

# Gourmet Galveston

By Jeff Heilman

Foodies are wining and dining in high style on the Texas coast

**F**rom the largest Mardi Gras in Texas to the annual American Institute of Architects' Sandcastle Competition and other summer happenings on East Beach, Galveston is synonymous with good times. Food and drink, naturally, are essential ingredients in the fun, with culinary celebrations including the annual Galveston Island Food & Wine Festival.

Taking place this month, the event's seventh edition will feature dinners, tastings, demonstrations and a live performance from acclaimed chef, restaurateur and Food Network star Robert Irvine at The Grand 1894 Opera House. Running four days, the core event includes advance happenings in Houston, and week-long wine festivities.

With other foodie fests that include Galveston Restaurant Week and Yaga's Chili Quest & Beer Fest, both in January, and the Galveston Island Shrimp Festival in September, group options run a wide gamut.

"Being the second-busiest immigration port in U.S. history, Galveston has a rich cultural heritage that has influenced the island's food scene in so many ways," says Meg Winchester, director of the Galveston Island CVB. "Charming family-owned restaurants dominate the island, offering delicious foods from all over the world and unique places for visitors to have authentic experiences. For lovers of Gulf seafood, you won't find it any fresher than here, and with all our diversity, no two restaurants prepare it the same way."

Richly supplied with sweet, meaty oysters, shrimp, flounder, snapper and other Gulf bounty, Galveston and its chef-driven culinary scene is quite the catch.



NUMBER 13 PRIME STEAK AND SEAFOOD

## Coastal Classics

Among the featured talent at the Galveston Island Food & Wine Festival is Chris Lopez, whose local resume as an executive chef since arriving here in 2002 includes a number of ready choices for groups.

Starting out at Saltwater Grill, still one of Galveston's top seafood restaurants, Lopez then opened former fine-dining spot Palms M&M. After flooding from Hurricane Ike closed the venue (since reopened as M&M Restaurant & Bar), he moved to Yaga's Cafe, where he elevated the menu while transforming Yaga's catering arm into a major provider for the group market, ranging from intimate dinners to large-scale events.

Last summer, he became executive chef at BLVD. Seafood, the fifth restaurant and bar concept from the Yaga's group. Fresh, locally sourced seafood drives the menu, with highlights including Lopez's signature Gulf Coast Flat Fish Stack. Facing the Gulf on the seawall within sight of Galveston's Pleasure Pier, the open-kitchen concept includes private dining for 18 guests.

Supplying much of Lopez's catch is Katie's Seafood Market. Located on historic Pier 19, this family-run business partners with local boat captains, fishermen and



# Zoom In

Q&A with Robbin Murphy // [www.moodygardens.com](http://www.moodygardens.com)  
Executive Chef, Moody Gardens Hotel,  
Spa and Convention Center

### How does F&B programming contribute to Moody Gardens' strengths as a group property?

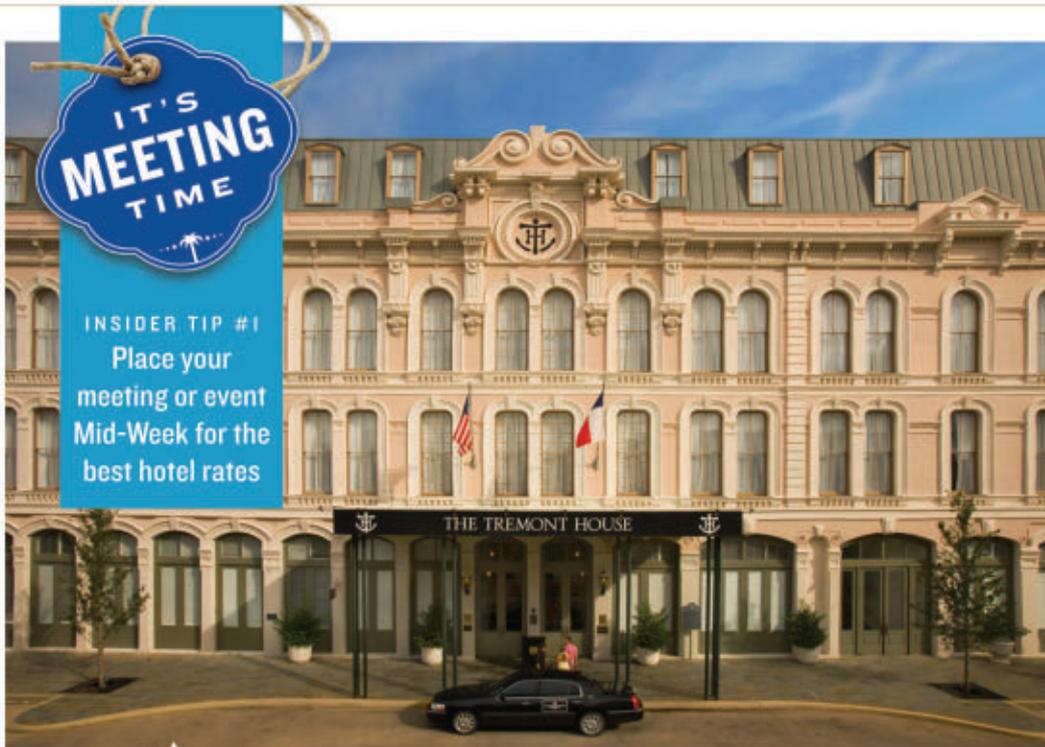
Our F&B program is exceptional because we are able to cater to groups of every size and type, which includes corporate, social, associations, government and medical. We offer fine dining with Shearn's Seafood and Prime Steaks, casual concepts Cafe in the Park and the Garden Restaurant, lobby and pool bars, Moody Brews and Blossom's Creamery. Having 103,000 square feet of meeting space allows us to cater events for up to 5,000 people. Along with the convention center and hotel meeting spaces, we offer catering in our unique on-site venues such as Colonel Paddlewheel Boat, Palm Beach, Visitor's Center and Aquarium Pyramid. We use our own catering menus, with customization to fit a group's budget.

