Backstage pass

Just what does it take to make a holiday show sparkle?

SETTING A PACE

With the men and women of the Chevron Houston Marathon

PRETTY DOGGONE GOOD

Mother Dog Studios leads a determined pack of urban art pioneers

DATE NIGHT DOWNTOWN | PAINT THE TOWN THREE VERY DIFFERENT WAYS
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Setting a pace
The Chevron Houston Marathon is one of the city’s biggest events. Meet three runners who take their training very personally.  
BY DEBORAH MANN LAKE

Doggone good
Free-spirited and ever-changing, MotherDog Studios’ founders have led a determined pack of urban art pioneers for years. But will downtown’s changing demographic mean the end of their eclectic lifestyle?  
BY NANCY WOZNY
Looking ahead.

As 2008 draws to a close, it’s only natural to reflect on the year past. But here at Downtown Magazine, we have a lot to think about when it comes to the future.

This has been a pivotal year for both the Downtown District and Houston Downtown Alliance. The opening of Discovery Green, and Houston Pavilions and the continued growth of residential construction lead us to believe that a long-awaited cultural shift is finally taking place. We’re seeing downtown transform before our very eyes into the true urban neighborhood we have been working on for years. It’s the future we’ve always imagined for downtown, complete with the parks, retail and housing that are necessary for livability.

All the elements seem to be in place, and it’s up to us now to start connecting the dots. Our two organizations have to keep the momentum going by making it easier for Houstonians to be part of downtown. The Houston Downtown Alliance will continue to create social opportunities and networking programs through Emerging Leaders and Houston Young People for the Arts. At the same time, the Downtown District will focus its attention, as always, on the nuts and bolts of managing downtown (trash pickup, landscaping and maintenance for example) and branding downtown as a distinctive destination.

This magazine is also part of the change. We hope you’re finding that it’s a publication you can trust when it comes to looking at downtown realistically and honestly. Keep your comments and suggestions coming in 2009 – we really do read them. In the meantime we wish you and yours the happiest of holiday seasons and hope to see you shopping and mingling on the streets of downtown!

Bob Eury
DOWNTOWN DISTRICT

Andrew Huang
HOUSTON DOWNTOWN ALLIANCE

On the cover:
As photographer Katya Horner styled this month’s cover shoot with Mother-DogStudios’ John Runnels and Charlie Jean Sartwelle she ruminated on the twist – an artist taking a picture of artists in front of their art. While we agree that it’s a pretty cool concept, we just love their take on American Gothic – Houston style. Read more about Runnels, Sartwelle and their unique take on life on page 16.
MAKE A DATE WITH Downtown

Whether it’s a group of friends, a family outing or something more flirt-worthy, you can’t help but catch a spark in this always-electric scene.

by Allison Bagley

Luxe is for lovers

Avoid airport security lines and sticker shock at the pump by escaping right here at home. The historic Hotel Icon boasts a three-story penthouse suite complete with unmatched terrace views of the downtown skyline. For the ultimate in room service, dial the hotel’s Voice Restaurant and Lounge, where the focus is on seasonal ingredients and eclectic pairings. As part of a lavish, customized room package, Chef Michael Kramer will visit the suite to introduce himself and inquire about meal preferences.

⚠️ Seal the deal: Begin your evening by hobnobbing with Houston Ballet dancers at the Wortham Theater Center. President’s Circle supporters get special perks, sometimes having the chance to catch a private rehearsal or learning how the dancers manage to “fly” during a production.

Fresh food...alfresco

The Four Seasons Hotel Houston has partnered with their neighbor, Discovery Green, to offer a hands-on dining experience. Your ultimate foodie evening kicks off at Quattro restaurant with Executive Chef Andrea Ossola. While the oven is pre-heating, he leads the group to the Thursday farmer’s market at Discovery Green where diners choose their own locally-grown, organic ingredients for the meal’s salads and sides. Back in the kitchen, they lend a hand with all the cooking before savoring their handiwork at the grand Chef’s Table in a private dining room or in the kitchen itself.

⚠️ Seal the deal: Work off dessert by skating on The Ice at Discovery Green. Beginning Thanksgiving Day and running through Martin Luther King Day, the model boat basin on Kinder Lake will be frozen over to create Houston’s own version of a winter wonderland. Skates are included in the $10 fee and don’t forget to order some organic hot chocolate or apple caramel cider while you’re there.

Underground edge

If off-the-beaten path is on your agenda, spend a night in some undiscovered dives. Grab some dinner and live music at the delightfully dark Red Cat Jazz Café, then take the party to Houston’s oldest bar, La Carafe on Market Square. At the hidden Notsuoh on Main – that’s Houston spelled backward – people watching is half the entertainment. Or head next door to Dean’s Credit Clothing, where hipsters congregate to sip cocktails while shopping racks of vintage clothing. The former 1930s clothing store has the original neon signage and storefront windows.

⚠️ Seal the deal: If it’s a Saturday night, explore downtown ’til the sun comes up, then head to the Houston Pavilions for a Sunday Gospel Brunch at the House of Blues. Let the spirit move you – there’s a heavenly buffet of soul food, headlined by real-deal gospel singers. The weekly event begins in early 2009.

Women’s clothes by stylist Blaire Pavlik at Hemline in Rice Village, 2505 Amherst. Men’s clothes by LnA and Subscript. Makeup: Lee Jaramillo and assistant Merima Sadic.
HOUSTON THEATER DISTRICT STAGES
TWINKLE THROUGH THE HOLIDAYS

BY HEATHER PRAY

THE STARS

Broadway has a pinup teen heartthrob among its ranks with guitar prodigy Kyle Riabko. Riabko takes his Broadway chops to the road as Melchior when Cadillac Broadway Across America-Houston opens Spring Awakening at the Hobby Center on January 6. Before acting, he spent three years performing around the world opening for John Mayer, Buddy Guy and Maroon 5. Don’t miss this fusion of rock ‘n’ roll, raw emotion and powerful lyrics with music by Grammy- and Tony-Award winning singer/songwriter/composer/blast from the past, Duncan Sheik.

Check out Kyle’s album The Parkside Sessions on iTunes for a warm up of two songs from the national tour. Still wooing them on Broadway as sorority sister Serena, Houston native Tracy Jai Edwards comes back to her hometown when TUTS brings Legally Blonde: The Musical to the Hobby Center February 10 through February 22. Houston Grand Opera Music Director and Conductor Patrick Summers performed double duty this past fall when the New York City Metropolitan Opera’s conductor Mikko Franck fell ill prior to the opening of Richard Strauss’ Salome.

For more information on the Houston Theater District and how you can get your tickets to see the arts, the stage and the stars visit houstontheaterdistrict.org. See you at the shows!

THE ARTS

Alley Theatre goes offstage with its new Alley Theatre University of Houston Master of Fine Arts Professional Training program allowing grad students to work with and learn from the Alley’s professional actors, directors and designers. Houston Grand Opera Studio (HGO’s young artist development program) mentor-opera Jamie Barton will make her Carnegie Hall Debut on January 20 and will be joined by pianist and HGO Studio Music Director Kathy Kelly.

DuCamera of Houston announces a new podcast partnership with 88.7 KUHF, Houston Public Radio. These podcasts spotlight recordings of live performances from DuCamera concerts from both the current season and the archives and feature premier artists from Houston and around the world performing a wide-range of chamber music. Subscribe for free at dacamera.com.

