



EMILY MOUG
HOTEL
Executive Chef
Guy Small

GEYSERS PEAK
WINERY
CALIFORNIA
CABERNET SAUVIGNON
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LONE ★ STAR EATS

Bring your Texas-sized appetite to Oro and fill up on fresh, bold flavors.

by John Griffin • photographs by Al Rendon

A visit to the Alamo promises to be a day filled with excitement as you relive the history that occurred at this world-famous shrine and learn about the men who sacrificed their lives there. But it can also be a day filled with enough heat and walking about that you find yourself with a Texas-sized appetite. What better, then, than to retreat into the cool comfort of the neighboring Emily Morgan Hotel, where the food and drink at Oro restaurant offer you a chance to refresh and renew your spirit.

The Emily Morgan has offered tourists and locals alike a haven from the ongoing fiesta that envelopes San Antonio's downtown and River Walk areas for more than 30 years now, the last three under the DoubleTree by Hilton banner. The building itself dates even further back, almost 100 years, in fact, and has served as both a medical arts center and office tower before taking in tired travelers.

The spacious hotel lobby gives way on the side closest to the Alamo to Oro's laid-back dining room, where you can relax over some of Chef Guy Fanelli's lively food, which pays homage to the restaurant's Texas roots by being fresh and filled with flavors of the region. "I think of it as elevated Southwestern cuisine," he says. In other words, you don't have to be from San Antonio to understand the pleasures to be had from a 14-ounce Angus strip steak smothered in jumbo lump crabmeat and topped with chipotle béarnaise sauce. The beef, of course, is a Lone Star State staple and so is the chipotle, but the crab meat and béarnaise make this a local variation on a French classic. What carnivore could resist such a winning combination?

Do you prefer salmon? You can try it with a honey and red chile glaze over the fish, which is also topped with crabmeat. Satisfying cuts of meat and fish are a Texas specialty, as are the chiles used in both of those dishes. But don't expect either to be a tongue scorcher. The chiles are used to add flavor, not to burn your taste buds, says Fanelli, who originally comes from Detroit and knows firsthand that not everyone can take the heat. People seem to know well enough to ask about how hot the various dishes are. "The heat's generally one of the biggest questions that we get," the Chef says. "We tell them that we want them to enjoy our flavor profiles and not offend them."

So, even though the Oro Angus burger is served on a jalapeño cheddar bun with your choice of toppings that includes house-made pickled jalapeños as well as bacon and your choice of cheeses, one bite will convince you that your mouth is ablaze with bold flavors, not heat. If you happen to be one of those hot heads that love taking everything up a notch, then Fanelli and his staff can help you in that area. "We can take it up to whatever heat level they want," he says, adding that some of their solutions include using an additional amount of the chipotle puree they always have on hand as well as those jalapeño pickles.

Spice isn't all that makes a Texas menu, much in the same way that Oro isn't a Tex-Mex place. So, don't go looking for an enchilada plate. But do look for pulled pork smoked in house with mesquite, a wood harvested throughout West and South Texas and used by many for barbecue. Or you could relax over a casual appetizer like a shrimp tostada made with Gulf shrimp, guacamole and cilantro in a crispy corn tortilla. One of the most unique dishes on Fanelli's menu is his avocado fries, in which strips of the creamy fruit are breaded and deep-fried before being plated with a smoky chipotle ranch dressing. It's Texas to a "T," or "familiar but new," as the Chef likes to call it.

Salad lovers haven't been overlooked in the lunch and dinner menus. A Southwestern wedge is crowned with spicy grilled shrimp, crispy prosciutto, several cheeses and that irresistible chipotle ranch dressing. Meanwhile, a Seafood Cobb Salad is served with jumbo lump crab meat and poached Gulf shrimp as well as bacon, hard-boiled egg, avocado, tomato and queso fresco; a toasted cumin and lime vinaigrette finishes the salad off with in tart, tangy style.

Not all visitors are meat lovers, Fanelli realizes, so he offers vegetarians and those who want to skip the meat for a meal a torta, or Mexican-style sandwich, filled with Portobello mushroom and Texas



Previous Page: Chef Guy Fanelli; **Above:** Grilled Portobello Salad with Avocado, Pico De Gallo, Roasted Corn, Goat Cheese, Hard Cooked Egg, Cucumber, Baby Spinach and Herb Vinaigrette.



Clockwise From Top Left: Steak Torta with Grilled Bolillo Roll, Crispy Pork Belly, Chile & Lime Marinated Steak, Avocado, Pickled Jalapeños, baby Spinach, Monterey Jack Cheese and Crema; Oro Seafood Cobb Salad with Tender Field Greens, Diced Tomato, Bacon, Hard Cooked Egg, Queso Fresco, Avocado, Roasted Corn, Topped With Lump Crab Meat and Poached Gulf Shrimp, Toasted Comino and Lime Vinaigrette; The Flourless Chocolate Cake; Avacado Fries with Smokey Chipotle Ranch Dressing; Atlantic Swordfish and Spice Rubbed Gulf Shrimp, Basmati Rice, Steamed Asparagus, Julienne of Carrot and Saffron Sauce.

goat cheese as well as heirloom tomatoes, roasted red pepper, arugula, cilantro and salsa rojo. A Portobello salad features avocado, pico de gallo, roasted corn, goat cheese and more, while an appetizer of roasted poblano and white bean dip is like a Texas version of hummus.

If you have a sweet tooth, the desserts are classics sure to please, no matter where you hail from. They include the ever-welcome New York-style cheesecake and a flourless chocolate cake as well as strawberry crème brulee and an old fashioned banana split, which is refreshing throughout the year.

The bar at Oro has developed its own steady clientele because of its extensive martini list as well as the ever-popular margarita and other potent potables. "Our bartender has won some pour-off competitions," Fanelli says. "Now there's an 8 to 10 martini drink menu." The specialty drinks change with the season, but a chalkboard keeps guests up to date with what's available that day. A well-chosen selection of Texas wines and craft beers provide further tastes of the finest that the state produces.

The Chef has also developed a bar menu worth investigating, whether you're in the mood for a trio of sliders, a roast chicken flatbread and grande nachos with pulled pork on top. Unwind over a BLT that includes those avocado fries and watch a Spurs game on the widescreen TV set. In addition to the restaurant and bar, the Emily Morgan also has private dining areas, in case you need a place to hold a business meeting. Up to 50 can be seated or you could find space for up to 100 walking about with various food stations, Fanelli says. The rooms are equipped with the latest audiovisual technology to assist with any presentations that you may need to make.

When all is said and done, people visiting Oro will likely have found the place because of its famous next-door neighbor. That's perfectly fine with Fanelli. "People relate us to the Alamo," he says. "That gives us quite a sense of pride ... and it helps us stay on our toes."

Oro at the Emily Morgan Hotel
705 E. Houston St.
(210) 225-5100
www.emilymorganhotel.com/oro-restaurant

WHO WAS EMILY?

The Emily Morgan, known as the "official hotel of the Alamo," was named after the woman who, legend has it, was the yellow rose of Texas that the song was written about. Her real name was Emily West and she is said to have been a free-born black woman during the time of slavery. She was hired by James Morgan to work for him in Texas, and those who mistook her for Morgan's slave gave her the new last name. While on her way to work for Morgan, she was taken hostage by Gen. Antonio López de Santa Ana, and her beauty is said to have distracted him shortly before his defeat at San Jacinto, a pivotal battle in the Texas Revolution. (Santa Ana was the general who led the battle against the Texans at the Alamo.) The historical accuracy of the tale is questionable, but why let a good fact bother a great story, right?