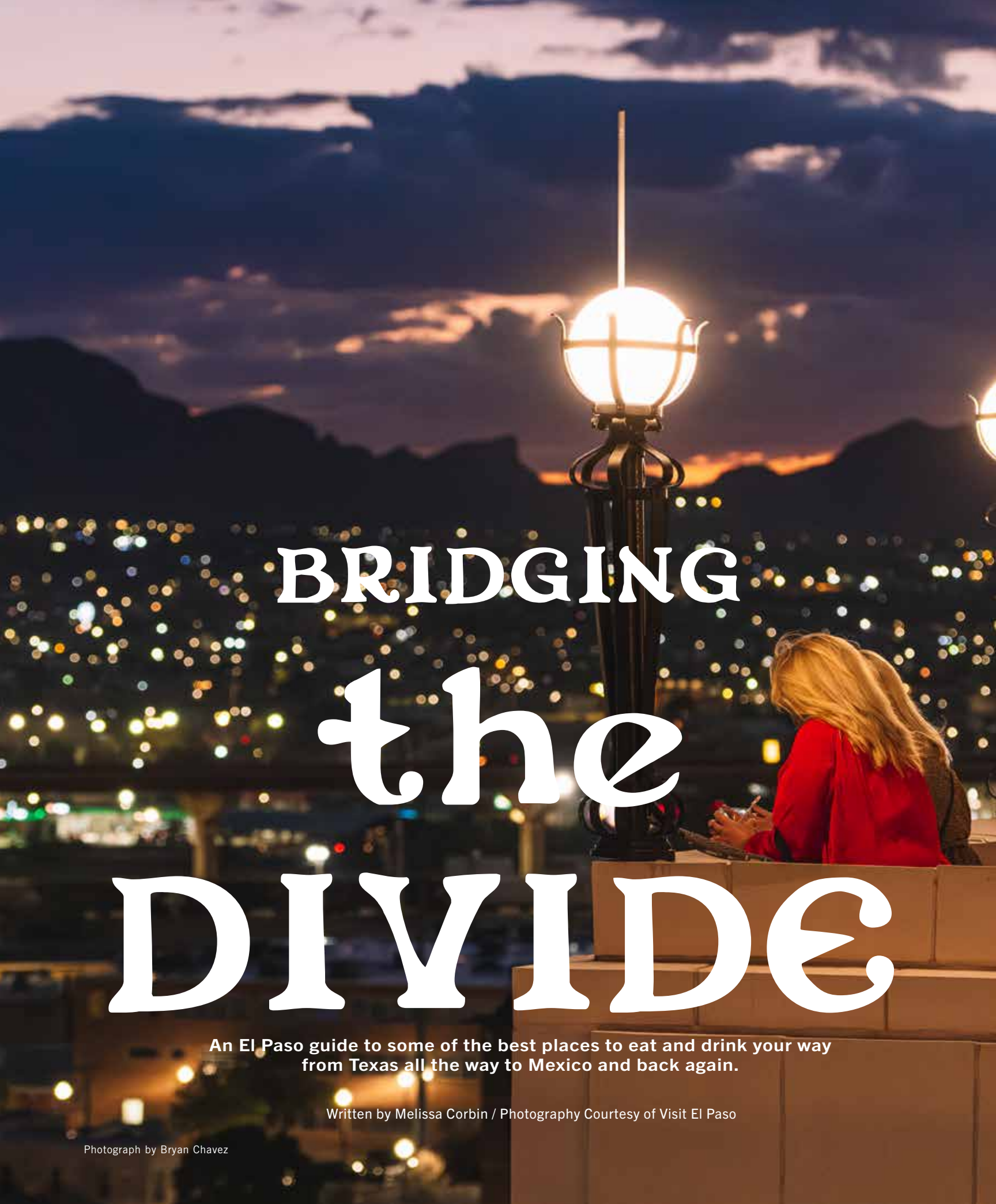




CHAPTER 3

STORIES



BRIDGING the DIVIDE

An El Paso guide to some of the best places to eat and drink your way from Texas all the way to Mexico and back again.

