

REVEL IN RED HOUSE'S NOSTALGIC LOUNGE

A GIRL WALKS INTO A BAR . . .

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There's a peculiar kind of delight in rediscovering things you loved long ago. Cleaning out your closet and finding old letters, photos and mix tapes. Finding the exact kind of cookie your grandmother dished up 20 years ago. It's not a longing for the past or a glance through rosy glasses, but sheer, almost giggly, delight at seeing again something wonderful.

In a rush of glee, I fell in love with the Red House lounge at El Gringo all of two seconds after I walked in: The red cowboy and Indian curtains echo exactly the same pattern as I remember from my youthful '70s flannel PJs (actually, the PJs might have been my brother's, but whatever). You know the PJs I'm talking about — the ones that match the little plastic horseys the dog kept trying to eat?

Other people might be interested in knowing that El Gringo's Red House has more than curtains. Launched by the El Chile folks in October and located a scant few yards down Manor Road, Red House radiates all the East Austin low-key hipness you might expect. The lounge is more than just a waiting room for the attached Southwestern restaurant — it has wide open spaces in the front yard, separated from the street by a waist-high wire and wood fence. You'll find plenty of chairs (between 50 and 60) to swing your feet under — and tables to kick the legs of — as you sip mixed beverages from the full bar or one of the dozen or so beers in bottles or one of the three different 20-ounce beers served in frosty glasses for only \$3 (Lone Star) or \$4.50 (Dos Equis, Live Oak Hefeweizen). The porch rocking chairs — really, they're gliders, but they add the same atmosphere as rockers — and the conveniently located ashtrays draw smokers to the porch, and the inside lounge area provides haven for those wishing to escape smoke.

The inside calls up an offbeat mix of '70s style cabin and kitsch. A dozen or so tiny "stag" heads mounted on one wall look kitschy and, at the same time, inviting. The bounce of the springs of the aged couches is remarkably like that of the smooth front seat of my high-school boyfriend's 1969 Skylark convertible. Other chairs bear tiny tears in vinyl, some have cattle prints, and still others have good solid wood armrests and tree-stumplike coffee tables for resting drinks on.

All the appetizers, soups, salads and deserts are available in the lounge and future plans call for more of the menu to be made available at Red House as well as the restaurant (though if it's slow, you might be able to grab an entrée too). But mostly it's fun to hang out in the lounge, worrying less about food than just having a drink — the lemongrass mojito, for example; a pomegranate martini, perhaps; a bourbon neat when in doubt or just channeling Jack Palance. I've seen the lounge host groups — families, old friends waiting for dinner — and individual and pairs and small groups of hanger-outers. The front yard, I'd guess, will draw even more of the latter as the spring and six-month-Austin summer descend.

In his poem "Men at Forty," Donald Justice writes that said men "Learn to close softly /
The doors to rooms they will not be / Coming back to." And he's right, of course. But I
can't stop grinning like a ninny every time I see those red cowboy curtains.

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El Gringo's Red House. 1917 Manor Road. 391-9500.