

SUNDAY, JANUARY 31, 2010

HOME A PLACE TO ESCAPE

Snag tips from interior designer Chandos Dodson on creating the perfect retreat room in your house. **12**



GEAR HITTING THE TRAIL



Heading into



FASHION
THAT CERTAIN
IF NE SAIS OUI!

TRAVEL

Loving ASPEN

>>> From its **GLITZY**, five-star restaurants to its **KITSCHY**, budget-friendly motels, this ski town enchants all types of visitors

By KRISTIN FINAN
TRAVEL WRITER

ASPEN, COLO. — When you visit a city best known for glitz, glamour and celebrity sightings, you come to expect an ingrained superiority complex of sorts. After all, when Dean Cain's flowers were freely as beer, truffles are among the items on spray-able menus, and cash is as ubiquitous as snowflakes, it kind of comes with the territory. During a visit over a long weekend in December, (we missed Charlie Sheen's incident by two weeks), I was surprised to also find a friendly, laid-back, even affordable side that made Aspen that much more charming.

When my husband and I got off at the wrong bus stop, for example, a couple stopped to offer us a ride. When we asked to see a room at one of the \$100-per-night motels in town, three guests invited us in to share their \$10 bottle of wine.

Photos by ENCHANT, Page 31



OUTDOORS 5 GREAT TEXAS HIKES

Whether you're seeking a relaxing sea-side stroll or a strenuous mountain trek, these scenic trails will take your breath away. **15**



WAGSTAFF

CHEF JUAN CARLOS GONZALEZ
Bistro Alex
800 W. Sam Houston Pkwy., Building 9, 713-827-3545

TUPELO HONEY BUTTERNUT SOUP

- 1 butternut squash (peeled, seeded, and diced in 1-inch cubes)
- 3 shallots, small dice
- 3 garlic cloves, minced
- 1 celery stalk, small diced
- 1 leek, medium chop
- ¼ pound unsalted butter
- 2½ quarts heavy cream
- 1 cup Tupelo honey
- Salt and white pepper to taste

Method:

Place butternut, shallots, garlic, celery, leeks and butter in a sauce pot on medium heat. Sweat vegetables until fork tender, then add heavy cream. Bring to a boil and reduce to a simmer for 15 minutes or until tender. Puree soup with hand mixer or blender. Add honey, salt, and white pepper. Taste and strain. Serves 12-15

GOOD FOOD

TAKE COMFORT IN CREOLE

Bistro Alex serves up local favorites with relaxed hospitality

By GREG MORAGO
FOOD EDITOR

How would Alex Brennan-Martin explain the concept of a modern bistro? "My definition of a bistro is the total lack of pretense. No pretense whatsoever," said the successful restaurateur. "It's a place of high quality food in a comfortable environment with a high degree of hospitality."

That definition accurately

describes Bistro Alex, Brennan-Martin's shiny new canteen serving modern Texas Creole cuisine. Perched on the second level of the Hotel Sorella, Bistro Alex is a gleaming glass box warmed with baconlike strips of handsome mesquite wood that wrap the walls and ceiling. The look is both ultra modern and rough hewn — perfect for chef Juan Carlos Gonzalez's contemporary takes on traditional Texas and Gulf Coast favorites.

Bistro Alex's dinner menu indulges in big flavors such as boudin blanc-crusted black grouper with fire roasted Texas shrimp and caramelized corn maque chou; tasso-brined pork porterhouse with cabbage choucroute; orange molasses glazed duck with cornbread pudding; beef short rib osso buco with goat cheese grits and truffled bordelaise; redfish with champagne-poached jumbo lump crab; and whole roasted



MICHAEL PAULSEN / STAFF

NEW CANTEN: Alex Brennan-Martin's Bistro Alex restaurant is in the Hotel Sorella in CityCentre.

chicken with smoked tomatoes and swiss chard. The bistro theme is furthered by items such as honey butternut squash soup (recipe at left); spiced pear salad with lardons; black Angus beef tartare; ahi tuna niceise salad; and, most significantly, by the beautiful charcuterie presentations — rosy cured meats and sausages that can be paired with outstanding cheese selections.

Even though Bistro Alex is only two months old, it is adapting as it develops its sea legs. And that's another definition of a successful restaurant, Brennan-Martin said. "Any restaurant I've been involved with, I consider them awfully close to living, breathing entities," he said. "They're evolving. We all evolve."

The bistro's regulars may soon see one of those evolutions on the sweet side of the menu: Brennan-Martin is toying with a take on Bananas Foster called Bananas "Faster" — a milkshake version of the famous dessert.

COCKTAILS SIP OF THE WEEK

- **THE DRINK:** The Bluesmobile at House of Blues Houston
- **WHY IT'S HOT:** Previously served only in other parts of the country, this House of Blues signature drink just arrived in Houston last month, said marketing manager Brian Distefano. The blend of ingredients is tangy yet sweet — and packs a punch. Plus, it's blue.
- **WHAT'S IN IT:** Bacardi Limon, Bombay Sapphire, Stoli Raspberry, DeKuyper blue curacao, vodka, sweet and sour mix and Sprite.
- **COST:** \$11.99
- **INFO:** 1204 Caroline; 713-652-5837; www.houseofblues.com/houston.
- **P.S.:** House of Blues also has a great happy hour with \$1 domestics, \$2 imports and \$3 house wine and cocktails from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday in the downstairs restaurant bar.

— KRISTIN FINAN



MICHAEL PAULSEN / STAFF

DIG IN: The Crispy Whole Red Snapper with saute of fennel, melted leeks, deck oven roasted grape tomatoes, charred corn and local citrus with a chimichurri sauce at Bistro Alex.

ggreg.morago@chron.com

BILL OLIVE