THE NUTCRACKER

The secrets to what makes your favorite holiday shows sparkle

Although they may be holiday standards, they are still the shows that sell out every single season. We thought we’d share the backstage secrets that help make the Houston Theater District sparkle.

ALLEY THEATRE

CHARLES DICKENS’ A CHRISTMAS CAROL – A GHOST STORY OF CHRISTMAS

NOV 21 - DEC 28

During the show’s run, the Alley uses 50 pounds of Mylar confetti, seven pounds of glitter, 660 pounds of snow, 25 grosses of crystal, 500 pounds of C02 and 240 pounds (per week) of dry ice. There are also 423 props, 352 light cues (one every 15 seconds of running time), 105 costumes in the show, 22 adult actors, 26 kids and 18 crew members.

TEATRE UNDER THE STARS

WHITE CHRISTMAS

DEC 4 - DEC 21

Irving Berlin was lounging poolside at the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa in 1940 when he wrote the hit song White Christmas. It went on to receive an Academy Award for Best Original Song and became the most selling single of all time, according to the 2008 Guinness Book of World Records.

HOUSTON BALLET

THE NUTCRACKER

NOV 28 - DEC 28

Over a million Houstonians have attended Houston Ballet’s The Nutcracker since the debut of this production in 1987. Two hundred pounds of “snow” falls during the snow scene of each performance. With 32 performances, that is a total of 6,400 pounds of fake snow. The Nutcracker was first performed on December 18, 1892 at Maryinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, Russia and Houston Ballet has performed it faithfully every year since 1972. More than 60 Houston-area children participate in the production and each show features 17 youngsters. There are 8,000 lights on the Wortham Theater Center’s 25-foot-tall Christmas tree.

Backstage pass

In her final reverence, a ballerina hangs up her pointe shoes

BY HEATHER PRAY AND MELISSA CARROLL

You’ve danced The Nutcracker for over 17 years. What’s your best memory? Your worst?

With so many years of The Nutcracker behind me it’s really difficult to pinpoint just one good memory and one bad one. I guess one of my favorite memories would be when I first performed the Lead Flower. I really love that role; it has remained one of my favorites. As for my worst memory, that would have to be dancing so many shows of snowflakes for so many years. It’s harder on your body than it looks.

What’s your favorite role that you’ve ever danced?

That is almost impossible to answer. I have been really fortunate in my career to have had the opportunity to dance such a variety of roles, both classical and contemporary. So I can’t choose just one, but here are a few: Carabosse from Sleeping Beauty, Suzuki from Madame Butterfly, Flora from Dracula, Jiri Kylan’s Petit Mort, the Rooster Girl in Christopher Bruce’s Rooster, Black is the Color in his Sargeant Earl’s Dream and the Mother in his Hush.

What will you miss most about dancing?

For me there is nothing better than being given a character to create. I love being challenged to find something in myself that relates to the person I am trying to portray. To walk out onto the stage and truly get lost in who I have to become, well, to me it just doesn’t get much better than that.

What will you miss least about dancing?

That’s easy, pointe shoes!

What do you plan to do after you retire from the stage?

I will be continuing my college career. Houston Ballet has a wonderful program set up for dancers interested in getting a few college credits under their belts while still dancing. I took advantage of the program for a few years and have since been taking online courses. I am interested in a degree in business, so, uh, here I come.

You can catch Tyann’s final performances in this season’s production of Houston Ballet’s The Nutcracker at Wortham Theater Center November 28 through December 28. For more information, visit www.houstontheaterdistrict.org.

In her final reverence, a ballerina hangs up her pointe shoes

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GET ON THE BUS

You’ve clicked through your options and now the bus – the steady, decidedly unglamorous public chariot – appears to be a viable alternative. Welcome to the club. More downtowners than ever are riding the bus to work.

BY PETE RADOWICK

What’s a commuter to do? Your monthly Shell statement nearly rivals the mortgage in the stack of bills. Bumper-to-bumper traffic – once rationalized as being reflective, quiet time – is no longer blissful. And that check engine light doesn’t really mean anything, does it?

Yes, somewhere along the road the romance with our vehicles has withered. It’s about as fresh as pumpkins in December.

Public transportation is a mystery to most Houstonians. Many left the bus behind in their high school days. Now we’re willing to get reacquainted.

A friend of mine, an otherwise savvy 52-year-old teacher who drives 10 minutes to her school, asked me, “How does that work, riding the bus?”

Have we all forgotten? Yes, some of the technology has withered. It’s about as fresh as pumpkins in December.

Many left the bus behind in their high school days. Now we’re willing to get reacquainted.

In 2001 when Tropical Storm Allison wreaked havoc on downtown, we were asked, “How does that work, riding the bus?”

Have we all forgotten? Yes, some of the technology has withered. It’s about as fresh as pumpkins in December.

Public transportation is a mystery to most Houstonians. Many left the bus behind in their high school days. Now we’re willing to get reacquainted.

My experience aboard the big coach stems from 2001 when Tropical Storm Allison wreaked havoc on downtown parking. A coworker suggested I try riding the bus, saying, “Once you do, you’ll never go back to your car.”

Amen. I’ve let Metro take me to work ever since.

If you’re charting a new course to downtown, you have two basic options: Park- and -ride service and local service. Each has its virtues.

The park- and -ride option gives riders a feeling of floating above the fray. Park- and -ride buses employ the HOV lanes, making it hard for riders to conceal any smugness when breezing past the stop- and -go crowd on the main lanes. Aboard these tall buses, park- and -riders sit high in the saddle with a full view of surrounding comings and goings.

Another plus for the park- and -ride bus is the comfort factor. The cloth seats are cushy and fairly roomy and the bus handles most bumps in the road with aplomb. If you like to read, work crosswords, do homework or catch a nap, the park- and -ride is almost as comfy as your favorite recliner.

On the downside, park-and-rides are a victim of their own popularity. The cloth seats are cushy and fairly roomy and the bus handles most bumps in the road with aplomb. If you like to read, work crosswords, do homework or catch a nap, the park- and -ride is almost as comfy as your favorite recliner.

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The local bus drops me off at the end of my street.

For a change of pace consider taking the bus to work in the morning and riding the bike home at night. My 15-mile jaunt through Memorial is something I look forward to once a week. If traffic is slow, you just might beat the bus home!

On that note, this would be a good time to remind readers that bus travel is a series of trade-offs. Sometimes it’s a faster option than driving your own vehicle, other times it’s not. Sometimes it’s convenient, sometimes it’s not.

Everyone’s calculus will be different. Only you can determine which trades you can live with and which ones are deal-breakers. For me, it’s liberating to eliminate the stress of rush-hour driving. Fewer fill-ups are nice, too.

How about you? Is this the time to explore new transportation options?

If so, it might be time for you to get back on the bus.
CEO Doug Erwin uses a Fred Flintstone philosophy to inspire his IT powerhouse

BY BARBARA HENSCHAW

His business card says he’s chairman and CEO of The Planet. It’s a lofty title, but if anyone can pull it off with aplomb and a bit of humor, it’s Doug Erwin.

But don’t let the pleasant demeanor fool you. This is a man who knows what he wants and where he’s going. He hits the ground running every morning to keep The Planet focused on its core values of customer service, integrity, trust, passion and growth.

He calls it the Fred Flintstone philosophy: In order to propel his car, Fred had to use his feet and just keep running. It’s a philosophy that’s shared throughout the company.

