

PLATES

A large pile of barbecued crab is the central focus, resting on a dark, textured surface. The crab is cooked to a deep orange-brown color, with some pieces showing white meat. It is surrounded by several beer bottles and a hot sauce bottle. One beer bottle is on the left, another on the right, and a third one is partially visible at the bottom right. A small bottle of hot sauce with a red cap is also present. The background is dark, making the crab and the white text stand out.

TRAVEL + EAT + DRINK

Crustacean Craving

Southeast Texas
stops for truly delicious
barbecued crab

story by June Naylor

Covered in a mixture of garlic, black pepper, and cayenne, barbecued crab is a regional speciality you won't soon forget.



BARBECUED CRAB, A COASTAL DELICACY born in a tiny corner of Southeast Texas, is tender, juicy, and laced with spice. This misnamed meal isn't barbecue, though, which I realized some years ago when my friend Carolyn invited me home from college to visit her family in Beaumont, promising we'd eat something not found anywhere else.

On a mild spring evening, her parents piled us into the car for a 45-minute trip from their Beaumont home down to Sabine Pass, where we pulled up to a local shack called Sartin's and stood around for about an hour before a table opened up. I breathed in the salty air, looked at the fish swimming beneath the aged dock beside the small café, and marveled that people would hang out and chat about nothing for what seemed to be

The scent of that powerful blend of cayenne and garlic cooked into these bright-red crustaceans was heady and irresistible.

forever, while waiting to eat something that sounded nonsensical.

After finally being seated at a long table, we waited some more. Eventually, a waitress arrived carrying two giant trays piled with searing-hot crabs—Gulf blue crabs, pulled that day from nearby waters—bearing an enticing and foreign aroma. The blackened-everything craze from Louisiana had yet to blanket Texas, and the scent of that powerful blend of cayenne and garlic cooked into these bright-red crustaceans was heady and irresistible. Nobody could explain why these shellfish were called “barbecued,” because they were neither smoked nor grilled—and there wasn't a trace of barbecue sauce anywhere to be found. The one similarity is that eating barbecued crab is messy as all get-out, perhaps more so than a slab of ribs, because the heavily seasoned crustaceans are served right out of a molten-hot deep-fryer. Carolyn and her parents showed me how to crack the crabs to pull out the meat once they were cool enough to handle. It was a process; I remember being a little envious of their prowess.

In the years since, that particular Sartin's closed, but I'd heard that other locations survived in the Beaumont area. I kept promising myself I'd return to see if these crabs lived up to my memory; motivation kicked in when I heard there was but one Sartin's still in business, and the specialty was becoming scarce. After talking my husband into a barbecued crab mission, we set out for the Golden Triangle.

We stopped in the remaining Sartin's, which operated in Nederland for 21 years. (In May, well after my trip, Sartin's relocated to a mall in Port Arthur.) The visit took me on a delicious, messy journey back in time with every bite. We were mesmerized by cook Elaine Tran's preparation of the barbecued crabs. She'd already done the hardest part, which involves

This page: Crabs fresh from the deep fryer. Opposite page: Aside from barbecued crab, Floyds in Beaumont is known for its crab bisque.

stunning the live blue crabs in icy water before pulling off the carapace and apron. She then covered the crabs in seasonings and, grabbing them with tongs, lowered them into searing-hot oil to fry about a minute. Sartin's models its seasoning recipe after one developed by Granger's Restaurant, the Sabine Pass seafood joint that invented barbecued crabs in the late 1940s and burned down a decade later. Granger's original black pepper, garlic, and cayenne recipe is said to have vanished, but you can still buy Bolner's Fiesta brand BBQ Crab Seasoning if you want to master this dish at home.

As we continued on our barbecued crab adventure, we finally became better at the technique of eating the shellfish, which requires a bit of practice to get right: With one hand, you grip the body and, with the other, pinch the place where a big front leg attaches

(using napkins—those babies are hot and slippery!), and break them apart to reveal lush, thick shreds of white crab meat. My favorite addition to the ritual came in drizzling each bite with a squeeze of fresh lemon wedge.

