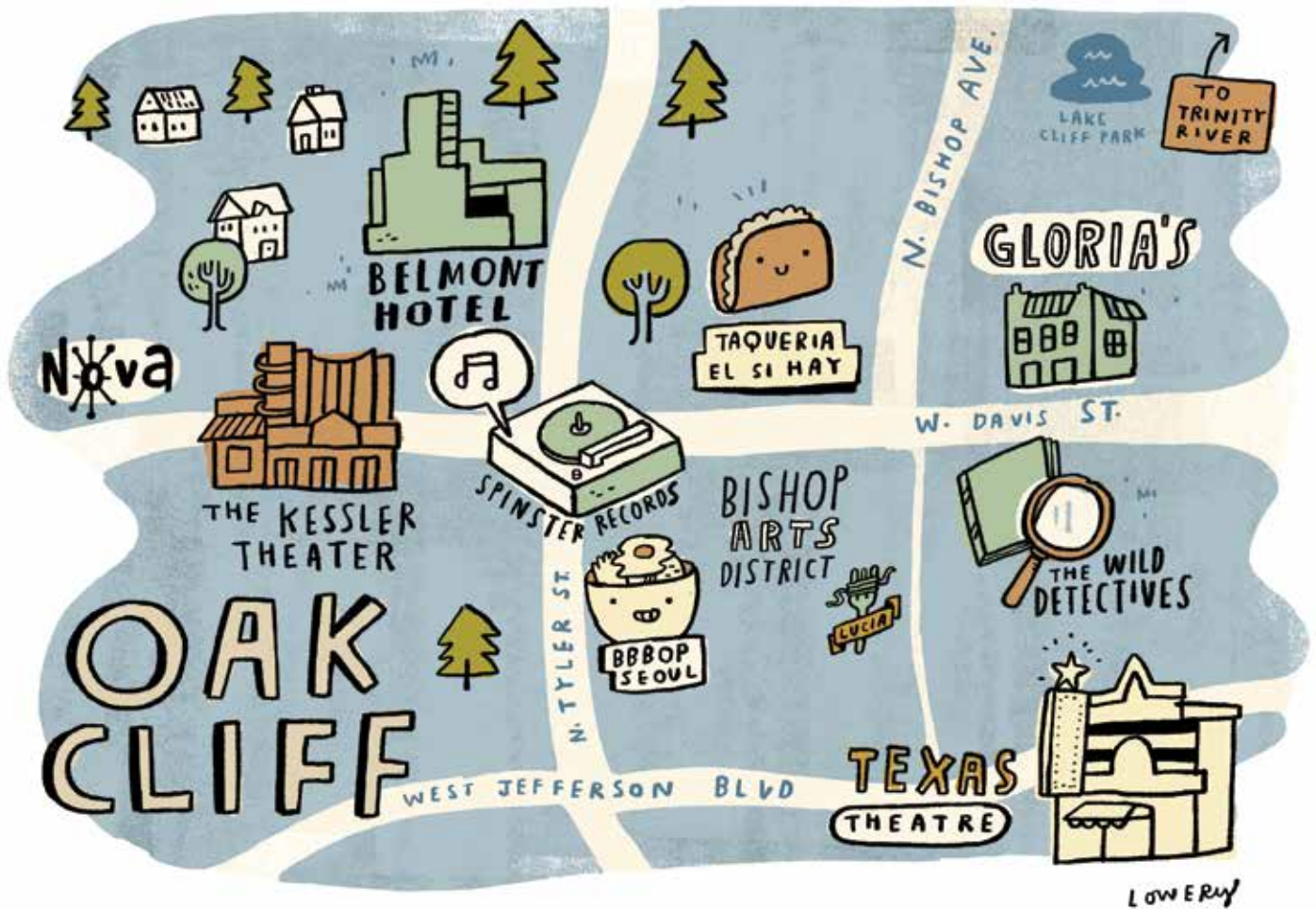


HIT THE ROAD

CAN'T-MISS GETAWAYS



DESTINATION: OAK CLIFF



The Brooklyn of Texas

Experience another side of Dallas in Oak Cliff

story by **Michael Corcoran**

IT'S NOT A SUBURB, BUT A BOROUGH. NOT AN extension, but a separate township, at least spiritually. Although Dallas annexed Oak Cliff in 1903, the 87-square-mile area southwest of downtown has maintained its own identity. If Dallas is the packed dance floor under a disco ball, then Oak Cliff is the mysterious couple at the dark end of the bar playing footsie.