“I wake up in the morning and go with a ‘Yabba Dabba Doo’, ” says Clayton Spivey, development manager for The Planet’s managed-hosting division. “It’s the people. It’s the atmosphere,” Spivey says. “We’re able to express ourselves here. If you find something that can be done better, everybody listens and you can make things happen.”

The Planet moved from the Greenspoint area to its downtown location on the former Albert Thomas Convention Center site last winter. Its big planet logo can be seen on the side of the building, and its offices have views of the bayou and the skyline. Inside there is a lot of glass and metal, including large glass garage doors that can be opened onto outdoor patios, where meetings take place, or where Erwin fires up the grill and puts a few steaks on for special occasions. The high ceilings, exposed pipe and floating noise-reduction panels give the various levels an open feel. Amid the concrete floor runs a “bayou” of carpet, which emulates the rolling waterway just outside The Planet’s door.

Rooms throughout the building have names such as The Bayou, The Hill, Vertigo, The Fish Tank and The Attic. In each of them is a mural painted with that theme by artist Theresa Burgess. There are plans to expand on the mural artwork throughout the building.

Artwork isn’t the only thing expanding. Expanding the business into other cities and growing the company are always on Erwin’s mind. He says growth is best and easiest when things are going well. And since things seem to be going well, there’s no doubt Erwin will be looking to take the next step. Given the right climate on Wall Street, The Planet may even go public next year, he says.

“If the market were to behave, we would think about third or fourth quarter next year,” he says.

Erwin welcomes those ideas from all levels of the company.

“They want to feel like they’re part of something,” Erwin says. And, apparently they do.

“It’s the people. It’s the atmosphere,” Spivey says. “We’re able to express ourselves here. If you find something that can be done better, everybody listens and you can make things happen.”

The Planet hosted its first holiday raffle last year to benefit Make-A-Wish. Employees walked treadmills in the contact center. “I’ve met so many outstanding people here that I’ve learned a lot from — not only in this department but across the company. It’s a young industry ... and The Planet has industry-leading ideas.”

RULING THE PLANET

Houston-based EV1Servers. In 2006 GI Partners, an equity capital firm, purchased two companies that happened to be rivals: Dallas-based The Planet and Houston-based EV1Servers. The Planet was ranked fourth, and EV1Servers was seventh in the dedicated server hosting providers industry.

The newly merged company was intended to be based in Dallas. That is until GI Partners brought in Doug Erwin to take the reins. He has lived in Houston for the past 15 years, and he told GI Partners he wasn’t moving.

“Texas is an incredible state to do business in,” he says. “I love that Houston is pro-business. It really is a place where you can grow a business.”

But the business aspect wasn’t the only allure that Houston holds. Erwin’s need to give back to the community is evident in both his personal and professional life. Some of the agencies that receive his attention include Yes Prep Public Schools, Target Hunger Food Bank, Kinkaid School and Make-A-Wish. At work Erwin opens up The Planet’s meeting rooms to those agencies in which his employees are involved, and the company recently focused its fund-raising on the American Heart Association.

One of the activities includes having employees walk on the treadmills in the various offices in Houston and D.Dallas. For every mile employees walked on the treadmill, the company donated $1 to the charity. Combined with a dunk tank, Wii contests, raffles and other activities, Erwin says he expects that grand total for the charity will be more than $50,000.

“I find Houston and the people to be an unbelievable charity-focused, ‘how-can-I-help’ city,” he says.

The word people comes into play often in Erwin’s conversation. He talks about the people of Houston, how important his customers are and how most endearing refers to the employees at The Planet as “my people.”

“When you amass a group of talented people who are educated on where we’re going and have a desire to go there with you, you can do great things,” he says.

It seems that the people who work there are on the same page.

“I enjoy the people,” says Chris Valderrama, support supervisor in the contact center. “I’ve met so many outstanding people here that I’ve learned a lot from — not only in this department but across the company. It’s a young industry ... and The Planet has industry-leading ideas.”

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Erwin is a man who knows what he wants and how to get there. He knows that by providing a place where employees feel like they’re a part of something special, where the physical and political environments are nurturing, and where they know they’ll be compensated for their hard work, he will realize the goal of becoming the No. 1 place for one-stop shopping for small- to medium-size businesses.

“IT’S THE PEOPLE. IT’S THE ATMOSPHERE,” SPIVEY SAYS. “WE’RE ABLE TO EXPRESS OURSELVES HERE. IF YOU FIND SOMETHING THAT CAN BE DONE BETTER, EVERYBODY LISTENS AND YOU CAN MAKE THINGS HAPPEN.”

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**Gift Exchange**

From Merimekko to fly fishing, downtown is a great shopping destination.

**For Him**

- **Mini-Rolling Duffle 2** by Club Golf
- **Garlic & Herb Roaster** by Martha Stewart Collection
- **Set of 16 Orbital Spice Racks**
- **House of Blues Amazin’ Combread**
- **Starbucks Gift Card**
- **Hug-a-bug**
- **Nana’s Spicy Cornbread**
- **Blue Moon Seasoning**

**For Her**

- **Tory Burch**
- **The Harlequin Globetrotters**
- **UGG Australia Deluxe Gift Set**
- **Skulls Hotsauce**
- **Apple iPod Nano**
- **Pokémon**

**For the Kiddies**

- **Horton Hatches the Egg**
- **Twilight**
- **McKInney Pavilions**
- **Art Prices Range from $50-$7,500**
- **Spencer Giclee by Liz Conces**

**Secret Santa Ideas**

- **A Couple of Minifs $15**
- **365 Bottles of Beer for the Year 2009 Calendar**
- **Starbucks Gift Card**
- **House of Blues Amazin’ Combread**
- **IXI Forever, Hat Wardrobe**
- **Amazin’ House of Blues Eau de Toilette**
- **Apple iPod Nano**

Don’t be a wallflower, this handbag will brighten up any outfit! Merimekko Poppies Handbag, $64 MENDOTA, 910 LOUISIANA/TUNNEL LEVEL.

Your favorite outdoorsman doesn’t need to stray too far from home for some of the most exciting freshwater fishing in the country. Big Idea: IFLY’s guided and personalized trips of a lifetime. Flyfisher’s Guide to Texas: $29.95 IFLY, The Angler’s Edge, 728 Travis.

You never know when you’ll need a dash of herb here, a pinch of spice there. Martha Stewart Collection Herbal Spice Rack, 16-Piece. You never know when you’ll need a dash of herb here, a pinch of spice there. Martha Stewart Collection Herbal Spice Rack, 16-Piece.

No more arguments with your honey over stopping to ask for directions. Magellan and Garmin GPS Units.

For the guy who is style-minded, this modern watch has a distinctive vintage feel. Fossil Kaleido Blue/Mirror 10 Downtown, 1110 MAIn.

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When it comes to the Chevron Houston Marathon and its related events, the numbers tell the story: 18,000 runners; 25,000 total participants; 200,000 spectators; 5,000 volunteers; an estimated $30 million in economic impact; and $1.26 million raised for charity.

The two marathons, the Chevron Houston Marathon and the Aramco Houston Half Marathon, sold out six and a half months before race day, January 18, 2009, and there’s a waiting list.

“We could have more people but we choose not to because we’re committed to quality, not quantity, for the marathon runners. We have a ratio of one volunteer for every five runners,” says Steve Karpas, director of marketing and race development for the Houston Marathon Committee. “We have a lot of bells and whistles that other marathons don’t have. People can track a runner on real time and all runners receive a clip of themselves coming over the finish line. They can have that forever and that’s free.”

