

First taste: New hospitality group brings Texas comfort food to Memorial City

By [Eric Sandler](#)

5.8.16 | 8:00 am



Cherry Pie Hospitality has revealed its vision for the second of three former Ogden Hospitality Group spaces it has taken over. Building on last week's announcement [that the group](#), which is led by former F.E.E.D. TX partner Lee Ellis, will open a [brick and mortar version](#) of Pi Pizza Truck in the former Funky Chicken space on Heights Boulevard, comes the news that Memorial City-area gastropub Pour Society is now known as [State Fare](#).

Although plans for renovations to the space are still awaiting final approval from the landlord, Ellis and Cherry Pie culinary director Jim Mills have already installed a new menu. In place of Pour Society's [Southern-inspired pub grub](#), State Fare serves a Texas-based comfort fare: everything from dips like queso and guacamole to BBQ shrimp and chili. Almost everything — from the potato and tortilla chips to the three sauces served with the smoked, fried chicken wings — is made from scratch in the restaurant's massive kitchen.

“The food that was here was taking itself pretty seriously. We wanted food that didn't take itself too seriously,” Mills tells CultureMap. “Our first guiding thought was the food we love to eat or the food we grew up eating. It has sort of a context of this area, more or less.”

Nowhere is this approach clearer than with Mills's chili, which is based on a recipe the chef first developed in the '80s. Unlike some versions, Mills says you can count the number of ingredients on two hands.

“Texas chili, Frank X. Tolbert said it best, ‘ain't no tomatoes. Ain't no beans.’ Our chili has neither,” Mills explains. It does have two kinds of chile peppers that give it a slow burning heat.

Physical changes will be done after business hours and on Sundays when the restaurant is closed. Tentatively, Ellis says his plans include painting the ceiling white, adding a small stage for singer-songwriter acts, replacing the flooring, upgrading most of the furniture, installing a roll-up awning over the patio, and more. Perhaps the most dramatic change will be a new steel and corrugated glass partition between the sections of the main dining room, as well as between the booths.

To answer the most obvious question, State Fare's menu doesn't bear much resemblance to what Ellis served at [Liberty Kitchen](#). First of all, the new restaurant serves far less seafood — it doesn't have any raw selections, for

example. In addition, a full section of shareable items, including a variety of dips (the pickle dip is an Ellis family recipe), has been created to cater to the happy hour crowd that prefers to have a drink and a snack before tackling traffic on the Katy Freeway. Those drinks have also received an upgrade courtesy of Laurie Harvey (ex-Triniti), including a spicy house margarita and other twists on classic cocktails.

At lunch, diners will mostly choose from the four salads or seven sandwiches. Of those, four are burgers, including the signature Hicksburger. Named after a regular, the pastrami, grilled onion, gruyere cheese, and chicken fried french fry-topped burger seems poised to become Houston's latest Instagram sensation. More conventional burgers, a chicken sandwich, and a fish sandwich round out the selection.

Dinner entrees include a couple of steaks, a few seafood options (salmon, fried shrimp, catfish), a massive, root beer-glazed double pork chop, and a roasted, butterflied airline chicken breast that Ellis says he's particularly proud of. All dishes can be matched up with a la carte sides likes creamed corn, roasted asparagus, and mashed potatoes that are inspired by celebrity chef Joël Robuchon's famously creamy spuds.

Regardless of the dish, portions are Pappas-style generous. Heaping bowls of mac and cheese, topped with ingredients like short rib or shrimp, crab, and andouille sausage, work either as stand-alone meals or sides that can be split among groups of four to six.

“I wanted this menu to be representative of the food ways of Texas and this area. Not trying to be rigorously authentic and historical, but in spirit and geared for modern tastes,” Mills says. “Food that wasn't trying to be all that, that didn't take itself too seriously. Good quality, good tastes, big flavors, ample portions, lots of choices.”

Of course, Cherry Pie has other projects in the works. Ellis says he's still waiting for final approvals on changes to the former Bradley's Fine Diner space and hints other announcements will follow. For now, diners can check out State Fare and imagine what the future will hold.