Written by Melissa Corbin / Photography Courtesy of Visit El Paso

Photograph by Bryan Chavez



Opposite: The twinkling lights of Juárez can be viewed from the El Mirador rooftop bar at the Hotel Paso Del Norte in El Paso. **Above:** At Carlos and Mickey's, come for the margaritas and stay for the food.

Photograph by Andy Austin



Photograph by Bryan Chavez



Photograph by Manu Espinosa Nevaumont



Photograph by Andy Austin



Photograph by Paeo Ibarra, Lemur Entertainment



MAYBE A GOOD MARGARITA CAN'T QUITE BE THE DUCT TAPE THAT FIXES EVERYTHING, BUT SURE SEEMS LIKE A GOOD PLACE TO START.

I've crossed the Mexican border many times, but I have never walked across it – until I received my passport stamp by foot last winter. El Paso, Texas is the largest U.S. Border city with the 982-foot-long Paso del Norte Bridge connecting travelers to and from Juárez, Mexico. As people were traveling to and from, the energy of my crossing was absolutely electric. And, while there are distinct differences between the twin cities, their connections are as undeniable as the Paso Del Norte Bridge itself.

MARGARITA OF JUÁREZ

With the Franklin Mountains to the north and the Sierra de Juárez to the South and the Rio Grande flowing between, my journey to El Paso and Juárez started with my favorite cocktail – the margarita. As there are several accounts of the margarita's origins, my quest for the truth may never end. But, the Juárez legend warms my heart, all the same.

Walking across Paso del Norte Bridge, I could almost hear Mariachi playing at The World Famous Kentucky Club on Juárez Avenue. Back in the day this area was considered Mexico's answer to Las Vegas, according to Sergio Peña, co-owner of the margarita mothership with his three sisters – Laura, Miriam, and Vianey. The siblings inherited the legendary bar from their father, Sergio, when he passed away in 2020.

Founded in 1920 by Miguel Montes, Kentucky Club was also an American watering hole during prohibition. "Miguel just wanted the bar to have an American name," Peña explains the Kentucky Club's name. The Peña family would eventually earn the title of a Kentucky Colonel by Kentucky's 60th Governor Ernie Fletcher.

The World Famous Kentucky Club lays its claim as the birthplace of the tequila-based cocktail. As Peña explains that the equal parts tequila, coin-treau, and lime juice "shaken-not-stirred" concoction was first served in a

Clockwise, L to R: The annual Sun City Craft Beer Fest is held each July inside the El Paso Convention Center. • Views of the Franklin Mountains in one of the world's largest urban wilderness parks. • San Elizario Chapel, one of three missions along the 9-mile stretch of the El Paso Mission Trail. • The food scene all around El Paso is flavorful and exciting.

martini glass with a salted rim and lime garnish by Lorenzo "Lencho" Hernandez. It was named in the 1930s after a girl – Margarita. You may have also heard different versions of this birth story. But, all I know is that Margarita's could perhaps be one of my favorite love stories. And, speaking of love, you'll love some of the most popular menu items such as bean burritos and chicken wings.

DAY TRIP: It's a regular thing for people to cross the border for a day trip. If you have time for only one other stop, make that stop at the nearby Laberinto Del Quinto Sol – an art gallery housing a private collection to promote the work of regional, national, and foreign artists.

BACK IN EL PASO

There are plenty of worthy riffs on Lencho's classic served stateside including the first one I enjoyed upon my arrival into El Paso at Sabör – one of the five restaurants on site of my accommodations at Hotel Paso Del Norte. The historical hotel was where Luis Terrazas, former governor of Chihuahua, rented the top floor of the hotel when he fled Chihuahua during the 1910 Mexican Revolution. The terrace was one of his favorite spots to watch battles between soldiers and the revolutionaries. Upon returning from my day in Juárez, I headed to the hotel's El Mirador Rooftop Bar for a nightcap and gazed at the twinkling lights of Juárez thinking of Margarita – the same view Terrazas saw.

Other notable margaritas inspired by Lencho can be found at L&J Café, Los Bandidos de Carlos and Mickey's, Taconeta, Casa Pantera, and Malolam which are several local favorites. You could certainly turn these stops into your very own margarita crawl. But, if you don't have a designated driver or don't want to rack up Uber charges, Sun Metro offers daily passes for reasonable prices.