The EP5K, the inaugural ABB Team Challenge and the Texas Children’s Hospital Kids’ Fun Run are still open for registration. Everyone can enjoy the free Memorial Hermann Sports Medicine EXPO Jan. 16-17 at the George R. Brown Convention Center.

Karpas says the January average temperature of 50 degrees is optimal for runners, as is the flat course. “The crowds are phenomenal and make for a wonderful experience and our sponsors, Chevron and Aramco, have been instrumental in helping us achieve our goals,” he says.

With its Run for a Reason program, now in its 11th year, charities from the Food Bank to the Houston Area Parkinson Society have received just over $6 million. For the 2009 race, 50 charities are part of the program. The goal is $1.5 million this year, Karpas said.

The Aramco Houston Half Marathon will host the Men’s and Women’s 2009 USA Half Marathon Championships. This is the third consecutive year for the women’s championship and the fifth for the men’s championship.

“Having elite U.S. athletes coming here in January to compete lends another element to the event,” Karpas said.

**FINDING LOVE AND CAMARADERIE ALONG THE TRAIL**

Houstonian Doug Schroeder is the first to admit that his debut marathon in November 2000 was almost a bust. For starters, he didn’t even know if he could run 26 miles. The most he had run was around 15.

He and a work buddy just decided they should go for it. Second, he left his bib in his San Antonio hotel room and by the time he got back to the starting line, the rest of the field had a 10-minute lead.

“I had to ask them which way they went and it took a mile for me to see the flashing lights of the motorcade behind the last runners. It took me 10 miles to find the friend I was supposed to run with,” Schroeder says. “At the end, I was very tired from going out so fast and he finished ahead of me.”

Despite that near-traumatic experience, Schroeder ran his first Chevron Houston Marathon three months later and never looked back.

As well as rediscovering his love for running, he met his wife in a running club (she runs, too) and they now have two little runners who just participated in their first event at the Heights’ 5K this past spring.

Schroeder, 41, who lives in the Copperfield area and works downtown, saw his first Houston marathon in 1999 when he volunteered to be a course marshal.

“It inspired me. I looked at all those people and thought, ‘I...
can do that," she says. "At the time, I weighed 50 pounds more and I thought it would be good for my health, too," says Schroeder, who ran cross country and track in high school.

He joined a downtown gym and a running club at the company where he worked at the time. After the San Antonio marathon experience, he joined The Kenyan Way, a running club where he met his wife and began to train more seriously.

Schroeder, who used to compete in triathlons, also has run in marathons in Austin, Dallas, Chicago and Boston. This past weekend, he participated in a marathon in Toronto.

"Hurricane Ike kind of threw a kink in my plans. I wanted to break three hours and I went 3:29," he says. "The last good run I had was the morning of the hurricane. You’re supposed to taper down after that, but my taper went to nothing after the storm."

Schroeder, who will be running in his eighth Houston marathon in January, is a member of the Houston Striders club and Team Luke’s (Luke’s Locker’s master team). He runs with groups on Saturday mornings and Tuesday evenings, and during the week at lunch time he runs along Buffalo Bayou downtown.

"Running is how I escape from my everyday stress," Schroeder says. "I can get out there in the fresh air."

**PACING HERSELF IS A SPIRITUAL QUEST**

When an El Paso Corporation co-worker asked if Theresa Sauls would run with her while the friend trained for the 1999 Chevron Houston Marathon, Sauls agreed.

"I thought I would go through all the training with her, but not run it," says Sauls, a volleyball and tennis athlete who had never been a runner. "Halfway through she got another job and moved out of the state. But I was so into it, I stayed with it."

Sauls, 45, ran in the 1999 Houston event and since then has run four full Houston marathons and four Aramco Houston Half-Marathons.

"I remember the first time I started training, we had us run for five minutes and I will never forget how long that took," says the Missouri City area wife and mom. "It’s amazing how conditioning your mind and body falls into place."

Her training regimen includes a long run on Saturdays with family or friends and shorter runs four days a week at lunch time down Allen Parkway along Buffalo Bayou.

"It’s so nice to run along the bayou. We (El Paso employees) volunteer with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership to clean it up to keep it pretty," Sauls says. "It’s a great community effort."

She says running helps keep her P.A.C.E. — Peace of mind, Ability to finish what she starts, Control and Endurance.

"Part of running for me is meditation so I can build up my spirituality," says Sauls, who now also runs trail races such as the Rocky Raccoon Trail Run in Huntsville that was held in October.

"Having a healthy lifestyle is important to me and I’m always going to run for that. El Paso is really big into encouraging employees to be healthy and I’m proud of a company that supports those activities."

Her 17-year-old daughter ran the EPSK sponsored by El Paso last year and is training for the half marathon for ’09. Sauls also has a son in the Coast Guard and another son attending Blinn College on a basketball scholarship.

"The half-marathon is a huge feed into the marathon. It helps give people the belief they can do it," says Sauls.

"The half-marathon is a huge feed into the marathon. It helps give people the belief they can do it," says Sauls. "My daughter and I ran recently at Memorial Park at 5 a.m. and it blew her away. She knew all those people were out there so early. She even turned off her cell phone, which is a lot for a teenager. But she said none of her friends were awake that early anyway."

**RUNNING FOR HER FATHER AND HER HEALTH**

Karen Stewart has also found that running helps alleviate the symptoms of the attention deficit hyperactivity disorder she was diagnosed with two years ago. She prefers to train alone rather than running with a group of people, which can be distracting for someone with ADHD.

"Running puts me in a place where I’m all by myself and I can relax. I can do something for myself and find myself," says Stewart, 33, who lives in the Friendswood area with her husband and teenage daughter. "If there’s a day when I don’t exercise, I have a hard time relaxing or sleeping. It’s almost therapeutic for me."

In January she will run her second Aramco Half Marathon and there’s no doubt she’ll make her father proud. ☺
KEEPING THE FAITH

MotherDogStudios and neighbors adapt to Houston’s diverse, ever-evolving cultural terrain.

by Nancy Wozny

JOHN RUNNELS STORMS OUT of MotherDogStudios like the unofficial mayor of the block. As proprietor of one of Houston’s most venerable artist-run warehouses, along with his partner in art and life, Charlie Jean Sartwelle, it’s a title he has earned. Runnels bolts out the door with the energy of an adolescent ready to sing the praises of the eclectic exterior of MotherDog. A mural of a tank marching towards the city flanks the north wall, while his provocative text-based mural, X-Marks the Spot, covers a good portion of the west wall, along with the scrappy black canine that is the MotherDog. He points out the faded “Dixie Glass Co. Inc.” sign on the building with unbridled pride for the space he has looked after for the past 24 years. Originally built in 1939, the 22,000-square-foot building held the wordy distinction of “the railroad to track covered cross dock freight terminal.” Runnels lovingly refers to his oasis as his “southern Gothic castle cathedral old warehouse dive.” Sartwelle even received a special “artist warehouse” occupancy permit from the city. “Once you get inside, it’s paradise,” boasts Runnels. His now-grown daughter, Sara Katherine Runnels, endearingly described the studio as “almost enchanting” in a college essay illuminating her alternative childhood under the MotherDog roof. It’s the “almost” part that most interests Runnels, whose stewardship of MotherDog stands as a shining example of the vital role the artist plays in an urban environment. “We are the early settlers who tamed the area for others,” insists the artist. “We have the vision and take the risks.” He’s the first to admit it’s not been a journey for the weak, needy or faint of temperature.

sanctuary
solitude
silence
seizure
sacred
Runnels remembers the early years with a touch of nostalgia. “Nobody wanted this neighborhood. It was considered a Mad Max wasteland. The only people there were police, transients and lost people,” Runnels remembers. “It was a no-man’s-land. The police told Charlie Jean not to leave the building without a saved-off shotgun.” That said, the place proved perfect for Runnels and Sartwelle and the first cadre of artists who moved in with them. Artists need a lot of space for little money. At first, the couple heavily scrutinized the tenants for artistic merit. These days they are more interested in artists who obey the rules, which include no pets, no smoking, no moving in and no noise. “Headphones are OK. ‘We run a tight ship,’ Runnels grins. ‘This isn’t grad school.’”

