



# 2024 MAYOR'S HISPANIC HERITAGE AWARDS

Recognizing Outstanding  
Volunteer Service  
In the City of Houston

**Deadline for Nominations:**

**Must be postmarked or electronically received by **Friday, August 30, 2024****

**Return via U.S. Mail To:**

City of Houston

Attn: Jackie Schuessler-Kimsey (MHHA)

901 Bagby, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor

Houston, Texas 77002

Or

E-mail: [Jackie.schuessler-kimsey@houstontx.gov](mailto:Jackie.schuessler-kimsey@houstontx.gov)

---

## Nomination Application About the Awards

### **PURPOSE**

The Mayor's Hispanic Heritage Awards (MHHA) Committee seeks to recognize exemplary Hispanics who have made outstanding contributions toward improving the quality of life within the Houston Hispanic community.

The MHHA Committee will review nomination entries and select the most outstanding nominees to receive the 2024 Mayor's Hispanic Heritage Awards. Mayor John Whitmire and City Council will salute the winners at Council session every Tuesday during Hispanic Heritage Month (September 15 to October 15). All winners will be presented an award at the kick-off celebration.

### **2024 AWARD CATEGORIES**

**Arts in the Community** – recognizes the contribution of an individual whose outstanding efforts have enriched and nurtured the creativity in the Hispanic community through Art programs. Art programs may include visual, music, dance, theatre and quilting/embroidery. In addition to an application, nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the services rendered by the nominee for which this award is to be presented.

**Community Activist** - recognizes the outstanding volunteer efforts of an individual dedicated toward improving and educating the Hispanic community thru public and community service. In addition to an application, nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the services rendered by the nominee for which this award is to be presented.

**Education in the Community** - recognizes an individual who has demonstrated an extraordinary commitment to increasing educational opportunities in academic, healthy living, and sportsmanship, in the Hispanic community. In addition to an application, nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the services rendered by the nominee for which this award is to be presented.

**Healthcare** - Recognizes an outstanding person who has increased awareness of healthcare issues affecting Hispanics in Houston and implemented specific projects leading to improvements. Nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the service provided by the nominee.

**Youth Activist** - recognizes a young Hispanic between the ages of 15—25 for outstanding work in the community through volunteerism. All community projects must demonstrate leadership qualities that inspire our youth to become the future leaders in the Hispanic community. In addition to an application, nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the services rendered by the nominee for which this award is to be presented.

**Lifetime Achievement** - recognizes community leaders who have led a lifetime of community service in the Hispanic community. In addition to an application, nominations for this award must include a biography highlighting the services rendered by the nominee for which this award is to be presented.

### **NOMINATION CRITERIA**

- An individual currently engaged in **volunteer service** that improves the quality of life for Houstonians.
- Contribution and/or activity must have been performed in the city of Houston area for a minimum of one calendar year.
- Nominees are subject to background checks.
- Incomplete nominations will not be considered.
- Award recipients will be asked to attend a recognition event during Hispanic Heritage month at Houston's City Hall.
- Award recipients may be asked to do media interviews
- Elected officials may not be nominated
- **Nominees must live inside Houston city limits and be eligible to vote in Houston municipal elections**

### **DEADLINE**

**Nominations must be emailed or postmarked no later than Friday, August 30, 2024 for consideration.**

**2024 NOMINATION**

Please print clearly or type in the spaces below.



**Category** (choose only one)

- Arts in the Community
- Community Activist
- Education In the Community
- Healthcare
- Youth Activist
- Lifetime Achievement

**INDIVIDUAL NOMINEE**

(must live inside Houston city limits and be eligible to vote in Houston municipal elections)

Name: Hugo Ortega  
 Cell Phone: 832-723-6983 Other Phone:  
 Home Address:  
 City: Houston State: TX Zip:  
 E-mail: paula@pattersonandmurphy.com

**NOMINATOR**

Name: Priscila True  
 Cell Phone: 979-627-3790 Other Phone:  
 Home Address: 1021 W. 21st, Unit D  
 City: Houston State: TX Zip: 77008  
 E-mail: priscilamarietrue@gmail.com

**Submit via Mail or email the completed form**

- Nomination form (mandatory)
- Narrative statement or Letter of Recommendation (mandatory)
- Resume/Bio (mandatory)
- Other Supporting materials

