

FOOD & DRINK FEBRUARY 15, 2017 1:09 PM

Hunting for lunch? These 10 Tarrant restaurants are off the eaten path



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This is the latest installment in an occasional series on hidden cultural experiences around DFW.

On the ground floor of the downtown Fort Worth building that houses the Star-Telegram offices is a restaurant called Caffini's. It's a mostly cafeteria-style place where you can do some grill orders and it has been doing good business there for about 20 years. Yet there's a good chance that many people who live and work downtown don't even know it exists.

The building, officially the Oil & Gas/Star-Telegram building, is 19 stories tall and holds enough workers to keep Caffini's busy, especially on a rainy or cold day. It's on heavily trafficked Seventh Street and yet you could easily drive by without realizing Caffini's is there.

If you're on foot and you're paying attention, you might see one of the sidewalk signs advertising the daily special for a cafe that closes at 3 p.m. and isn't even open weekends (and often closes for full holiday weeks).

And yet, merely by having that sidewalk sign, Caffini's isn't as "hidden" as some other Tarrant County restaurants. Many of the most concealed ones are deli-style places inside office buildings, without any signage out front.

But there are others tucked away on side streets or off the freeway exits less traveled. And a few are just in odd places where you wouldn't expect to find an eatery. Often they have limited hours or even limited weeks.

And yet, some have been around for decades — enough to develop a cult following. Here are a few of them.



Aguilera's Cafe

The epitome of what this story's about: Aguilera's is south of the Stockyards, on a street you'd probably only take if you lived in the neighborhood — or if you were looking for this restaurant someone told you about. Which doesn't have anything outside, other than maybe some extra parking spaces, to indicate that it's a restaurant.

Take a chance on opening the door and you'll find a place with booths, a counter and a grill area, maybe meet someone who's been going there for decades: It's been there since 1961, when Jose Carmen Aguilera Sr., founded the cafe, which was a favorite of nearby meatpacking workers.

There once was a sign, but current owner Santos Aguilera, who took over when his father, Jose, died in 1991, told the Star-Telegram in 2006 that the sign "blew away in a storm and I never replaced it," adding, "The people who are going to come here know where it is."

Santos, who recently turned 90, is limiting his hours more these days, but when we dropped in, he cooked us a couple of \$2.50 bacon-and-egg breakfast tacos while engaging us in conversation.

2005 N. Grove St., Fort Worth, 817-624-0189. Hours: 6:30-10 a.m. Monday-Friday, 6:30-11 a.m. Saturday (hours subject to change). Closed Sunday.



Alonti Cafe & Catering

In-the-know downtown Fort Worth dwellers and workers are aware that there is a tunnel under Burnett Park, connecting the Bank of America building to Burnett Plaza. Depending on the direction you take, the tunnel either begins or ends at Alonti, a cafe in the basement of Burnett Plaza (there is also a location at 203 Commerce St., inside the D.R. Horton Tower, in Sundance Square).

Alonti is part of a chain. According to the website, its origins lie in a gourmet grocery business that started in New York and then moved to Houston in 1974, and has been growing ever since.

The restaurant menu features nearly 20 “premium sandwiches,” including such relatively offbeat options as Tiger Thai beef (\$6.49) and harissa beef with tomato jam on a brioche roll (\$6.49).

Traditional sandwiches (BLT, roast turkey, etc),, wraps and hot pressata sandwiches are also available, as are several breakfast options, salads and pastas.

801 Cherry St. No. 25, Fort Worth, 817-877-4022; also 203 Commerce St., 817-335-3988; <https://www.alonti.com> Hours: 6:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. Monday-Friday; closed Saturday-Sunday



Blue Tower Cafe

Located in Mallick Tower at Summit Avenue and West Fifth Street, this is a place we've driven by dozens of times without realizing that there's a cafe inside.

It turns out that the joint does a good old-school bacon-cheeseburger, cooked to order. And when we asked for our patty medium, we got the pink center that we don't always get from better-known burger restaurants. Fries were an additional \$2-\$3.50; we found the small size sufficient and nicely seasoned, with salt and tiny flecks of pepper.

There are other burger options, a big sandwich menu (we were also pleased with the \$6 gyro, although we wished it were served just a *little* hotter), and a breakfast menu consisting of omelets, tacos, burritos, sandwiches, pastries and the Tower platter (two eggs, sausage, bacon, choice of bread). Catering available.

101 Summit Ave., No. 110, Fort Worth, 817-386-9220. Hours: 8 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday (breakfast 8-10 a.m., grill open 11 a.m.-2 p.m., sandwiches available till 3:30 p.m.)



Frezko Taco Spot

You can see this Southlake taqueria's sign from Southlake Boulevard — if you're paying attention and headed in the right direction.

Located behind an eyeglasses shop just before eastbound Southlake Boulevard intersects with Texas 114, Frezko is difficult to see — and get to — from just about any other direction at this interchange, and even eastbound you might wind up on the freeway access road before you take the street that actually gets you to Frezko's Taco Spot (if this happens, turn right after the IHOP).

But it does authentic Mexico City-style tacos, and has stood up to some very stiff competition from the more visible Torchy's Tacos that's about a mile away.

3105 E. Southlake Blvd., Southlake, 817-251-4836, <http://frezko.com>. Hours: 11 a.m.-9 p.m. Monday-Saturday. Closed Sunday.

Mar-Cosina

The Texas 114 corridor in northern Tarrant/southern Denton counties includes several cities with restaurant scenes: Roanoke, Grapevine, Southlake, Trophy Club (thanks mainly to a location of Meat U Anywhere barbecue and a new Bread Winners Cafe). But 114 commuters can easily bypass the exit for the Solana development in Westlake, simply looking with curiosity at the blocky buildings designed by the late Mexican architect Ricardo Legorreta (who also designed the Fort Worth Museum of Science & History).