“Nobody wanted this neighborhood. It was considered a Mad Max wasteland. The only people here were police, transients and gone, and the lofts just keep going,” says Sartwelle as she describes the change in her neighborhood. “Over the years the landscape has shifted as artists have come and gone, and the lots just keep coming on. ‘Lots to the right of the lots to the left one,’ says Runnels. ‘Money talks and artists walk.’ There are still plenty of guns around, but they belong to the Metro Police, whose shiny new headquarters sits down the street. Polished sidewalks line the streets complete with street trees. The character of the area has shifted into gentrification contrast to the sleek, albeit sterile, residential dwellings. During his time with DiverseWorks between 1983 and 1995 Michael Peranteau witnessed the entrance of regular people and the exit of artists from downtown. “It was a ghost town then,” says Peranteau, who now serves as the Society for the Performing Arts’ Director of Development. “Warren’s and La Carafe were about the only places to go, but with that deadness came cheap prices for artists to live and work. Peranteau also observes the upside of residential development. “It’s great to have people living here, all of that feels good. On any given night the place is hopping.”

“Early on Runnels and Sartwelle considered becoming a non-profit like DiverseWorks. Their motto, ‘How small can we stay and still accomplish our vision?’ guided the MotherDog mission.”

Runnels says, “How small can we stay and still accomplish our vision?” guided the MotherDog mission. Early on Runnels and Sartwelle considered becoming a non-profit like DiverseWorks. Their motto, “How small can we stay and still accomplish our vision?” guided the MotherDog mission. “We were afraid we would lose control. We always wanted it to be a democratic dictatorship,” jokes Sartwelle. “We didn’t want to grow bigger either.” The pair got their chance to try the non-profit route during their 10-year tenure as directors of the Bayou Bend ArtPark from 1993-2003. “That experience prepared us for the work we are doing now in public art,” says Sartwelle. After a decade they were ready to move on and allow others to take the helm.

Early on Runnels and Sartwelle considered becoming a non-profit like DiverseWorks. Their motto, “How small can we stay and still accomplish our vision?” guided the MotherDog mission.
really quite beautiful how the water bled some of these colors,” observes Runnels. Tropical Storm Allison left the couple trapped inside the studio for two days. “The place looked like Venice,” reflects Runnels.

For Runnels, the bayou may just be the link that connects the neighborhoods separated by highways. “The Bayou is geomorphologically a river,” Runnels insists. “On a quiet day I can even hear the bayou from MotherDog.” Water, a frequent subject for the artist, forms the basis of dream.boats, his ongoing collaboration with the Buffalo Bayou Partnership. “When you see the sight of silver boats on high your imagination demands the other half,” says Runnels about his gleaming upside down stainless steel vessels. “They trigger a portal entrance to a potential experience. For me it was about bringing the qualities of the water up to the street level.” Anne Olson, director of the Buffalo Bayou Partnership, sees dream.boats as a prime example of integrated art and remains dedicated to incorporating public art into all of the organization’s projects. Massive pillars created by architects TeamHou and artist Mel Chin gracing Sesquicentennial Park stand as a prime example. Olson is particularly proud of Nights on Blue Bayou, a collaboration with the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts that placed music and visual arts events in direct contact with the pedestrian public. “We have made a commitment to innovative events,” says Olson. “We want to think beyond beer blasts and rock concerts.”

MotherDogStudios, DiverseWorks, and the Buffalo Bayou Partnership join in a mission to find sustainable ways to boost the city’s vibrant downtown art scene. Negotiating the territory with careful attention will determine the future cultural ecology. It’s no wonder that Runnels’ object of choice takes the form of a boat. As Runnels finishes his final dream.boats in the upcoming months, he contemplates the city’s evolving landscape. As for the loft dwellers, Runnels remains unconvinced of their contribution and he wishes they would clean up after their dogs more. Runnels and Sartwelle soldier on despite an uncertain future with a gratefulness for the space MotherDog afforded them and the many artists who created under their welcoming umbrella. They accept their tenuous situation like true urban pioneers. “As artists we adjust. You can’t fight the future. We are lucky our space was never considered loft-worthy,” admits Sartwelle. “Still, we are always sitting on tender hooks. But then again, I never thought we would be here this long.”

DiverseWorks is now considering another move, while Runnels and Sartwelle take the “last man standing” approach, holding out amidst flux. Their stewardship speaks to the artists’ unbending resourceful spirit. “Change is inevitable and I embrace it,” Runnels ruminates. “The moment we landed here we knew our fate was determined. Our mere presence was the green flag for gentrification. We followed in a long line of artist citizens who ready the ground for the next inhabitants.” Runnels ends the tour of his homestead with a visit to his favorite end-of-the-day spot, where mama and papa dog often enjoy a late afternoon cocktail. In the distance looms a stunning view of the shining city rising out of a dusky glow they both still proudly call home.
Downtown decks the halls
For more information see page 22
**Downtown: the holiday season is here**

The downtown holidays will kick off with the H-E-B Holiday Parade on December 7th. The parade is a superb ensemble. Tickets $25-$250. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. 713.524.5050.

**Fiesta Navidad Mariachi Los Campeiros**

Dec 9 Society for the Performing Arts Don’t miss this mariachi ensembles, complete with singing, vivid styls and dynamic choreography performed pit your jester dance. Tickets $22-$52. Thu & Fri 6. Jones Hall, 615.713.227.4772.

**Performing Arts The Nutcracker**

The Houston Ballet. It’s snowing, it’s glowing, the beauty is showing—it’s The Nutcracker, based on the story of the three wise men, a litle boy and his mom who travel through the Kingdom of Sweets. The Nutcracker is performed with simple sets and costumes, sign language interpretation and two different orchestras. Tickets $25-$70. HOly Theatre, 800.713.357.2325.

**The House of Mind**

Jan 13 Society for the Performing Arts Expansive choreography and incredible feats of athleticism from male and female Dancers will bring the audience to its feet. But the show of the heart is unquestionably the talent of our dancers. 615 Louisiana. 713.224.7575.

**Divertissements Lane Nishika**

Dec 5-12 Society for the Performing Arts This unique and inspiring show brings to life the stories of the three wise men, a lame little boy and his mom through the Kingdom of Sweets. The Nutcracker is performed with simple sets and costumes, sign language interpretation and two different orchestras. Tickets $25-$70. HOly Theatre, 800.713.357.2325.

