

# LOCAL

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# OPEN

By Carlos Brandon

## RAMEN TATSU-YA

CUISINE: JAPANESE/RAMEN

1722 California St., Houston, TX 77006  
346.226.3253 | www.ramen-tatsuya.com

Ramen feels like it's been around forever, but is only recently enjoying a cultural moment thanks to a global appetite for food trends. This Japanese soul food has been around since the early 20th century in Japan, and for decades in cities like San Francisco and New York. But only as of the last five to seven years has the rest of the world begun to understand this dish beyond the microwavable noodle packets we all enjoyed so much in college.



Tsukemen

## HELEN IN THE HEIGHTS

CUISINE: GREEK

1111 Studewood St., Suite B, Houston, TX 77008 | 832.582.7146 | www.helengreek.com

News flash, Houston is diverse. I know, right, who knew? There are neighborhoods where people will speak their native language to you, fully expecting you to speak it back. The best ethnic restaurants have little, if any, English on the menus. Still, every now and then the city still finds a way to surprise me with an authentic cuisine experience that comes seemingly out of nowhere. Helen in the Heights is a Greek restaurant, and they mean it.

Greek food is extremely popular in the US. Everyone loves Gyros, right? In fact, like Mexican and Italian, Greek has joined the ranks of cuisines so highly Americanized that it has joined the greater melting pot of what we consider "American-ish" food. As a result, much like Mexican and Italian, finding an authentic Greek restaurant is a rare treat. Helen is that rare Greek find in Houston. My wife and I had the pleasure of tasting some of Helen's newest

menu items, starting with the amazingly simple, equally impressive, marinated feta. Marinated in olive oil, served with sliced pepperoncini and basil, the creamy feta is eaten on small slices of pita. Give me that and a bottle of wine any day. Next, we tried the fried squash blossoms, stuffed with manouri cheese, served over a tangy yogurt sauce and drizzled with local honey. Like a majority of Greek dishes, the squash blossoms are somehow savory and

Co-owners and chefs, Tatsu Aikawa and Takuya Matsumoto, opened the first Ramen Tatsu-Ya in Austin in 2012, as perhaps the first ramen brick-and-mortar in Texas. After opening a second location in ATX, the duo decided it was time to bring their talents to H-Town. I met with Tatsu's brother, Shion Aikawa, at the recently opened Montrose location to discuss the history and regionality of ramen, and the recipes that his team has collaborated on to create the Tatsu-Ya menu.

Ramen Tatsu-Ya strives to maintain regional authenticity in all of their bowls. Their commitment to quality is unsurpassed, not even willing to prepare to-go orders so as to not compromise the integrity of their noodles. I tasted both a Tonkotsu variation cooked with pork broth, savory and deeply flavorful, as well as a Shoyu chicken broth

ramen called the Ol' Skool. For those with a sensitive stomach, the Ol' Skool is a lighter broth, still richly flavored and filling. The knockout punch however, is the house special, Tsukemen. This dish is served in two parts, one bowl of dry cooked noodles with a slab of brisket on top, and one bowl of condensed pork broth meant to dip your noodles into. The aromatic sauce has an extremely complex flavor profile, and the brisket is slow-cooked and dripping with fat. Did I mention this isn't an ideal meal for dieters?



Broken Pasta &amp; Brown Butter

filling while at once light and airy. An important quality when dealing with multiple courses.

Our favorite, of course, was the Avgolemono soup. This traditional chicken broth soup is true Mediterranean comfort food. Mom's chicken soup gets a zesty Greek twist. A lemon egg sauce, made by whipping lemon juice and egg whites into a custard, is introduced to chicken, broth, Greek greens and winter squash for a medley of flavors that taste like what I imagine a hot fire on a cold Athens night feels like.

## CIRO'S

CUISINE: ITALIAN

9755 Katy Freeway, Houston, TX 77024  
713.467.9336 | www.ciros.com

The original Ciro's opened off of Campbell Road, a mile and a half east of its current home, in 1986. For over 30 years, this family-operated Italian kitchen has been a neighborhood icon. The current (and third) location, off of Bunker Hill Road, sits just two car lengths south of its previous self. Ciro's now rests in the shadow of the, soon to open, Hotel ZaZa Memorial City. The hotel promises to deliver a steady stream of new clientele to an already well-established Houston hangout.



Meatball Sliders

The opening of owner Ciro Lampasas' third iteration of his self-named ristorante, came days before Hurricane Harvey shut down every eatery in Houston. Ciro and his staff, however, managed to stay open all week, serving pizzas to brave customers hours before the worst of the storm. Days later they reopened, one of the first Houston restaurants to do so. They managed to serve a limited menu to customers, many of whom were living out of suitcases and hotel rooms.

The Ciro's menu is a mixed bag of family classics, old favorites and new additions. One of those new additions is the meatball sliders, a modern take on the classic meatball sub. The sliders are a standout, made with hand-rolled meatballs resting on a bed of finely chopped artichokes, Kalamata olives and mozzarella. As

an entrée, I recommend the "BB." Like so many of Ciro's dishes, the BB is named after the family member that either created or inspired it. In this case, cousin BB. This is a simple Sicilian seafood dish: sautéed shrimp, calamari, tomatoes and olives, tossed in olive oil and finished with basil and pepper. To paraphrase Ciro himself, this is the kind of late night Sicilian meal you have in your kitchen with a glass of white wine after a long day. What's not to love?

