

COMFORT FOOD AT A CROSSROADS

BY SAM ARMSTRONG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL THAD CARTER

24

THE SKINNY ON 24 DINER

CUISINE:

Imaginative
comfort food

SETTING:

Charming,
intimate and relaxed

SERVICE:

Familiar
and friendly

PRICES:

Entrees generally
range from \$10 to \$20

CARDS:

All majors

HOURS:

24/7

PARKING:

On-site lot

ADDRESS:

600 N. Lamar Blvd.

PHONE:

512-472-5400

ONLINE:

www.24diner.com

Some people are uncomfortable with change. Remember all the hoopla that erupted the first time someone even mentioned developing the empty delta of land between Lamar and Guadalupe? When they tore down Liberty Lunch, some people were madder than a hippie without a Hacky Sack. Now they've gone and done it again. In the space that formerly housed Waterloo Ice House, the longtime neighbor of Amy's Ice Creams and Waterloo Records at Sixth and Lamar, more change has come to the Capital City.

With a promising food philosophy, comfortable environs and a creative approach to comfort food, 24 Diner is providing the sort of change Austin diners can support. With a mix of bar tables, dining tables and diner-style seating, 24 is modern and chic, but not distractingly over-designed and over-thought. Bound on two sides by panoramic windows, the space is open, tall, welcoming and, as its name implies, ready for business.

At Sunday brunch, business is good. The dining room is kinetic and buzzing with that oh-so-Austin mix of soccer moms, muscle Marys, power dykes and the requisite hipster clientele. In short, all comers welcome. And the reason they've all come seems to be the food. Much like its mishmash of diners, 24's menu is a pleasing paradox. Farm-to-table chalkboard specials built from fresh, local produce cavort with a permanent lineup of playfully, unapologetically indulgent comfort foods.

The burgers, fashioned from ground Texas brisket and served medium, are prime examples of that unapologetic approach. The bacon Gorgonzola burger swims under the weight of its own juices and a blanket of aioli. Thick applewood-smoked bacon, an unblushing smear of Gorgonzola and a nest of caramelized onions climb on top, unashamed in their exhibitionism. If you feel like going all the way, they'll happily cover your sins with a glossy fried egg. Or maybe that's just a little bit more than the law will allow. Don't worry, you can always substitute a homemade vegetarian patty. 24 even offers a vegan burger with roasted tomatoes, arugula and lemon vinaigrette atop a baguette for some of your more cautious friends who are into that sort of thing and will pretend like they don't want a bite of the big, juicy burger you were smart enough to order. Their loss.

For Southern palates and stomachs, few foods are as comforting as fried chicken and waffles. Not from here? Stop questioning and move with faith. Deftly prepared fat, salt, sugar and carbs never lied to you before. Add a little alcohol to the equation and you'll be a zealous and ecstatic believer. Spicy enough to hurt but not enough to do permanent damage, share an order of Sparkies with your fellow diners. These pickled jalapenos with cheddar cheese, sausage and buttermilk dressing are fried in Panko breadcrumbs and perfect whether you're having a 3 p.m. *tête-a-tête* or a 3 a.m. sobriety check.

Executive Chef Andrew Curren's approach to menu planning is both imaginative and responsive. "I like to focus on local and seasonal. That is how I was trained in New York and Northern California. My time abroad has also pushed me to think more seasonally," said Curren, who sources much of his products from local farmers and purveyors. "Not only am I currently using lettuces, greens, arugula, sweet potatoes, spinach, Swiss chard and cabbage, I am using strawberries and black-eyed peas which have been preserved by the farmers. When strawberries are in season, the demand can't always keep up with the farms' supply. Farmers take their ripe berries which aren't sold and don't travel well, and freeze them. I purchase 15 to 20 pounds a week, which can help supplement the farmer in the winter while their land is less productive. The same holds true for the black-eyed peas and shell beans."

This may benefit the farmers and the land, but one taste of 24's thick, creamy strawberry milkshake and you'll be too busy pampering your taste buds to think about sustainability.

"As we developed the 24 concept and menu, we aimed for elevated classics that would be approachable and at a very reasonable price point, especially considering the quality of ingredients we are using," Curren said. "Our specials have become a place for us to play with interesting wine-and-food pairings, as well as a chance to use more elegant ingredients such as lamb, quail, short ribs, etc."

While Austin's culinary revolution has seen a number of new restaurants better suited for romantic dinners, 24 is comfortable enough for a first date, accommodating enough for big groups and, probably most importantly, a welcoming spot for friends.

While 24 doesn't serve liquor, those looking for a little adult-beverage action have plenty of options. If wine's your thing, bring a friend or two. While 24 only offers a handful of wines by the glass, the wine list, which leans toward the Old World without ignoring New-World choices, is reasonably vast and varied. Bottles range from about \$30 to more than \$150. On tap, the beer choices are limited but excellent: Real Ale Fireman's #4 and Pale Moon Rye share the plumbing with a few seasonal choices. By the bottle, 24 offers everything from the de rigueur Dos Equis (\$3) to the 25-ounce Brooklyn Brewery Local 1 (\$13). Brunch is a big deal at 24. Mimosas? You bet. ■