Framed by beautiful rolling hills, Oak Cliff celebrates independence, diversity, and creativity. It's Berkeley without the big college, Brooklyn sans subway. Just a 10-minute drive from downtown Dallas, Oak Cliff offers a convenient day trip for residents of



- **Fort Worth**
35 minutes
- **Wichita Falls**
2.25 hours
- **Austin**
3 hours
- **Houston**
4 hours

the Dallas-Fort Worth area. But Oak Cliff has also been drawing visitors from all over the state in recent years.

They drive for hours to see musicians Michael Nesmith or St. Vincent in the intimately restored, art deco Kessler Theater. Or, they visit to catch a comedy revue or offbeat film at the notorious Texas Theatre, now known more for its adventurous arts programming than as the site of JFK assassin Lee Harvey Oswald's arrest. It used to be that folks only came to the edgy Cliff to visit the Dallas Zoo or to chase Oswald's ghost, but now the curious are lured by chic eateries, interesting shopping, and

craft coffee and cocktail hangouts.

Maybe visitors will want to follow in the footsteps of Beyoncé and Jay-Z to upscale coastal Mexican restaurant Mesa on West Jefferson Boulevard, where the music moguls ordered lobster enchiladas and chicken mole; try the upscale barbecue of Smoke, with dishes like beer-can chicken and coffee-cured brisket; or brunch on chicken and waffles with coffee or a mimosa at Oddfellows. It's possible to spend a few days in Oak Cliff without ever going into Dallas proper, whose skyline provides a spectacular view to the north. To paraphrase a lyric from Jimmie Dale Gilmore, have you ever seen Dallas from the pool of the Belmont Hotel?

"You just get this good feeling when you're crossing the Trinity River," says David Grover, a longtime Los Angeles

musician who opened Spinster, a "vinyl record lifestyle store," on West Davis Street in 2014. "Oak Cliff is special. It's a mom n' pop vibe in a big city."

"Where else but Oak Cliff can you find a fine dining restaurant next to a car wash?"

Oak Cliff's restaurant scene is especially fluent in entrepreneurship. "Oak Cliff is a place where you can test a business concept or buy your first home at very little risk," adds Paul Wilkes, who owns the Glass Optical eyewear boutique, while his wife, Megan, co-owns Emporium Pies.

In just a five-block stretch of West Davis Street, the main drag, your dining options include Cuban sandwiches

at C. Señor, Korean fried chicken at bbbop Seoul Kitchen, gourmet flatbreads and steaks at Bolsa, fancy home-cooking at Pink Magnolia, El Salvadoran cuisine at Gloria's, or the best \$1.35 tacos in the world at Taqueria El Si Hay. Go farther west on Davis, just past the Kessler, and you'll find Nova, a neighborhood restaurant and bar set in an old Dairy Queen building that busts hunger with a chicken-fried pork loin (\$18) covered in spicy sausage gravy and served with mashed potatoes.

"Where else but Oak Cliff can you find a fine dining restaurant next to a car wash?" Wilkes poses, referencing the dual character of the historic neighborhood. Rare is the trendy area that has so many working-class residents. The gentry have arrived and real estate costs have risen, but the cultural air

remains scented with grilled peppers and onions, girded by the rumbling bass lines of hip hop and salsa.

Oak Cliff likes it funky and original. "If you're not into the malls and the chain stores, Oak Cliff is for you," says Grover, who hosts live music at Spinster two to three times per week. Instead of Barnes & Noble, there's The Wild Detectives, a bookstore that serves food and drinks, shows art films, and hosts live music. And why go to Starbucks when you can get fresh-roasted coffee at Davis Street Espresso, which serves an amazing "house toast" with avocado, tomato, and ricotta?

Another Oak Cliff original is the Belmont Hotel, which was the first non-Californian motor court motel west of the Mississippi when it opened in 1946. Restored in 2005, the Belmont is more like Oak Cliff's Chateau Marmont because like that Hollywood hotel, the Belmont is a place to start the night. Bar Belmont, off the lobby and outside, overlooks the sparkling promises of a city in wait.

"We've kept the motor court aesthetic, but we've modernized it for the new type of traveler," says Jordan Ford, part of an investment group that bought the Belmont in 2015. "You walk

out of your room to open space. It's a campus with room to roam."

