

NO. 1 best of DOWNTOWN

NEED SOME HELP PICKING A FAVORITE NEW EATERY, BAR, CAFE OR COFFEE SHOP? LET US GUIDE YOU TO THE RICHEST DESSERTS, SLEEKEST BISTROS AND THE PERFECT POWER LUNCH.

BY HOLLY BERETTO

Strip House's Decadent
Twenty Four Layer Chocolate Cake.



Best Happy Hour Bites → a+ BAR & GRILL ←

If you want something more imaginative than your everyday happy hour chips and dip, head to the Alden Hotel's **a+ BAR & GRILLE** for \$2 shrimp tacos and crispy calamari, both sure to make you a seafood lover. **MCCORMICK & SCHMICK'S** has fried shrimp, an ahi tuna roll or ceviche and none of it's over \$4.95. With 59 beers, specials on the three wisemen, martinis and perfect brick oven pizzas, **ANGELO'S** is a primo happy hour destination – seven days a week. For great food with a stunning view, you want **THE TREEHOUSE** in Discovery Green. Beef sliders, Kona kampachi and Kennebec potato chips all make an appearance on an extensive menu, as do several signature cocktails.



Best Tableside Service
QUATTRO

Watch them layer biscotti, fresh oranges and espresso granita to create Houston's finest tiramisu in front of your eyes at Quattro in the Four Seasons. It's a fantastically fresh twist on a classic Italian dessert.

Best Food You Loved As A Kid
17 RESTAURANT

Mac 'n cheese grows up at the Alden's swanky 17. The childhood favorite is as creamy and cheesy as you remember, but an infusion of truffle oil takes this comfort food to a whole new level.

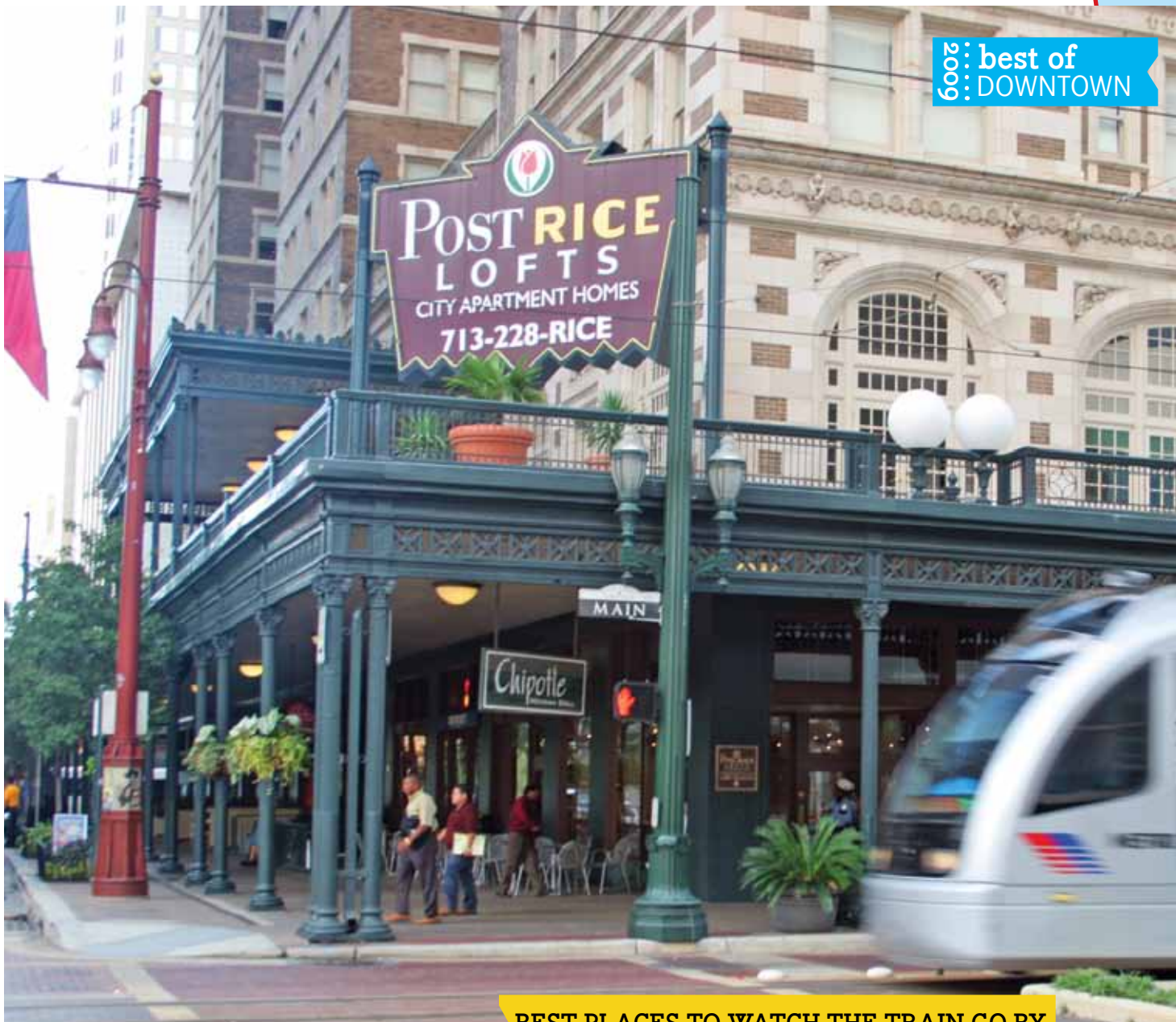
Best Chance You'll Need A Doggy Bag
SHULA'S STEAK HOUSE

