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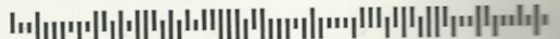
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TAPS AT AXELRAD WERE CARVED
BY AN ARTIST IN VENEZUELA

IT'S 10 on a Monday morning at West Alabama Icehouse in Houston's Montrose neighborhood. The busy weekday commute has ended, corporate cubicles are filled with warm bodies, and owner Pete Markantonis is filling beer coolers with ice. A table of regulars sits close by, a few plastic cups, an ashtray, and a sweating can of Busch beer on their table. One of them, an older man who just poured himself a cup of white wine from a miniature bottle, proudly declares that he and his friends have been meeting at West Alabama Icehouse for twenty-five years. "It's good to come here during the day," he says, "before the yuppies come with their credit cards." The Texas icehouse is a particular

BY AMY C. EVANS / PHOTOGRAPHY BY JULIE SOEFER

TAPPING TRADITION

Houston's Icehouse Renaissance

style of open-air bar that is a holdover from the retail ice business. In the generation before automobiles and electric refrigeration, local ice companies erected small outposts in neighborhoods so that people could easily walk to purchase a block for their home icebox. In the days B.C. (Before Cerveza—the legal sale of it, anyway), an employee of Southland Ice Company in Dallas had the idea to sell milk, bread, and eggs from the icehouse he managed, offering home staples to families who couldn't easily get to a grocery store or did shift work that got them home when stores were closed. This Southland Ice Company outpost was open from 7 am to 11 pm seven days a week. In 1927, this new model of convenience became the franchise of neighborhood markets we know as 7-Eleven, the same company that gave the world the gift of the Slurpee, their trademark frozen soft drink. When prohibition was repealed in 1933, the mom-and-pop-owned ice markets became watering holes—places for neighbors to congregate and enjoy conversation under shady oak trees while drinking an ice-cold beer on a hot Texas day. (It was illegal to sell liquor by the drink in Texas until 1949 and by then, icehouses were icehouses. All they need serve was ice-cold beer.) At last count, there are at least fifty establishments in the Houston area that are considered to be, or simply call themselves, icehouses. Only a handful of them have been open for sixty years or more. West Alabama Icehouse has been in continuous operation since 1928. The icebox has a padlock on it, and the old walk-in cooler houses an electric ice machine, but Houston's oldest icehouse is not just a relic of the past; it's a model for the future.

G

GERASIMOS (JERRY) MARKANTONIS arrived in Texas from Greece in 1948 and received a degree in geology from the University of Houston. After a successful career in the oil and gas industry, he purchased a handful of

different businesses but is best known for his ownership of the iconic West Alabama Icehouse. Jerry bought the place in 1986 and every Friday night, he would fire up a grill and hand out free hot dogs to his loyal customers. Jerry passed away in 2001, but his youngest son, Pete, still operates the family business. Here, family doesn't just mean blood relatives; it means neighbors, their kids, stray dogs, and twenty-five-year regulars, and yes, a few yuppies. Pete is proud of his icehouse family, and it shows. Hardly a week or even a couple of days go by that the marquee out front doesn't congratulate a friend or an employee, announce a wedding or community event. The icehouse is a place to celebrate birthdays and Texas Independence Day, compete in the Halloween pumpkin-carving contest (winner gets a beer tab), or attend the Montrose Beer & Gun Club's annual cook-off. Lone Star is two dollars and fifty cents a bottle, and you can whittle away a few hours by playing basketball or ring-on-a-swing in the large patio out back. This fully realized outdoor space is just one of the improvements Pete has made since he took over the place. There are more picnic tables, more televisions, better bathrooms, and even a few cell phone-charging stations. And, there's more beer. Pete has embraced the craft beer craze, expanding his offerings and, along with them, his clientele. On any given day, you'll likely find a Navy veteran drinking Busch in a can next to a twenty-something holding a bottle of Saint Arnold's Santo, a beer made by Houston's oldest craft brewery. Kids run and play, dogs lie in the shade, and people come and go, venturing across the street to get tacos from a food truck so they can fill their bellies with sustenance and stay for more beer. After close to 100 years in the making, this is your quintessential Texas icehouse of the twenty-first century. Ten years ago, people in Houston were mourning the loss of this traditional form of neighborhood watering hole. Gentrification and rising real estate costs have certainly squeezed some of the older joints out of business, but some, like West Alabama Icehouse, are still going strong. And today, a new generation of