The artist-in-residence at the Belmont is tough-and-tender songsmith Alejandro Escovedo, who curates a series of music performances in the lobby and is developing a podcast from the Belmont consisting of interviews with songwriters. "I loved my time in Austin, but there's no place like Oak Cliff," says Escovedo, who lives in the Belmont when he's not on the road. "People come here to get things done. It's not all talk."

The 2012 opening of the soaring Margaret Hunt Hill Bridge, whose span resembles the world's largest butterfly net, helped spur the Oak Cliff renaissance, providing a new gateway to the area. Running parallel is the Ronald Kirk Bridge (formerly the Continental Bridge), which was built for cars but recently converted into a pedestrian walkway. Hike-and-bike trails continue along the banks of the Trinity.

If Oak Cliff had a chip on its shoulder for not being on the ritzier side of the Trinity, it's been whittled by artisans and now sits in a storefront window of a trendy shop on Bishop Avenue. Oak Cliff's revitalization in the early 2000s originated in the Bishop Arts District, a four-square-block area that's now home to more than 50 small businesses. The district fills on the weekends with North Dallasites, who come for brunch at classic French bistro Boulevardier or, if they've made reservations a month earlier, at the tiny Lucia, regarded by foodies as the best Italian restaurant in North Texas. Eno's Pizza Tavern and Hunky's Hamburgers are more casual faves.

A friend from Dallas derides Oak Cliff as "the new Disneyland for hipsters," but Jeff Liles, the longtime Dallas music scenester who has booked



OAK CLIFF
is southwest of downtown Dallas. Visitor info is available from the Dallas CVB, www.visitdallas.com, the Bishop Arts District Merchant Association, www.bishopartsdistrict.com, and the Oak Cliff Chamber of Commerce, www.oakcliffchamber.org.

the Kessler since its 2010 rebirth, says the Cliff is "hipster proof." Yes, there are tourists, many of whom have beards and every Bon Iver record, but Liles argues that the neighborhood maintains "a large ethnic influence that inspires its creative class." Grover notes the high stroller count and says, "Our hipsters have kids. It's an older crowd." You turn in your hipster card the first time you buy diapers at midnight.

Oak Cliff has only recently become hip, but it's always been cool. These are the old stomping grounds of Bonnie and Clyde, and the home of both the nation's first drive-in restaurant (Pig Stand in 1921) and convenience store (Tote'm, later renamed 7-11, in 1927). Before he became the first person to play blues on an electric guitar, T-Bone Walker recorded as Oak Cliff T-Bone in 1929, when he was still shining shoes at Stevens Park Golf Course. Two of his disciples, Jimmie and Stevie Ray Vaughan, also grew up in the Cliff, though a couple of decades later. Adamson High, where country legend Ray Price began singing, later spawned "outlaw country" forbearers B.W. Stevenson, Michael Martin Murphey, and Ray Wylie Hubbard. New Bohemians singer Edie Brickell named her 1990 song "Oak Cliff Bra," after her hometown.

Oak Cliff is still a bit like a Tex-Mex Chinatown; nothing would really shock you here. Not even seeing the future Mrs. Paul Simon sitting on the front porch in her bra, watching the world go by. You can be yourself in the Cliff. Maybe that's what her song is about.

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
David Grover of Spinster Records, Texas Theatre's neon sign, Davis Street Espresso, C. Señor, The Wild Detectives bookshop, strolling Bishop Avenue in the Bishop Arts District.



Photos: © Robert Hart



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HIT THE ROAD

CAN'T-MISS GETAWAYS



DESTINATION: WHARTON

Small-Town Stories

Country-fried charm abounds in Wharton

story by **Clayton Maxwell**

WHARTON IS THE KIND OF TOWN THAT invites you to relax on a wraparound porch with an old friend, sip an iced tea—or something stronger—and reveal some secrets. At least that's what I wanted to do when visiting for a weekend last spring, standing on the front porch of Wharton-born playwright Horton Foote's childhood home, peeking in at all the old photos on his mantel, and then looking out at the blossoming azaleas and old oak trees that adorn the front yard.