If you can actually finish the 48-ounce porterhouse, you'll be a member of The 48-Ounce Club, with bragging rights and your name listed on their Web site.



Best Way To Skip Church Without Feeling Guilty
HOUSE OF BLUES

Missed Mass? Skipped Sunday services? No worries. The Sunday Gospel Brunch will redeem you. Fried chicken, corn muffins with maple butter, peel-and-eat shrimp and other Southern favorites share the stage with some of Houston's best gospel talent.

**BEST PLACES TO WATCH THE TRAIN GO BY**

METRORail ushered Houston into the mass transit age, and the Main Street corridor's gentrification followed quickly after. Watch the silver bullet pass by at [MIA BELLA](#), where you also can have tasty risotto and wine, or at the [CORNER BAKERY AND CAFÉ](#), where you can indulge in breakfast and lunch items like the massive muffins, flavorful coffee and gourmet sandwiches. At [SHAY MCELROY'S](#) you can nosh on pub fare and over at [ANGELO'S](#), you can watch the train while drinking a great brew (more than 50 to choose) served from the coldest tap in the city.



Best Place to Dine Before the Curtain Goes Up

→ **PERBACCO** ←

Theater District restaurants are the perfect overture to a night of culture. Before a big Broadway show at the Hobby Center, check out **ARTISTA'S** angel wings or grilled swordfish. Next door to the Alley Theatre, **BIRRAPORETTI'S** serves up home-style Italian; the chicken picatta is particularly nice with a Pinot Grigio. If the Wortham Theater Center is your destination, don't miss the three-course, fixed price pre-theater menu at the Alden Hotel's **17**, the veal scaloppini from **MINGALONE'S CURTAIN CALL** menu or the selections at **BISTRO LANCASTER**, all within walking distance. Fans rave about the seafood ravioli at **PERBACCO** in the Pennzoil Building and at **TABLE 7 BISTRO** you can grab a pre-theater drink and kicked-up bar cuisine.

Best Schizophrenic Kitchen
CIELO MEXICAN BISTRO & COLLIN'S CHOP HOUSE



Part Mexican bistro, part old-school chop house, Cielo and Collin's give a whole new meaning to multiple personality. Two separate restaurants, they share some facilities, so start early with the chimichurri steak at Cielo then stop by for a whiskey-laden

happy hour at Collins - and stick around for their prime rib.

