dry-aged beef comes with arugula, applewood bacon compote, and caramelized onions. On the side, there's plenty of blue cheese aioli—but no ketchup! Dinner for two, \$40.

■ **BEST BARGAIN** *Guelagueta*
3337½ W. 8th St.; 213-427-0601

No need to fly to Oaxaca to sample the Mexican city's fabled cuisine. At this lively spot, the black mole is astonishingly rich and complex, the tamales are wrapped in banana leaves, and the empanadas are filled with zucchini blossoms. Dinner for two, \$45.

■ **MOST CREATIVE CHEF** *Sona*
401 N. La Cienega Blvd., West Hollywood;
310-659-7708

Whether he's dressing a lobster risotto with Kaffir lime and shellfish emulsion or pairing a strawberry tart with Parmesan ice cream and sweet corn puree, chef David Myers has a knack

for conjuring up exciting cross-cultural flavors. Sona's wine list could be the most interesting in town. Dinner for two, \$150; closed Sunday.

MIAMI

With its hot Latin vibe and design-conscious South Beach hotel restaurants, Miami's dining scene has long been considered the sexiest in the country. The city keeps on sizzling, and these days there's some serious cooking going on beneath all the glitz.

■ **THE COOL PLACE** *Restaurant at the Setai*
2001 Collins Ave.; 305-520-6400

A pan-Asian fantasy designed by Jean-Michel Gathy of the fabulous international Aman resorts, the Setai overshadows even South Beach's splashiest restaurants. Watch as wok and tandoor masters in the exhibition kitchen prepare delicacies like Burmese lobster bisque and red-curry duck with lychees. Save room for the Franco-Asian sweets. Dinner for two, \$140.

■ **FOODIE'S CHOICE** *Chispa*
225 Altara Ave., Coral Gables; 305-648-2600
Chispa (the name is Spanish for "spark") is a boisterous space with terrazzo floors, star-shaped lights, and a great-looking, mojito-fueled crowd at the 40-foot bar. From classic ceviches and