

Elgin: 'Sausage Capital of Texas' Cow-Patty Bingo, barbecue joints, brick factory add flavor to Central Texas town

By By Nicolas Brulliard (Daily Texan Staff)

ELGIN - Gentle slopes, historical buildings and antique stores make Elgin a typical Central Texas town, but one asset undoubtedly sets it apart from its neighbors: sausage. "A lot of folks come to Elgin for sausage," said Amy Stallard Miller, economic and community development director at the city of Elgin. "We produce well over 3 million pounds of sausage a year."

Located about 20 miles east of Austin, Elgin was founded in 1872 by the Houston and Central Railroad. The town was named after one of the company's land commissioners, Robert Morris Elgin, whose Scottish name was pronounced with a hard "g." The pronunciation remains today "as in 'begin,' not as in 'liquor gin,'" Miller said.

Home to about 6,000 Elginites, Elgin also hosts three sausage plants, which prompted the Texas Legislature to officially christen the city "Sausage Capital of Texas" in 1995. All three factories have their own adjacent restaurant, and all three are regularly ranked among the top barbecue restaurants in the state, Miller said. Southside Market and BBQ Inc. is the oldest one in town and has been making and serving sausage since 1882. For owner Ernest Bracewell Sr., success lies in the recipe itself. "That's the way we make it, and the ingredients we put in it," he said.

Unlike most sausages, the Elgin specialty is not composed of pork, but beef products. Plate, a piece of meat located just below the ribs, tripe and beef liver constitute the bulk of the sausage, but spices, water and pork intestine used to hold the sausage together all come together in a recipe known only to the owner and his son. Southside Market's sausage plant is federally inspected every morning before any sausage is made, said Southside Market comptroller Dustin Manhart, and the level of cleanliness at the end of the day appeared impeccable. Describing the sausage-making process, Manhart pointed to various pieces of glittering machinery. "Here is where you add the spices and ... a little bit of water," he said. "This is the sausage stuffer ... It shoots your sausage through this thing, and right here is where you get your sausage."

Most of Southside Market's business comes from the restaurant, where around 10,000 pounds of sausage are cooked and served on busy Saturdays, Manhart said. But the company also sells its products in local grocery stores, including some in Austin. Elgin sausage enthusiasts in

other parts of the country need not despair, as Southside Market ships sausage nationwide. "We ship this stuff to Washington, D.C., New York City, California. We ship this stuff all over," Manhart said. "It shows up on your front porch still frozen."

Elgin's dining scene, although predominantly sausage- and barbecue-oriented, leaves room for diversity ... And for Telephone Jim's Catfish Parlor. Born and raised in Beaumont, SBC employee Jim Christian and his wife Janet recently moved to Elgin, renovated an old brick building downtown and have been serving Vietnamese catfish since last year. "It's not Texas catfish, because Texas catfish to our palates is muddy," Janet Christian said. Christian faces tough competition from sausage restaurants, but she's had some encouraging results. "I've had a lot of conversions," she said. "People say, 'Oh no, I don't eat catfish,' and they eat catfish now." Her restaurant might satisfy sausage purists as well with its boudin, a Cajun sausage served steamed or fried.

Livestock does not necessarily end up in sausages in Elgin. The Hogeye Festival, which takes place the fourth Saturday in October, gives plenty of inoffensive attention to a specific bovine. In Cow-Patty Bingo, the animal is kept in a fenced-in area and wanders over a painted grid with numbers until natural needs cause the cow to release a much expected pie. The square receiving the most matter wins the biggest prize, but neighboring squares lead to small prizes as well. Decisions are made in a very formal manner. "We have official Cow-Patty judges," Miller said.

Before getting its fame from the sausage industry, Elgin was known at the turn of the century as the Brick Capital of the Southwest. The town's brick plants provided 5 million bricks to build the state Capitol, and the four remaining plants are still flourishing today. "My guess is those plants are putting out 150 million bricks a year," said Russ Butler, president of the Elgin-Butler Brick Company.

Demand for sausage does not seem ready to decline, either. "We make a lot of sausage," Manhart said, "and a lot of people like it."



Photos by Mu Ming Chen/
Daily Texan Staff