Take the exit, and south of 114 you'll find the tree-lined Plaza, which houses locations of Fossil Creek Spirits, Hollywood Burger, Pizzeria La Scala and this white-tablecloth Tex-Mex restaurant with a large menu that includes cabrito, "Pasta Tex Mex," puerco en cascabel (pork chops topped with ancho-chile sauce) and more. The restaurant has a nice patio as well.

1301 Solana Blvd., No. 4108, Westlake, 817-490-6115, <http://www.marcosina.com>. Hours: 10 a.m.-9:30 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 10 a.m.-11 p.m. Friday-Saturday.



Mi Cocinita

There's a sign for this one, too, but you have to take a freeway exit you might not ordinarily take and then a residential side street to find this cult-following restaurant, which Virgie Martinez operates out of a converted backyard garage (there's even a small, attractive patio).

You'll find classic enchilada-beans-and-rice plates as well as combo plates with tamales and other dishes, and if it's not too busy, Martinez and whoever's helping her will have a chat with you while you're eating.

For more than 30 years, Martinez has been carrying on a tradition started by her mother, Betty Mendez, but she's slowing down to care for her ailing husband: The restaurant, once open Wednesdays through Fridays, recently changed to just Fridays.

3509 1/2 Bryan Ave, 817-923-0033, twitter.com/micocinitafw or [Mi Cocinita — My Little Kitchen on Facebook](#). Hours: 10:30 a.m.-3 p.m. Fridays only.

Riverfront Cafe

Educational Catering Inc. (ECI) runs this mostly food-court style restaurant at Tarrant County College's downtown Fort Worth campus, but you don't have to be a student to eat there — you just have to know it's there.

There are a variety of food stations — pizza, tacos, DIY waffles, salad bar, grab 'n' go items, etc. — but there is also a grill where you can get made-to-order breakfasts till 10 a.m. and lunches after 11.

There's also a recently added burger menu, including such options as bacon and bleu cheese, "Bird's Eye" (a fried-egg-topped cheeseburger on an egg bun), Fort Worth BBQ, and stuffed jalapeño and cheddar cheese — and all burgers are a modest \$6.99.

Best of all, though, is the seating area with its large-windowed view of north Fort Worth, with the Trinity River in the near distance.

300 Trinity Campus Circle, Fort Worth, 817-515-1103, <http://tcc.ecimanagementgroup.com> Hours: 7 a.m.-2 p.m. Monday-Friday.

Rising Roll Gourmet Cafe

The 777 Main building in downtown Fort Worth is home to Grace, one of the city's most elegant restaurants. Go up an escalator flight and walk by a security guard stand, and you'll find this more downscale but versatile spot, which is part of a chain with locations in Austin and Houston, as well as Florida, Georgia and Kentucky.

The lunch menu features nearly two dozen sandwiches, including turkey & pear with goat cheese, firecracker chicken (which gets its name from its firecracker sauce), and a traditional Cuban. A smaller breakfast menu is also available, as are a variety of baked goods, salads, soups, "gluten-reduced" and vegetarian and vegan options.

There is a dining room, but we prefer to take our food out to the building's large atrium area, where you can get a seat with a view of the intersection of West Seventh and Main Streets and watch the world go by.

777 Main St., No. C-90, Fort Worth, 817-870-3821, <http://risingroll.com>. Hours: 7 a.m.-3 p.m. Monday -Friday; closed Saturday-Sunday



T&P Tavern

I asked a friend and co-worker who often parks near the T&P Building in downtown Fort Worth if he was aware that there was a restaurant in the back of the building. He wasn't — and it's been there for more than five years.

There *is* a sign facing Lancaster Avenue, but it's dwarfed by the historic T&P Building, and you practically have to be looking for the sign to see it as you drive by on this busy part of Lancaster.

The Tavern's 24-tap beer list, augmented by an additional three dozen beers in cans and bottles, has earned it a following among the craft-beer crowd, and there's a good cocktail list as well. And then there's the food menu, which includes such sandwiches as the Albuquerque Turkey (turkey breast with Hatch green chiles), a meatloaf burger, and a triple meat (marinara with smoked salami, bacon, pulled pork and cheese).

221 W. Lancaster Ave., Fort Worth, 817-885-8878, <http://tptavern.com>. Hours: 4 p.m.-2 a.m. Monday-Friday, 2 p.m.-2 a.m. Saturday-Sunday; kitchen closes 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday, 11 p.m. Friday-Saturday.



West Fork Grill

Owned by Christina and Nehme Elbitar of the better-known Chadra Mezza, a Mediterranean restaurant on Park Place near Eighth Avenue, West Fork is a tiny spot tucked into one of the Summit Office Park towers at Summit and Lancaster Avenue.

Lunch options include a gyro sandwich and Greek and feta salads, but you can also get a patty melt, BLT or Philly cheesesteak, or a daily special that is sometimes more directly Chadra Mezza-related.

We stopped by for a late breakfast, when the cafe happened to be out of the blueberries that are a key component of the Monday Blues, a \$4 short stack of blueberry-lemon pancakes — so the staff offered to make strawberry pancakes instead. We were pretty happy with that improvisation — and you get three thick, fluffy pancakes for a relatively small amount of money.

1200 Summit Ave., No.100, Fort Worth, 817-529-2710, <http://www.westforkgrill.com>. Hours: 7:30 a.m.-4 p.m. Monday-Friday.

This report includes material from the Star-Telegram archives.

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Nothing makes the line go faster than a few margaritas from the Patio Bar. On an average Thursday night, Joe T.'s will sell 55 gallons of margaritas, and in a week they'll use 870 pounds of limes.

Steve Wilson - Star-Telegram.com



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