**All mandatory materials must be submitted, to be considered.**

**E-mail to:**  
[Jackie.Schuessler-Kimsey@houstontx.gov](mailto:Jackie.Schuessler-Kimsey@houstontx.gov)

**Mail to:**  
 City of Houston  
 Attn: Jackie Schuessler-Kimsey (MHHA)  
 901 Bagby, 3<sup>rd</sup> floor  
 Houston, Texas 77002

**Deadline:** Postmarked by **August 30, 2024**



## **Hugo Ortega**

***Executive Chef/Co-owner***

***Backstreet Cafe, Hugo's, Caracol, Xochi and URBE***

Chef Ortega was named winner of Best Chef: Southwest at the prestigious 2017 James Beard Foundation Awards. (He was a finalist for the award for six consecutive years, 2012- 2017.)

Ortega has been recognized locally, nationally and globally for his inspirational story and his passion for sharing traditional Mexican cooking and culture.

Ortega's American Dream story started at Backstreet Cafe, a neighborhood bistro started by Tracy Vaught in 1983. He began his career in the restaurant business first as dishwasher and busboy and later as a line cook before graduating from culinary school and later becoming Backstreet's executive chef. He and

Vaught married, and together, they have created an award-winning Houston restaurant family – H Town Restaurant Group – that also includes Hugo's, Caracol, Xochi and URBE.

Ortega was born in Mexico City, the oldest of a family of eight children. At 15, he began working at one of several Procter & Gamble factories in Mexico to help support his family. In 1984, he immigrated to Houston with no contacts or job leads, but determined to make a life for himself in America. Slowly, step-by-step, Ortega began to set down roots in the bustling oil capitol. He shared an apartment with several friends, and followed up on leads for jobs in nearby restaurants. He was happy to find his first job, as a dishwasher, at a popular bar and nightclub. While the pay was meager, Ortega grabbed at the opportunity to learn the fundamentals of the restaurant business and find contacts to help him improve his English.

Later, Ortega cleaned the floors in office buildings to supplement his income. With an unexpected turn of bad luck, his roommates moved to California and he lost both of his jobs. He had no income and no place to live. A friend asked Hugo if he wanted to wash dishes and Hugo jumped at the chance. The friend took Hugo to Backstreet Cafe, and this is where the turning point of his life happened.

Ortega worked hard and showed an interest in working in the kitchen. In Mexico, he learned cooking from his mother and grandmother. Ortega was given a position on the line in the Backstreet kitchen, and he continued to advance from there. Impressed by his hard work and dedication, Vaught offered to enroll Ortega in the Culinary Arts program at Houston Community College. He jumped in with both feet.

Ortega graduated from HCC's Culinary Arts program in November 1992 and assumed the role of chef at Backstreet Cafe, then executive chef in 1995.

Ortega is passionate about sharing the traditional foods and culture of his native Mexico with diners. In 2002, he opened the critically acclaimed Hugo's, which brought Authentic Regional Mexican Cuisine to the forefront of dining. In 2013, the Ortega and Vaught opened their third concept, Caracol, a Mexican coastal kitchen highlighting the richness of seafood found along Mexico's 16 coastal states; and in January 2017 they opened Xochi, which celebrates the flavors of Oaxaca, Mexico, in the new Marriot

Marquis Houston Downtown. In 2021, they opened their most recent concept, URBE, celebrating the iconic street foods of Mexico.

Ortega has made three guest chef appearances at the prestigious James Beard House in New York City; and was named "Up-and-Coming Chef of the Year" in 1999 and Chef of the Year in 2012 and 2002 at the Houston Culinary Awards; among other accolades. His restaurants have been named "Top Table" by Bon Appetit; Best Restaurants in America by Eater; one of Houston's Four Top Latin Restaurants by Forbes Travel Guide; included in "What Makes Houston's the Next Great American City?" in Smithsonian Magazine, among others.

Ortega is author of two cookbooks - Hugo Ortega's Street Food of Mexico [Bright Sky Press, \$34.95], published in fall 2012 and selected by Saveur magazine as one of just six "essential Mexican cookbooks"; and Backstreet Kitchen: Seasonal Recipes From Our Neighborhood Cafe [Inwood Publishing, \$34.95], to celebrate Backstreet Cafe's 30th anniversary.

