Premier Presentations

Five local restaurants and the chefs behind their plated excellence

At the turn of the millennium, outside the pages of glossy magazines or cookbooks, the trappings of fine dining had a short shelf life. Painstakingly arranged dishes arrived embellished for the eye and were summarily ingested, their flavor savored but their beauty quickly beyond recall. The advent of the smartphone and the rise of social media inverted this imbalance: Decorative imagery, once fleeting, is now indelible, instantly and infinitely feeding your feeds. Before the first bite, word of mouth has already spread. What's on your plate can be metabolized in more ways than one.

As chefs cooking with ambition and artistry establish new restaurants across the city, Corpus Christi's culinary scene is developing a distinct aesthetic ethos. We went to five establishments that showcase this boldly and beautifully and learned about the ingredients—food, philosophy and people—that form some of the Coastal Bend's most picturesque plates.

BY EVELYN MARTINEZ & MARK TRAVIS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JESSICA GAERTNER





Fork & Vines

Chef Marcelo Godines & Kitchen Manager Christian Taylor

A visit to Fork & Vines will leave you satiated and saturated—and feeling like you've just earned another stamp on your passport. No travel arrangements are required to get a taste of the Old World, only a reservation.

Christian and Ashley Bernard had imagined opening a gateway to foreign delicacies in Corpus Christi ever since they took over Sugarbakers in 2013, but the chance to establish a fine-dining experience didn't arrive until August 2023, when they expanded into the space next door. Inveterate travelers with cosmopolitan taste, they envisioned bringing more than memories home with them. "The whole concept was built around the idea of an evolving menu, featuring different types of cultures and foods," Christian Bernard said.

The Bernards' vision for Fork & Vines, which just celebrated its third anniversary in August, has aged well and is now being executed by a dynamic duo in the back of the house. Chef Marcelo Godines and kitchen manager Christian Taylor have both been part of Fork & Vines since its inception, and they have been entrusted to run the line day-to-day.

"It was always the goal to develop somebody on board who was capable of running the operation seamlessly," Christian Bernard said. "They quickly demonstrated they were capable of it."

After starting as a dishwasher at Sugarbakers seven years ago, Taylor rapidly rose through the ranks thanks to his strong work ethic and affable nature. He began as a relative novice in the food industry and is now someone who can sermonize about the meretriciousness of nonfunctional garnish. From wringing rags to plating dishes, and from escuelerie to epicurean, all under the same roof.

Godines had more culinary experience before joining Fork & Vines. He started cooking at 15 and had amassed about a decade of fine-dining experience, including working in the kitchen at Republic of Texas. But here he has finally been given the artistic liberty to cultivate his flavor. "It's nice to have a creative outlet," Godines said, adding that Taylor "makes it a lot easier for me to get what I want from my mind onto the plate."

The pair have developed a culinary concinnity that keeps their kitchen crew in step. While they share cooking duties, Taylor also keeps an eye on ticket times and operational efficiency as Godines refines the recipes and designs the dishes. "I feel like when we're back there, it's almost like we're dancing," Taylor said. As they waltz through a shift, they liken themselves not to Remy and Linguini at the cutting board but to one of the best duos in the history of the hardwood. "We're like Shaq and Kobe back there," Taylor said.

Rest assured: Your fried amberjack will not be alley-ooped onto your plate. Instead, each dish is served with a far larger audience in mind. "We want the first thing you do when that plate comes [to be] pull out your phone," Taylor said. Although plating is often an egalitarian effort, Godines and Taylor form the philosophy behind their arrangements and accouterments. "Your eyes eat first," Taylor said. "We look for things that complement the flavor and also fill in that negative space on the plate with color and contrast."

Each week, the pair crafts an au courant chef's specials card, charting excursions from Austria to Australia and Spain to Sicily. The dishes are often paired with vintages sourced from thematically appropriate vineyards, while mixologist Tiffany McDevitt's cocktails offer a more concentrated complement. "They are the best kitchen staff I have ever worked with," McDevitt said. "They are so accommodating, helpful and knowledgeable."

