

# The Texas Livestock Massacre

On a roadtrip round the Lone Star State, **Laura Goodman** eats a whole herd's worth of the world's best burgers – with a side order of vintage Americana

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **JOE SCHMELZER**



Flying the flag: get the authentic US diner experience at Hut's Hamburgers in Austin



Bun times: the Alan Freed Burger, with hickory sauce, at Hut's in Austin. Opposite, clockwise from top left, room 53 at the Belmont hotel in Dallas; Keller's, Dallas; Richie Valens burger at Hut's; the Belmont exterior; Austin Motel; pool at the Belmont; Chris Madrid's in San Antonio; steak house on Highway 90; the bar at Hut's



**U**nder normal circumstances, I wouldn't be this excited about my seventh burger. But here I am, in the passenger seat of our Texas-sized car, fixating on the bottom-right corner of the TomTom, where an ETA is displayed – 22 minutes. Next to me, in the driving seat, my boyfriend Rich is trying to do it in 21, such is the rumbling of his own stomach.

To look at us, you might not believe we've been filling our faces for 10 days solid. We've grazed on tater tots (cylindrical hash browns), slurped down shakes like they were water, and shared nana pudding (bananas and custard) with cowboys. We've even sent back six buffalo wings because we were too stuffed to be near them.

And why? Because of what's been happening in London. There, burgers have somehow become the new sushi. Diligent foodies and scenesters now scour the internet for the addresses of pop-up joints and hot-this-week restaurants with names like MeatLiquor or Lucky

Chip, then queue for hours to order such self-consciously cool delicacies as the 'Dead Hippie' burger or the 'Kelly LeBrock'. And what do they get? A pale imitation of the exquisite original that can still be had for \$2 (£1.30) at any old roadhouse in small-town USA.

I know this because of a book called *Hamburger America – A State-by-State Guide to 150 Great Burger Joints*. Its author, George Motz, has taught a course on hamburgers at New York University, been a consultant for numerous burger restaurants, and even coaxed his wife away from lifelong vegetarianism. I trust him.

And it's clear to me, when I look at his book for the first time, that I need to eat everything in it; but equally clear that this will not be possible for as long as I have a mortgage and want a waist. I have to narrow things down – and, unsurprisingly, the state with the most Motz-endorsed burgers within its borders is Texas. The South, it seems, kept calm and carried on griddling, while carb-counting East and West Coasters went all macrobiotic.

Even more persuasively, it's apparent that in Texas, the burger lives symbiotically with all that is best and most beautiful in >





Table manners: inside Chris Madrid's in San Antonio. Opposite, Stars & Stripes in Lampasas, Texas; the Tostada Burger at Chris Madrid's



## While carb-counting East and West Coasters went all macrobiotic, the South kept calm and carried on griddling

American nostalgia, and I'm as excited about retro Coca-Cola signs, diner booths, malt shakes, drive-ins and cowboy boots as I am about those juicy little American sandwiches.

I plan myself a 'burger loop' – flying in and out of Dallas, circling the state in between – that I hope will take me to the heart of the real America. And within an hour of landing, it feels like my plan is working, as our Englishness clashes spectacularly against a backdrop of red pick-up trucks and glorious neon. Keller's in Dallas is a drive-thru in the truest sense – a car park with a little, garage-style kitchen. An old poster instructs us to 'turn on blinkers for service', so we spend a few jet-lagged minutes discussing what a blinker might be (hazard lights), and a further few grappling around in the giant car to find them. In a flash, our 'carhop' arrives. We order a #5 (Motz's choice: double meat, double cheese, lettuce, tomato, 'special sauce') and a cheeseburger with pickles and mustard.

The burgers are just the things we've been hankering after – perfect parcels of mingly, meaty loveliness, the melted American cheese seeping through the slimline patties, inside squishy, lightly seeded buns; mine fits in my hand like the on-the-go snack the hamburger was designed to be. Once we've cleaned up, we head straight to our hotel – and bed. The *only* place to stay in Dallas on a trip like this one is the Belmont Hotel. An original 1940s motor hotel, its twinkling, fairy-lit bar and lobby area have a kitschy retro aesthetic, but our little bungalow is modern and blissful, with views of downtown that fill the enormous window when we wake.

