

Deep-Fried Fun

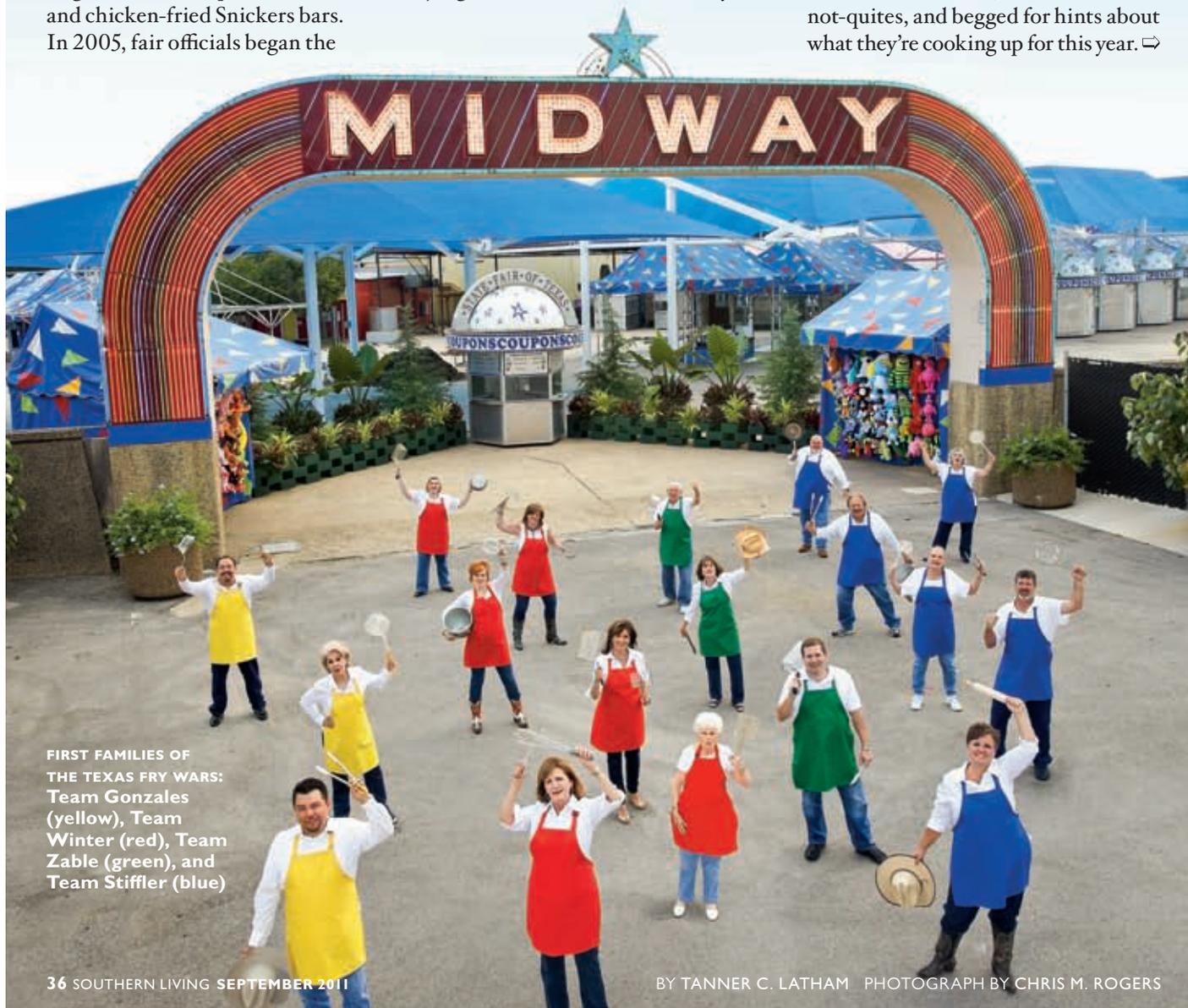
At the State Fair of Texas, an epic cook-off anoints the best fare at the fair. Meet four family dynasties (frynasties?) who often find themselves in the finals

Who knew you could fry a banana split? Or guacamole? Beer? Seriously? Yep. For several years, vendors at the State Fair of Texas, located at Dallas' Fair Park (Sept. 30-Oct. 23; bigtex.com), have been shattering culinary boundaries and revolutionizing the fair-food landscape. Forget fries and chicken fingers. Think deep-fried Twinkies and chicken-fried Snickers bars. In 2005, fair officials began the

Big Tex Choice Awards, a competition to see which vendor could bring new and unique food to the fair. Game: Changed. Frying quickly became king. At once, you had fried PB&J-and-banana sandwiches and fried Coca-Cola (along with a "Have you tried it?" word-of-mouth buzz) floating around the fairgrounds. Award-winner Abel Gonzales says a big win can increase sales up to 70%, and the judges see 50 to 60 entries each year.

Based on the descriptions, they whittle those down to eight finalists who compete in a Labor Day fry-off.