Our weekend continued with more barbecued crab discoveries, and each came with its own round of gustatory joy. At The Schooner, a large seafood house alongside a busy Nederland highway, the barbecued crabs shared space on a large oval platter in a jumble with big, butterfied and fried shrimp, scallops, and stuffed deviled crabs. Owner Constantine Megas spoke with humble pride about the recipes that have become traditions since his family took over the then-3-year-old



restaurant in 1950. Its barbecued crabs bear a less spicy and slightly sweeter seasoning combination made just for The Schooner by a Beaumont food company called TexJoy. The Schooner also cooks exceptional gumbo, a nuanced dark bowl of roux packed with meaty shrimp, crab, and crawfish.

A photograph of a bright green vintage truck parked on a dirt path next to a river. A man is taking a photo of a large tree trunk, and a family of three (two women and a child) are standing nearby.

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At loud and crowded Floyds Cajun Seafood in Beaumont, we started with a bowl of the much-touted crab bisque, which general manager Paul Knobloch insisted we try. Good thing we split this lush, creamy indulgence, or else we wouldn't have had room for the main event. Steam wafted from the giant platters set before us as the crabs—piled at least three deep, with more than a dozen to a platter—had come seconds earlier from the fryer. Floyds' version was as spicy as Sartin's, with most of the seasoning clustered around the center of the crabs and less on the legs. Knobloch claimed his proprietary recipe, made in house, is a 75-year-old secret dating back to another long-gone South Louisiana shack connected to the Landry's seafood restaurant family. We listened and nodded, tearing apart the crustaceans, squeezing lemon on each piece then taking another bite of the warm, addictive garlic toast served on the side. We washed it down with cold Abita Amber, that refreshing lager for piquant Cajun foods.

Finally hitting overload, we pointed the car toward home, agreeing not to wait years before returning for another barbecued crab weekend. We've since heard from our Southeast Texas pals about other great crab destinations. The only thing we can't agree on is where to stop for our first crab fix. 🦞

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Floyds Cajun Seafood and Texas Steakhouse, 2290 I-10 South, Beaumont, **409-842-0686**; **floydsbeaumont.com**. Floyds serves barbecued crab from about July through September, when blue crabs are in season.

The Schooner, 1507 S. Hwy 69, Nederland, **409-722-2323**; **theschoonerrestaurant.com**.

Sartin's Seafood, 3100 Hwy 365, Port Arthur, **409-721-9420**; **sartins.com**.

A Light in the Storm

Camaraderie and comfort food at Rockport's seafood standout GLOW

story by **Michael Corcoran**



WHEN EVACUEES KAREY AND DAVID SWARTWOUT returned to Rockport in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey, they assumed their old boathouse-turned-restaurant would be part of the devastation they'd been watching on TV. Driving down Broadway for the first time post-Harvey was "very disorienting," Karey said, "because so many landmarks and buildings were just gone." She took a deep breath when the car reached

"It was important for us to reopen as quickly as possible."




the 1800 block and then exhaled in relief when, at the end of the long driveway, she saw a magnificent GLOW: Their little seafood restaurant was still standing. The costly wall reinforcement materials required to pass code before opening in 2011 turned out to be well worth the red tape. The restaurant was back in business as soon as power was restored a couple of weeks later.

"It was important for us that we reopen as quickly as possible for the community," said Karey, GLOW's owner-chef and a 10-year Rockport resident. "We had incredible survivor's guilt, but we were fortunate enough to have a choice—either move on or keep going. So we chose to just keep 'swimming, swimming, swimming,' as my sons say."

By the start of 2018, about one-third of the businesses in Rockport had reopened, and GLOW had become more than a place for creative shrimp and steak dishes and refreshing intoxicants like the Big Tree, a blend of vodka, cucumber, lime, and mint. The charming white wooden box with the high ceiling brought a sense of comfort to residents, who shared their stories and felt like everything was going to come together again like the shrimp, crab, and oysters in GLOW's famous Rockport chowder.

"This has always been a gathering spot, a place to make memories," Karey said of the 32-seat eatery, designed to be intimate but also social, like a European bistro. The tables are so close, conversations spill over and friendships develop. If you'd like a little room and a nice view of Little Bay, there are six well-spaced picnic tables outside, in addition to patio seating.

Karey Swartwout—with husband, David, and daughter, Olivia—wants GLOW's diners to feel "welcome and cared for."

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GLOW withstood Hurricane Harvey and quickly reopened after the storm; popular menu items like **Mom's Shrimp** bring comfort to Rockport residents.