We've planned our route intentionally to include a couple of places we've never heard of, one of which is little Washington-on-

the-Brazos, a 'town' two hours north of Houston, where the Texas Declaration of Independence was signed. As we get closer, the land is littered with starry ranch signs, randomly located horse troughs and ominous-looking standalone houses made of MDF; the roads get twistier and the air looks dustier – like in the movies.

At the town's Star of the Republic museum, we get the lowdown on Davy Crockett and the Battle of the Alamo (it turns out these were Real Things, not just film fodder) before moving on to the serious task in hand. On an otherwise empty stretch of the town's main highway, 105 Grocery is barely a grocery store. It deals in Twinkies, cans of Doctor Pepper and scratchcards (there are over 50 varieties by the till).

But in the back right corner, among the washing powder, Raid and Ajax, there are a few tatty tables, occupied by hungry gentlemen in their cowboy hats. The only free seats are next to a jukebox housing the tunes of LeAnn Rimes and Conway Twitty; as Shania Twain fades out, we panic. We already look out of place – silly Londoners in pursuit of the 'Real Deal'. So we could do without choosing the wrong song.

I hit the 'most popular selection' button with relief, and as Merle Haggard and George Jones begin their jaunty lament, *I Haven't Found Her Yet*, our nearest neighbour looks up from his reel of scratchies and shouts – in an accent so authentic it could be fake – 'You're playin' my favourite song!' And our burgers arrive. Each patty weighs half a pound, so we've stuck with singles, but they're still substantial, magnificent. I am buzzing about the realness of the whole event, but I'm also beaten. I snooze all the way to Houston. >



Red alert: iconic signage is abundant in Texas; right: exhibit in Washington-on-the-Brazos's Star of the Republic Museum, where you can also learn about Davy Crockett



TEXAS

## Lankford Grocery is kitsch, pink, fairy-lit and 'the kind of place where you can order a burger for breakfast'. So we do

Houston is a big, brash city – we mainly drive around it, but it looks grey and dense and steamy-hot. And, perhaps because the city is so intense, its neighbourhoods are super-chilled and home to the kind of local eateries you wish you could revisit tomorrow. And the next day. Ad infinitum. Lankford Grocery & Market sits on a nondescript residential street, with friendly dogs tied up by the door. Inside, it's beautifully kitsch, pink and wonky, festooned with fairy lights and tinsel arranged in heart shapes, and pink PVC tablecloths decorated with Love Hearts.

According to Motz, this is 'the kind of place you can order a burger for breakfast', so Rich goes in hard, ordering the Philly Cheeseburger with fried onions, bell peppers and spicy mayo. I order soft, silly oatmeal but am unable to resist the allure of frickles (deep-fried sliced pickles).

As we await our nosh, our mugs of coffee slide down the table with the slant of the wooden floorboards, while a waitress warns a group of breakfasting bin-men that she's got a lot of trash this week.

The frickles come first – salty, briny little snackables that taste weird with coffee, but we don't let that stop us. Rich's burger is huge, wrapped tightly in waxed paper, as if to tame it. Its cross-section is formidable. I notice that he's getting in a tizz – it is spicy and serious, and it looks as though it might consume him.

On the way out, we grab a vanilla malt (US roadtrip rule No. 1: keep your cupholders fully loaded), and owner Eydie catches our alien accents. We tell her we are here by way of George Motz, and she confirms the truth that Londoners are just beginning to grasp: 'There's nothing better than a good burger, huh?'

Food is everywhere in Texas. Every five minutes spent on the road yields another Arby's (sandwiches), Dickey's (barbecued meat) or Popeye's (fried chicken). And the grub is, of course, as massive as it is prolific. If you want a supesize experience you won't regret, make your burger Macho at Chris Madrid's in San Antonio. In Motz's book, this is the page that made me drool the most. The picture is not everyone's cup of tea. It features a sunshine-yellow swamp of cheese, cascading from a giant golden bun (when it comes to burgers, I am fiercely pro processed cheese).

