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Strange relationship: Unusually good, unusual flavor combinations in Austin

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By Justin Davis June 17, 2010

Take two great things and throw them together unexpectedly—say, some candy factory worker with an armful of chocolate stumbles into a coworker who happens to be carrying a jar of peanut butter. Suddenly, they’ve created an amazing combination of flavors that tastes like it should’ve always existed. Luckily for Austin diners, these kinds of happy accidents (or intentional experiments) happen all the time at the city’s eateries. Of course, those efforts tend to get overshadowed every time some fool in a food trailer throws unorthodox toppings on a dessert pastry. With that in mind, *The A.V. Club* looks to shine light on those whose culinary risk-taking isn’t always widely acknowledged, those who are consistently mixing and matching foods and cooking methods in unusual manners—yielding unusually delicious results.

The restaurant: **Foreign & Domestic Food & Drink** (306 East 53rd Street, 512-459-1010)

The dish: F & D Poppy Cock

The combination: Candied popcorn, spiced up with pork rinds

The surprise inside the first item on the newly opened restaurant’s playful menu isn’t a chintzy sticker or plastic jewelry—it’s pork rinds, the puffed pork snack more commonly associated with

truck stops than fine dining. Avoiding the frequently medicinal taste of bagged pork rinds, Foreign & Domestic's airy, crisp take on them carries a hint of cayenne, and the flavor ably combines with the toffee and fried peanuts to create a uniquely sweet and salty snack. The appetizer pairs excellently with The Cyclist, an odd and dangerously addictive cocktail made with Full Sail Session Lager, preserved lemon, and ginger beer.

The restaurant: **Hot Boiled** (2501 W Parmer Lane, Suite 550, 512-833-9057)

The dishes: Cajun crawfish bombs and Cajun crawfish pho

The combinations: East meets West, by way of European imperialism

Some restaurants don't bother with small changes—they seek to perplex diners with a fusion of cultures. Tucked away in a strip mall at the intersection of I-35 and Parmer Lane, Hot Boiled's pho and crawfish bridges the gap between Vietnamese and Cajun food with an ease likely rooted in a shared history of French colonization. The decor, however, has greater trouble rectifying those differences, juxtaposing wild Mardi Gras iconography against serene pictures of life in Vietnam. The saxophone-playing crawfish on the New Orleans-themed mural may call to mind Jon Hamm's greasy *Saturday Night Live* horn-blower **Sergio**, but you can take out your ill feelings toward the musical crustacean with Hot Boiled's Cajun crawfish bombs, wontons filled with crawfish tails wrapped in minced pork. Served with Cajun cocktail sauce, the bombs are smaller, more tightly wrapped, and have a much heartier crunch than the standard wonton.

Crawfish tails crop up again in Hot Boiled's take on the traditional Vietnamese noodle soup pho, mingling with sliced, spicy sausage in a slightly murky and rich broth with Cajun seasonings. A large bowl is big enough for two people—or one of those **obese infants** featured on *The Maury Povich Show*—but beware, baby: The “medium spicy” packs a powerful kick. A spoonful of just crawfish or just sausage reignites the decor's bipolarity, but eat them together for a hint of an über-light gumbo.

The restaurant: **24 Diner** (600 N. Lamar Blvd., 512-472-5400)

The dish: Bacon Gorgonzola burger

The combination: A twist on an American favorite that could forever alter a major religion

This classed-up all-night diner currently substitutes the buns on a majority of its hamburgers with challah, a bread typically served during the Sabbath, Jewish holidays, and whenever Jews *or* gentiles feel like picking up a loaf from Central Market. Why is this tauntingly tasty combination potentially blasphemous? The hamburger topping that goes best with 24's buttery, lightly toasted buns is a not-quite-kosher strip of applewood-smoked bacon. Nonetheless, each bite into the challah-bacon amalgamation could make even the most devout rabbi question his faith.

The restaurant: **Aster's Ethiopian Restaurant** (2804 N. IH-35, 512-469-5966)

The dish: Kitfo**The combination:** Steak in Texas, minus the fire

This one's more of a subtraction than a combination: In a state that elevates appreciation for huge hunks of beef grilled over an open fire to a near religious fervor, Aster's boldly peddles an Ethiopian steak dish that spends either mere seconds on the grill or skips the heat entirely. (How's that for blasphemy?) Not that this minced tartar is likely to make you miss the taste of charred flesh, as Aster's seasons its kitfo with herbed clarified butter, mit'mit'a (a concoction of dried ground chiles, salt, cloves, and cardamom seeds), and other traditional Ethiopian spices.
