

SPRING IN AUSTIN MEANS SHADY GROVE

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Who knew Chapstick was an effective sunscreen? At lunch a couple of Tuesdays ago at Shady Grove, I found myself waiting for a table with the April sun shining brightly. I'm a pasty-face and can get burned riding my bike the 0.8 miles to the grocery store, so I rarely leave the house without sunscreen. (People with my kind of skin, as a friend said, were not meant to live in Texas.) But I'd forgotten my sunscreen that Tuesday. I did, however, have a Chapstick with SPF 15 in my purse, so I discreetly pulled it out and promptly balmed my shoulders and upper arms. I may have gotten a few strange looks, but I am burn-free -- and now my shoulders are kissably smooth.

Shady Grove is one of those great Austin springtime institutions. Part restaurant, part music venue, part kitsch, Shady Grove is a destination of choice on sunny days (witness my 20-minute wait on a Tuesday for lunch). A short walk from Barton Springs and Zilker, Shady Grove is an excellent place to stop by for a margarita after a swim. Or so I've heard: Barton Springs is too cold for me unless it's 100 degrees out and well, I'd never been to Shady Grove before this past month (please don't hurt me/mock me/revoke my Austin citizenship). But I can certainly imagine sitting out on the patio in late afternoon or early evening post-swim, tasty adult beverage in hand, watching the myriad varieties of people -- young, old, middle-aged, excited kids, watchful parents, college students complaining vociferously about failing because of too many absences, teachers who fail students because of excessive absences, athletes, couch potatoes, tech workers, beautiful people, grandparents, tattoo artists and so on.

The patio is the main draw at Shady Grove. With shady sections, sunny sections and about 35 tables, pasty-faces and sun goddesses alike can be accommodated. Additionally, a completely covered (as in, it has a roof) outdoor waiting area is available, and a no-cover-at-all waiting area allows you to drink as you burn. You can also wait out by the hippie trailer -- a silver bullet of a thing, with chairs outside and laundry bobbing on the clothesline. A small bear garden -- with a vine-and-chicken-wire sculpted bear and a sign that says only bears are allowed and children are not bears -- greets people coming in from the capacious and often full parking area. Wagon wheels, wooden fences, strings of light bulbs, umbrellas in the real heat of summer and signs that look like they belong in the "Old West" section of an amusement park (though they're meant to be '40s-state-park-esque and they're also that) dominate the aesthetic "feel" of the patio. Inside, of course, air conditioning rules the day and diners and drinkers alike can satiate their hungers in dark coolness. But the patio is more fun.

For example, on Thursdays during the spring and summer, Shady Grove hooks up with KGSR for "unplugged" nights. In other words, bands play. Tonight is Ruthie Foster. Others this spring: Shawn Colvin, Jimmy LaFave, the Gourds, Toni Price and Bob Schneider. Some nights, Shady Grove shows movies out on its patio -- everything from Hitchcock to sci-fi, making it a great place to get a burger or cobbler or their famous

tortilla fried catfish, have a beer (Dos Equis, Shiner and various Live Oak varieties on tap), and while away an evening.

When I lived in other, colder parts of the world, I always got homesick for Texas in the summer. Not because I missed the blistering days -- see the comments about sunburns -- but because I missed the nights, the ones when it was still 90 degrees at midnight, when I'd sit with friends on a patio, wearing shorts and T-shirts, drinking margaritas and beer. I missed places like Shady Grove.

Shady Grove. 1624 Barton Springs Road, 474-9991.