Tracy and Hugo are investors in the award-winning Origen restaurant in Oaxaca, Mexico, and created the menu for Hugo's Cocina at Houston's George Bush Intercontinental airport. Hugo is the first Mexican-born chef to win a James Beard Award, and June 20, 2017 was declared Hugo Ortega Day in Houston by Mayor Sylvester Turner in honor of the award; and Hugo was bestowed the 2017 Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award from Southern Foodways Alliance. In 2019, Vaught established the Hugo Ortega Endowment Houston Community College's Culinary Arts Program to support current and future HCC culinary students, and the lobby of the new building is named in Hugo's honor.



August 27, 2024

City of Houston  
901 Bagby, 3rd floor  
Houston, Texas 77002

2024 MAYOR'S HISPANIC HERITAGE AWARDS

Dear Nomination Committee,

I am delighted to write this letter of recommendation for Chef Hugo Ortega for the Lifetime Achievement Award for the Mayor's Hispanic Heritage Awards. His extraordinary career and unwavering dedication have left an indelible mark not only in Houston but on the international culinary stage. The Consulate General of Israel has had the pleasure of working with Chef Hugo and his team for a culinary exchange honoring Hispanic Heritage Month in 2023.

Chef Ortega's journey to success is nothing short of inspirational. As the executive chef and co-owner of five renowned Houston restaurants—Backstreet Cafe, Hugo's, Caracol, Xochi, and URBE—he has redefined the culinary landscape with his commitment to excellence. His impressive accolade being named Best Chef: Southwest by the James Beard Foundation in 2017 underscores his exceptional talent and dedication. Notably, he stands as a handful of chefs to receive this prestigious honor in Houston, highlighting his remarkable achievement in the culinary arts. As a successful businessman, Chef Ortega utilizes his success to elevate other Houstonians, playing a vital role in bridging Latino culture and creating jobs in our city. His efforts have significantly contributed to establishing Houston as a world-renowned gastronomical hub.

Beyond his professional achievements, Chef Ortega's commitment to giving back to the community is truly commendable. His willingness to collaborate with the Consulate on the "Sabor a Shalom" event exemplifies a generosity that extends beyond our city and touches other communities. This spirit of collaboration with one of Houston's Israeli chefs reflects his deep-rooted commitment to enriching the lives of others, further showcasing his dedication to making a positive impact through his craft by sharing Mexican cuisine.

Chef Ortega's life story is a testament to the American Dream and serves as a powerful role model for aspiring restaurateurs, chefs, and young entrepreneurs. His journey from working as a dishwasher to becoming a celebrated chef and restaurant owner is a powerful narrative of perseverance, passion, and success. His ability to rise from humble beginnings to achieve such remarkable success in a highly competitive field is truly inspiring and offers a beacon of hope to many young professionals in the industry.

In summary, Chef Hugo Ortega is an exceptional individual whose achievements as a chef, entrepreneur, and community advocate are truly deserving of recognition. It is my pleasure to recommend him for this award, and should you have any questions please contact my office at 832-301-3501 or [cg-sec@houston.mfa.gov.il](mailto:cg-sec@houston.mfa.gov.il).

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Livia Link Raviv'.

Livia Link Raviv  
Consul General of Israel to the Southwest





**COOK LIKE A TEXAN**

# Texas Monthly

THE NATIONAL MAGAZINE OF TEXAS

**FRY IT.  
SMOKE IT.  
GRILL IT.**

**HOW TO  
MAKE  
10 CLASSIC  
DISHES,  
FROM  
BEEF  
RIBS TO  
BISCUITS**

**Hugo Ortega's** famous grilled oysters draw fans from all over Houston. Learn how to make them yourself on page 93.

**Plus:  
THE TEXANIST  
WOULD NEVER  
PUT BEANS  
IN HIS CHILL.  
WOULD HE?**

THE GREAT  
GRAPEVINE  
QUILTING  
KERFUFFLE

*by Rachel Monroe*

KEN PAXTON  
HOPES YOU SAW  
HIM ON TELEVISION

*by R.G. Ratcliffe*

SEARCHING FOR  
THE AMERICAN  
DREAM IN AMARILLO

*by Katy Vine*



HOUSTON

RESTAURANT NEWS BRIEF

# Chef Hugo Ortega Donates More Than \$100K to Fund Culinary Arts Scholarships

Plus, a Houston restaurant plans to serve a “natural Viagra” pill on Valentine’s Day and more Bayou City dining intel

by [Brittanie Shey](#) | [@brittanieshey](#) | Feb 10, 2021, 10:28am CST



Chef Hugo Ortega



*Welcome to AM Intel in the time of coronavirus, a round-up of the city's newest bits of restaurant-related intel. Follow Eater on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) for up-to-date details on how COVID-19 is impacting the city's dining scene.*

