

# FLAVOR

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Taylor Hall: Willie's Grill & Icehouse; Clark Cooper Concepts; Tracie Luong; Carla Gomez; Kimberly Park; Paula Murphy; and Carly Shuttlesworth

## Dishing secrets

By Greg Morago  
STAFF WRITER

**H**ouston restaurants want to please their customers, including tweaking dishes to meet dietary restrictions and simple diner preferences. But some kitchens will go further, whipping up appetizers, entrees and desserts that aren't even on the menu.

These secret menu items are known to insiders as hidden indul-

Insiders know Houston restaurants serve off-the-menu items — just ask

gences at their favorite restaurants. Some of the dishes are even signatures though they never show up on the printed menu.

Brasserie 19's Lazy Lane Fries are a good example. Originally prepared eight years ago for a regular customer — who lives on Lazy Lane in nearby River Oaks — the fries were meant to be a one-off acknowledgment to a big

spender with a decadent palate.

But loyal patrons know they can still order the truffled french fries topped with seared foie gras and glossed with au poivre sauce. The dish's popularity grew organically, B-19's director of operations Marc Cantu said.

"Believe me, you only have to send it out to one table, with the smell of

truffles wafting over the room, and people will say, 'Hey, what are they having?'" Cantu said.

Same with the restaurant's celebratory mountain of cotton candy presented for special birthdays. Festooned with sparklers, it's a theatrical show within a show. It's not on the menu either, but the beehive of spun sugar has proved popular enough that it has transferred to B-19's new sister restaurant Gratify in Rice Village, where it is served in antique silver champagne buckets.

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Clockwise, from top left: Rosie Cannonball's pasta with cheese and pepper cream; Willie's Grill & Icehouse catfish po'boy; Brasserie 19's Lazy Lane Fries; Ember & Greens Restaurant and Bar's chicken club sandwich; Kata Robata's Southern Smoke hand roll; Molina's Cantina's BLT tacos; Étoile Cuisine et Bar's lobster and basil lemon risotto; and the Annie Café & Bar's filet mignon nachos



Draw Anthony Smith

The "hairier board" at Georgia James steakhouse is a whopping sampler platter (made for four or more diners) that represents a chef's selection of indulgences.

**SECRETS**

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Not all secret dishes are this elaborate. Tex-Mex lovers know that at some of their favorite restaurants they can ask for a hotter salsa than the ones automatically brought to the table. Arnaldo Richards' Picos, Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen and Molina's Cantina restaurants have nonadvertised salsas for customers who desire more heat.

The "atomic" salsa at Molina's, however, is only one of several off-menu items. A cheeseburger, fried shrimp platter and BLT tacos are also known to regulars. Co-owner Ricardo Molina said the company's three restaurants are only too happy to make the hidden dishes.

"It's no problem. In fact, it's kind of cool," Molina said, adding that accommodating the special requests is good business. "If we have the stuff to make it, we will. Quite honestly, the guys in the back like to do it. It's fun for them." Here are some of the city's other secret menu items; all you have to do is ask.

**Tony's:** The Italian fine-dining restaurant has many off-the-menu dishes including Duck Presse (a whole roasted duck presented tableside with a sauce made with a French duck press); salt-crusted snapper, also served tableside; Pasta Portanova finished with caviar; and a wagyu truffle cheeseburger made Gruyère cheese, shaved black truffles and black truffle aioli served with truffled Kennebec fries. Several of Tony's famous soufflé desserts are off the menu, including tiramisu soufflé, Bananas Foster soufflé and an apricot soufflé with caramel sauce that was the late founder Tony Vallone's favorite.

**Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen:** In addition to

"Hair on Fire" habanero salsa and pickled jalapeño relish, the two restaurants from "Enchilada Queen" Sylvia Casares will make Chalupas a la Sylvia (piled with refried beans and grilled fajita meat) and a burrito called The Raymondville: chicken or beef fajita in a flour tortilla topped with chili gravy and served with rice and beans.

**Kata Robata:** Chef Manabu Horiuchi created the Southern Smoke hand roll to mark his first appearance at 2019's Southern Smoke festival. It's not on the menu, but you can order this decadent nibble of fatty tuna, sea urchin roe and caviar at Houston's beloved Japanese restaurant.

**State Fare Kitchen & Bar:** The restaurant with locations in Memorial and Sugar Land can create a weekend brunch board with avocado street corn toast, silver-dollar bacon praline pancakes, deviled eggs and chicken and waffles.

**Ember & Greens:** The Memorial restaurant offers Monster Fries, topped with cheese and bacon, and a wood-grilled chicken club sandwich on a toasted brioche bun.

**Etoile Cuisine et Bar:** The French restaurant in Uptown Park makes a Maine lobster and lemon basil risotto topped with lobster foam; and a papardelle pasta with mushrooms, aged Parmigiano-Reggiano and shaved black truffle.

