

HOUSTON FARMERS MARKET: A NEW FOOD WORLD

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44 Farms angus burger at Underbelly Burger

If you can't remember the last time you shopped at the original **Houston Farmers Market** on the east side of the Heights, you likely won't recognize it today. The oldest farmers market in the city, formed in 1937, was purchased in 2017 by local commercial real estate firm **MLB Capital Partners**, which devoted the last four years to revitalizing the 18 acres. In August 2019, **Studio RED Architects**, landscape architects **Clark Condon Associates**, and **Arch-Con Corporation** and **Gunda Corporation** began construction on seven new climate-controlled buildings, an open-air pavilion with retail and wholesale stalls, and a one-acre green space.

More than 35 local retail and wholesale vendors operate at this market 363 days a year (save for Christmas and New Year's Day), so you can find nearly any fruit, vegetable, legume, spice, herb, seed, coffee, chile, or meat that a recipe might require. You'll discover purveyors such as



MICHAEL CRAFT

Celestino Galvan of **Chito Produce**, who has sold vegetables here for more than 38 years, and **Alex Garcia**, the owner of **South Mex**, specializing in Caribbean and exotic fruits. New sellers include **R-C Ranch**, a craft-meat and butcher shop from **Ryan Cade** and **Blake Robertson**, who also own the **R-C Ranch** in Bailey's Prairie, Texas, which raises Texas Wagyu and heritage pork products.

To spearhead the development of several new eateries, the powers that be hired James Beard Award-winning chef **Chris Shepherd**. Raised in the Midwest, Shepherd has made it his mission to source locally grown and raised products. Recently he brought two of his own concepts to market: **Underbelly Burger** and **Wild Oats**.

Underbelly Burger stands in a 1,200-square-foot space with 14 seats and a pick-up window for guests who want to dine outdoors on the green. You'll find locally sourced beef on the menu from **44 Farms**, as well as from **R-C Ranch**, just next door. Fans of Shepherd's **Cease and Desist Burger** served at the now-shuttered **Hay Merchant** will find **Underbelly's** standard burger an updated take on that favorite. Food selections include a bacon sausage hot dog, chicken

sandwich with black pepper buttermilk, and a house-made veggie burger.

Shepherd enlisted **Underbelly Hospitality** culinary director **Nick Fine** as chef/partner of their new concept **Wild Oats**, which opened in February. The 5,000-square-foot restaurant focuses on the traditions and native ingredients of Texas cuisine. Fine purchases as much product as possible just feet away at the market stalls. "Texas food is easy to stereotype," he

says, "and this restaurant is about rejecting those stereotypes and showing the underbelly of our state — the ingredients, the people, and cultures who make it one of the most diverse in the nation." The interiors, designed by **Amanda Medsger**, reflect a peaceful Hill Country vibe with antique schoolhouse lights, patterned linoleum floors and Stetson hats and vintage

Gilley's decor lining the walls.

Chef Fine brings cooking over a live fire center stage. Enlisting the help of legendary Austin BBQ pitmaster **Aaron Franklin** to design the grill, the chefs play with varying heat temperatures, not to mention the flavors that charcoal and wood impart on entrees such as bacon-wrapped jalapeño quail (\$30), short rib fajitas (\$80), and wood-grilled chicken (\$36).

Wild Oats is open for dinner starting at 5 pm, with starters such as Haven-style shrimp corn dogs (\$16), armadillo eggs (\$14), and pepper jelly on Texas toast with farmer's cheese (\$14). And there will be margaritas — not to mention cocktails (**Ranch Water**, **Palomas**) and a wine list with 60-plus selections from points around the globe.

Arriving later this year is **Crawfish & Noodles**, a Viet-Cajun concept with a cult following — one which won chef/owner **Trong Nguyen** a nomination nod from the James Beard Foundation. This family-owned second outpost (the original is in Asiatown) will operate as a full-service restaurant overlooking the one-acre green space.

Houston Farmers Market, 2520 Airline Dr., thehoustonsfarmersmarket.com; open 5:30 am – 6 pm daily.