Chris Madrid's is a giant beer-hall-style building with ceiling fans and old Coors Light signs. Before we order, a kindly regular spies our inexperience and advises us, with a frantic, wide-eyed nod: 'If you like cheese, get the Cheddar.' But we've had other instructions. The Tostada Burger is, according to Motz, 'a better reason to eat at Chris Madrid's'. It's made up of beef patty, refried beans, cheese, diced onions and homemade corn chips. Usually I would avoid this sort of filling jamboree, but there is something about the oozy, squishy nature of this one that has me spellbound. The bun is sticky on top – it's borderline brioche – and has no chance of holding everything together, so we dig in with our cutlery.

In San Antonio, you can park up and stroll around, which is novel ('people are walking!', I cried, when we pulled in). The city is lovely – European and chic with pretty buildings featuring only a modicum of glassiness. There's a holiday atmosphere, and we spend quality time pottering, shopping and sipping frozen Margaritas.

But it's in Austin that I find the kind of guesthouse I imagined when I dreamed up this whole nutty trip. Beyond the Austin Motel's >

## In the style of a Western hero swinging through saloon doors, I proclaim: 'We came all the way from London'

landmark neon sign is a rare find: an affordable motel, family-owned since 1938, with a gorgeous '50s-style swimming pool. And it's on trendy South Congress Avenue, surrounded by shops selling modern art, vintage dresses and cowboy boots.

In fact, Austin proves to be so darn cool that stepping into Hut's Hamburgers – the home of *The Austin Chronicle's* best burger for 26 years – feels like stepping back in time. As Motz puts it, 'It's not on the party drag.' If you want an authentic diner, this place has the whole shebang: heaps of history, bouncy red and black booths, sports flags dangling from the ceiling, and couples slurping on single shakes with two straws. In our booth, we play spot the difference against a 30-year-old photo on the wall – as far as we can see, a blackboard has been replaced with a white one, and a huge buffalo head has been installed (to mark the fact they now offer buffalo meat for health-conscious regulars), but that's about it. Next to the picture, an old *Texas Monthly* review explains how house band DC Burrows, Maggie Mae and the Western Melodies used to play every Wednesday night, when ladies swung their big skirts around on the lino-tiled floor.

The burger list is a bit convoluted, so I brave The Alan Freed Burger, which is loaded with so much sweet, sticky hickory sauce that I can't taste the meat. Luckily, Rich has gone for The All American Buddy Holly Burger, with mayo, mustard, onions, pickles, tomato and American cheese. It's as reliable as its name suggests.

And now we're back where I started. That ETA. We are 90 minutes north of Dallas and 19 minutes from what promises to be the best burger on the face of the earth.

We roll past cows, truck stops, oil rigs and hitchhikers, beneath those blue, Texas-sized skies and their wispy ribbons of cloud. The incredible Herd's Hamburgers, in right-out-there Jacksboro, is run by fourth-generation owner Danny Herd, and consists of grill, till, fridge and seats. It doesn't serve fries, only crisps. The walls are covered in crayoned customer tributes, honours from the Texas House of Representatives, and old photos of Danny's relatives.

He has a great hunk of ground chuck steak sitting in the top-left corner of his flat-top griddle – exactly where Motz said it would be. When Danny gets an order, he uses a trowel to turn a wad of meat into a patty in one, seamless, swift motion. Once the patty's been flipped, the bottom of the bun is popped on top to warm. This mesmerising method is almost 100 years old.

As we walk in, a man reads from the lovingly graffiti'd wall, then comments in a thick Texan accent: 'These people came all the way from NYC for their burger!' And in the style of a Western hero swinging through saloon doors (or so I would like to imagine), I proclaim: 'Well, we came all the way from London!' We're handed a crayon, and Danny himself swings round from the grill to ask what brings us here. He says he hopes our next burger will be our best.

The burger is seductively thin – the meat is loose, crumbly and tender. It's the perfect vehicle for that gloopy American cheese, offering craters for it to trickle into. I am, by now, settled on my ideal extras – cheese, onions, mustard and pickles. Just like the Herd's. I will never use ketchup again. Danny pivots briefly away from the grill to ask how the burgers are...