## Chef Hugo Ortega makes big donation to fund culinary arts scholarships

A new endowment created by Chef Hugo Ortega and his family will give \$100,400 to current and future culinary arts students at Houston Community College. The endowment, which was made by Ortega, his wife Tracy Vaught, and their daughter Sophie Ortega, will help fund the scholarships to the community college. In addition, HCC will name its new Culinary Arts Building, which opened in 2019, after the chef.

Ortega's rise to become one of Houston most renown chefs is one for the story books. The Mexican immigrant first started working as a dishwasher at Backstreet Cafe before graduating from HCC's program in 1992. He eventually worked his way up to executive chef and now co-owns four restaurants with wife Tracy, with a fifth, Urbe, on the way. In 2017, Ortega won the James Beard award for Best Chef in the Southwest. He is considered one of the best-known graduates of the HCC Culinary Arts program.

## Musaafer will serve Kama Sutra-inspired "natural Viagra pill" for Valentine's Day

Over-the-top Galleria-area Indian restaurant Musaafer has a special treat in store for Valentine's Day diners — **a house-made herbal supplement meant to mimic the effects of boner pill Viagra**. The supplement, which executive chef Mayank Istwal is calling the V-pill, will include ashwagandha, Ayurvedic herbs, watermelon, blueberry, and Pop Rocks, "for textural sparkle", Istwal tells the Houston Chronicle. The supplement is part of a seven-course Valentine's Day menu inspired by the Kama Sutra, which will include "libido-boosting" spices and ingredients considered aphrodisiacs. Unfortunately, reservations for the meal are already sold out.

## Grubhub partners with Houston nonprofit for Black History Month fundraiser

Food delivery app Grubhub has partnered with Houston nonprofit Feed the Soul Foundation, a group associated with Black Restaurant Week, to help provide grants and emergency funding for Black restaurant owners. The program, called Donate the Change, allows who use Grubhub to round their order to the nearest dollar, and donate the change to a monthly featured charity.

Minority-owned businesses have been especially hard hit by the coronavirus pandemic and economic turndown, According to the Houston Chronicle, in 2020, Feed the Soul received hundreds of applications for their Restaurant Business Development Fund — **94 percent of those applicants were Black.**

The money raised from the Donate the Change program will go to several \$10,000 grants for restaurant owners to help with business development, as well as emergency funds for events like weather-related closures or accidents.

**E**

## Eater Houston

Sign up for our newsletter.

Email (required)

By submitting your email, you agree to our [Terms](#) and [Privacy Notice](#). You can opt out at any time. This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

SUBSCRIBE



## Houston Dynamo Football Club adds world-renowned chef Hugo Ortega to match day culinary team

Monday, Feb 13, 2023, 01:14 PM



Houston Dynamo Football Club announced today a multi-year agreement with James Beard Award-winning chef Hugo Ortega, who will collaborate with Levy, hospitality partner of the Club. Together they will elevate the food and beverage experience at Shell Energy Stadium and feature local restaurants, purveyors, and eclectic flavors from Houston's culinary community.

"We are thrilled to work with Hugo Ortega to reimagine the culinary experience that fans will enjoy this season and for years to come," Club majority owner and chairman, Ted Segal said. "It's vital that we bring the diverse and rich flavors of Houston into Shell Energy Stadium and this partnership provides us a tremendous opportunity to do so."

Ortega is an avid fan of the Club and has been supporting the Dynamo and Dash since the franchise relocated in 2006. Through his deep roots and passion for sharing the vibrant Houston culinary community, Ortega will work with Levy to curate a collection of food and beverage destinations throughout the stadium that feature diverse local businesses. Fans will feel that passion in the form of Houston's favorite and up-and-coming restaurants across the concourse, as well as new signature menus in club and suite areas influenced by Ortega's own favorite flavors. A full list of local vendors will be announced in the coming weeks and the revamped menu will debut on March 18 for the Dynamo home opener against Austin FC.

