



# HOUSTON'S NEW HEIGHTS

TWO HOUSTON CULINARY PLAYERS CULTIVATE THEIR  
TALENTS ALONGSIDE THEIR URBAN GARDEN **BY AMY C. EVANS**

**Ryan Pera** is a North Carolinian with Italian blood. **Morgan Weber** is a native Texan, tried and true. Together, they opened **Coltivare Pizza & Garden**, a rustic Italian restaurant in Houston's Heights neighborhood. Their goal was simple: create an ingredient-driven, casual dining experience that is at once a nod to traditional Italian fare and, at its heart, a celebration of its Southern roots. Just two years in, Coltivare has set the bar for garden-to-table dining in the city.

**PHOTOS BY JULIE SOEFER**



**CC: F/H&U**  
COLTIVARE'S SIGNATURE  
BLACK PEPPER SPAGHETTI  
**H. F. C. - & RYAN PERA**  
(LEFT) AND MORGAN WEBER  
ENJOY A GLASS OF ROSE IN  
THEIR HOUSTON RESTAURANT,  
COLTIVARE





#6; #5P/F&%E; 8 %&, HICHEF RYAN PERA IN COLTIVARE'S CITY-CONTESTED URBAN GARDEN; PERA AND TEAM WORK THE BUSY LINE IN COLTIVARE'S OPEN KITCHEN; MORGAN WEBER MIXES AN AVA CROWDER (RECIPE PAGE 126) AT COLTIVARE'S BAR; THE EXTERIOR OF COLTIVARE IN HOUSTON'S HEIGHTS



**R**YAN PERA DID NOT COME TO HOUSTON OF HIS OWN VOLITION. The year was 2003, and his future wife had received an assignment at Baylor University after medical school. Ryan, a mostly self-trained chef who'd cut his teeth in the kitchens of some of New York City's top restaurants, followed her. He entered Houston's fine-dining scene as chef de cuisine at the Four Seasons. Later, Ryan made a name for his style of cooking at 17 Restaurant in the Alden Hotel.

Morgan Weber grew up in rural Yoakum, Texas. He studied music in college and later had a career in real estate development, but he always nurtured his passions: farming and spirits. Morgan was one of the partners who opened Anvil Bar & Refuge, Houston's first bar devoted to classic cocktails, in 2009.

When Ryan and Morgan first crossed paths in the Bayou City, they bonded over Mangalitsas, the Hungarian breed of hog that is coveted in culinary circles for its particular fat content. And so began their first business venture together: an opportunity for Morgan to raise heritage-breed hogs on his family's farm and for Ryan to produce his own charcuterie and salumi from a trusted source.

In 2011, they opened Revival Market—part grocery store, part butcher shop, and part café—featuring locally-sourced products, house-cured meats, and seasonal offerings from the Texas Gulf Coast region.

A little more than ten years ago, the Heights neighborhood was dry. As in, you could not purchase a drop of alcohol within the boundaries of this largely residential area northwest of downtown Houston. That all changed when a handful of entrepreneurs banded together and spearheaded a movement to bring new businesses—and alcohol—to the area. They won, and the Heights is now home to some of the most celebrated restaurants and bars in the city.

In 2012, when Ryan and Morgan were working to open Coltivare, they had a different kind of fight on their hands: convincing the city to let them plant a garden next to the restaurant in the space where more parking would ostensibly be. After six months of meetings and negotiations, they hired a full-time gardener and planted their first seeds.

The menu at Coltivare is Gulf Coast-influenced Italian. From sorghum-crust pizzas to gnocchi made with a Texas ricotta, carrot-top pesto to sassafras bitters, the dishes, as well as the drinks, showcase everything that Ryan and Morgan are passionate about—and are a true celebration of the city they call home.

## HEIRLOOM TOMATOES WITH CUCUMBER GAZPACHO

½ cup cucumber gazpacho (recipe follows)

1 pound heirloom tomatoes, sliced (use a variety of shapes and sizes)

½ cucumber, peeled, deseeded, and sliced

¼ cup arugula

2 ounces feta (preferably from your local cheese maker)

2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil

1 lemon, juiced

Coarse sea salt and freshly ground pepper

Place gazpacho on plate and spread evenly across surface. Arrange tomatoes and cucumbers on top of gazpacho. Arrange arugula and feta across vegetables. Crumble feta and add to plate. Drizzle liberally with olive oil and fresh lemon juice. Finish with salt and pepper.

*Yield: 2 servings*

### Cucumber Gazpacho

1 pound cucumbers

½ pound green seedless grapes

1 bunch green onion, tops only

2 lemons, juice only

½ cup extra virgin olive oil

Salt and pepper

Place all ingredients in blender and purée. Season with salt and pepper.