"Our [sales] numbers are about the same as they were last year at this time," said Karey, who named her restaurant after the glimmering luminescence of the sun and the moon on Little Bay. Although the word "glow" today conjures smartphones in the dark, the Rockport restaurant harks back to the days when talk was entertainment. Usually, the only time cell phones come out is to take "shelfies" of such dishes as Mom's Shrimp in a sauce of white wine and mushrooms over creamy mashed potatoes.

There was a period of uncertainty immediately after the hurricane, so to get some cash flow GLOW started

selling the sea salt it had been harvesting from Aransas Bay. "We wanted to keep the payroll going," said Karey, who was able to keep her staff during the downtime. A three-day process, from cistern to oven to bottle, yields a finished product that goes for \$13 an ounce. A portion of the proceeds funds the nonprofit Glow Rockport Foundation, which has committed \$2,000 to Rockport-Fulton High School's Class of '18 for college scholarships. (Husband David is a career and college guidance counselor at the high school.)

Karey became interested in harvesting salts during her eight years in Europe, where the practice is commonplace. Although she once served a cheeseburger to Jack Lemmon while working as a waitress at Sardi's in New York City out of



college, her true entrée in food service came when she opened a catering business in the United Kingdom in 2001. Karey moved to London when a job in e-commerce transferred her from Austin. “Tex-Mex, barbecue, and New Orleans cuisine were just dreadful in London at the time,” she

To increase cash flow after the storm, the restaurant began to harvest and market sea salt from Aransas Bay.

said. Sensing an opportunity, Karey launched Butter & Co.—Butterworth is her maiden name—which got really busy, really fast, making authentic North American dishes such as gumbo, chicken posole, and muf-falettas. Karey went full time from software to cookware.

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Pregnant with twins, Karey moved to Rockport in 2008 with her then-husband, whose parents lived there. "It was supposed to be temporary," she said, "but I just fell in love with the town." She found her building, which was formerly a sailboat repair shop—hence the high ceiling—right next door to Rockport Cemetery in late 2010.

Framed antique maps are a big part of GLOW's décor, especially in the quaint bathrooms. "They're from all the places David and I have lived," Karey explained. The plat of Manhattan in the bar area represents Karey's time studying acting in the Big Apple after graduating from Texas State University in 1994.

The map of Panama in the men's room alludes to David's previous job as assistant principal of an international school in the Central American country. It was there that he received an email in January 2014 from his short-time, junior high flame Karey, whom he hadn't seen in 29 years. "I never really forgot him," she said. The pair planned a rendezvous in Houston, and three years later they were married and the parents of a daughter, Olivia, who joined their five boys from previous marriages.

Add a restaurant, and it's a lot of work, though Karey said it's the satisfying kind: "The world is becoming increasingly automated, less personal. It's important to us at GLOW that we connect with our customers, from our made-from-scratch kitchen to our napkins folded into the shape of a sailboat. We all have a basic human desire to feel welcome and cared for."

Karey wants you to walk out of her restaurant with your senses radiating. Organic happiness manifests as a warm glow. 



GLOW

is at 1815 Broadway St. in Rockport.

Call **361-727-2644**;

glowtexas.com.



What a Wonderful World

A Houston brewery became an unlikely hero during Harvey

story by **Kimya Kavehkar**

ON A MERCIFULLY COOL FRIDAY EVENING IN the acre-size backyard of Houston's 8th Wonder Brewery, the post-workweek crowd streams in, ready to cut loose. And just as you'd expect of the fourth-largest city in America, the vibe is delightfully diverse—a 20-something couple canoodles in a seating area made from a retrofitted shipping container; a group of coworkers roll up their sleeves, setting newly freed elbows on a picnic table; and a trio of pals stare up at a television watching the tense last moments of a basketball game. Different races, ethnicities, and age groups have come together, cradling amber and coffee-colored pints of beer, carrying on the centuries-old tradition of breweries, pubs, and taverns as centers of their communities.

But the 5-year-old brewery, located in East Downtown, doesn't just facilitate the community, it participates in it.

That word-of-mouth chain reaction resulted in five 16-hour days of extricating strangers, the brewery staff navigating the crisis-stricken streets of Houston.

