"Austin is the ultimate American city

I visit this town at least once a year, usually more. And I keep coming up with excuses to come back. I **love the food**—and I really **love the people**. You'll see a kid with a nose ring talking to a 70-year-old woman. Every business is run like a mom-and-pop shop. You feel like you belong to the community, whether you're there for the first time or the hundredth. It's dog-friendly, one of the **greenest cities** in America and the **live music capital of the world**. (And you know that my husband, John, and I are huge music fans!) There are a million reasons to love Austin, and I've come up with a half-dozen big ones right here.

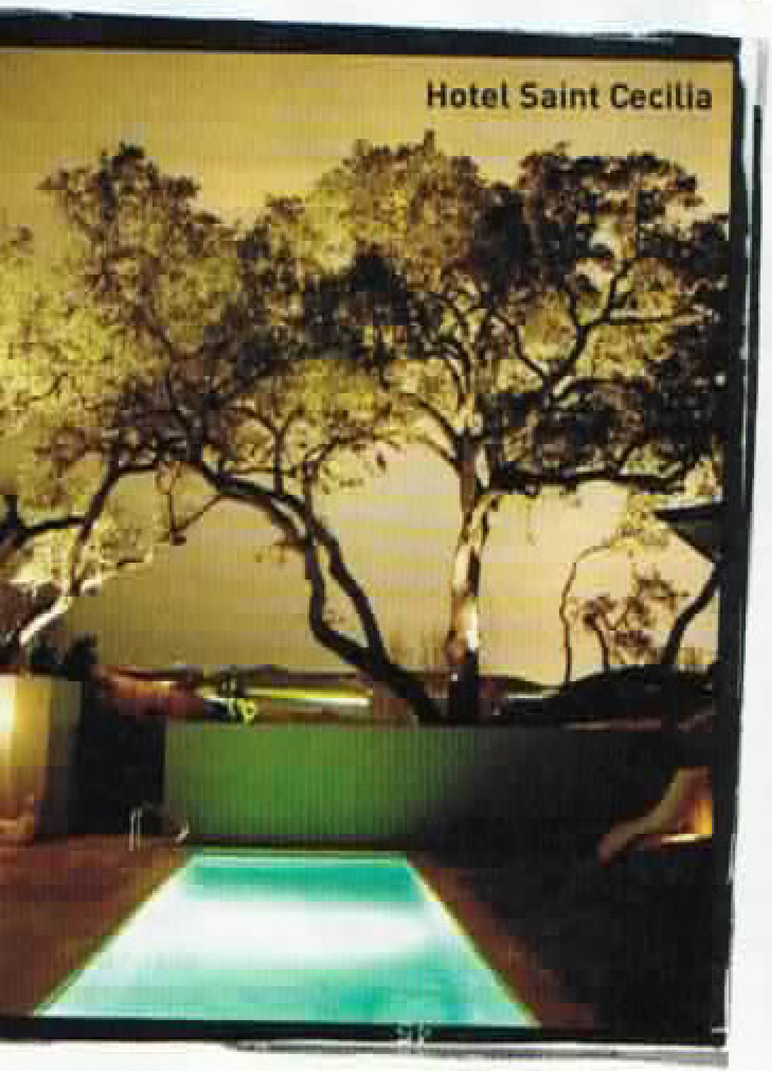
BY RACHAEL RAY

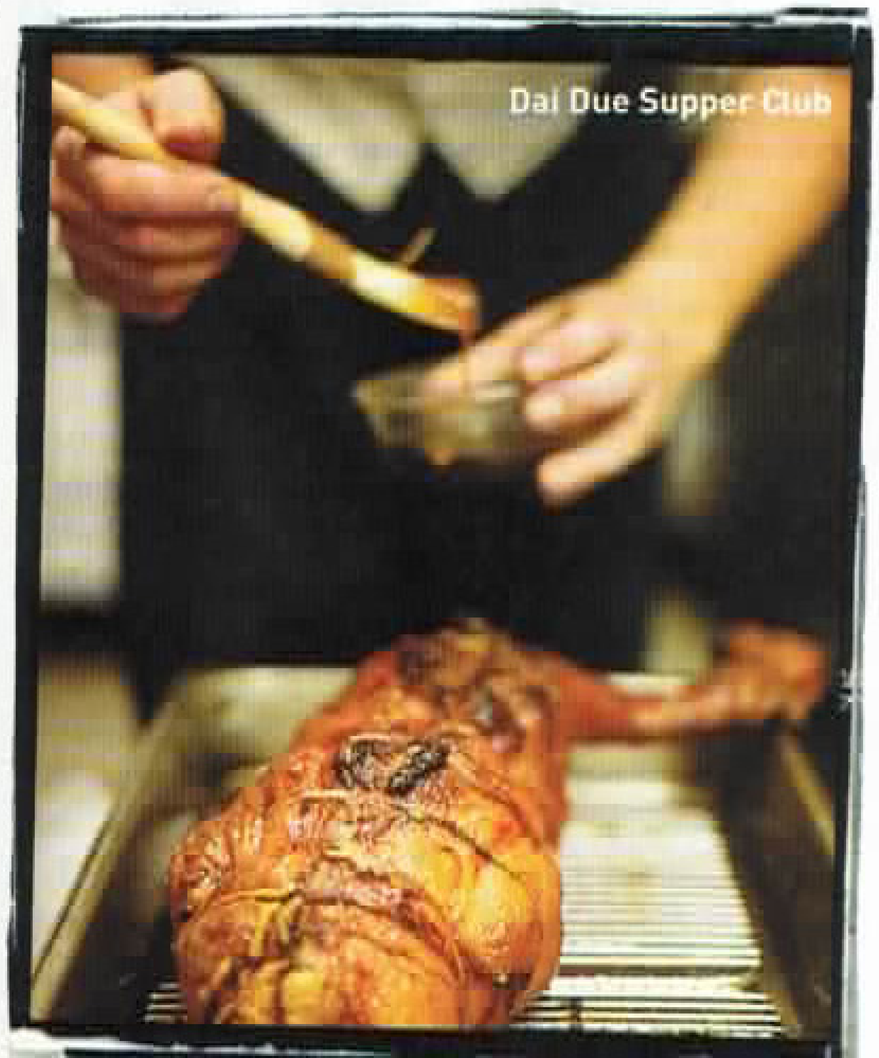
austin

The Hold Steady

Dai Due owners

e best time to be in Austin is during the South by Southwest music festival. Keep flipping to see more pictures! ★

