

Marfa

MUCH ADO IS MADE OF THIS WEST TEXAS TOWN'S ART SCENE, BUT THE DINING IS ALSO MIGHTY FINE

by Laurel Miller



I WENT TO MARFA, but I skipped the selfie at the Prada installation. I also didn't make it to the **Chinati Foundation**, but in my defense, it was that or a final meal at the celebrated Marfa Burrito. I cannot be forced to choose between asado and art.

With all due respect to Donald Judd and his ilk, I experience places through my stomach, and for my first foray to this remote West Texas town, it was all about gustatory gratification. I was fresh off of judging the International Frank X. Tolbert-Wick Fowler Memorial Championship Chili Cook-Off in Terlingua, and it seemed fitting to end my West Texas trip with a culinary pilgrimage to Marfa.



Photograph by Jessica Zollman

Even if you know about Marfa only by association (as I did), you're likely aware that it's "quirky," if not downright weird. Marfa does what it wants, when it wants. That's part of the charm.

Despite its isolation (located in the TransPecos, even the nearest railway is more than 25 miles away, in Alpine), Marfa's food-and-drink scene is more than capable of holding its own, especially given the fact that the best of its establishments emphasize regionality, using high-quality Lone Star State-grown or -raised ingredients. A quick scan of recent menus includes mentions of Marfa Maid Goat Cheese, Bandera quail, South Texas antelope, Beeman Ranch Akaushi beef (a Japanese breed frequently mislabeled as wagyu or Kobe), mesquite toast, backyard fruit and Gulf seafood.

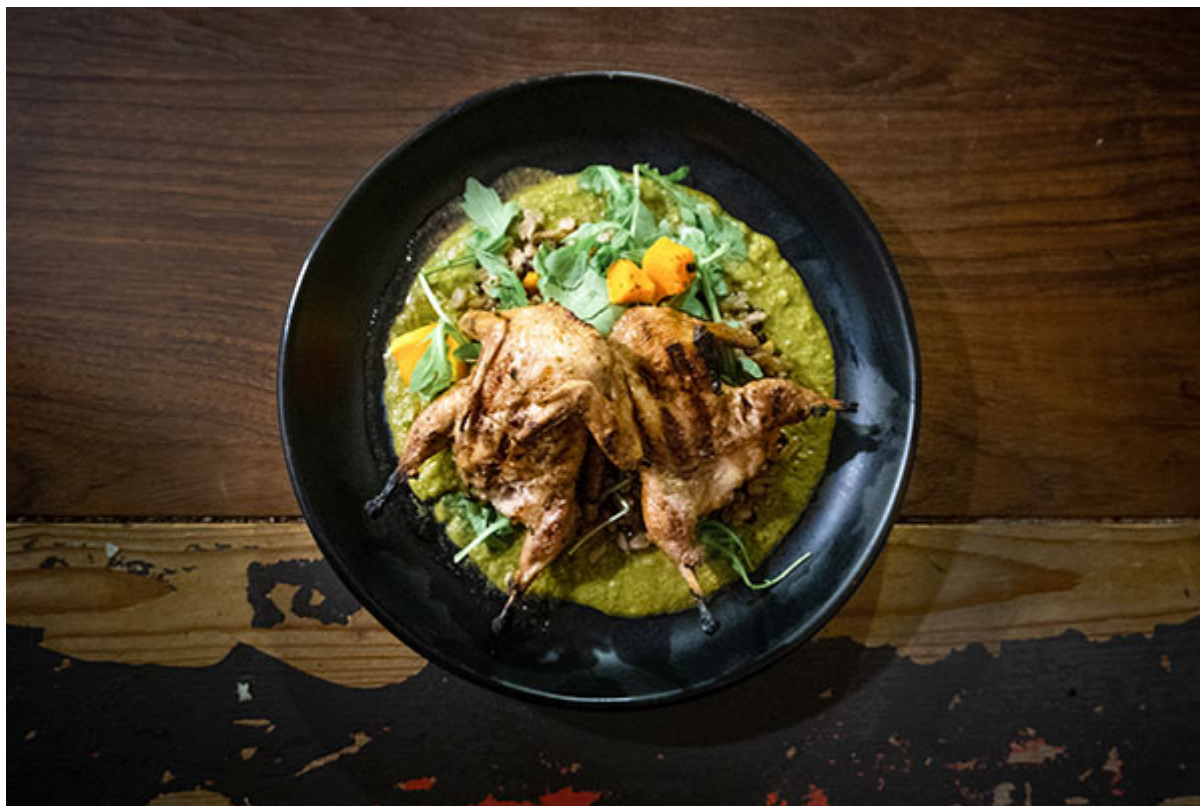
Provenance aside, what Marfa's chefs, cooks, bakers and mixologists are doing with said ingredients is remarkable for any small town (Marfa's current population sits right around 2,000). This standard applies both to fine dining (like Austin, it's all about come-as-you-are, be it clad in Wranglers and dusty ropers or head-to-toe couture) and hole-in-the-wall spots like **Marfa Burrito** and **Stars Marfa** (exquisite doughnuts bedazzled with toppings like roasted banana glaze, peanut butter and malt powders and lardons). At Marfa Burrito, where owner-cook Ramona Tejada has been serving up made-from-scratch, no-frills Mexican fare out of her home kitchen for years, the house-made flour tortillas are the star attraction; bring cash.