**1751 Sea and Bar:** Customers at this upscale seafood spot can order French toast with foie gras, an open-face A-5 wagyu steak sando, buckwheat blini with golden osetra caviar and "Eggs on Eggs" (soft scrambled eggs topped with Siberian osetra caviar and sea urchin roe. Executive chef JD Woodward also



Paola Murphy

You won't find The Raymondville (a burrito of beef or chicken fajitas topped with chili gravy) on the Sylvia's Enchilada Kitchen menu.

will create multicourse chef's dinners with advance notice.

**La Table:** The Galleria-area restaurant has an off-the-menu dish worthy of its upscale pedigree: pasta with Australian black truffles created by chef de cuisine Artem Orlovsky.

**Mastro's Steakhouse:** The posh dining room that's part of the grand Post Oak Hotel at Uptown Houston complex offers several "smoking" cocktails bubbling with dry-ice plumes, including the off-the-menu Lemon Drop.

**KP's Kitchen:** The new Memorial restaurant can prepare four-cheese lasagna, house-made churros and peach crumble. But the top secret menu item is a surf and turf for two (filet mignon with crab cake served over house slaw with Parmesan fries and roasted Brussels sprouts, and two house salads).

**Pappas Bros. Steakhouse:** There are plenty of secret dishes at the Pappas' downtown and Westheimer locations that only regulars know, including fried shrimp and beef tartare appetizers, Japanese A-5 strip loin steak

and chilled red Alaskan king crab. At the downtown location, there's an off-the-menu dish of crispy Brussels sprouts with pork belly in a lemon soy vinaigrette. But the biggest secret showstopper is a 45-minute hand-cut, dry-aged Prime tomahawk rib-eye steak.

**Killen's Steakhouse:** Both the original Pearland and the newer Woodlands locations will whip up a burger with a patty made from steak scraps and dry-aged fat. Chef Ronnie Killen's sister barbecue restaurants in Pearland and The Woodlands also have off-the-menu wagyu brisket and beef burnt ends that are occasionally available (you have to ask for them because they go fast).

**The Annie Café & Bar:** The Uptown restaurant whose kitchen is under the direction of James Beard Award-winning chef Robert Del Grande will prepare filet mignon nachos and chicken fingers with french fries.

**Candente:** The Montrose Tex-Mex joint will prepare its fajitas and carnitas plates "taqueria style," substituting onion,



Kimberly Park

Blue crab and caviar nachos is a secret menu item at Brennan's of Houston, available at the bar and courtyard.

cilantro, jalapeños, lime and spicy "taco truck" green salsa instead of the standard accompaniments. Regulars also know they can ask for house-pickled hot carrots.

**Brennan's of Houston:** The historical Midtown restaurant specializing in Texas Creole fare might have Houston's worst-kept secret: the 25-cent martinis available for weekday lunch only. (Customers are limited to three each.) Brennan's also offers off-the-menu blue crab and caviar nachos (with a queso made from French triple-cream cheese) served in the courtyard and bar.

**Frank's Americana Revivals:** The Westheimer spot has a number of options, including classic smothered liver and onions, pot roast po'boy, a half-pound hickory burger and bucatini pasta topped with long-simmered Sunday sugo and served with garlic bread.

**Willie's Grill & Icehouse:** This casual restaurant has two off-the-menu items: catfish po'boy (grilled, fried or blackened) served with tartar sauce, cocktail sauce and

fries - and a quadruple-stacked cheeseburger.

**Mico's Hot Chicken:** The Nashville hot chicken sandwich restaurant also offers loaded waffle fries with cheddar cheese, chopped fried chicken and special sauce. But regulars know they can order these fries "dirty" with the addition of coleslaw and pickles on top.

**Georgia James:** Chef Chris Shepherd has become famous for the "hairier boards" he created for One Fifth. The board at his Montrose steakhouse can be assembled with a gut-busting assortment of steaks, seafood and sometimes fried chicken. It's a chef's choice sampler-platter arrangement available for hungry parties of at least four.

**Rosie Cannonball:** The Montrose Italian restaurant makes terrific stone-oven pizzas, including a cacao e pepe flavor. The white sauce for that pie, a punchy blend of dairy, cheese and pepper, is used to sauce an off-the-menu pasta dish. Chef Felipe Riccio makes it with either spaghetti or rigatoni.

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Tony's

Tony's offers a wagyu truffle cheeseburger (wagyu beef, Gruyère, black truffle aioli and shaved black truffles served with truffled Kennebec french fries).



Dominique McGhee

State Fare's off-menu weekend brunch board is chicken and waffles, shown, and avocado street corn toast, bacon-praline pancakes and deviled eggs.



Mastro's Steakhouse

The "smoking" Lemon Drop martini is a secret bar-menu cocktail at Mastro's Steakhouse.