"As a lifelong soccer fan – with a childhood dream of being a professional player – I am thrilled to join Houston Dynamo Football Club by doing what I do best: serving the food and drink of my homeland of Mexico," says Ortega. "There are so many wonderful changes happening at Shell Energy Stadium to enhance the fans' experience, and we know that the authentic Mexican cuisine that we will offer will be an exciting new part of cheering on our hometown team. We encourage people to come see and enjoy all the new changes in support of our club."

Ortega is the executive chef and co-owner of H Town Restaurant Group which operates Backstreet Cafe, Caracol, Hugo's, URBE and Xochi. The Houston-based, family-owned and operated hospitality group was founded by Ortega and his wife, Tracy Vaught. The Mexico City native immigrated to Houston in 1984 and transformed the culinary scene in the Bayou City for the last three decades.



Ortega is renowned for his hospitality offerings that champion the traditional foods and culture of his native country. His culinary career began at Backstreet Cafe in the late 1980s when he began as a dishwasher, then attended and graduated from the Culinary Arts Program at Houston Community College and became the restaurant's executive chef.

Ortega is the first Mexican-born chef to win a James Beard Foundation Award for Best Chef. He received the honor in 2017, his sixth consecutive nomination as a finalist. His list of honors includes the Chef of the Year award in 2002 and 2012 from the Houston Culinary Awards. Additionally, he was bestowed the Craig Claiborne Lifetime Achievement Award in 2016 from the Southern Foodways Alliance.



[Tickets](#) [Schedule](#) [News](#)

## Chef Hugo's Culinary Offerings



**1/6** Tacos de Barbacoa

“As we continue to prioritize the fan experience, this is another impactful project that has been in the works for months,” Club chief operating officer, Jessica O’Neill said. “With feedback from our supporters and stakeholders, we will work with chef Hugo to curate a more authentic and uniquely-Houston approach to match day.”

Shell Energy Stadium will open to the public for the first time to Dynamo fans on March 18 and for the first time to Dash fans on March 26 for each team’s respective home openers. These matches will be the first opportunity for fans to enjoy the all-inclusive air-conditioned club on the east concourse. Additional renovation projects include all-new mesh seats throughout the seating bowl. The multi-million-dollar renovations began in November 2022.

---

Club Sites

---

Tickets

---

Members

---

Club

---

MLS

---

**FOOD**

# A history of Hugo's, from 1930s soda fountain to Houston's best Mexican restaurant

As the Montrose mainstay celebrates 20 years, chef Hugo Ortega and Tracy Vaught discuss their flagship restaurant's even older history.

By **Megha McSwain**, *Former food reporter*

Updated April 8, 2023 8:55 a.m.



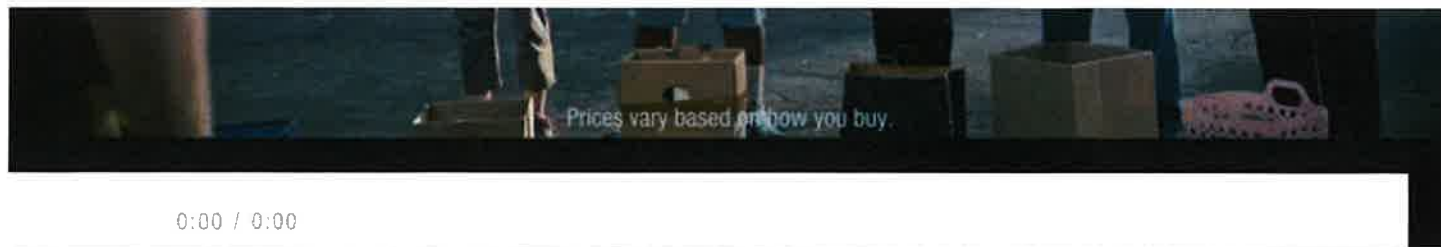


Hugo's in Houston celebrated 20 years in 2022.  
H-Town Restaurant Group

For a 19-years-young Hugo Ortega, owning a building on Westheimer Road in Montrose seemed like an impossible dream. Ortega arrived in Houston from Mexico in 1984, was unemployed, and had only his cousin as a connection in the city.







"I used to go by Westheimer looking for work," he said. "In passing the buildings, including the one where Hugo's is now, I would think to myself: 'I wonder how much it would cost to buy one of these buildings.'"

