

cullen's upscale american grille

Cullen's

ADDRESS 11500 Space Center Blvd.
south of Genoa Red Bluff Rd.

TELEPHONE 281-991-2000

WEBSITE www.cullenshouston.com

CUISINE American high and low

PRICE RANGE Lunch entrees \$9.95 to \$29.95, dinner about 25 percent more. Three-course lunch special \$29.95, three-course brunch special \$29.95

CREDIT CARDS All major

HOURS Daily lunch 11 am-3 pm, dinner 5-9 pm Sun.-Mon., 5-10 Tue.-Sat., brunch 10:30 am-3 pm weekends, bar/lounge 11 am-midnight daily

RESERVATIONS Accepted

NOISE LEVEL Loud, with some quieter niches

out-of-this-world experience.

Now, there's another Clear Lake area establishment that's making a name for itself and "space" certainly plays a big role in its prominence. Just a different kind of space – as in wide open and massive, jaw-dropping amounts of it.

Cullen's Upscale American Grille is, in a word, huge. In fact, better make that *huuuuuuge*.

Although the restaurant is not much more than a year old, it's not really accurate to call the place the "new kid on the block" since it covers considerably more territory than that. All told, Cullen's is bumping up against 40,000 square feet – roughly the size of a half-dozen regular restaurants. By way of comparison, the popular two-story Vietnamese eatery Kim Son on the edge of downtown Houston – which is itself a colossal, cavernous venue – is 22,000 square feet. So, close your eyes and think, "Nearly twice the size of Kim Son." And it sets on a five-acre plot with a parking lot you could land planes on. Management has been talking about adding a lake. Hey – why stop there? A nice alpine mountain range winding around the back would a clever touch, too, eh?

Here in Texas, where we often celebrate sheer magnitude as a virtue in itself, you still have to ask why this place had to be so dad gum *B-I-G*.

Owner Kevin Munz, a software developer and pawn shop magnate who invested \$10 million to build Cullen's (named after his son), can no doubt explain how it makes perfect business sense since the area – a relatively undeveloped northeastern portion of Clear Lake near Pasadena – lacks its fair share of restaurants, banquet facilities, entertainment venues, meeting rooms, etc. So Cullen's shrewdly addresses those assorted deficiencies in one fell swoop with its sprawling mix of grand and intimate dining areas, a balcony bar, a two-story lounge with live music (Cullen's Live), a ballroom and other such sites for corporate and social functions.

That's probably a prudent observation and not a bad business plan. But I

RISING STAR

By Eric Gerber

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what the best-known restaurant in the Clear Lake area is – but chances are you'll probably find more than a few of them eating there.

During the past two decades, Frenchie's has steadily developed a well-deserved reputation as the favored dining spot for the NASA crowd and other Clear Lake denizens. Despite the restaurant's Gallic name, owners Frankie and Giuseppe Camera have long been serving Italian-American food that is simple, but satisfying. Along with such longtime reliables as eggplant parmesan and spaghetti carbonara, patrons can also feast on an extraordinary display of astronaut memorabilia that decorates the otherwise nondescript strip-center storefront on NASA Road 1. For those with an interest in space, Frenchie's offers an

suspect it's equally true that Munz just enjoys the heck out of knowing he's the guy who built a restaurant the size of a freakin' medical complex.

Of course, all that size is nothing but sheer novelty if the establishment looks like a blimp hangar and serves food you'd expect at a detention center. Fortunately, neither is the case.

Cullen's has taken its cue from Vegas, creating a "classy" casino ambience that tiptoes deftly between glitz and decorum. The main dining room is dressed in rich chocolate brown tones, with chrome and Plexiglas highlights. Hovering high above the center of the main room is Macy's Table, a stunning glass-walled, private dining area (named for Munz's daughter) that you access only through the chef's kitchen. Adorning the dark walls are 50 or so large LCD TV screens, but don't expect Monday night football or NASCAR. Art History 101 reproductions of classic paintings – Degas, Rembrandt – are projected and rotate from screen to screen during the course of an evening.

(I can almost imagine a hostess asking if you'd like to be seated in an Impressionist or non-Impressionist section ...)

Now, if that Great Art on TV sounds a tad too pretentious, let me just say two words to put this back in perspective: Frito pie.

That's right. Cullen's offers that classic Texas treat, sharing the commendably accommodating dinner menu with such high-end items as a New York strip steak (\$39) and red snapper (\$28) and more modest selections such as a pork panini sandwich (\$16) and a fresh rigatoni pasta (\$18). As that all-encompassing name suggests, the menu Cullen's Upscale American Grille is all over the place, from casual pizza-and-sub brunch items to haute cuisine. It's always a little unsettling to see a menu that expansive since it suggests almost impossible demands on the kitchen. At Cullen's, that's only about half true. Some dishes are quite successful, a number of others less so, without any

discernible pattern. You place an order, you take your chances. And that includes service, too, which can range from puppy-dog attentive to annoyingly remiss.

Executive chef Paul Lewis, who perfected his craft at the much applauded Four Seasons' Quattro, has wisely crafted a bill of fare at Cullen's that's conventional without being monotonous.

A few standout dishes — like a lovely lobster bisque, a crabcake that's virtually all crab and a delicate butter-nut risotto — are clear indications the kitchen can shine when it chooses to, but is basically geared to serve well-prepared favorites on a (very) large scale.

Along with my own choices, I found myself casting an envious eye on a platter of short rib ravioli. I was also sorely tempted to try a glistening Bibb salad with beets and Maytag cheese as an after-dinner refresher — it looked so inviting when it arrived at a nearby table. And, as pedestrian as it sounds, I will make a beeline next time for a chicken pot pie (made from locally raised poultry) that I overlooked on my initial visits.

By now, Cullen's has, I hope, worked out the kinks of a high-tech wine system that allows you to search and order electronically from your table using a hand-held tablet (as in computer tablet). Either that or dropped the consarned thing altogether. Still, any wine list that offers more than 100 Texas labels is worth noting, yes?

So, admit it — now that you know it's here, how can you *not* be curious? What could be more appropriate for the Clear Lake/NASA area than a restaurant you can probably see from space?

WHO ARE THESE REVIEWERS?

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT is a staff writer for the Houston Independent School District.

ERIC GERBER is the director of communications at the University of Houston.