### Describe Galveston's culinary scene overall.

With new restaurants moving in and younger chefs pushing the boundaries of cooking, the scene is exploding and evolving right now. Galveston's sustainable fishery is just incredible, with fishermen and shrimpers truly elevating the freshness of the seafood catch. There's also great cooperation with local farmers, and local ranchers raising cattle and hogs, that's helping supply Galveston and surrounding areas with farm-to-fork fare.

### What are some of your favorite dining or after-hours spots on the island that would work for groups?

Operating for over 100 years and now in its fourth generation, Gaido's Seafood Restaurant is a Galveston institution, with sister restaurant Nicks Kitchen and Beach Bar next door. Rudy and Paco is another Galveston favorite.



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BLVD. SEAFOOD

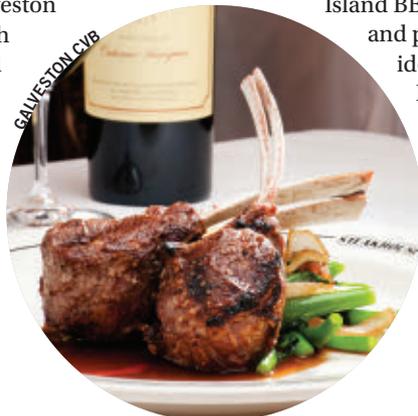
YAGA'S ENTERTAINMENT

shrimpers to provide fresh seafood to local restaurants and the public. The subject of National Geographic's *Big Fish, Texas* television series, Katie's offers behind-the-scenes group tours on a selective basis.

Opened in 1911, fourth-generation family-owned Gaido's Seafood Restaurant has been serving Gulf shrimp, Galveston Bay oysters and other meticulously prepared dishes for over a century. Fresh as ever, this local shrine, accommodating from 20 to 200 guests for private events, is for classics like Oysters Maria—cornmeal fried oysters topped with bacon and tangy hollandaise—and Gaido's celebrated pecan pie.

Adjacent to The Grand 1894 Opera House, event-capable Rudy & Paco Restaurant & Bar features grilled seafood and steak with a Central American twist. True to its name, Nonno Tony's World Kitchen uniquely blends Italian, Asian fusion, Creole and traditional American cuisine, with special programs like pizza-making for groups. Located at Pier 21, the venue is part of the Galveston Restaurant Group, which launched Saltwater Grill in 1997 and recently introduced the Gumbo Diner adjacent to the Commodore Hotel.

This being Texas, beef and barbecue are also on the menu, with upscale choices such as the award-win-



THE STEAKHOUSE AT THE SAN LUIS RESORT

ning AAA Four Diamond Steakhouse at the San Luis Resort, and Number 13 Prime Steak and Seafood. Set amid tropical foliage, the restaurant accommodates large groups with reservations, including outdoor terrace space overlooking the Pelican Rest Marina.

Opened in October 2015, Bahia Oaks Island BBQ & Beer hosts events and provides catering. Also ideal for catered events is Leon's BBQ, where Leon "Dr. Bar-B-Q" O'Neal serves slow-cooked brisket, ribs and other meats in special sauce passed down through the generations.