WEST ALABAMA ICEHOUSE: OUTDOOR SEATING IS AN ICEHOUSE HALLMARK

bar owners are looking to this model for inspiration. In the past year alone, multiple takes on the traditional icehouse have popped up all over town. A close look at two of them illustrates the staying power of the style.

Hipster Hangout

In 2014, Morgan Weber and Ryan Pera opened Coltivare, a rustic Italian restaurant in Houston's Heights neighborhood. Weber's bar program was a proud part of the city's high-end craft cocktail revolution that he helped start along with his friend Bobby Heugel when they opened Anvil Bar & Refuge five years earlier. But Weber, a bourbon aficionado who grew up in rural South Texas, had a vision for something simpler, what he calls a revisionist icehouse: an open-air bar serving not only beer, but also bourbon—lots



EVERYTHING'S BIGGER IN TEXAS, INCLUDING THE 16-OUNCER TEXAS BUSCH CAN

On any given day, you'll likely find a local drinking Busch in a can next to a twentysomething holding a bottle of Saint Arnold's Santo.



**EIGHT ROW FLINT
DIE ON BOURBON**



**MOST POPULAR DRINK AT EIGHT
ROW FLINT IS A BEER AND A BUMP**

and lots of bourbon. He had been eyeing an old gas station on the corner of Yale and 11th streets—just a stone’s throw from Coltivare—for years, and he jumped on it as soon as it became available. Eight Row Flint opened in December 2015. The name comes from the variety of corn first used in the distillation of American whiskey, and the drink menu is a celebration of that history. In addition to having fifteen beers on tap (nine of them brewed in Texas), carbonated cocktails, and frozen drinks (think margarita slushee), Eight Row Flint boasts an inventory of more than 100 different bourbons, eight of them actual proprietary barrels, tapped and mounted behind the bar. “I wanted to serve thoughtful drinks, not in a stuffy environment,” says Weber of his extensive and, in places, pricey menu. “A lot of people say you can’t be everything to everyone, but we kind of do that. We can sell you a fifty-dollar glass of bourbon or vodka and a Red Bull. I like that both of these things can exist in the same space.” Their most popular order is what’s listed on the menu as a Cheap Thrill: a Miller High Life and a shot of bourbon for four dollars. Traditionalists may balk at the idea of anything opened in 2015 being considered an icehouse. After all, how can a bar be an icehouse if it never sold blocks of ice? But Weber carefully considered the tenets of what makes an icehouse an icehouse and even got into arguments with friends over some vital characteristics. They already had a foot in the game by starting with an old gas station: roll-up doors are an icehouse signature, blurring the line between indoors and

Check back in thirty years, and an aging hipster might just belly up to the bar for a Cheap Thrill.

out. Did they have to have outdoor seating? Yes. Did they have to offer dominoes and cornhole? Yes. Did they have to serve just beer? Absolutely not. But, being situated in the Heights, a dry neighborhood since 1912, Weber and his team had some unique hurdles. Using a workaround that was legalized about ten years ago, Heights businesses can serve alcohol if they also serve food. So Weber put Pera in charge of developing a taco menu—with tortillas made from Eight Row Flint corn—and, in lieu of a space-hogging kitchen, he



TACOS WITH
HOUSEMADE TORTILLAS

In lieu of a space-hogging kitchen, he situated a taco truck out back.

situated a taco truck out back. Using much of the corner lot for outdoor tables ate up valuable parking space, so Morgan leased the empty lot across the street and also offers valet parking on busy weekend nights. Revisionist indeed. But other traditional icehouse traits are easy to spot: kids and dogs meandering through the patio on weekends, televisions outside to watch the Texans win, and on Tuesdays during the season, they host crawfish boils. Check back in thirty years, and an aging hipster might just belly up to the bar for a Cheap Thrill.