Best Throw-Back To The '80s
FOUNDATION ROOM

Channel your inner Working Girl or Gordon Gecko with dollar martinis during lunch at House of Blues' hip and happening Foundation Room. Live it up, because unless you're a member, lunch is the only time you can get a reservation. Order a dirty one and chase it with crab cakes.

Critic's Choice
VOICE

Esquire named Voice the Best New Restaurant of 2008 and *Travel + Leisure* calls it one of the 50 best new restaurants in the country. It's easy to see why. Chef Michael Kramer combines local ingredients for a truly Texas taste, with nods to continental cuisine.



Don't Worry, Be "Hoppy"
FLYING SAUCER DRAUGHT EMPORIUM

Houston's home base for hops. Whether you fancy a true English ale, a Belgian brew or anything in between, head here for the city's most extensive beer list. Insider hint: beer flights = good. Chase it with some good ole fashioned pub food.

Your "Eyes Are Bigger Than Your Stomach" Moment
STRIP HOUSE

You made it through dinner at the Strip House, famous for its flavorful steaks and huge portions, and now you're ready for dessert. Make sure you've left some room for their Decadent Twenty Four Layer Chocolate Cake. Twelve layers of cake, 11 layers of semisweet ganache and Tobago chocolate cannot be denied.

Best Place For Sealing The Deal

VIC AND ANTHONY'S STEAKHOUSE

Power brokers have Vic and Anthony's set on speed dial and you'll know why after your first visit. Clubby, old-school and known for their steaks, it's Houston's business address. Come in for lunch or dinner and be ready to network and break out the expense account.

Freshest Fish

MCCORMICK & SCHMICK'S

Newly opened in Houston Pavilions, McCormick & Schmick's serves up seafood so fresh you'll be convinced the chef went out and caught it just for you. Lobster, shrimp, halibut, salmon, an ever-changing array of oysters on the half shell, swordfish, crab...you get the idea. It's all served to perfection.

carrots, cucumbers, jalapeno peppers and cilantro. At \$2.75, it won't break the bank and might just be your new lunch favorite.

Best Way To Go Green

GUADALAJARA DEL CENTRO

Order the guacamole at Guadalajara, located in the new Houston Pavilions, and feel like you're on vacation. It's made to order every time with a perfect blend of avocado, onion, tomato, cilantro and fresh lime, and paired with crispy tortilla chips.

don't see spirits, you'll love the Italian comfort food – meatballs, ravioli, chicken parmigiana and, naturally, spaghetti.

Best Place To Wear A Bib And Not Get Laughed At
RAGIN' CAJUN

Laissez les bon temps roulez at Ragin' Cajun, in the heart of downtown's tunnel system.

Follow the crowd looking for quick Cajun cuisine, including gumbo, crawfish or shrimp po' boys and fried oysters.

Best Post-Barhopping Spot
EL REY TAQUERIA

Open till 3 a.m. on Fridays and Saturdays, funky El Rey on Main serves up killer coffee and muy bien Cuban and Mexican for not a lot of dinero. Refuel from your weekend partying with a hot Acapulco sandwich (rotisserie chicken, onion sauce, pinto beans, cheddar cheese on toast) or wake up with an

espresso drink.

Best Balcony

CABO'S MIX MEX

Cabo's balcony is the perfect spot for margaritas and people watching during happy hour or for chomping down fish tacos at lunch. The perch wraps around the side of the building, giving great Market Square views and spot-on food at the same time. What more could you want?

Best Place To Take The Kids
DOWNTOWN AQUARIUM

Kids will dig watching the sharks and other fish, checking out the tigers, the Ferris wheel and the train at the Downtown Aquarium. The kids' menu features all their favorites like popcorn shrimp, mini cheeseburgers and chicken tenders. Bonus: the menu's an activity book for even more interactive fun.