While people mingle and play corn-hole in the yard, a dark green military cargo truck adorned with the 8th Wonder logo sits unassumingly near the fence line. During Hurricane Harvey, a friend who knew about the brewery's large truck, a six-wheel-drive M35, called co-founder Alex Vassilakidis and asked if Vassilakidis could take it to rescue some family members who'd been stranded in south Houston. Once he and others evacuated one house, next-door neighbors called out for help, and that word-of-mouth chain reaction resulted in five 16-hour days of extricating strangers, the brewery staff navigating the crisis-stricken streets of Houston to rescue nearly two dozen residents who'd been stranded in their homes.

"Our city was hurting, and people were struggling," recalls co-founder Ryan Soroka, who was in Dallas at the time of the hurricane with his wife and young child. "We had a vehicle that can get through waters, and so they went out."

The brewery had bought the truck a year before, thinking it would be a fun prop for patrons' selfies and for use in marketing and promotion. Soroka never imagined it would be a lifeline. "If it even saved one family's life or got them out of a dangerous situation, it was worth every penny," he says of the truck that eventually became too water-logged and broke down. While the brewery staff does have plans to fix it, the vehicle currently takes on a symbolic role as a memorial.

With its unwavering dedication to the city, it's no wonder 8th Wonder has become a local favorite. Patrons line up at the counter to pay \$15 for a 16-ounce souvenir glass and three tokens that can be exchanged for three beers. You can also get a plastic cup and three tokens for \$12, or a plastic cup and one token for \$5. The brews, which total 12 to 15 on tap at any given time, have cheeky names that wink to life in Houston: Weissheimer, a German hefeweizen that won gold at the

The main taproom of 8th Wonder Brewery is almost always bustling with thirsty Houstonians.



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prestigious U.S. Beer Championship in 2017 is a play on Westheimer Road, a well-known east-west artery. Cougar Paw, a mild and malty red ale, is an ode to the University of Houston mascot—a portion of its sales benefits scholarships for the Hilton College of Hotel and Restaurant Management, where Soroka earned his master's degree and hatched plans for the brewery. Brew GK, an apple kolsch, is a collaboration with rapper Bun B, a member of legendary Houston rap group UGK. 8th Wonder's beers are purposefully lower in alcohol content and are highly drinkable, meant for sipping in notoriously hot and humid Houston. "In a city where it's summer nine months a year, it's hot," Soroka says, "and I don't want to be chewing through 8, 10, 12-percent alcohol-by-volume beers." Even Rocket Fuel, a typically hefty porter blended with milk sugar and Vietnamese coffee from local Greenway Coffee Company, feels lighter.

Any selection pairs well with fare from the gold-plated food truck Eatsie Boys out back. The *elote* fries adds a Mexican street snack kick to waffle fries, which are slathered with buttered corn, garlic aioli, hot sauce, cotija, and green onion, and come with lime wedges for squeezing. The menu also



8TH WONDER BREWERY

is at 2202 Dallas St. in Houston. Call 713-229-0868; 8thwonder.com.

The taproom is open Mon-Sat, 11 a.m.-10 p.m. and Sun 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Brewery tours are held Mon-Fri at 7 p.m.

features well-known standbys, including a Cuban sandwich, burger, and pimento grilled cheese. Eatsie Boys, which formerly had a brick-and-mortar location, was Soroka's first business venture before he downsized it to focus on the brewery, a risk that paid off—8th Wonder is the 14th-largest craft brewery (production-wise) in the state.

8th Wonder's name is a reference to the Astrodome, which due to its unprecedented size at the time of its opening in 1965, was hailed as the "eighth wonder of the world." The Astrodome sits 5 miles from the brewery's industrial 'hood. The Toyota Center, home of the Rockets; Minute Maid Park, home of the Astros; and BBVA Compass Stadium, home of the Dynamo, are all within walking distance. The brewery nods to its proximity to three major stadiums in its sports-themed taproom. Memorabilia ranges from 20 original Astrodome seats to a signed square of hardwood from the Rockets'

The brews, which total 12-15 on tap at any given time, have cheeky names that wink to life in Houston.

championship in 1994. A customer also gifted a set of patron saint candles adorned with the faces of Astros players. During Game 7 of last year's World Series, eager fans packed the brewery hoping for a shift in Houston's sports luck and a cosmic response to the sorrow of Harvey. They set up the candles in a corner and lit them. People prayed over them. And it worked. It also made 8th Wonder Brewery a triple threat—local hangout, scrappy crisis response team, and shrine. And the beers are pretty darn good, too. 