



Magnolia blooms

By Tiffany Figueiredo Photos by Ralph Lauer

While Fort Worth's 7th Street corridor draws buzz for its shiny new bars, restaurants, and retail and living spaces, a mile-long stretch along the Near Southside has quietly and steadily become home to the coolest, most vibrant and most original restaurant row in town.

Pedestrian-friendly Magnolia Avenue, from 8th Avenue to Hemphill Street, has more than a dozen eateries with more on the way. And unlike the chains slated to open on 7th, these restaurants — from old standby Paris Coffee Shop to newcomer Ellerbe Fine Foods — are locally owned and delightfully authentic.

Richard King, owner of the recently opened Ellerbe, said it took him and partner/chef Molly McCook more than a year to decide where to open their elegantly upscale yet comfortable farm-to-table restaurant, which is housed in a renovated filling station between Hurley and 7th avenues.

"We looked everywhere, particularly on the Westside, but a strip center wasn't right for our concept. We needed a free-standing space," he says. "Molly is actually the one who spotted this neat old building while driving around one day, and we just knew it was the one. It needed a lot of love, but we took a leap of faith, and it's worked out beautifully."

Indeed it has. The space, which barely resembles its former self, has the feel of a long-established Southern (think New Orleans) restaurant, which marries perfectly with McCook's ever-changing fresh gourmet cuisine. A big



The renovation was long and difficult but the transformation from old gas station to airy, comfortable restaurant makes Ellerbe a fine example of sophisticated restaurant design. An old skylight was saved and moved into the larger dining space, and the overall feel makes us want to linger over coffee and sweets such as the Callebaut chocolate tart, right, in a graham cracker crust and topped with toasted marshmallow cream.



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Thanks to pedestrian-friendly sidewalks, Magnolia's cluster of restaurants gives the Near Southside street a decidedly urban feel. Outdoor seating at Nonna Tata, Lili's, Yucatan Taco Stand and Ellerbe add to a festive environment, especially when the weather's good.



Noteworthy Magnolia Avenue restaurants

Magnolia's eateries offer something for everyone, from Thai and Middle Eastern to vegan and comfort food. Here are a few of our favorite spots to eat and drink.

Benito's Restaurant One of Magnolia's original draws, serving hearty Mexican food, including migas and menudo, and potent margaritas. The go-to spot for late-night eats. 1450 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-332-8633

Ellerbe Fine Foods Upscale seasonal Southern fare served in a gracious and relaxed environment. A food-to-go and retail section is in the works. 1501 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-926-3663; www.ellerbefinefoods.com

Lili's Bistro A warm, inviting space with eclectic global fare focused on small plates and great wine from one of Fort Worth's favorite chefs. 1310 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-877-0700; www.lilisbistro.com

Nonna Tata Authentic Italian in a space so tiny that years after opening, it's still tough to get a

table. Bring your own wine and lawn chairs and wait it out. It's worth it. 1400 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-332-0250

Paris Coffee Shop A true Fort Worth institution, serving up old-fashioned diner food, including chicken and dumplings and mile-high meringue-topped pies, since 1926. 704 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-335-2041; www.pariscoffeeshop.net

Spiral Diner A fun, funky, nationally recognized vegan eatery that's a shining star in a town full of steakhouses. The food is so good, you'll wonder why you eat meat. 1314 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-332-8834; www.spiraldiner.com

Yucatan Taco Stand Modern Latin food from Paul Willis, the serial restaurateur behind Fuzzy's Taco Shops. The grub could be better, but the full bar and patio draw a young crowd. 909 W. Magnolia Ave.; 817-924-8646; www.yucatanacostand1.com



cool neighborhood

open patio out front adds to the neighborhood feel. And while the restaurant is drawing Near Southside residents (who are fiercely loyal to Magnolia establishments), it has generated enough buzz that people from all over Fort Worth and Dallas are coming to try it out.

"Some of the restaurants on this street are Fort Worth icons, so we're really proud to be here," King says. "And everyone, even restaurant owners who might see us as competition, has been supportive, asking us if we need anything and if they can help. It's a good place to run a business. We're all working to make it better."

The one thing King says he'd like to see on Magnolia is more retail. Vance Martin, chef and owner of Lili's Bistro agrees. "This is being revitalized in the right way," he says. "Exciting things are under way, and we are poised to become an area similar to SoCo in Austin or the Bricktown in Oklahoma City. We just need some retail and entertainment venues."

If rumors about several planned mixed-use developments pan out, Martin's vision could become a reality. It's something he's betting on as he plans to open a second restaurant a block away from his first, in the former Catholic Charities building at 1208 W. Magnolia Ave.

"It's going to be called Cat City Grill," he says. "We're still tweaking the concept, but we'll offer signature sandwiches, some steaks and seafood and a full bar. It'll have the same neighborhood feel that Lili's does. Magnolia has been missing a grown-up bar and we're going to fill that void."

Martin says that he is asked almost daily about opening a second restaurant downtown or in the Cultural District but that he never considered it, wanting to stay close to home.

"The long, careful planning of a lot of people who are committed to Magnolia and the Southside is finally paying off," he says. "There is nowhere I'd rather be."

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