Marfa Burrito owner Ramona Tejada is known for her sensational, made-from-scratch Mexican fare. Photograph by September Broadhead.

I also fell hard for **Do Your Thing** coffee; owners Simone Rubi and Robert Gungor are Bay Area refugees/artists/musicians/former baristas who saw a need for a top-notch coffee house in Marfa. The minimalist space is part of **The Lumberyard**, an artist collective and community hub that makes an ideal place to while away a blistering-hot West Texas afternoon.

There are delicious drinks, like a latte spiked with mesquite and vanilla bean syrups, but don't miss the house-baked sourdough made from wild yeast starter. Each loaf is thickly sliced and turned into addictive toasts topped with the likes of avocado, tahini, za'atar oil, gochugaru, toasted sesame seeds and Maldon sea salt, or butter and house-made jam. In fact, I may have eaten a second breakfast my last morning, just to get another taste of that dense, chewy, flavorful bread.



One of many enticing dishes from Stellina.

Marfa's high-desert environment vibrates from the best menus, manifesting in soulful dishes and drinks that reflect balanced elements of heat, smoke, sweetness and earth. At **Stellina**, a standout dish was molotes, plantain-masa-cheese fritters with black bean and habanero sauce; even the bread and butter came with a rotating duo of salts, such as chicatana ant and cardamom, and charred corn and lime. Another evening, I enjoyed a Spicy Chihuahua cocktail (mezcal, serrano agave syrup, lime) in **The Capri's** lush garden before dinner. The stunning restaurant (concrete floor and walls, exposed brick, seductive lighting, regional artifacts), a part of the **Thunderbird Hotel**, is chef Rocky Barnette's love letter to explicitly sourced ingredients (customers will feel less warmth from the lackadaisical staff, but you're in Marfa, relax). Muscovy duck is paired with cortido, huitlacoche and cacao; yucca blossoms are fried tempura-style; and foie gras terrine may appear with "plums from our orchard." My final dining pick and the perfect spot for a sweet finale? **Cochineal**: Think orange cardamom Marfa Maid goat milk ice cream or tres leches cake with brandied cherries.



Cochineal serves up delicious plates with a cocktail menu to match.

Says Krista Steinhauer, co-founder/executive chef at Stellina, “Marfa definitely attracts creative types who dine out a lot and are exposed to myriad cuisines. But it’s also a really supportive community where people can launch their projects more easily than most places.”