**The Bad Plus**

February 6-8 Society for the Performing Arts The Bad Plus, an intense and amusing journey through the creative mind of American jazz pianist and composer David King is known for complementing original music with a wide variety of artists and ensembles presented this season. Fri. Midland room. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. 713.524.5050.

**The Art of the Piano Recital**


**The Bad Plus**

Feb 7 Da Camera This collection of hotbed American jazz and its Latin influences. Ben Wang is known for complementing original music with a wide variety of artists and ensembles presented this season. Fri. Midland room. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas. 713.524.5050.

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AN EVENING OF ROMANCE
Feb 15
The Hobby Center, 800 Bagby. 713.315.2525.
Bringing the best in classical music and dance... Directing Houston from the cello, this dynamic dueling of 25 performeres will mesmerize and move you.
Tickets $22 $35 Sat 8 Sun 3.

WOMEN ON THE VERGE
Feb 20
Two pairs of shoes who've been abandoned, betrayed and are hell-bent on revenge-who could ask for better entertainment? This not-to-be missed comedy by Simon and Garfunkel will have you laughing from start to finish.
Tickets $27 $37 Thu-Sat 8:30. Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana. 713.322.7800.

LÉHÉNE GRIMAUD'S BEETHOVEN 4
Feb 24
20x751
THE HOBBY CENTER, 800 BAGBY. 713.315.2525.

BIRDS, BEADS AND BRANDENBURG
Feb 14
713.227.2787.

tickets@houstonoperahouse.com

SANDBOX
Feb 8-10
Murphy Arts District. 713.400.7336.

LIVE MUSIC:
BETTER UNION
Feb 28
713.237.1439.

STEWART CADILLAC LUNCH SPEAKER SERIES
Feb 27
8:30. Dean's Credit Clothing, 316 Main. 713.437.5249.

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BETTER UNION
Feb 28
713.237.1439.
SHARKEY’S NEW YEAR’S EVE BALL DROP
at Minute Maid Park, 501 Crawford. 713.236.1700.
Fri & Sat 10-9 & Sun 11-7. George R. Brown Convention Center, 1001 Avenida de las Americas. 713.400.7336.

HARLEM GLOBETROTTERS
Feb 6 & 7 For 42 years, the Harlem Globetrotters have thrilled audiences with timeless basketball exhibitions. Tickets $20-80. $40 VIP & $70Looper. Sat 7-7:30. George R. Brown Convention Center, 1001 Avenida de las Americas. harlemglobetrotters.com

BAYOU BAND BED & BREAKFAST
2700 Deco Dr 713.526.2555.

**NOTE: **If you’re making reservations, 20 person max per trip. $7 adults, $5 kids ages 3-14, $4 kids 3-1,免费 for kids under 3. Reservations required, cancellations must take place 48 hours prior to the tour. $50 adults. Sat 10-noon & Sun 11-12. 1100 Bagby. 713.655.1912.

**FREE SELF-GUIDED AUDIO WALKING TOURS**
Meet your new tour guide. Put your headphones on, and you’ll be guided by local artists, activists, museum experts and others whoたい the community to share their experiences. Free. For more info, call 713.717.5795.

**MUSEUM DISTRICT WALK & ROLL**
Visit the district with a roll or walk. Meet your new tour guide. Put your headphones on, and you’ll be guided by local artists, activists, museum experts and others whoたい the community to share their experiences. Free. For more info, call 713.717.5795.

**A WALK IN THE PARK: DISCOVERY GREEN WALK & ROLL TOUR**
A trip to Houston is not complete without visiting downtown Discovery Green. Discover the park and its history. Take a walking tour, guided by a volunteer. You’ll learn about the park’s art, design and collaborative team building efforts and events. Free. For more info, call 713.526.2555.

**ICE CARVING COMPETITION**
Jan 10 Match your skills from around the world—U.S. Chavez and Dutch tones to create masterpieces. Free. Sat 10- Discovery Green, 1500 McKinney.

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**artista offers inspirational contemporary American Artista offers inspirational contemporary American cuisine and theatrical ambiance with high ceilings, glass walls and sweeping views of the Houston downtown skyline.**

cordua's. Hobby Stop, 800 Bagby, 713.276.4782. L Mon-Fri; D Mon-Sat (open for L & D on Sunday only if a theater performance is suggested).

**Antoinette’s Po’ Boys & Deli** Known for their delicious po’ boys and sandwich selection, Antoinette’s is a great spot for lunch. 400 Capital, 713.224.4679. L Mon-Fri. $$$

**Artista American** Artista offers inspirational contemporary American cuisine and theatrical ambiance with high ceilings, glass walls and sweeping views of the Houston downtown skyline.

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On a mission for a downtown BREAKFAST SPOT

Once you get beyond the hotels, downtown’s pick of breakfast spots is a pretty short list, especially on the weekends. If you’re looking for a place for an early-morning event or just have a hankering for a breakfast taco, here are a few recommendations.

Corner Bakery
Your find-made-to-order egg scramblers, hot breakfast sandwiches, fresh fruits and delish bakery eats; some great people watching right on Main and McKinney. 1000 Main. Served Mon-Fri.

Joe Muggs Café
Coffeeshop downtown, where am I?

As Table 7 Bistro
Classic American favorites including migs, Belgian waffles or a bacon, sausage and egg pizza.

La Palapa
There is always a line at this pink confection downtown, a Courthouse District hangout spot before or after an Astros ballgame. Great happy hour specials.

Humble Cafe
The Humble Cafe is a full-service restaurant serving up breakfast and dinner. Only a few short blocks from Minute Maid Park. 300 Main, 713.223.3474. L & D Daily.$

Guadalajara Hacienda Mexican
This family-owned restaurant consistently serves up tasty food in a welcoming, authentic hacienda environment. It’s the perfect place to bring the family or a large group of co-workers or friends. Great happy hour specials.

Emilio’s Mexican
Emilio Galvan has been crowned Houston’s Tex Mexgod. This authentic spot offers Mexican cuisine and offers some tasty items, and the standout view makes the place unique. Lots of big-screen TV’s make it the spot for sports watching – from baseball to ultimate fighting.

Market Square Bar & Grill
Located right on Main Street Square, you can’t beat the people watching or just relax and watch the rail line and Main Street Square’sumping locations. cornerbakery.com. 1000 Main, 713.631.0673. B, L & D Mon-Sat.

Downtown Houston Seafood
The menu features a huge variety of seafood and something for everyone. While dining, guests are surrounded by a 100,000 gallon aquarium. Enjoy the sights and a great meal at this family-friendly spot.

Gumb’s Bar & Grill
A two-story, old-school restaurant is found at Discovery Green downtown’s newest hot spot. The menu features rustic American cuisine such as Gulf Coast seafood, steaks, and signature red sauce. The Tree House root beer bar features craft beer taps and Woods’s Men’s, 1110 Main, 713.522.1668. B & L Mon-Fri. D Mon-Sat.

The Downtown Houston Seafood
The menu features a huge variety of seafood and something for everyone. While dining, guests are surrounded by a 100,000 gallon aquarium. Enjoy the sights and a great meal at this family-friendly spot.

Downtown Houston Cafe
Fast food spot offering all your Asian favorites. 632 Clay, 713.759.0535. 1 Mon-Fri. $$

Downscale Mediterranean
This authentic Mediterranean spot offers up a quick and satisfying egg spot for lunch.

Table 7 Bistro - Houston's classic American favorites including migs, Belgian waffles or a bacon, sausage and egg pizza.

