

## A TURN TOWARD ELEGANT AT 1900 LOUNGE

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Lately, I've been dreaming of elegance. After five years of going to class in T-shirts and writing columns in my jammies (which, I admit, I'm doing now), I want to wear soft dresses and linen shirts that need ironing before being worn. I want to develop a facial skin care regimen that includes things like toner and pore refining. So far in my quest for elegance, I've managed to fill my house with roses -- Central Market had a big sale -- wax my hardwood floors till they shone and discover the 1900 Lounge at The Mansion at Judges' Hill.

I first heard of the boutique hotel several months ago, when a friend offered to take me to dinner there for my birthday (we ended up elsewhere). The restaurant rates four stars, according to our own Dale Rice, and the Lounge, open only since April, exudes a quiet elegance.

Sitting at the oak bar, drinking a red mojito made with rum, muddled mint and pomegranate juice, I looked out the windows at the courtyard with its enormous crape myrtles, supposedly the oldest ones in Central Texas and the only plants left from the mansion's original owner Ella Wooten's turn-of-the-century garden. I alternately listened to the music (lots of '40s big band and jazz greats piped in) and to occasional bits of conversations near me (political; one a chat about Texas judges, ironically enough) and read my book (escapist fiction set in cold, cold Scotland). Service was consistently good: helpful and attentive without being obsequious or intrusive, and so didn't impede either my reading or sidelong forays into absent-minded eavesdropping.

One Friday afternoon, friend Matt and I dropped in for 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. happy hour specials: a selection of \$5 specialty martinis, including the Texan with Tabasco; \$2.50 domestic beer (seven options, all bottled), \$3.50 imported (seven options, all bottled); and \$4 frozen margaritas (during the last hour). Beginning Aug. 12, the 1900 Lounge is going to start serving 30 mini-dishes -- smaller versions of the meals they offer in the dining room, such as sea bass and tenderloin. They'll range from \$5-\$12 and can be paired with half-glasses of wine -- "tasters" -- which will cost about \$3.50 or \$4.50.

When Matt and I arrived, a birthday was being celebrated: 25 or so people nibbling delicacies and sipping drinks. Though they nearly filled one of the two rooms in the bar, there were still big, heavy, comfortable chairs for us to sink into, watch the afternoon wane through a bay window, catch up on work, life, etc., and discuss why the lovely green of the walls would be a bad color to paint my house.

A month or two ago I re-read Shirley Hazzard's "The Transit of Venus" -- one of the best books written in English. Each sentence is perfect: the language spare and elegant. Returning home from the 1900 Lounge, arranging the roses to place next to my bed with its clean, white sheets, I thought of this line of Hazzard's, which has stayed with me: "Eventually he would learn this too -- to speak confidently and leave a room." How much

we have to learn.

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The Mansion at Judges' Hill. 1900 Rio Grande St., 495-1857.