Little did he know that one day, he would open his own restaurant on that block, Hugo's, which celebrates its 20th anniversary this year. He would also go on to build his H-Town Restaurant Group, becoming one of the most renowned chefs in Houston. Acclaimed concepts Xochi, Caracol and Urbe followed.

---

**ADVERTISEMENT**

Article continues below this ad

---



Chef Hugo Ortega was a James Beard Foundation Award "Best Chef: Southwest" finalist for six consecutive years, then finally won in 2017.

Michael Paulsen/Houston Chronicle

But at the time, the young Newstonian had no idea what he would have done with such prime real estate. "I was just thinking that I want to do something with my life. I knew I wanted to be successful," he said.

The structure he was eyeing at 1600 Westheimer had a storied past dating back to 1926. It was designed by [Joseph Finger](#), a well-respected architect who worked on many hotels in town, the original River Oaks Country Club, and later on Houston City Hall, completed in 1935. After it was built, Finger held court there with an office adjacent to Mading's Drugstore, which housed a soda fountain. The building was eventually taken over in its entirety by Imperial Plumbing Supply, until it closed in the '90s. Hugo's would be the next name to grace the door.



Hugo's then and now. (Photos courtesy of H-Town Restaurant Group)

Ortega didn't know it then, but a suggestion to apply for a job at [Backstreet Cafe](#), by a friend he played soccer with, would be the catalyst for the start of his legendary culinary career. The fateful step would lead him to owning the very building that inspired him in his early years in Houston.

"He was aggressive," said Tracy Vaught, owner of Backstreet Cafe and Ortega's now-wife. "He started as a dishwasher, became a busser, and then started to cook."



Tracy Vaught (center) talks with staff before the first ever service at Hugo's in 2002.  
Melissa Phillip/Houston Chronicle

By 1990, a romantic relationship sparked between the two. It was after dining out together many times that Vaught began putting the wheels in motion on opening a restaurant to serve food from Ortega's native Mexico. "When we would go to any Mexican restaurant in Houston, he didn't recognize any of the food," she said, citing choices like The Original Ninfa's, which were mainly Tex-Mex then. "He would say: 'I don't know what nachos are, what a burrito is, what a taco salad is...'"

Ortega was new to cooking American food at Backstreet Cafe, but he was experienced in cooking Mexican food long before that. Vaught figured, at his own Mexican restaurant, he could introduce Houston diners to the foods he grew up eating. And so the idea for Hugo's namesake restaurant was born.



**ADVERTISEMENT**  
Article continues below this ad



A snap of the 1930s-era soda fountain housed in the same building where Hugo's is today.

H-Town Restaurant Group

As a lifelong Houstonian, Vaught was more than familiar with Montrose, a progressive pocket of the city with an eclectic mix of restaurants. "A lot of artists, writers, and gay people lived there," she recalled. "It was always an artsy neighborhood that appealed to us as young people." When Andrew Kaldis, a longtime Houston real estate developer, phoned Vaught about the former Imperial Plumbing space becoming available, she made it clear she wanted it.

Vaught and Ortega leased the property and completely renovated the space to turn it into a restaurant. The transformation included building a kitchen in a room previously used for storage, and adding a bar. They chose to leave the original tin ceiling, which had been a feature across all of the businesses housed in the almost 100-year-old space. Hugo's opened its doors in 2002 and has been a cornerstone of Montrose dining ever since. The couple purchased the building from Kaldis in 2007.

---

**ADVERTISEMENT**

Article continues below this ad



Hugo's was previously a plumbing company. (Photos courtesy of H-Town Restaurant Group)

Vaught isn't shy about sharing the challenges she has faced in opening a restaurant in an old building, but she does admit it's got its charm. "I love the idea of reusing a building that's been around, a building which has some historical significance," she said. "When you visit other cities, those are the buildings that seem to be the most interesting."

The restaurant couple continue to keep things interesting, as they move the restaurant's existing patio to make way for private dining, something Hugo's has never had.

---

## More Food & Drink

**Champs** | [USA Gymnastics team got popular Houston burgers to go before trip](#)

**Gossip** | [Mytiburger owner unapologetic about recent rumors about restaurant](#)

**Celebrity** | [Wisconsin fast food chain Culver's debuts JJ Watt meal collab](#)

**Scuba** | [Divers rescued from Matagorda Bay stop by popular Houston deli](#)