Best Place To Rub Elbows With Local Celebrities
THE GROVE

Everybody comes to The Grove, Houston's hottest downtown spot for haute cuisine. Keep an eye out for local TV stars, celebrity athletes and Houston's social set, because they all wind up here, sipping the signature Summer in Bombay, and munching on deviled yard eggs, Gulf Coast oyster bruschetta, the charcoal grilled rib eye or the chef's family-style tasting of house specialties.



Best Late Night Slice

FRANK'S PIZZA

When you're done with downtown's bars, stop in for a slice of downtown's best pie. Order the supreme for a killer combo of meats and veggies and eat it looking at the larger-than-life movie posters on the wall. Or grab a great big slice of classic cheese or pepperoni and nosh on the way to your next nightspot.

Best Use Of 750 Square Feet

HUBCAP GRILL

Good things come in small packages at Hubcap Grill, serving up handcrafted hamburgers in a teeny, tucked-away spot on Prairie. The Muffaletta burger is a house fave, and the burger topped with a chili dog is both



delicious and oh-so-bad-for-you good.

Ghosts Love Pasta Too
SPAGHETTI WAREHOUSE

The walls really can talk at Spaghetti Warehouse, housed in a historic building on Commerce St. Local lore says the place is haunted, so don't be surprised if a ghost turns up along with your order of gnocchi. Even if you



Best Tofu Sandwich
LES GIVRALS KAHVE

Packed at lunchtime, Les Givral's serves up simple and stunning Vietnamese specialties. Dressed up in traditional style, the tofu and barbecue pork sandwiches are perfectly seasoned and stuffed with the typical fixings of a traditional Vietnamese sandwich – pickled

Best Place To Carbo Load JOSEPHINE'S ITALIAN RISTORANTE

At Josephine's, the food's Italian and the location is a stone's throw from the Hilton Americas and the George R. Brown Convention Center – making it the perfect spot for



downtown marathon runners. Whether you pick a pizza or pasta, you're guaranteed to love it for

its home-cooked flavor and the friendly staff will make sure you get the perfect plate.

Best Place To Get Your Groove On SAMBUCA JAZZ CAFE

The vibe's hot, hot, hot at Sambuca, Houston's premiere jazz bar. This sultry setting scores big points for cool cat drinks, chill music and excellent people watching. There's entertainment every night, and Sambuca's extensive menu has everything from lobster enchiladas to lamb meatballs; all of it perfect accompaniments to the music.

Best Place To Devour Red Beans And Rice (And Chat With God)

TREEBEARDS
Since 1991 Treebeard's has been dishing up its Louisiana-inspired comfort food in the social hall at The Cloister in Christ Church Cathedral. You'll love looking at the soaring architecture while chowing

down on red beans and rice, cornbread and the rest of Treebeards' favorites.

Best Local Hangout MARKET SQUARE BAR AND GRILL

Market Square Bar and Grill has an unpretentious vibe that locals just love, plus it offers awesome eats. Insiders know to order the Blue Burger, sit back and enjoy people watching and good company in this cozy spot.



See Plate on page 35 for restaurant information. Or check out houstondowntown.com



Only in Downtown → IRMA'S ←

Some places have a personality based on their geography and that's true of these downtown faves. **THE LAST CONCERT CAFÉ** dishes up eclectic, local music and tasty Tex Mex staples from behind a red door. **IRMA'S** doesn't have a menu – or serve dinner – but it's a downtown institution where you'll get great Mexican food and rub elbows with the political crowd. Anchoring Market Square, **TREEBEARDS** is a must-visit for red beans and rice, gumbo, daily specials and other Louisiana-inspired comfort foods. Don't forget to wash it down with one of their "you-will-want-more-than-one" butter bars.

Best Cheap Eats

→ THE LAKE HOUSE ←

Frugal foodies and fun-lovers know [THE LAKE HOUSE](#) at Discovery Green is great for burgers, salads and soups under \$10. At [CHINA GARDEN](#), next to Toyota Center, you'll get cheap Chinese that tastes like a million bucks. And you'll love the taste – and the price – on the chicken, pork or spinach dumplings at [DOOZO](#) in The Shops at Houston Center. With those options, there's no need to break the bank for a good meal.