Foote, who won Academy Awards for his screenplays of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Tender Mercies*, died in 2009 at the age of 92, but he lives on through



- **El Campo**
15 minutes
- **Houston**
1 hour
- **San Antonio**
2.5 hours
- **Dallas**
4.5 hours

his plays and films, which break your heart open with their simple beauty. He knew how to tell piquant, wistful stories about small-town Texas, and many of those stories took root right here on this front porch, right here in Wharton.

During my visit to Wharton, I could imagine how Foote found inspiration in his hometown. Everywhere I went, I discovered interesting stories. I heard them while clutching my vintage coffee mug at the down-home Milam Street Coffee and Wall 2 Wall Words Used Books shop, trying to wake myself up. Linda King, the woman with short white hair and comfy sandals who made my Americano,

HIT THE ROAD

scouted around, rearranging the chairs from last night's Java Jams music show. Her husband, Carl King, sat in his cowboy hat and Wranglers at a nearby table, chatting with a friend—about the packed house the night before; about the dancing that broke out when band-leader Joe Flores closed the night with *La Bamba*. Every Texas town needs a gathering place, and this is Wharton's.

Located on the Colorado River about 55 miles southwest of Houston, Wharton is no longer the agricultural

boomtown of Horton Foote's youth in the 1920s, when cotton, corn, and sugar cane prospered. The once-busy train station has closed and morphed into a weekends-only museum, many of the town's grand homes now look hungry for repair, and the arrival of Wal-Mart made survival impossible for the beloved local grocery and department stores that once kept the main square bustling. But it has maintained a notable thread of kind, no-nonsense authenticity, something you see in many Horton Foote characters

During my visit to Wharton, I could imagine how Horton Foote found inspiration in his hometown.

like Mac Sledge from *Tender Mercies*.

A shop owner named Mary Lee from Selections gift shop across the square popped in for coffee while I was telling Carl and Linda that I had stayed the night at Wharton's kitschy Teepee Motel, one of the tepee roadside motels that sprang up along U.S. highways in the 1940s. The three of them regaled me with Teepee scoop: how Willie Nelson stayed there when he was a boy picking cotton; how it

was rescued from disrepair by a guy from Eagle Lake who won the lottery; and how ladies from Katy like to rent out all 10 tepees and stay up until the wee hours drinking and telling stories around the fire pit.

While I could not corroborate Willie's stay at the Teepee Motel, it is definitely true that the quirky landmark came back to life thanks to Bryan Woods buying that winning lottery ticket at J&K's convenience store in Eagle Lake in 2003. He used part of his \$49 million win to realize his wife's dream of returning the motel to its former glory.

I parted ways with the coffee shop trio and headed one block up the street to a very different community hub—a new restaurant in Wharton so healthy, stylish, and tasty it would be at home in New York or Napa. Named "Provisions" because it was originally envisioned to be primarily a market for natural foods like homemade yogurt and organic butter, this little gem is somewhere I could waste away hours noshing on its fresh-made breads,

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:
Wharton's Teepee Motel;
new restaurant Provisions;
local gathering place Milam Street Coffee.



Photos: Kevin Stillman

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soups, and salads while watching the way the light pours in through its floor-to-ceiling windows.

Debra Medina, the visionary and “real food” advocate who brought Provisions to life, is a great talker in addition to being a savvy restaurateur. Particularly since, as the owner of a medical billing firm with a back-

For a minute there, it felt like all of the spirits of this old building were joining us at the bar, telling their tales.

ground in politics, she’d never opened a restaurant before. While I sat at the bar, she filled me in about the renovation of this gorgeous 1897 property with towering ceilings and exposed brick.

As I sampled from the Texas wine list, Debra pulled out a big white binder with photos that showed how this architectural beauty had originally been a bank owned by local resident R.T. Erwin; although a disgruntled customer shot Erwin down in a Wharton bar, the building remained a bank for decades.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:

The Plaza Theatre in downtown Wharton; the Wharton County Historical Museum; Dan Rather’s childhood home on museum grounds.

Debra pulled out another relic for me from the binder: a letter from J. Edgar Hoover dated 1938 that had been found stuffed in the building’s crown molding. It reported that a fugitive the FBI had been pursuing had been apprehended. For a minute there, it felt like all of the spirits of this old building were joining us at the bar, telling their tales, and I wished that Horton Foote were around to write it into a play.