'Gone too soon', is our forlorn reply. ■



TEXAS

Good to go: the #5 burger with tater tots at Keller's drive-thru

## Get me there

### GO INDEPENDENT

**American Airlines** (0844 499 7300, www.aa.com) flies from Heathrow to Dallas from £620 return. Or you could start your hamburger loop elsewhere: **United** (00 1 800 864 8331, www.united.com) has flights from Heathrow to Houston.

### GET AROUND

**Holiday Autos** (0871 472 5229, www.holidayautos.co.uk) has 10 days' car hire from Dallas airport from £184.

### WHERE TO STAY

**Dallas: Belmont Hotel** (00 1 866 870 8010, www.belmontdallas.com; doubles from £70, room only). **Brenham** (near 105 Grocery): **The Ant Street Inn** (00 1 800 481 1951, www.antstreetinn.com; doubles from £88, B&B) is a super-cute Washington townhouse, and filled with antiques, log fires and four-posters. **Houston: Hotel Indigo** is equal measures boutique and business, in a handy uptown location. There are well-located Indigos across Texas (0871 942

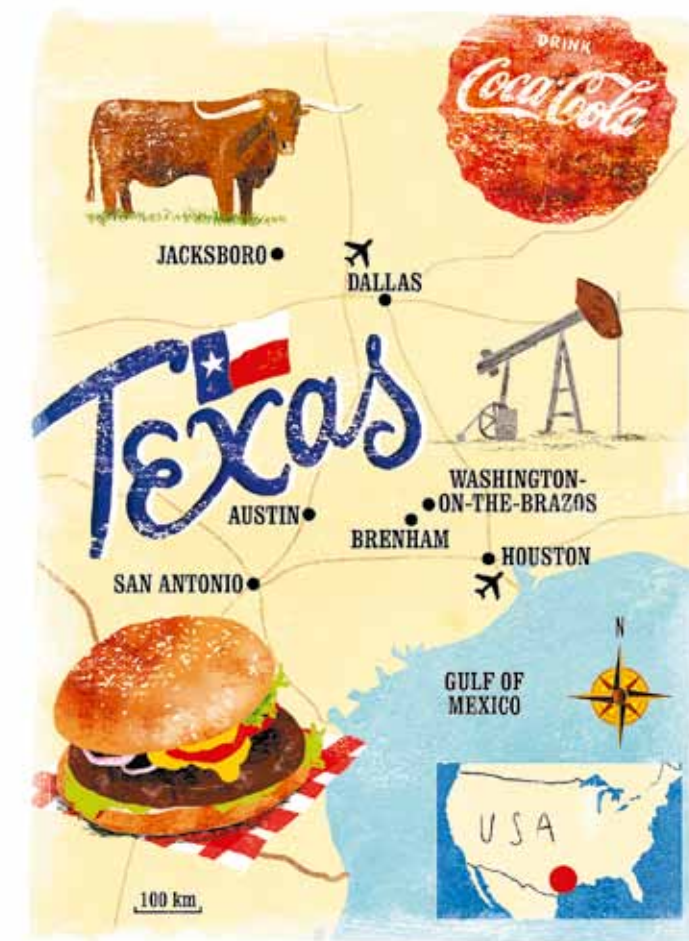
9242, www.ichotelsgroup.com; doubles from £104, room only). **San Antonio: The Hotel Contessa** (00 1 210 229 9222, www.thehotelcontessa.com; doubles from £105, room only) is a swish, suite-only treat on the river. **Austin: Austin Motel** (00 1 512 441 1157, www.austinmotel.com; doubles from £70, room only).

### THE BURGERS

**Keller's** (6537 E Northwest Highway, Dallas; 00 1 214 368 1209; burgers £1.10-£1.80). **105 Grocery & Deli** (17255 Texas Highway 105, Washington; 00 1 936 878 2273; burgers £2.85). **Lankford Grocery & Market** (88 Dennis St, Houston; 00 1 713 522 9555; burgers £3-£5.40). **Chris Madrid's** (1900 Blanco Rd, San Antonio; 00 1 210 735 3552, www.chrismadrids.com; burgers £3-£5). **Herd's Hamburgers** (400 N Main St, Jacksboro; burgers £3.35-£5.25)

### THE BURGER BIBLE

See www.hamburgeramerica.com.



MAP: SCOTT JESSOP

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