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Tracking the  
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**(pg. 40)**



# AL FRESCO DINING

Making the happy hour—happier. BY MARIA CODER

AL FRESCO DINING MAKES THE HAPPY HOUR—HAPPIER. There's something about mingling, sipping and eating outdoors that sets the mood and instantly raises the stakes. Now that warmer weather is here, event-goers will welcome the revival of dining *en plein air*. And with so many stellar outdoor venues, blue skies are ready to offer a cameo appearance guests are sure to recall long after the event comes to a close.



(Clockwise from top) Ellerbe Fine Foods is a 1920s gas station-turned-restaurant. Guests flock there for its seasonal menu and outdoor dining. Zed's patio takes advantage of Texas breezes. Avanti Fountain Place restaurant offers views of a world-class water feature. Ellerbe Fine Foods pairs fresh herbs with local ingredients for its seasonal menu.



PHOTO COURTESY OF: ELLERBE FINE FOODS; ZED'S; AVANTI FOUNTAIN PLACE.



### Water Garden Gem

Nestled under a canopy of native Cypress trees at the base of a Dallas landmark is the Avanti Fountain Place restaurant. The plaza at this internationally acclaimed Fountain Place building is a force to be reckoned with. In fact, the fountain configuration is among the most complex in the world. There are an impressive 172 bubbling fountains in the pools that surround the building and 360 dancing fountains, consisting of 217 computer-driven water jets. The Avanti Fountain Place restaurant offers front-row seats.

"The ambiance is so unique, you do not feel like you are really in downtown Dallas," says Amy Lowe, director of marketing and special events. "There is a tunnel from the lobby of The Fairmont to our lobby; you don't have to drive or step outside."

The restaurant also is within walking distance to the Dallas Arts District and West End Historic District, and within blocks to American Airlines Center, The Dallas Convention Center, the McKinney Avenue Trolley and the largely awaited Woodall Rodgers Park.

Avanti Fountain Place is open weekdays for lunch and happy hour. Then, at 7:30 p.m., it undergoes a Cinderella-like transformation to host private events, something it has been doing for more than a dozen years. Rental costs range from \$250 to \$2,000. Accommodations vary from 50 to 175 for a seated dinner party. The plaza can fit up to 500 for a reception. Lowe often manages the details of the many events taking place at Avanti—a built-in service that lends a hand to planners and vendors alike.

"She not only planned the menu and seating, but also arranged for flowers, entertainment, menu cards and hotel accommodations," says Debbie Vaughan, of Debbie Vaughan Productions, who recently hosted cocktails, dinner and a full program for 100 people at Avanti.

### From Farm to Patio

The award-winning Fort Worth restaurant, Ellerbe Fine Foods, takes al fresco to a whole new level. Originally built as a gas station in 1920, the building was renovated into a restaurant in 2009 and has played a significant role



Wildwood Inn

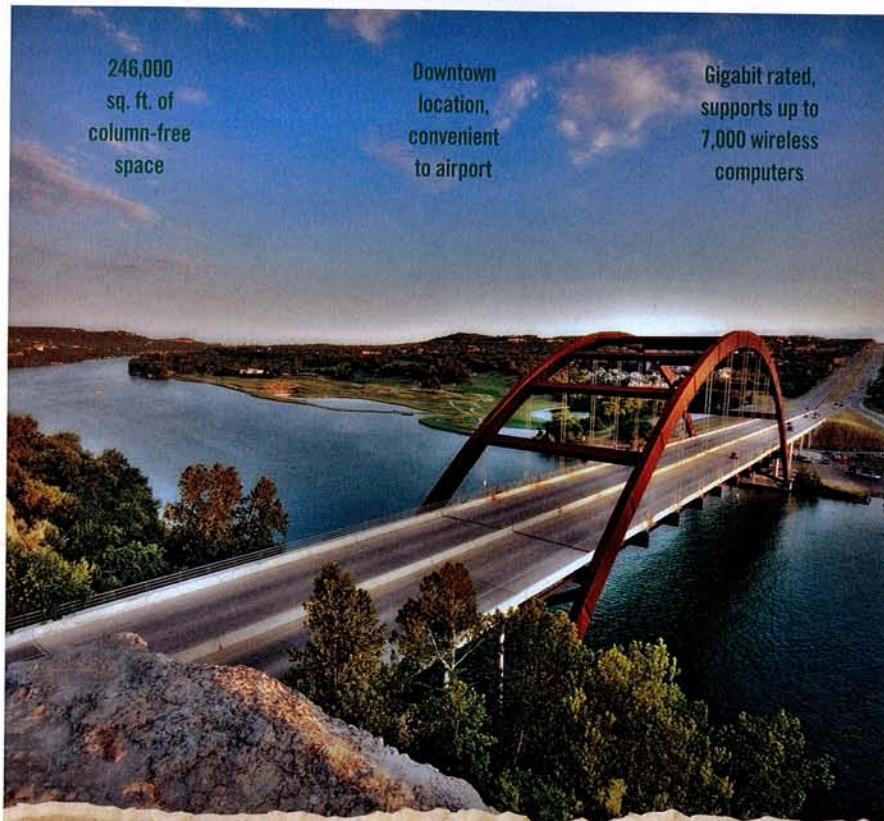
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in the revitalization of the area. The Ellerbe patio was created by connecting the building to the former filling station's pumps, turning a feature that resembled a carriage porch into an upscale, outdoor dining area. Last year, *Bon Appétit* magazine crowned Ellerbe as one of the Top 10 Best New Restaurants in America.