I should mention that Foote is not even the most famous son of Wharton; another, different kind of storyteller grew up here, too—Dan Rather. You can visit his very tiny white childhood home while on the grounds of the Wharton County Historical Museum, which is another rich repository of local lore. Looking at the old photos of Wharton’s cotton-picking and Brahman cattle-raising past, you get an idea of how the town sits on the agricultural and cultural border between the Old South and South Texas.

Housed in the same building is the



20th Century Technology Museum, a storehouse of techno-gadgets that will shock your kids with tactile proof of what a telephone used to look like. The owners, Art and Sharon Schulze, own 80 to 90 percent of the treasures on display; to get the most of the experience, make sure you are there when Art is available to show you around. His enthusiasm for a Wurlitzer and other artifacts is contagious.

My adventures in Wharton came full circle when, back at Provisions, Debra introduced me to a pair of handsome men sitting at a nearby table. One of them, Van Broughton Ramsey, is a Wharton-born, Emmy Award-winning costume designer whose extensive oeuvre includes the *Lonesome*

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Dove miniseries, Horton Foote plays in New York, and *The Trip To Bountiful*, a 2014 TV movie based on Foote's play.

Although Wharton is much changed since Van's days growing up here, he and his partner, Robert Nelson, who live half the year in upstate

"I've never seen so many fish fries or pancake breakfasts in my life," Robert said. "There is always something going on here to raise money or support someone."

New York, remain dedicated to this town and the sense of place it carries. They told me about the time Fidel Castro came through to pick up a horse promised to him by local rancher J.B. Ferguson, the owner of champion quarter horse Go Man Go. We talked about the very active local company at the Plaza Theater, where I had just attended a raucous, full-house performance of the comedy *Noises Off* the night before. They intrigued me with tales of international church trips, lively dinner parties, and the Beautification Commission. "I've never seen so many fish fries or pancake breakfasts in my life," Robert said. "There is always something going on here to raise money or support someone."

It seems that Horton Foote is not the only one who has found, woven deep into the fabric of this little town, a wellspring for good stories and nostalgia for home. And if you spend a little time here amid Wharton's old front porches, tepees, and friendly community gathering spots, you'll undoubtedly end up with stories of your own to tell. 📍