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## JULY

### MANCHESTER CITY VS. MANCHESTER UNITED AT NRG STADIUM

**CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION** – The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, breaks ground on the **Nancy and Rich Kinder Building**, the second of four new buildings that will make up the museum’s Susan and Faye S. Sarofim Campus. To date, more than 150 individuals, couples, corporations and foundations have pledged \$390 million toward the museum’s campus expansion and transformation.

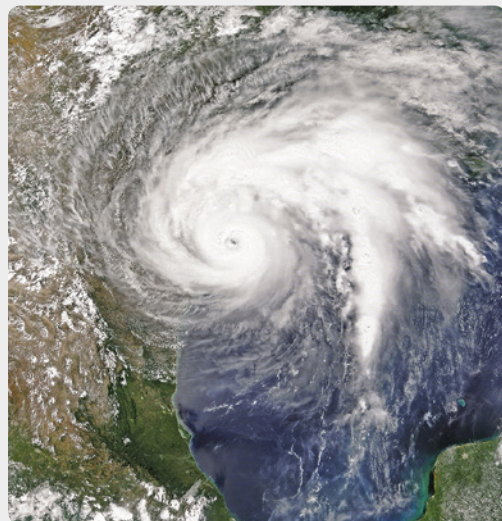


### GOLD CUP– SOCCER GAMES– COSTA RICA VS. CANADA AND HONDURAS VS. FRENCH GUIANA AT BBVA COMPASS STADIUM

## AUGUST

### HOUSTON RESTAURANT WEEKS– TO RAISE MUCH-NEEDED FUNDS FOR THE HOUSTON FOOD BANK

## Hurricane Harvey



**DISASTER STRIKES** – Perhaps the biggest story of the year is **Hurricane Harvey**, a multi-day rain event that begins August 26, eventually dropping in excess of 50 inches of rain throughout the Houston/East Texas/Louisiana area. Harvey is the costliest hurricane/natural disaster on record, inflicting nearly \$200 billion in damage – including the wholesale destruction of entire neighborhoods in West Houston that were thought impervious to flooding. At the flooding’s peak, it is estimated that 25–30 percent of Harris County was submerged. At the end of 2017, approximately 70,000 now-homeless Houston residents are still living in area hotels and motels.

## SEPTEMBER

**TILMAN SCORES** – In September, billionaire **Tilman Fertitta** makes it known he’s offering \$2.2 billion to buy the Houston Rockets from Les Alexander (who bought the team for a measly \$85 million in 1993). It’s a record sale price for an NBA franchise. The deal is finalized in October.



## OCTOBER

## WORLD SERIES CHAMPIONS

**ON TOP OF THE WORLD** – In a series spanning the full seven games from October 24 to November 1, our hometown Houston Astros prevail over the Los Angeles Dodgers in the 113th MLB World Series. It’s **the Astros’ first World Series victory** in franchise history, and also the first team from Texas to do so. Outfielder George Springer is named as the series MVP, and Carlos Correa proposes to former Miss Texas Daniella Rodriguez on live TV during the post-game show coverage. Days later, Astros pitcher Justin Verlander jets off to Italy to marry supermodel Kate Upton.



**HOTEL ALESSANDRA, DOWNTOWN’S NEWEST LUXURY HOSTELRY, OPENS AT GREEN STREET. LUCIENNE RESTAURANT GETS RAVE REVIEWS.**

## NOVEMBER

**WELCOME NEIGHBORS** – **Heights Mercantile**, an innovative retail development that includes restored bungalows as well as new construction, opens on Heights Boulevard. Merchants include Melange Creperie, Cloud 10 Creamery, Local Foods, Chubbies, Lululemon, Warby Parker and a branch of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston.



**HOUSTON DYNAMO ADVANCE TO THE FIRST LEG OF THE WESTERN CONFERENCE FINALS AGAINST THE SEATTLE SOUNDERS ON NOVEMBER 21. THE DYNAMO ARE UNBEATEN IN THEIR LAST NINE GAMES – SOMETHING THEY HAVE NOT DONE SINCE 2011.**

## ALTUVE WINS AL MVP 2017

**NOVEMBER 16** – Astros second baseman **Jose Altuve** wins the 2017 American League Most Valuable Player Award. Altuve picked up 27 of a possible 30 first-place votes.

**CHRIS PAUL DOMINATES** – The **Houston Rockets** had the highest-scoring first quarter in franchise history with 45 points, 41 of which were generated by Paul and James Harden.

## DECEMBER

**AFTER SO MUCH ANTICIPATION, EMMALINE OPENS IN THE OLD TEALA’S SPACE ON WEST DALLAS WITH CHEF DIMITRI VOUTSINAS IN THE KITCHEN.**

**NEW KID ON THE BLOCK** – **Hotel ZaZa opens at Memorial City**, marking the second Houston location of the boutique hotel property. In addition to a decadent spa and signature restaurant, the ZaZa also features 133 luxury apartment units on seven floors atop the hotel.