Given the restaurant's expanding reputation and frequently full dining room, the dinner rush is as hectic as ever. Godines and Taylor's ability to maintain order in the heat of the moment has been vital to keeping things smooth and sumptuous.

"They have the ability to stay calm under pressure, which chefs are notoriously not able to do," Christian Bernard said. "When things are really difficult for a server or a bartender, a lot of places, the front-of-house people can be almost afraid to go back and say anything to the kitchen. But these guys are just so even-keeled and approachable, even in difficult moments. That's fascinating to me."

Godines and Taylor, two Corpus Christi natives, demonstrate a fluent understanding of foreign fare and infuse a collection of distant cultures with a taste of local talent.

"I've described my ideas to other people for the past 10, 20 years and they'd be like, 'That sounds stupid,'" Godines said. "Now I do it here, and it sells."

FEATURED DISH

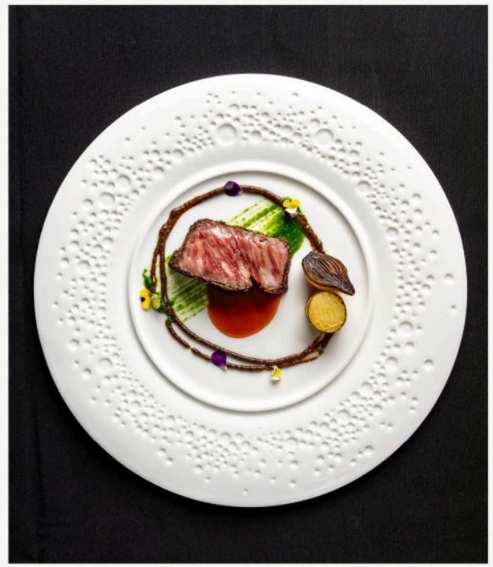
Wild Mushroom Short Rib Magu: Mushroom-stuffed ravioli with whipped ricotta and house-made mushroom demi-glace, topped with tender bits of seared beef short rib, mornay sauce and microgreens.

written by Mark Travis

Black Lamb

Chef Thomas Mandzik





Thomas Mandzik was finishing a long shift of pulling fajitas off the grill when a co-worker showed him a book that would change his life.

Growing up in South Florida, Mandzik had two dreams: playing second base for the Florida Marlins and drawing his own comic books. As his batting average dipped, art began to shape his professional goals, though his direction remained unclear. Somewhere between the dugout and the drawing board, Mandzik found himself at a Chili's, holding a bright white book.

"[I] open it, and I'm like, 'What is this? Is this even food?'" Mandzik said.

The book was *The French Laundry Cookbook*, featuring recipes from the revered Napa Valley restaurant of the same name. Indeed, the dishes proffered on its pages appear to be made for a different species than the one consuming the Triple Dipper. "I thought there was no way I could ever make this food, but the art part of it was very interesting," Mandzik said. It also included photos of the restaurant's chefs, and their pristine white coats were enough to entice Mandzik toward The Art Institute of Tampa, where he earned a culinary certification.

A copy of the book now sits on a shelf at Black Lamb Chef Table, Corpus Christi's latest chef-driven dining experience—and Mandzik's passion project. For the previous two decades, he worked with a variety of cuisines in highly stylized restaurants while based in the Tampa Bay area. As his career grew, so did his family, and with children now in their 20s, Mandzik and his wife, Marley, began thinking about their next chapter.

Marley had a close friend from Corpus Christi who was eager to connect more often. The friend's husband suggested a move to the Coastal Bend, an area relatively unfamiliar with the tasting-menu concept. Intrigued by the culinary challenge but wary of the community's receptiveness, Mandzik posted on the Corpus Christi subreddit to gauge local interest. Commenters promptly replied with a fusillade of reasons why the restaurant wouldn't work. But then a private message hit his inbox: A landlord wanted to lease him a spot for his new business.