Kombucha on Tap

Just as Weber and Pera were opening Eight Row Flint, Adam Brackman, Jeff Kaplan, and Monte Large celebrated the grand opening of their new venture, Axelrad Beer Garden. If Eight Row Flint is a revisionist icehouse, Axelrad is a holistic one. Brackman, Kaplan, and Large met in 2003 and connected over a shared interest in urban revitalization with a vision for creating a beloved community within their collective hometown. In 2006, they opened a kitchen incubator that operated for a few years. In 2009, they opened New Living,

which is both a manufacturer and retailer of eco-friendly furniture. Their mission with New Living is “to have a direct economic, social, and environmental impact on our community with a focus on providing better indoor quality for everyone.” In 2010, Large and Kaplan were part of a group hell-bent on providing better outdoor quality for everyone and launched the popular “Houston Needs A Swimming Hole” campaign. So when the trio started tossing around ideas for another kind of outdoor gathering place—a third space—for their fellow Houstonians, a beer garden quickly came to mind. “The idea of big-picture health links all of our projects together,” says Large. “We loved the idea of creating a social space for people to be active and come together. Beer was not a motivating factor,” he adds with a grin. But beer they have, and plenty of it. They even have kombucha on tap. It’s made by one of their kitchen

incubator success stories, Kickin’ Kombucha. But, again, the drinks are not center stage at Axelrad. People are. Since it first opened, Axelrad has worked diligently to cultivate community in this ever-evolving social space. They don’t have icehouse street cred, per se, but the century-old building formerly owned by the



Axelrad family once served the neighborhood as a grocery store. Inside in the downstairs space where produce and dry goods once sat, customers are welcomed by installations and video works by local artists. One of the most



AXELRAD'S LIGHT INSTALLATION
HAS BEEN AN INSTAGRAM HIT



prominent elements of the bar is the wall of taps, which features gorgeous, handmade pulls—individual hand-carved figures created by an artist in Venezuela, each character reflecting the diversity of Axelrad’s clientele. But the enormous outdoor area is where the magic happens. Picnic tables cover most of the large open space, many of them situated under a giant tree that not only provides shade in summer, but features an impressive light installation that has become an oft-Instagrammed beacon for this Midtown meeting place. The eastern edge of the garden is lined with a dozen or more hammocks. They offer a five-percent discount if you arrive by foot, bike, skateboard, roller skates, or public transportation—anything but a car. They host fundraisers and are passionate supporters of the arts. Local bands play regularly for no cover, as does beloved New Orleans trumpeter—and Axelrad investor—Kermit Ruffins, who has a weekly residency, performing (almost) every Wednesday night. Kids play and enjoy bottles of Saint Arnold’s root beer, and dogs are aplenty. Over the winter, when the temperature dipped below sixty degrees, there were mushroom heaters and fire pits dotting the patio, and Mexican blankets on offer. “If you come here, you’ll be welcome,” says Brackman. And they want you to stay as long as you like. If you’re hungry, you can grab a bite from their food truck vendor of the day or a slice of pizza from their backyard neighbor, Luigi’s Pizzeria. Axelrad may not be considered a classic interpretation of the form, but it has achieved the icehouse trifecta: an inviting outdoor space, plenty of beer, and a vibrant community.

Connecting Community

In the spring of 2015, the Rice Design Alliance, a member-supported organization based at Rice University’s School of Architecture, funded former student and native Texan David Richmond’s proposal to explore the relevance of Houston’s icehouses as communal spaces. “These buildings stood out to me largely because they counter most understandings of Houston,” Richmond wrote for OffCite, the Rice Design Alliance’s blog. “In this city known for massive forms, these are intimate. In a city home to the world’s widest freeways dividing neighborhoods, icehouses create slow spaces that connect neighbors. In a city of [air-]conditioned malls and underground tunnels, they invert their interiors outward, and in doing so pull the city in.” In the nation’s fourth-largest city, that’s no small feat.