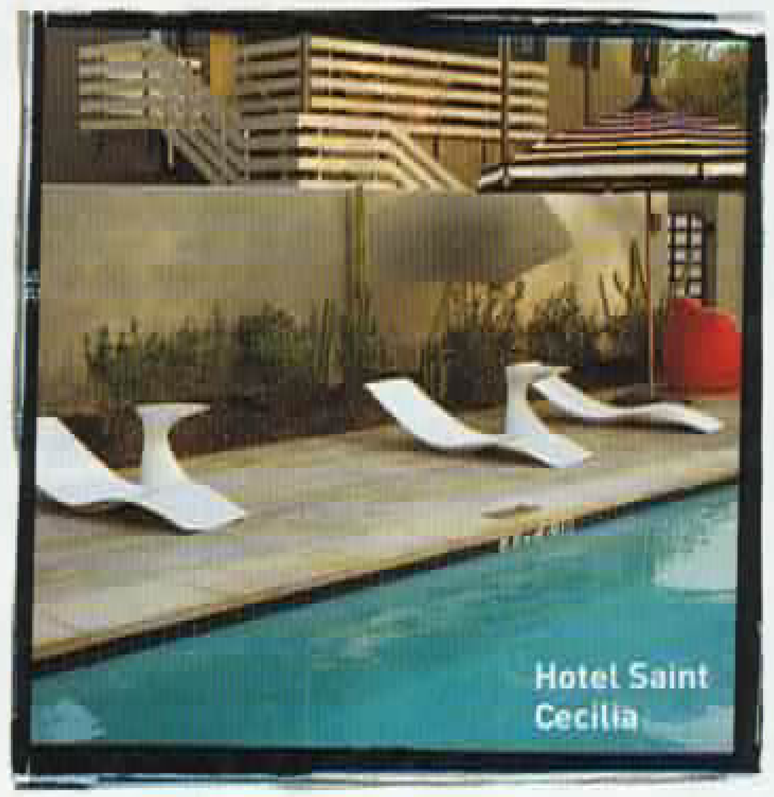

Hotel Saint Cecilia


Dai Due Supper Club

It's home to the best tel experience I've ver had."

I fell in love with the **Hotel San José** *(1316 S. Congress Ave., sanjosehotel.com, 800-574-8897; doubles from $160)* the first time I checked in. I've stayed there a bunch of times since and always look forward to coffee at **Jo's** *(512-444-3800; small coffee $2)*, which is in the parking lot. I'm a fan of the hotel owner, Liz Lambert, so I wanted to try her new place, **Hotel Saint Cecilia** *(112 Academy Drive, hotelstcecilia.com, 512-852-2400; doubles from $300)*. It's pricier, but so worth it. Everything is thought out to the smallest detail. They have a record player in every room. The Bloody Marys come in antique glasses with spicy pickled green beans. If you can't swing a stay at Saint Cecilia, you might be able to eat there. The **Dai Due Supper Club** *(daidueaustin.com; dinner from $55)* hosts a weekly dinner party at different spots, and Saint Cecilia is in its rotation. Check the schedule online.

Hotel San José


Hotel Saint Cecilia

Dai Due Supper Club

★ At the party we had Tex-Mex mac 'n' cheese, which tasted like a giant jalapeño popper. ★

Taco Xpress

's all about Tex-Mex and good times."

Austin, they start eating tacos at breakfast. Do just that at **Taco Xpress** *(2529 S. Lamar Blvd., 2-444-0261; tacos $1.50 for 2, migas taco $2.30)*, where the tacos are made with any combination of g and chorizo, potato, bacon, ham, bean or cheese. I love their migas tacos, eggs scrambled with matoes, onion, jalapeños and corn chips. For dinner, try my favorite Mexican place in town, **Polvo's Mexican Restaurant** *(2004 S. First St., 512-441-5446; entrées from $7)*. It's cheap and cheerful, th Christmas lights and mismatched furniture. The chicken and beef fajita al Gualjillo is amazing—veet and spicy at the same time, packed with sun-dried peppers, grilled onions and poblano chiles. My sband likes the beef cerveza fajitas. And the fish tacos are insane! We ate there twice in two days.

Jalapeño Popper Mac 'n' Cheese

SERVES 4

Enough said, right? Two meat-free, everybody-loves-them classics come together in one dish.

- Salt and pepper
- 1 pound hollow, ridged corkscrew pasta, such as cavatappi
- Extra-virgin olive oil (EVOO)
- 3 jalapeño chiles, seeded and thinly sliced
- 2 serrano chiles, seeded and thinly sliced
- 2 cloves garlic, chopped
- 1½ cups whole milk
- 8 ounces cream cheese
- 2 tablespoons dried minced onion
- 2 cups shredded monterey jack cheese

1. Bring a large pot of water to a boil, salt it, add the pasta and cook until al dente. Drain and return to the pot.
2. In a skillet, heat a drizzle of EVOO over medium heat. Add the jalapeños, serranos and garlic and cook until tender, about 5 minutes. Add to the pasta.
3. Preheat the broiler. In a saucepan, combine the milk, cream cheese and onion over medium-low heat. Cook, stirring, until smooth, 5 minutes; stir into the pasta. Stir in the jack cheese; season with salt and pepper.
4. Transfer the pasta to a baking dish and broil until browned, about 3 minutes.