To savor the complexities of some of the world's rarest Agave spirits in their purest form, I headed to Ambar Restaurante within The Plaza at Pi

oneer Park. Ambar boasts over 800 bottles of Mezcal, Tequilas, Sotols, Bacanoras, and Raicillas — making it home to the largest and rarest agave spirit collection in North America. And, considering some of their spirits can set you back several hundred dollars per serving, flights starting at \$50 are a Tequila enthusiast's dream. To pair with your favorite sip, El Paso native Chef Lawrence Acosta helms the wood-fired Mexican menu with delicacies ranging from Hamachi Verde and Beef Barbacoa tacos to Duck in Mole Poblano, and Chilean Seabass al Pastor.

FUN FACT: Just as Elizabeth Taylor was known to frequent *The World-Famous Kentucky Club*, she called *The Plaza at Pioneer Park* home with her then-husband Conrad "Nicky" Hilton while filming the 1955 classic movie, *Giant*.

At the foot of The Plaza at Pioneer Park and Ambar, I found a 14 feet tall bronze sculpture portraying Fray Garcia, founder of Our Lady of Guadalupe Mission at the Pass of the North.

Among the area's other numerous missions, I embarked upon a 9-mile stretch known as El Paso's Mission Trail. Dating back 400 years, it is here that I toured the three oldest churches in Texas – Socorro Mission, Ysleta Mission, and San Elizario Chapel. While European colonization brought strife among the indigenous tribe of Tigua, along with others such as Piroso and Apache, these missions tell the stories of how Mission Valley was forever changed. I first ducked in at the Tigua Cultural Center along the Mission Trail for an in-depth perspective of the Tigua people who inhabit the area to this day.

THE EARLIEST INHABITANTS OF EL PASO MISSION TRAIL

Built by the Tigua Indian community in 1682, Ysleta Mission represents the oldest community in Texas. It's also the oldest continuous operating mission in the southwest. Socorro Mission is a fine example of traditional adobe craftsmanship sharing the distinction of being among the oldest continuous settlements in the Southwest, as well as being one of the oldest continuously operated missions in Texas. And, while San Elizario Chapel was originally built by Spain in 1789 as a military outpost to protect Spanish land rights from France, it was flooded by the Rio Grande in 1821. After several rebuilds, the current chapel has become the centerpiece of the San Elizario community.

Before I started my day touring the area, I had breakfast at Café Cocol. While cocol refers to a type of Mexican bread, it is also a Spanish word for great horned owl. In this instance though, it means "coffee, tasty food, art, music, great times, Latina-owned business that's 100% homegrown, and brewed with love," says Lizbeth Carlos.

But, if you want to raise a pint of craft beer, Three Missions Brewery serves

up plenty of pints paying homage to the missions. And to sample some of the finest Texan and Mexican-produced wines, you can't beat Wine Down. But to taste the terroir of this land in particular, Bodega Loya abides by produce grown following certified organic practices and harvested from the farmland located behind the bodega, and from other local farmers.

As corn has been highly revered for years by indigenous communities, you'll find plenty of it in the valley along with pecan groves, vineyards, and many other crops. Among the vineyards that El Paso boasts, La Vina Winery, Mesa Vista Vineyard and Tasting Room, Rio Grande Winery, Sombra Antigua Vineyard and Winery, Sunland Winery are in neighboring New Mexico. Zin Valle Vineyards is in Canutillo TX in El Paso County. All are top picks.

And there are plenty of opportunities in El Paso to shake some of the hands that grow El Pasoans food: Upper Valley Artist and Farmers Market, Ardovinos Desert Crossing Farmers Market, and The Market EP.

MARK YOUR CALENDARS for October 19-20th to attend this year's 11th annual El Paso Food and Wine Festival where you can get your fill all in one place.

GET PHYSICAL

Whenever I explore towns rich in culinary history, I try to fit in a bit of physical activity. Otherwise, I'm not sure I'd fit in the clothes I packed for my return home. On this adventure, I couldn't help but explore the view I had been admiring all week long – The Franklin Mountains. As one the world's largest urban wilderness parks, Franklin Mountains State Park spans over 26,000 acres featuring an entire Chihuahuah Desert Mountain Range within the city limits of El Paso. But these mountains have long been populated by humans far before El Paso was founded in 1871. Native Americans lived here for more than 12,000 years. Their well-preserved pictographs can be seen throughout the park to this day. There are plenty of hiking and biking trails to choose from with camping available, as well. Just remember to bring proper footwear as the terrain is rocky. And don't forget sunscreen and water. It's hot out there!