"I thought he had the rare combination of the technical skill and creativity to deliver on a concept like this," David Loeb, owner of Landlord Resources, said. Despite the Reddit thread's skepticism, Loeb was willing to bet on him. "The way you get new things we didn't have before is you support the new things we didn't have before. That encourages the next guy or gal coming along to give it a shot."

Mandzik first considered moving to Corpus Christi less than two years



ago, but the desire to open his own restaurant has simmered for far longer. "This has been my dream for years, and it was time to make the dream into a reality," he said. Before the ink was dry on his lease, he drove himself halfway across the country, arrived in late July and served his first guests in mid-September.

Diners who reserve one of Black Lamb's limited spots on Friday and Saturday nights will enjoy a mutable 12-course meal featuring aquatic glissandos from lobster to red snapper to octopus, savory terrestrial cuts of lamb and wagyu and delicately dappled desserts, all decorated and accentuated by handmade sauces and locally grown microgreens. This prix-fixe approach curbs menu paralysis and gives every course a chance to leave a lasting impression.

Mandzik's dishes display his robust range and fastidious process. His plating is precise, using a seemingly infinite variety of shapes and depths from his crockery set, always finding the perfect pairing of canvas and course. "I always start with colors," Mandzik said. "I consider the spectrum and find colors that suit each other and will work on a plate together. Then you have to meld the flavor, because without that, nothing works."

Few creative endeavors are as cutthroat as fine dining, especially as an independent venture. The cost, the scrutiny and the crowded field require not only a singular vision to stand out, but the rigorous work ethic and competitive drive that develop when you grow up dreaming of the major leagues. There's even an element of spectatorship at Black Lamb, where an open window into the kitchen gives guests a view behind the scenes. If you catch a glimpse, you will see an artist in his element, an inner child reaching the apotheosis of his aspirations in an unexpected way, rolling up sourdough instead of ground balls.

Getting a Michelin designation outside the triumvirate of California, New York City and Chicago is challenging and expensive, as regional tourism boards often pay lofty sums just to attract Michelin's attention. Might Corpus Christi one day have a Michelin star of its own? Of all the ingredients necessary to achieve the world's most prestigious gastronomic honor, perhaps the most vital is ambition. And with Mandzik, that is never in short supply.

"I want to be the first Michelin-starred restaurant in Corpus Christi," Mandzik said. "And I know I am going to do that."

FEATURED DISHES

Spanish Octopus: The octopus tentacle curves naturally, defining the dish's structure. It rests upon a smooth sweep of saffron mayonnaise, accompanied by a spoonful of chorizo nage. A tracing of squid ink vinaigrette frames the arrangement, accented with fresh pea shoots and delicate edible flowers along the tentacle.

Lamb: Ancho jus forms the base beneath tender lamb, set alongside a neat quenelle of black garlic–parsnip purée. Mint and jalapeño enhance the flavor profile, while pea shoots and edible flowers delicately garnish the purée, leaving ample open space around the two central elements.

Australian Wagyu: A stroke of rosemary purée paired with a truffle jam ring sets the dish's artistic layout. Anchored at the center, peppercorn-crusted Australian Wagyu rests over cognac jus, accompanied by potato fondant and charred onion. Edible flowers accentuate the composition, keeping the beef as the highlight.

Redfish: Set atop a pool of sweet potato curry, the redfish is ringed by delicate dots of coriander aioli. A crisp, geometrically patterned squid ink tuile crowns the dish for visual height, while an edible flower adds a refined finishing touch.

Duck: Seared skin-side up atop a vibrant orange sauce, this citrus-brined duck breast is paired with three tender duck confit ravioli, offering an alternate expression of the dish. The orange sauce gracefully ties the duck and ravioli together, while a single edible blossom adds a refined final touch.

written by Mark Travis





Roasted Clove

Chef Mark Pulich

Over his 30-year culinary career, Mark Pulich has learned that, in a turbulent industry rife with fiscal constraints and creative demands, the greatest impediments are often environmental. He has seen opportunities washed away twice by hurricanes before the pandemic dealt a universal blow to the food service industry.