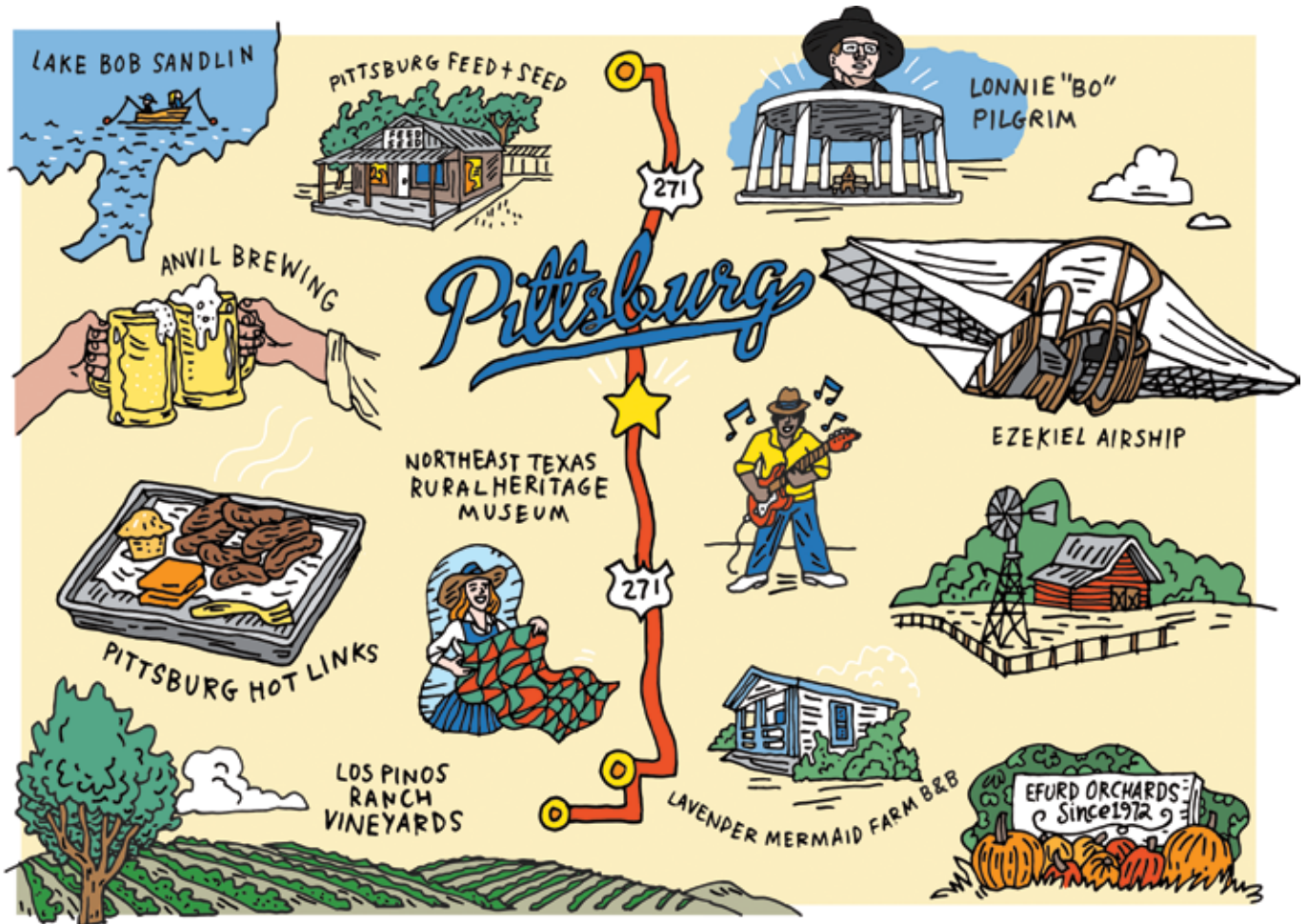


WHARTON

For Wharton visitor information, call the Wharton Chamber of Commerce at **979/532-1862**; www.whartonchamber.com.

HIT THE ROAD

CAN'T-MISS GETAWAYS



DESTINATION: PITTSBURG

Flights of Fancy

Award-winning wines and historic yarns in Pittsburg

story by **Wes Ferguson**

IN PITTSBURG, THE HOT LINKS ARE PLUMP, mermaids abound far from the sea, and a Baptist preacher invented a flying contraption that got off the ground a full year before the Wright Brothers made their famous first flight.

Surrounded by lush green forests and calm blue lakes, the town of 4,700 about two hours east of Dallas is probably best known as the hometown of poultry mogul Lonnie “Bo” Pilgrim, who died in July at the age of 89. But visitors to Pittsburg find much more than chicken when they venture into The Depot at the Northeast Texas Rural Heritage Museum, where a replica of a historic winged machine



- **Tyler**
1 hour
- **Dallas**
2 hours
- **Houston**
4.5 hours
- **Austin**
5 hours

is suspended from the ceiling as if frozen in midair.

The anachronistic aircraft is called the Ezekiel Airship. Did it ever fly? Folks in Pittsburg say it did.

The Rev. Burrell Cannon hatched the idea for the airship around the turn of the 20th century while reading the biblical book of Ezekiel, which describes the prophet’s journey on a flying machine that utilized a “wheel within a wheel.” An inventor, sawmill operator, and Baptist minister, Cannon interpreted this as wheels of different sizes. As his imagination whirred, Cannon conceived of an internal motor that would turn a crankshaft, controlling fans to propel the aircraft.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:
Bo Pilgrim statue, Ezekiel Airship,
Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards,
downtown Pittsburg, Pittsburg Hot Link
Restaurant, Lavender Mermaid Farm
Bed and Breakfast, Efurd Orchards.

and Pittsburg Hot Sauce, which is also made in the restaurant and is known to friends and family as “Mean Gene” sauce after previous owner Gene Warrick.

“They’re old-world and hand-tied,” said co-owner Sabin Warrick, Mean Gene’s son. “You see the links, you know they’re unique to us.”

Some folks even call them “East Texas Caviar.” The restaurant also serves classic breakfast items like pancakes and omelets, in addition to burgers, sandwiches, and plate lunches.

After lunch, the Paccard bells from Pittsburg’s 75-foot-tall Prayer Tower chimed a pretty song as we walked past the biggest Coca-Cola mural in Texas, just around the corner from Anvil Brewing. The brand-new brewpub and dancehall revived the historic Pittsburg Feed & Seed, where Pilgrim launched his business in 1946. The feed store had been vacant since 1961, but new owners Byron and Kristin Aldredge rehabilitated the aluminum building and reopened it for business on Fridays and Saturdays, offering craft beer, live music, and pizza.