After my hike, you can bet your boots that I was thirsty for something a little more than water. At the foot of the Franklin Mountains, I swung by DeadBeach Brewery. Co-founder Jason Hunt helms the culinary part of things while co-founder Gabe Montoya heads the brewing side. With a Chuco Lager in hand, I followed them to tour their 30-barrel system brewhaus producing all-year-round and seasonal beer for the state of Texas. Trust me

Clockwise, L to R: DeadBeach Brewery co-founders Jason Hunt who helms the culinary side and Gabe Montoya leads the brewing side. • Casa Panthera brings more to the table than being on the local margarita tour. • Stop by Zin Valle Vineyard to enjoy a taste of El Paso's home-grown wine. • Head to Ambar Restaurant within The Plaza at Pioneer Park where they are home to the largest and rarest agave spirit collection in North America.



Photograph by Paco Ibarra, Lemur Entertainment



Photograph by Paco Ibarra, Lemur Entertainment



Photograph by Andy Austin



Photograph by Andy Austin

when I say, do not pass by without trying Toma! Chuco Red Ale - Cerveza Y Clamato Preparado.

Opened in 2015, the brewery also features a breakfast-through-dinner tavern that focuses on El Paso-inspired, smoked cuisine. I started with the ceviche made with shrimp, European sea bass, avocado, and diced tomato, finished with a drizzle of Valentina & the DeadBeach spice blend, served with tostada chips. For my entree, Mt. Cristochu-Bano made with maple glazed smoked country pork braised in Brown Bonnie & Hatch green chile, with diced ham, provolone cheese, cilantro coleslaw, DeadBeach HefeMustard and pickles on a locally sourced roll. Suffice it to say, this isn't your usual pub fare. The classically trained Chef Hunt studied at Le Chef College of Hospitality Careers which became Le Cordon Bleu and now is known as The Texas Culinary Academy in Austin. He says, "My original landlord wouldn't let me put in a kitchen." So, most of Hunt's culinary creations come from two food trucks adjacent to the brewery. Now that he has a new landlord, you can expect a full kitchen coming soon, along with an expansive space next door.

But, why DeadBeach? "I grew up here in a time where you could literally just go walk across the border. My friends and family lived on both sides," explains Hunt "Even out in the desert, right along the river, there's a place that a lot of us used to go to. We called it the beach, but it was pretty much just desert sand."

DeadBeach Brewery isn't the only game in town – there are 9 breweries and counting. Even though El Paso's craft beer scene might be smaller than others, it's mighty. You can understand what I mean by attending the annual Sun City Craft Beer Fest to sample all that the scene offers. In addition to sipping their favorite brews, craft beer lovers team up for the yearly beerlympics. And, if they've had enough "liquid courage" they can give it their best shot at karaoke among other fun ways to connect over their drink of choice. The city's largest beer festival is held inside the El Paso Convention Center each July. So, no worries about beating the heat.

Even still, Hunt's vision is to create a beer festival along the border wall so that Juárez and El Paso can join in the merriment by cheering in unison – an exemplary way to bridge the divide by connecting through craft beer.

Mark Twain once wrote, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry, and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts. Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things cannot be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."

Now more than ever, the twin cities of El Paso and Juárez connected by Paso Del Norte Bridge is exactly what Twain so eloquently described. Maybe a good margarita can't quite be the duct tape that fixes everything, but in this case? She sure seems like a good place to start.

.....
Opposite: Nominated for a 2024 James Beard Award in Outstanding Wine and Other Beverages, Taconeta is a culinary gem in the El Paso dining scene. This Mexican taqueria is a go-to destination for those seeking an authentic dining experience. Since opening, they have been committed to serving and promoting natural wine, artisanal destilados Mexicanos, and local craft beers.



Photograph by Paco Ibarra, Lemur Entertainment