*Yield: 1 quart*

“In developing any new dish, I begin the process by talking to local farmers to see what ingredients they have ready to harvest, as well as what ingredients are finished for the season. Then I go to my menu.”  
—Chef Ryan Pera





“After I figure out where to utilize the new, seasonal ingredients in certain menu areas, only then do I begin the creative process of actually building a dish.” —Chef Ryan Pera



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(RECIPE PAGE 126)



**CHARRED CORN ON THE COB WITH BASIL AIOLI**

4 ears corn, shucked and cleaned of silk  
Butter, at room temperature  
Salt and freshly cracked black pepper  
¼ cup basil aioli (recipe follows)  
½ cup Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, finely grated  
Basil leaves for garnish

- 1. Light grill and allow to heat up.
- 2. Place corn on grill and cook about 1 minute per side, or until ears reach a dark brown color. Rotate as necessary to achieve even charring.
- 3. Remove corn and immediately brush with

butter, coating each ear evenly. Season with salt and pepper, place on serving plate, and drizzle basil aioli on cooked corn. Sprinkle cheese on top, garnish with basil leaves, and serve.

*Yield: 4 servings*

**Basil Aioli**

2 heads garlic  
½ teaspoon olive oil  
1 cup fresh basil  
1½ cups mayonnaise  
2 lemons, juiced

Salt to taste

- 1. Preheat oven to 300 degrees.
- 2. Cut garlic heads in half lengthwise and coat with oil. Wrap garlic in aluminum foil and place packet on baking tray. Place in oven and cook until garlic is soft, about 1 hour. Let cool.
- 3. Once cool, remove soft cloves from brittle skin and mash cloves with fork. Set aside 3 tablespoons (reserve any extra for another use).
- 4. Place garlic with remaining ingredients in blender. Blend until smooth.

*Yield: 1 pint*



**SHRIMP AND BURST  
SUN GOLD TOMATO PASTA**

1 pound ridged tubular pasta  
2 heavy tablespoons high-quality extra virgin olive oil, divided  
1 medium shallot, minced  
½ small serrano chili, minced  
1 pound local Sun Gold tomato (or preferred tiny seasonal tomato), washed and trimmed  
12 ounces large shrimp, peeled, deveined, and cut in half horizontally  
1 tablespoon butter  
5 large basil leaves, torn  
1 tablespoon parsley leaves, torn  
Sea salt and freshly ground black pepper

1. In large pot, bring 2 quarts of heavily salted water (should taste like the ocean) to a boil. Drop in pasta and stir. Reduce heat to keep at steady boil, stirring occasionally.  
2. Meanwhile start sauce. Place sauté pan over medium-high heat. Add 1 tablespoon olive oil. When oil shimmers, add shallot and chili and reduce heat to medium. Sauté shallot and chili until soft and translucent, but not brown, about 1 minute.  
3. Add tomatoes and cook until they burst, about 3–5 minutes.  
4. Add shrimp, cook until just done/just

opaque. When pasta reaches al dente, use skimmer to transfer to sauté pan. Note: if sauce is done before pasta, remove sauce from heat to not overcook shrimp.  
5. Ladle about ¼ cup pasta water from pasta pot into sauce. Turn heat to high and cook sauce and pasta together for about 1 minute. Add butter and remaining oil and vigorously stir until all is incorporated. Stir in herbs. Add sea salt and freshly ground pepper to taste and serve immediately. Tastes like summer!  
*Yield: 2 entrée servings or 4 appetizer servings*



**CC, F&U**  
COLTIVARE'S DINING ROOM IS ALWAYS BUSTLING. BLACK PEPPER SPAGHETTI (RECIPE PAGE 126)  
**H, F&U** - **COLTIVARE'S**  
SHRIMP AND BURST SUN GOLD TOMATO PASTA (PICTURED HERE ATOP FRESH PESTO, A SUMMERY SERVING OPTION)



“This dish has a special place in my life. My now wife, Lori, and I were living in New York City and had just started dating. She was living on Houston Street, right across from the newly opened Lupa. The *Cacio e Pepe* there was perfection. It was so in-your-face aggressive, so simple and sublime that it really blew me away. We ate that dish often at Lupa and then when we briefly lived in Europe. Now, at home in Houston, it has become our go-to meal. The dish is technically called *Cacio e Pepe*; however Coltivare’s is not. We use Parmigiano-Reggiano cheese, not Pecorino Romano (*cacio*). I like it a little better, as the dish comes out more luxurious.”  
—Chef Ryan Pera

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