Walking Pittsburg’s downtown streets, we then made our way to The Farmstead, also part of the Northeast Texas Rural Heritage Museum. The



fully restored farm features a general store and farmhouse containing many original furnishings, as well as an old well, outhouse, smokehouse, and barn, revealing how the region’s rural ancestors lived during the time Cannon constructed his airship. Shortly before our arrival, an unwanted guest had also made an appearance. “We had a nest full of eggs, and a chicken snake got ‘em—all but one,” volunteer guide Joanne Bates informed us.

That afternoon we drove south down a narrow country road that tunneled through tall pines and hardwoods, suddenly opening into a beautiful clearing where grapes grow in the East Texas sun. When Los Pinos Ranch Vineyards opened about 15 years ago, the winery and vineyard raised a few eyebrows in the traditional community, says Gerald Jones, a managing partner. “People would come hide and say, ‘Don’t tell anybody I was here!’” he chuckled.

Inside the winery, which produces upwards of 10,000 cases a year,

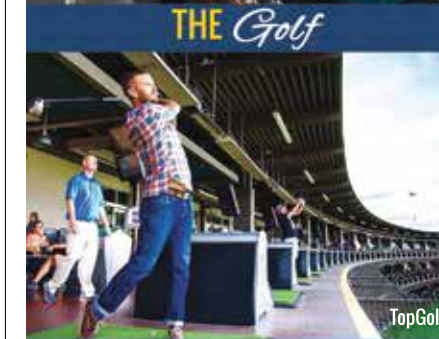
winemaker Arnulfo Perez led us past the wooden cask-lined walls of the barrel room and into a production room where wine was fermenting in huge metal tanks. On a windowsill of Perez’s laboratory office, where he samples and blends Los Pinos’ varieties of sweet and dry wines, I noticed a pile of trophy buckles. Each was more shiny and ornate than the last.

The anachronistic aircraft is called the Ezekiel Airship. Did it ever fly? Folks in Pittsburg say it did.

“You guys are going to think I’m crazy, but look at this,” Perez said. He grabbed a couple of cardboard boxes and showed us dozens of ribbons and medals garnered for his award-winning wines. We raised our glasses to toast his achievements. The winery offers private tastings by appointment, which includes a tour of the production facilities and ends with a pairing of wines and light hors d’oeuvres in Los Pinos’ Barrel Room.

That evening we sat on Los Pinos’ wooden deck overlooking the vineyard rows, feasting and passing around bottles of floral whites and bold reds. Eventually a bright, full moon illuminated our path toward the cozy cottages we had rented at the Lavender Mermaid Farm Bed and Breakfast around the corner.

The next morning, B&B owner Michelle Smith had left a metal pail



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PITTSBURG

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larded with tasty breakfast treats just outside my cottage door. I sat in the cool shade, facing a lovely stand of young pine trees, and listened to birdsong that was disturbed only once by the distant horn of a passing train. Curious about the cottages' mermaid-and-flower theme, I asked Smith about it when she stopped by to chat. She explained that she and her partner, Tanya Byrd, had previously owned a lake house filled with mermaid tchotchkes and decor, providing a convenient and catchy theme for their five landlocked cottages.

Before long, we made our way down the road to Efurd Orchards, a bustling produce stand and market surrounded by rows of bushy trees bearing locally famous Pittsburg peaches. Greg Efurd, who owns the orchard with his wife, Amy Efurd, said his parents opened the stand in 1972. "It was this little-bitty dirt-floor shed," he said. "It kept growing, and we kept planting peach trees."

Peaches grown in the sandy soil around Pittsburg just taste a little sweeter, he added. "I don't know how many we sell. It's a bunch though."

Over the years, the Efurds have expanded their offerings to include jams and jellies, gifts and—a crowd favorite—soft-serve ice cream in a range of flavors such as fresh peach and blackberry. Tourists come for a peck of peaches and end up lingering in the rocking chairs or beside the duck pond, or they marvel at the antique farm equipment suspended from the rafters.

"We've got all this junk hanging from the ceilings," Greg said. "A lot of people reminisce and say, 'Man, I used to have that when I was a kid.' It's just good for parents bringing their kids out here to have a feel for an old farmers market, the way it used to be a long time ago." 🐼