As his restaurant Roasted Clove celebrates one year since opening its brick-and-mortar location, it stands not only as the culmination of Pulich's ascent to chef-patron, but as a testament to the resilience any gastronomic ambition requires.

Born in South Texas before his family moved to Austin, Pulich started dreaming of being a chef at a young age. He would come home from school and pore over Emeril Lagasse's shows and the "Great Chefs" series before joining his mother in the kitchen, where they would experiment with a cornucopia of ingredients.

Despite his burgeoning interest in food, Pulich chose business school instead of culinary school—perhaps a prudent decision for anyone who intends to have total control of their kitchen one day. After graduating, Pulich matriculated into the food chain, rising through managerial positions across the Coastal Bend and New Orleans. But in 2005, while he served as assistant general manager at a New Orleans-area outfit called Sun Ray Grill, Hurricane Katrina hit. In the aftermath, he moved to Port Aransas, forced to abandon a promising career trajectory in one of America's gustatory capitals. "I think about what would have been sometimes," Pulich said. "But three months after moving, I met my wife, so I wouldn't change a thing."

Back in Texas, Pulich settled in as the chef at the Venetian Hot Plate, an Italian restaurant in Port Aransas opened by Maurice and Linda Halioua. There, he broadened his increasingly European palate and business horizons. In 2013, he partnered with Linda to purchase a Portland-based catering company and incorporated it as VHP Catering.

Four years later, Hurricane Harvey devastated the coastal area, grinding everything to a halt. Pulich responded by cooking up a pizza and pasta delivery concept to keep his catering staff employed. "You have to be able to adapt in this business," Pulich said. "You have to anticipate the worst-case scenario and plan for that. Katrina and Harvey made me more diligent about that." Adversity can be a necessary seasoning.

Soon after helping the Venetian Hot Plate reopen its doors, Pulich decided to buy out Halioua's share of VHP Catering so he could focus on it full time. 2019 was not the best time to take full control of a business reliant on large communal gatherings. Pulich seemed incapable of evading natural disasters, regional or global.

By the time society slowly crept back into dining spaces, Pulich had already been thinking about opening his own establishment. He ran the idea by his wife, Kate, who was supportive, and when a spot opened up in Meadowbrook Plaza, he knew he had found a home. "I live right in this neighborhood," Pulich said. "I'd always looked at this location, so I said, 'I'm not going to let this pass me by.'"

Twelve months in, Roasted Clove has proven just as hard for locals to pass by. The menu's offerings are robust and showcase the taste profiles (French and Cajun, Italian, South Texas specialties) inculcated in him at his previous stops. A remoulade and wild rice jambalaya, both honed in New Orleans, complement the blackened drum, and his pizza panache informs a wide selection of pies.

Pulich's most popular dish changes by the week, as a variable features card often proves irresistible. Even the most practiced pescatarian will likely encounter a fresh arrival regularly, like prawn flown from Hawaii or halibut freighted from Alaska. Whether an entrée originates from land or sea, it arrives with a heavenly flourish born out of curiosity and flexibility. "I like textures and colors on plates," Pulich said. "You have to be willing to trust your gut and try different presentations."

In a timeline oversaturated with delivery apps shuttling fast food to doorsteps in record time, Roasted Clove reminds patrons what fine dining brings to the table: elegance imbued with a local ambiance and a menu that pops through Pulich's refined touch behind the stove and on the plate.

His dishes—some meticulously crafted, others spontaneously shaped—are the product of years of setbacks, scrapped ideas and scraped plates, offering a distinct flavor distilled over decades of navigating a fickle and fitful industry.

"Once I fell into the restaurant industry," Pulich said, "I thought, 'Give me the sweat and the rising fire over anything else.'"

FEATURED DISH

Hawaiian Mixed Grill: Seared Big Eye Tuna and Kauai Salt Water Prawn with ginger soy aioli and Coco Amino Pearls with sweet potato salad, ponzu gel, mango saffron gel, ogo seaweed and a pea tendril salad with heirloom tomato, endive and mango. (m)

written by Mark Travis