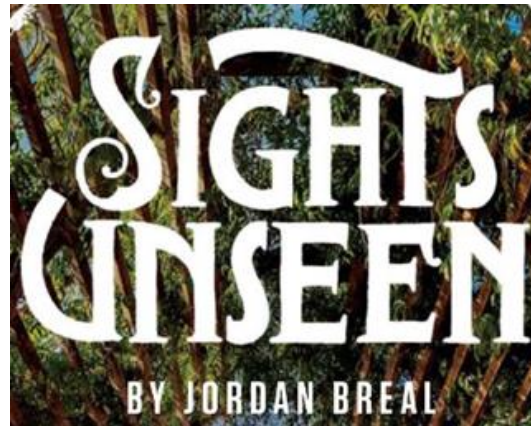


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If you think you have to stick to the big cities to experience the state's best dining, shopping, and culture, then you don't get out enough. From fine art in Saint Jo and fresh farm fare in Kennard to a glimmering hotel in Big Spring and an idyllic garden in Orange, there's a multitude of sophisticated surprises to be found in our smallest towns. **So get going.**

As a professional chronicler of places, it's my job to roam. And on this perpetual road trip of mine, I've noticed a couple of things: For all of the impressive hotels and cutting-edge restaurants and lauded cultural institutions that I run to check out in our state's metropolises, there are just as many intriguing destinations along our far-less-beaten paths. And yet my small-town scouting reports are usually met with polite surprise: *You mean to tell me that Coleman's got one of the best pizzerias in the state and now a trailblazing winery too? There's a French-inspired luncheonette with a meditation labyrinth in deep East Texas? Who knew you could buy stirring contemporary art at a gallery in little Saint Jo?* ¶ So while it's easy to stick to the epicenters and the rote

pleasures of strip-mall conveniences, it is a mistake to dismiss our less populous places as quaint backwaters that modern times have left behind. Sure, there are still plenty of old-school cafes and antiques emporiums (and more than a few desolate downtowns), but our minuscule municipalities are rife with some of the finest shops, restaurants, cocktail bars, boutique hotels, and other road trip-worthy ventures that Texas has to offer. And so, I've assembled this list of my favorite hidden gems, both old and new, that are worth the extra mileage to experience for yourself. ¶ For list-taming purposes, I've focused only on destinations that are in towns with populations of 30,000 or less. (In fact, only 7 of the 54 towns represented here have more than 15,000 residents.) I was specifically looking for places whose proprietors have an unmistakable passion for what they're doing, which manifests itself in exceptional attention to detail, a clear appreciation for good design, and/or a commitment to doing things well. I'm also drawn to places that, no matter how obscure or well-known they may be, are worlds unto their own, and spending time in them transports you, for a little while at least, into an entirely different orbit.

E A T S *a n d* T R E A T S

Sweet, hearty, fresh,
and from scratch.



THE CAPRI

Marfa

(POP. 1,733)

A Hollywood set designer looked to the surrounding landscape to create the cement-and-cacti cool of this remote, jewel-toned lounge and restaurant in West Texas's hyper-stylish outpost. As did the chef: he's known for tasting every native plant he comes across. That's why you're drinking prickly pear wine with your shrimp chicharrones and contemplating a permanent move to the desert.