Corner Bakery - Your find-made-to-order egg scramblers, hot breakfast sandwiches, fresh fruits and delish bakery eats; some great people watching right on Main and McKinney. 1000 Main. Served Mon-Fri.

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Market Square Bar & Grill - Located right on Main Street Square, you can’t beat the people watching or just relax and watch the rail line and Main Street Square’sumping locations. cornerbakery.com. 1000 Main, 713.631.0673. B, L & D Mon-Sat.

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A great dining atmosphere allows guests to enjoy a memorable experience. massaa.com, 1660 Smith, 713.650.0837. L, Mon.-Fri; D & Mon.-Sat. $5

Massaa’s Seafood Grill Steakhouse Like its sister restaurant, you can count on superior service and a great dining atmosphere. Conveniently located close to the convention center and Toyota Center, it’s a great spot for lunch and dinner. massaa.com. The shops at Houston Center, 1331 Lamar, 713.655.1001. L, Mon.-Fri. D & Mon.-Sat. $5

McKeevers & Schmitz’s Steakhouse The extensive menu changes daily depending on each day’s fresh seafood deliveries. With more than 80 preparations on the menu a day, every guest is sure to find something to satisfy their palate. mckeeversandschmitz.com. Houston Postlive, 1230 Fannin, L & D Mon.-Fri. Sat. $5

McDonald’s A Fast Food 808 Dallas, 713.651.9449. B & L Daily. D Mon.-Fri. $5

Milo Bella Italian Located in the heart of the Historic District, you’ll enjoy an eclectic variety of Italian cuisines blended with a Mediterranean feel. A long-time favorite, this intimate little bistro’s simple, yet sophisticated decor, makes it a downtown standout. bellarestaurant.com 310 Main, 723.270.0315. L & D Daily; Fri & Sat. $5

Monsoon Wok & Lounge Asian Fusion Monsoon features a unique combination of Asian Fusion cuisine, a chic cocktail lounge and appealing architectural design. Always busy at lunch but a great happy hour spot. Try it for dinner before or after a show. monsoon.com. Bayou Place, 540 Texas, 723.223.0088. L & D Mon.-Sun. $5

Molly’s Pub Pub Fare A good ol’ Irish bar with tasty food to soak up the beer. Your standard pub fare – sandwiches, dogs and pretty much anything that’s edible – is sure to find something to satisfy their palate. mollyspubs.com. 202 Washington, 713.237.0505. L & D Daily; LN Fri & Sat. $5

Morton’s The Steakhouse Steak House Steak This award-winning steakhouse offers an outstanding menu. The downtown location features their new bar concept; Bar D-22, which includes an impressive wine and martini menu along with their specially priced “bar bites.” 1001 McKinney, 713.659.2700. D Mon.-Sun. $5

Murphy’s Deli Deli Indulge in a variety of sandwich- es and salads. Hot or cold, Murphy’s specialty in creating your sandwich any way it’s ordered. 401 Jefferson, 713.652.4939. 1021 Main, 713.371.1912; 404 Louisiana, 713.247.9622. B & L Daily. Fri & Sat locations. $5

New Orleans Cajun Po’Boy Fast Food A great place to grab a fast-fooled or pregame lunch. 448 Polk, 713.750.0007. L Mon.-Fri. $5

New York Pizzaia Pizza 664 Polk, 713.759.9100. L, Mon.-Fri. D Fri-Sat. D Mon.-Fri. $5

Pappas BBQ Barbecue Voted one of Houston’s best spots year after year, this barbecue joint offers an excellent selection with Texas-sourced products. Traditional favorites such as brisket, ribs, sausage and ham are served with Pappas’ flare. Delivery and take-out are available. 1227 Pierce, 713.659.2425. L & D Mon.-Fri. 1000 Smith, 713.759.9018. L & D Mon.-Fri. $5

Paula’s Steak Shop Deli Sandwiches, salads and snacks to go. 1230 Prairie, 224-4701. B & L Mon.-Fri. $5

Perbacco Italian An adorable little spot located at street level of one of Houston’s shopping centers. Perbacco serves up Italian cuisine in a modern and fresh atmosphere. Catering to downtown workers and the theater crowd, you always get quick and friendly service and tasty food. 701 Milam, 713.224.2492. L Mon-Fri; D Fri-Sat. $5

Pfannen & Grill International Pfannen’s very diverse menu features everything from pizza and salad to prime steaks and signature cocktails. With fine downtown delivery and full service catering, Pfannen can accommodate any need. pfannendowntown.com, 142 Preston, 713.236.1300. B & L Mon-Fri; D Fri-Sat. $5

Plaza Bistro Fast Casual Kick back at Jones Plaza and enjoy a quick bite to eat. Plaza Bistro also serves up treats during scheduled Jones Plaza events. 600 Louisiana, Jones Plaza, 713.226.8810. L Mon-Fri. Also open for plaza events. $5

Ponte Vecchio Ristorante Italiano Italian From casual cafe style service at Ponte Vecchio to everything is prepared from scratch. You’ll find many delicious, healthy selections on the menus at this lacey eatery, all at a reasonable price. pontevecchioitalian.com, 377 Dallas, 713.659.9410. L Mon-Fri. $5

Popeye’s Fast Food 316 Travis, 713.571.8600. L & D Mon-Sat. $5

Quattro Contemporary Italian Italian Vivid colors, creative lighting and a unique design create a sophisticated and intimate ambiance for guests. Located in the luxurious Four Seasons Hotel, Quattro is one of downtown’s best restaurants. While dining at the chef’s table, guests can view the kitchen in action. Four Seasons Hotel, 1300 Lamar, 713.652.8250. B, L & D Daily. $5

Quino’s Fast Food 811 Rusk, 713.227.7972. D & L Mon-Fri; 11:30AM Commerce, 713.224.9000. L Mon-Sat; D Mon-Fri. 1600 Texas, 713.224.8265. L Mon-Sat. $5

Rachel’s Sandwich Shop Deli A good little sandwich shop. 421 San Jacinto, 713.223.2912. B & L Mon-Fri. $5

Red & White Bistro International A Chef’s Table bucket features a variety of world cuisines and an assortment of delectable desserts. Complement your meal with a selection from Red & White’s two 1,500 bottle wine towers. Houston/Toyotacenter.com, 1400 Polk, 713.724.7314. Open 90 minutes prior to the start of Toyota Center events; call ahead for reservations. $5

Red Cat Jazz Café Cajun Cajun style blends with Houston flavor at the Red Cat. Indulge in the distinct ambiance, cuisine and sounds offered at this laid-back spot. Live music nightly redcatjazzcafe.com, 424 Congress, 713.226.7870. D & D Daily. $5

Samba’s Jazz Café New American A high- end and upscale restaurant tight in the midst of Main Street. The menu includes a wide variety of favorites and combined with the live music. Sambuca is Houston’s ultimate supper club. sambucahoustdinner.com, 700 Texas, 713.244.2299. L Mon-Fri & Sun; D & L Daily. $5

SG’s Express Vietnamese Vietnamese You’ll find all your Vietnamese favorites here: vermicelli bowl, the sandwich, egg drop soup, egg rolls and many different smoothie flavors. 1225 Travis, 713.659.1020. L Mon-Fri & Sun; D & L Daily. $5

