



Savvy locals (and George W.) have stirred up media interest in Austin's food scene, and the nation is salivating

By Kitty Crider
AMERICAN-STATESMAN FOOD EDITOR

You're sipping your red iced hibiscus tea and flipping through a food magazine when you spot an Austin reference. "That's cool, we're cool," you think.

You reach for another magazine, a lifestyle publication called *Victoria*. There is local chef Rebecca Rather pictured with yummys from her bakery. "Wow! Here we are again. Have we been discovered?"

Yes, we have.

Promoted, too.

Savvy Austinites are selling the city and its food with as much fervor, but more subtlety, than street vendors. It's not just happenstance that local restaurants, markets and bakeries are showing up in such national publications as *Wine Spectator*, *Southern Living*, *Saveur* and *Bon Appetit*.

Every spring, the Texas Hill Country Wine & Food festival brings in national media such as *The New York Times*, *USA Today* and the *Wine Spectator* as guests or panel moderators to expose them to the fare of the area.

Last year, an Austin delegation of three food-biz women visited leading publications in New York. In a whirlwind weekend, they touted the city's bounty to such culinary heavyweights as *Gourmet*, *Bon Appetit*, *Food Arts*, *Saveur*, *Food Network*, *Rosie O'Donnell*, the James Beard Foundation and *Esquire* writer John Mariani.

ATTENTION: Austin scene reaping benefits of trip

Continued from E1

Cochran-Lewis, a former Central Market Cooking School director and current consultant, has long pitched the city and the market to national chefs, enticing them to teach here.

She is one of those three local women who hit the Big Apple for a long weekend in 2001 to tout Austin's food scene. Her companions were Jenny Stone, then-executive director for the Texas Hill Country Wine & Food Festival, and Paula Biehler, owner of Biehler & Associates, a local public relations firm that represents several Austin restaurants. The trip, instigated by Biehler, was born over lunch.

"We are all good friends, the three of us," says Stone. "Together we all had equal interests in the food industry in Austin and promoting it, but each had a different angle. By going to New York together, we were able to give the people a broader picture of the food in Austin."

Their efforts, along with those of others, such as the Texas Department of Agriculture and Peggy Weiss, Jeffrey's co-owner and the cookbook chairwoman for Texas Book Festival, have reaped results.



Kelly West photos AMERICAN-STATESMAN

From left, Cathy Cochran-Lewis, Jenny Stone and Paula Biehler went to New York last year and drummed up interest in Austin foods.

By the end of 2001, Ruth Reichl, editor in chief of *Gourmet*, had been to Austin for the Texas Book Festival and taught at Central Market. Colman Andrews, *Saveur* editor in chief, and Mariani, the *Esquire* food writer, had participated in both the wine and book festivals here and checked out local restaurants. Within months, mentions/reviews/features were showing up in national publications, radio shows, the *Food Network* and Web sites. The stories have continued in 2002 with more on the horizon.

Other locals have actively promoted their food and wine, too. Susan Auler, co-owner of Fall Creek Vineyards and a founder of the Texas Hill Country Wine & Food Festival,

was one of the earliest and most successful, pouring her product from coast to coast. "The best news is we now have 40 some-odd wineries in Texas and about half of them in the Hill Country. One person can spread the word, but 40 voices are even better," she says.

Austinite Barbara Beery contacted *Southern Living* magazine for two years before getting a story on her Batter Up Kids cooking classes and parties in the May issue. "I have done the same with the *Food Network* over the last year and a half. I will be on an upcoming fall show with Sara Moulton."

Southern Living food editor Scott Jones says Austin "has all the things you love about Texas, and yet there's that wonderful

cultural element that's uniquely Austin, Lucinda being a terrific example." He's referring to tequila/herb cookbook author Lucinda Hutson, a longtime Austin food proponent who was the subject of the *Southern Living* cover story in May 2001. Lucinda, as everyone calls her, lives in a purple house, prepares festive flower-garnished food and throws great sangria parties. When the national press comes to her door, she delivers a unique food picture with Austin charm.

That's the rest of the story. As visitors arrive to check out the city's growing food scene, they are not leaving hungry and disappointed. They are returning to Austin and telling their friends to visit too.

"I'm in Austin five or six times a year," said Jones, whose home base is Birmingham, Ala., "and that's not nearly enough."

Saveur's Andrews is a frequent visitor now, too. Is it a coincidence that Austin's been spotlighted in three of the magazine's issues this year? Or is it just good taste?