Fresh herbs and flowers, rustic accents, faded mismatched tables and chairs, and a picture-perfect fence combine to recreate the feel of a long-lost era. Chef Molly McCook prepares farm-to-table cuisine, further preserving the restaurant's mantra to use locally grown, sustainable products and to ensure each meal is unique.

"Ellerbe works closely with meeting planners to develop a custom menu—complete with pairings, which are also seasonal," says Richard King, co-owner and general manager. The venue offers turn-key event planning and complimentary valet service, both of which are especially helpful for out-of-town meeting planners.

Tara Wilson, event designer and president of Tara Wilson Events, frequently dines at Ellerbe and currently has the venue in mind for one of her clients. "I love the covered patio, which is flanked by pots and containers of fresh herbs and flowers. The experience is unique in that Molly often incorporates these herbs into her dishes—and as a client, I find this detail enchanting," she says.

The Ellerbe patio seats 26, although it can accommodate up to 40 people for cocktails. The full restaurant will seat 90 and serve 125 for passed hors d'oeuvres. Board meetings, pharmaceutical dinners and bridal luncheons are frequently held here. Event costs vary but average between \$2,000 to \$3,500.

### Outdoor Oasis

Zed's is a modern yet casual restaurant serving American cuisine with Austin-inspired ingredients. Set upon three acres, the venue—which opened last


December—includes spacious decks overlooking a pond, creek and indigenous landscaping. Zed's private dining rooms offer floor-to-ceiling glass patio doors that open to a private patio area.

A major focus of the dining backdrop is its unique east-facing deck built to take advantage of summer breezes and comfortable furnishings. Heaters provide warmth in cooler months to keep the scenic deck open virtually year-round. Celebrated local architect Michael Hsu designed the airy and sophisticated space. A landscaped stone pathway and waterfall welcomes guests while a great lawn is used to showcase local and regional musical performances. Outdoor space is nothing if not plentiful at this venue.

"We have three distinct patio levels," says Lynn Willis, director of banquets and events. "One directly outside of our main bar with its own fully operational bar, a center deck located adjacent to the outside waterfall feature, and a private patio located by the private dining room that overhangs our expansive lawn area."

The restaurant is fully equipped for audio visual needs, from LCD projectors with screens to professional staging measuring a roomy 16 by 24 feet. Willis anticipates the venue will host formal lawn dinners and casino parties in the near future. There is not a set rental charge at Zed's but there are food and beverage minimums that vary per event, she adds.

While these three venues offer plentiful options, there are thousands of others. "By working with convention and visitors bureau staffers, planners receive information on dining venues that could work best for their groups when they are booking their conference activities," says Diann Bayes, certified tourism ambassador and executive director of the McKinney Convention & Visitors Bureau.

After all, it's a tough decision. "We all know the stars at night are big and bright, deep in the heart of Texas," says Bayes. 

## GET CONNECTED

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AVANTI FOUNTAIN PLACE  
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—DIANN BAYES, CERTIFIED TOURISM AMBASSADOR AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT THE MCKINNEY CONVENTION & VISITORS BUREAU