The Shops at Houston Center Food Court Chick-Fil-A,; Don Panino Bar & Grill, Douche Noodles, Dr. Brox, Grill, Great American Cookies, Longhorn’s Pizzeria, Mediterranean Grill, Murphy’s Irish Pub, Ninfa’s, Otto’s Barbeque, Planet Smoothie, Potbelly Sandwich Works, Sambuca, The Roman Delight, Salina, Simon’s, Sotto’s, The Street Cafe, Subway, Top Yum, Togo Burgers, Wall Street Deli, West & Roll, Zag’s, New York Deli. shopsathc.com, 1200 McKinney, 713.759.3442. Mon-Sat. hours vary. $5

Shula’s American Steak House Steak House Steak The atmosphere is light, engaging and conducive to all ages and appetites. 901 Commerce, 713.229.0009. L & D Daily. $5

Sibylla Italian Bistro Contemporary Italian Located in the heart of the Historic District, you’ll enjoy an eclectic variety of Italian cuisines blended with a Mediterranean feel. A long-time favorite, this intimate little bistro’s simple, yet sophisticated decor, makes it a downtown standout. bellarestaurant.com 310 Main, 723.270.0315. L & D Daily; Fri & Sat. $5

Skyline Bar & Grill American Enjoy a breathtaking view of downtown from this contemporary getaway. High on the 24th floor of the Hilton Americas hotel, Skyline offers a variety of unique cuisines along with a full bar for an after-work or late-night cocktail. Hilton Americas, 1600 Lamar, 713.721.8000. D Tue-Sat. $5

Skyline Deli Deli With their freshly baked bread, Skyline makes a great deli sandwich. 777 Texas, 713.571.0159. B & L Daily. $5

Spaghetti Warehouse Italian Making its home in an old warehouse, this Italian-American eatery offers up large portions for lunch and dinner. Traditional menu items such as spaghetti and meatballs, lasagna and pizza allow the Spaghetti Warehouse to cater to all ages and appetites. 901 Commerce, 713.229.0009. L & D Daily. $5

Spencer’s Steak & Chop Steak House American Ideal location to enjoy a great steak. Spencer’s offers top-quality beef and boasts an extensive wine list. The atmosphere is light, engaging and conducive to conversation. Hilton Americas, 1600 Lamar, 713.577.8235. L & D Daily. D Mon-Sat. $5

Spinletop American Located in the heart of the Skyline District, Spindletop holds the title as the only restaurant in Houston with a revolving rooftop dining room. High atop the Hyatt, the view is spectacular and the cuisine is quite good. spinletopatthehyatt.com, 1200 Houston, 713.577.8235. L & D Daily. $5

REMEMBER THAT RICKETY TREE HOUSE YOUR FRIEND’S DAD BUILT OUT OF WOOD AND PLYWOOD AND NAILS? IT WOULDN’T DO FOR YOU AND YOUR PLAYFRIENDS.”
A home-cooked Thanksgiving dinner... Without the stress

For those of us who can barely toast a Pop-Tart, let alone roast a turkey, there are more and more restaurants serving Thanksgiving dinner. If you are cooking at home or going over to friends and family, pick up a perfect turkey and homemade pie. They'll never know you didn't slave over the stove.

17 at Alden Hotel
Your mouth will start watering when you read Chef Morton's Turkey Day menu. Start off with squash soup; the main course features Alexander Family Farm's natural turkey with sausage, créme friche, stuffing, green beans, cranberry sauce and rosemary scented gravy; and then for dessert, bread pudding with caramel sauce. Wine pairings are available for each course. Call 713.205.8800 to make your reservations.

Downtown Aquarium Restaurant
Downtown Aquarium offers a Thanksgiving buffet in both the Ballroom and the Aquarium Restaurant, featuring traditional holiday favorites and a knee-high buffet for the kids. Call 713.223.3474 for reservations.

Quattro at Four Seasons
An Italian Thanksgiving begins with an abundant antipasti buffet. Main course is family style with three options and a dessert buffet. Call 713.652.6250 to make reservations.

Voice at Hotel Icon
The ever-creative Chef Michael Kramer is putting together an amazing Thanksgiving menu. Dress up a bit and bring friends and family to this decadent dining room for an experience you won't soon forget. Call 713.652.6250 to make reservations.

What else to do downtown on Thanksgiving Day? Begin with the H-E-B Holiday Parade at 9; mosey over to one of the above destinations for a dinner and then walk it off by strolling down Main Street and then over to The Ice at Discovery Green for a skate on Kinder Lake.
**TROLLEY TIME ➤ Tied up with a bow**

There’s never been a better time to start new holiday traditions than this season. The Downtown District is pulling together existing events like the Mayor’s Annual Holiday Celebration along with brand new ones to create a five-week-long extravaganza. As expected, the festivities kick off with the H-E-B Holiday Parade on Thanksgiving Day. But to say that’s just the beginning is the understatement of the year. New holiday décor featuring peppermint sticks, snowflakes and twinkling trees will illuminate Main Street Square, which will be bustling with holiday shopping. Even better, Discovery Green will be transformed into an outdoor wonderland, featuring a 7,200-square-foot outdoor ice skating rink and Christmas Market. A free holiday trolley and easy-to-use event guide connect it all, making it a snap to pick up everything on your list.

Downtown District’s Holiday Spectacular
www.houstondowntown.com

**CAFÉFEINE BUZZ ➤ Cup of goodness**

Next time you’re craving a rich mug of coffee, reach for something totally unique. Bayou Blend is an earthy, aromatic mix of beans, inspired by Buffalo Bayou and its history and importance to Houston. A community partnership between Katz Coffee and Buffalo Bayou Partnership, the custom blend is part of the Coffee Cause Program. A portion of sales will go to the Partnership to help with a number of projects, including restoration of the International Coffee Building at historic Allen’s Landing. Pick up a bag online or at farmers markets around town.

Bayou Blend
$11.95 at www.katzcoffee.com or at Midtown, Bayou City and Houston Farmers Markets

**THREADS AND BOOKS ➤ Urban transformation**

The cool vibe of Houston Pavilions’ XXI Forever is just what we’ve been wanting for downtown. From the upscale architecture and décor (yes, those are chandeliers) to the absolutely not-just-for juniors fashions, XXI Forever is definitely taking Main Street retailing to the next level. As for Books-A-Million, we can’t think of anything we’ve been craving more. Enjoy a steamy espresso and crunchy biscotti at Joe Muggs Cafe, then settle into a comfy chair, pick up the latest best-seller or gossip magazine and while away an hour. It’s urban living at its very best.

XXI Forever and Books-A-Million
Houston Pavilions
1201 Fannin
www.houstonpavilions.com
Houston is special because it is the perfect mixture of different cultures, the arts, big city influence, neighborhood intimacy, good old-fashioned ranch living and a lot of Texas pride.

CHANDRA WILSON
Actor

EXPERIENCE MY HOUSTON

You have to see downtown Houston for the skyline, you have to see the famous Astrodome, you have to visit The Galleria and go skating, and you have to take the full ride around the 610 loop.

A perfect day in Houston would consist of visiting with high school friends, eating at the Spaghetti Warehouse, seeing a show at TUTS or at the Alley Theatre, and topping off the evening at the House of Pies.

What surprises me about Houston is that even though it’s such a big city, it maintains its intimate town feel.

For the rest of Chandra’s thoughts and to find out what others are saying, log on to VisitMyHouston.com
Birthday card. Latté. Lunch. All in one place.