The awards have bred a friendly but oh-so-serious competition among the vendors. Everyone is tight-lipped about recipes. And in the last six contests, four vendor families, including Abel's, have emerged as elite powerhouses, frequent finalists year after year. We talked to each family about their fried successes, their fried not-quites, and begged for hints about what they're cooking up for this year. ⇨



FIRST FAMILIES OF THE TEXAS FRY WARS: Team Gonzales (yellow), Team Winter (red), Team Zable (green), and Team Stiffler (blue)

DEEP-FRIED PEDIGREE	FRIED AND TRUE	NICE FRY, BUT NO CIGAR	THIS YEAR'S ENTRY
 <p>THE GONZALES: Abel Gonzales, a former computer analyst, makes his living in the 24 days of fair madness, joined by his parents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and four sisters. With four Choice Award wins, an interview with Oprah (he fed her 2007 Best Taste winner Fried Butter), and a charismatic personality, Abel is a media darling. "During the fair, I'm all in carnie mode thinking about next year's contest," says the fair vet.</p>	<p>2005 Best Taste: Fried Peanut Butter and Jelly and Banana Sandwiches; 2006 Most Creative: Fried Coke; and more.</p> 	<p>"Fried peppermint candy was not so good, and fried cotton candy was my Waterloo," says Abel. "But I see things like that more as unfinished products than failures."</p>	<p>"Maybe something savory, but I've said that the last three years and have ended up going with something sweet."</p> 
 <p>THE WINTERS: For the Winters, the State Fair of Texas is the stage for their life's big moments. Matriarch Wanda "Fernie" Winter was the first to sell funnel cakes here with her husband. Her daughter Johnna Winter McKee went into labor while making said funnel cakes. Johnna's daughter, Ashly McKee Esses, was married at the fairgrounds. (Her bridal portrait features the Ferris wheel in the background.)</p>	<p>2009 Best Taste: Fernie's Deep Fried Peaches and Cream. Finalists with Fried Chocolate Burrito, Fried Mac 'n' Cheese, Fried Grilled Cheese Sandwich, Fried Club Salad, and more.</p>	<p>"We haven't had flops, but I think that's probably because we don't fry anything too outlandish," says Christi LaBarba Erpillo, one of Wanda's daughters and CFO (Chief Frying Officer).</p>	<p>"No! I'm not going to tell you," Christi says with a laugh. "Those people are cutthroat," referring to her fellow competitors. The Winters' recipes are still in the works.</p>
 <p>THE ZABLES: Mark Zable made a splash (well, more like a warm squish) last year with his Fried Beer, a deep-fried pretzel-dough dumpling filled with Shiner Bock. But that wasn't Mark's first lap around the pool. His father, Norman, was just out of law school at SMU in 1964 when he bought the Belgian waffle concession rights (the first to do so) at the State Fair of Texas. This year will mark their family's 47th fair.</p>	<p>2010 Most Creative: Fried Beer. Finalist with Chocolate Covered Strawberry Waffle Balls and Sweet Jalapeño Corn Dog Shrimp</p> 	<p>"I tried to make a deep-fried milkshake, and it was a total disaster," Mark says. "It just made a really big mess in my deep fryer."</p>	<p>"My new product will necessitate a legal review," says Mark with a mysterious smile, "and it will be awesome. That's all I am willing to share for now."</p>
 <p>THE STIFFLERS: Tammy Stiffler married into a family that's been vendors since the 1960s. Her husband, Rick, and his brother, Mike, took over the booth from their uncle Charlie in 2005. For inspiration, she leads monthly family get-togethers where everyone brings a fryer, ideas, and ingredients for a fry-off. She says she wants to be the Texas version of Paula Deen.</p>	<p>Finalists a number of years of the competition with such offerings as Fried S'Mores (one of the hottest-selling items at the fair) and Fried Lemonade.</p> 	<p>"Fried cotton candy, because it disappears," says Tammy.</p>	<p>"It's still a work in progress, but I can say we have both sweet and savory items," says Tammy. "I also will say we believe we have a winner for the Big Tex Choice Awards 2011!"</p>

TOP TO BOTTOM: STEVE STOCK/ALAMY; D. HURST/ALAMY; DICK MAKIN/ALAMY; COURTESY CHATTANOOGA BAKERY, INC.; COURTESY KEVIN BROWN/STATE FAIR OF TEXAS



WHAT NOT TO MISS While you can't actually attend the Big Tex Choice Awards, be sure to sample the fried fair fare, then head to one of the concerts during this year's 24-day run, including **KC and the Sunshine Band** and **Pat Benatar**. Stroll the two giant

buildings full of automobiles, concept cars, and displays sharing technological advances in the industry. Meet our own Grumpy Gardener, Steve Bender, at **Greenhouse on the Midway**, an 8,000-square-foot horticultural wonder—hanging baskets on moving tracks overhead, the *Southern Living* Plant Collection, and a talk by the likes of famed Texas garden author Bill Welch. Editor-at-large Kimberly Schlegel Whitman will share tips for designing beautiful tabletops.

Plan Your Trip!

WHERE TO STAY

Several chain properties (from Westin to Embassy Suites to Hampton Inn) sit a short drive from the fairgrounds, but our lodging pick is the **Belmont Hotel**. This low-key but stylish property was originally built in 1946 and wonderfully renovated in 2005. Chef Tim Byres keeps his menu at **Smoke**, the adjoining restaurant, locally sourced and creative. Rates start at \$109 (901 Fort Worth Avenue; belmontdallas.com).

HOW TO AVOID THE CROWDS

Crowds are lightest Tuesdays-Thursdays. Go at 10 a.m.—parking is easy and there are no lines for food. Largest attendance is the day of the Texas vs. Oklahoma football game (Oct. 8). Columbus Day is the second largest. Miss traffic by taking the green line on the **DART light rail** (dart.org) to the Fair Park Station or the MLK, Jr. Station. Ages 60 and over get in free each Thursday. Ride coupon prices are reduced on Tuesdays. [SL](#)