For hands-on fun, downtown's Kitchen

## Latest + Greatest

- The **Moody Gardens Aquarium Pyramid** ([www.moodygardens.org](http://www.moodygardens.org)), one of Galveston's most popular reception venues, is undergoing a \$39 million, multiphased renovation. While remaining open for much of the project, the aquarium will be closed from Aug. 15 through Nov. 14, 2016, and then again in early 2017 before the scheduled grand reopening in May 2017, with new jellyfish and tropical penguin exhibits among the additions. Last year, the Moody Gardens Hotel completed a property-wide \$25 million renovation and refresh, including all 428 guest rooms.
- Offering complimentary Wi-Fi service property-wide, the **Galveston Island Convention Center at The San Luis Resort** ([www.galvestonislandconventioncenter.com](http://www.galvestonislandconventioncenter.com)) completed a technology enhancement in 2015. Catering to attendees who carry multiple web-based devices, the upgrade from a 100 Mbps circuit to 500 Mbps has created a significant increase in bandwidth to provide simultaneous Internet access to up to 2,500 devices.
- Opened in December 2015, the Galveston Historical Foundation's new **Hendley Green Park** ([www.galvestonhistory.org](http://www.galvestonhistory.org)) offers an outdoor oasis in downtown Galveston, including a central lawn accommodating guests during events.
- Opened in June 2015, **The Bryan Museum** ([www.thebryanmuseum.com](http://www.thebryanmuseum.com)) features the world's largest private collection of Southwestern historical artifacts, showcasing 70,000 rare items spanning more than 400 years. The venue offers customized guided tours for groups as well as distinctive indoor and outdoor meeting spaces.
- Galveston welcomes three new limited services hotels this year. Anticipated spring 2016 openings include a Best Western, with 96 beachfront suites, and across from the new 10-acre, group-capable Sea Scout Base recreational facility, a Best Value Inn. Expected to open this summer on Galveston's East End is a new 86-suite **Homewood Suites** ([www.homewoodsuites3.hilton.com](http://www.homewoodsuites3.hilton.com)).
- **Schlitterbahn Galveston Island Waterpark** ([www.schlitterbahn.com/galveston](http://www.schlitterbahn.com/galveston)) has announced the summer 2016 debut of MASSIV, the world's tallest water coaster incorporating both downhill and uphill experiences.
- Launched in 2015, **Galveston's Cool Tours** ([www.cooltoursgalveston.com](http://www.cooltoursgalveston.com)) offers customizable, discounted shuttle service from Houston George Bush Intercontinental Airport and William P. Hobby Airport for Galveston delegates and conventioners.

Chick is a boutique kitchen shop offering cooking classes for groups, while at La King's Confectionery visitors can see taffy and other old-time recipes made on antique equipment. Groups can also book harbor cruises aboard the Galveston Historical Foundation's *Seagull II*, with dinners catered by Pier 21 restaurants such as Olympia Grill and Fisherman's Wharf.

### Sip and Savor

With newly amped-up wireless connectivity at the waterfront Galveston Convention Center, major group properties like Moody Gardens Hotel, Spa and Convention Center, 15 blocks of brand new beaches (and more to come) and abundant outdoor diversions, meetings are a breeze in Galveston.

What better than a refreshing cocktail,

SHRIMP COCKTAIL, MOODY GARDENS



craft beer or other beverage to complement this laid-back vibe? Galveston has just as many diverse options for drinks, such as pioneering Galveston Island Brewing.

Launched two years ago by former tugboat captain Mark Dell'Osso, the island's first brewery in decades has since expanded its programming to include tours, tastings and craft brewing classes. For private events, groups can rent the Barrel Room, where Dell'Osso ages his best beer in Maker's Mark, Four Roses and other premium bourbon barrels. There's also outdoor space complete with games and bleacher seats for catching glorious Gulf sunsets.

The brewery is among the participants at the island's highly popular annual BrewMasters Craft Beer Festival. Taking place over Labor Day weekend, the nationally recognized event staged at Moody Gardens and various venues around Galveston features more than 400 craft beers along with food, live music, educational events and more.

Did somebody say "Cocktails in a Bag?" Galveston-based Lt. Blender's has attracted national attention for its all-natural cocktail mixes packaged in party-size bags. Brainchild of Ralph McMorris, who earned the "Lt. Blender" moniker for his Caribbean-based cocktail-making during the Vietnam War, the line includes margaritas, daiquiris, pina colodas and mojitos—just add the alcohol and other mixers. Groups can tour the factory—housed in the former headquarters of Purity Ice Cream, the oldest ice cream company in Texas—and sample the delicious products.

Located in the Strand District, Tsunami Exotic Tequila Emporium serves more than 45 tequilas and 12 styles of margaritas, and features a collection of official Galveston Island Mardi Gras posters dating back to the 1980s.

Offering nearly 16,000 square feet of flexible space, The Tremont House, a Wyndham Grand Hotel, is home to the island's only rooftop bar. Located on Galveston's beachfront, Island Famous is a unique concept combining four bars and a casual restaurant. 

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GALVESTON ISLAND

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