Steinhauer has been a pivotal influence on the local food scene since her arrival in 2004. “I was moving back to Texas from Italy and wanted a change from Austin. Back then, Maiya’s was the only fine-dining spot in Marfa, but now there are so many different ways to enjoy a night out,” she says.

After co-founding the popular **Food Shark** truck and the late **Comida Futura**, Steinhauer opened Stellina with Brandon Messer in 2016 (she took over full ownership in January, after Messer moved on to pursue other opportunities). Since its inception, Stellina — which has justifiably been likened to a dinner party, for its convivial atmosphere — has morphed from a Mediterranean bent to skewing more south of the border.



Mouthwatering waffles from The Water Stop. Photograph by September Broadhead.

Like Barnette, Steinhauer derives pleasure from local sourcing, including “produce from growers in town and game from Central

Texas. There are even vineyards in the Davis Mountains whose wine appears on our list. We're always looking," she says.

One blustery afternoon, I drove two miles east on Antelope Hills Road to visit cheesemaker and artist Malinda Beeman of **Marfa Maid Goat Cheese**. She moved to town 20 years ago to establish a community arts organization following stints as a professor of art in Printmaking at the University of Houston and program director of painting and drawing at Colorado's prestigious Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Snowmass.

The self-taught cheesemaker notes that her current profession, which she's been doing full-time since 2010 with the help of her partner, Allan McClane, "is kind of the integration of my life experience. As a painter and sculptor, it's about making what you want and refining that thing. Cheesemaking appeals to me for the same reason."



Impressive chevre logs from Marfa Maid Goat Cheese.

Beeman and McClane offer year-round farm tours by appointment where visitors can interact with their herd of 30-odd goats, and their cheese is featured on West Texas menus and available at **Farmstand Marfa**, the weekly market she and McClane established in 2006.

Says Beeman, “When I moved here, the food was terrible. I met Allan and we started an organic garden, which led to the farmstand, but when the recession hit, we decided we needed to be completely self-sufficient as well as have a product we could sell at the market.”



As I nibbled the remaining crumbs of Beeman’s herbed chevre, I asked her the same question I’d posed to Steinhauer earlier in the week. Why does Marfa have such a progressive dining scene?

“I’ve often thought about that,” she said. “Artists are generally very interested in creating and enjoying a great meal. Not finding that in Marfa years ago, many of the people who have started the most-innovative food businesses here have also come from an arts background.” She paused to watch a few does ambling across the pasture, in stark relief against that endless West Texas horizon, and smiled. “I believe the art of a town often reflects the quality of the food.”

Bunking Down

OPTIONS RUN THE GAMUT FROM GLAMPING TO HIGH-END LUXURY.



Photograph by Nick Simonite

El Cosmico, Liz Lambert's iconic nomadic campground spot also boasts the best options for travel keepsakes at on-site **Provision Co.**

Thunderbird Hotel, a midcentury motor lodge renovated in 2004.

Hotel St. George, a luxe option and community hub featuring Bar Saint George, poolside venue Bar Nadar and LaVenture for fine dining.

Ranch 2810, the ultimate Airbnb experience, a lavish contemporary property designed by architect Carlos Jiménez. Located in the Chihuahuan Desert, 10 minutes from town.

Down(Town) Time

VENTURE OUT TO SEES THE STARS OF YOUR DREAMS OR HANG
AROUND TOWN FOR SHOPPING.



McDonald Observatory in nearby Fort Davis is a must-see for some of the country's darkest skies and brightest stars. Check their schedule for events. Boutiques like **Communitie**, **Cobra Rock**, **Garza Marfa**, **Freda**, **RABA Marfa**, **Moonlight Gemstones** (aka "the rock shop"), **Marfa Book Company**, **Wrong** and **Marfa Brand Soap**, which sell locally-sourced and crafted goods to fit any budget. **Lost Horse Saloon**, the hottest spot in town for late-night drinks and live music.