

HOUSTON CHRONICLE

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Sunny: High 88, Low 69

CONGRESS

Spending bill clout boosts Democrats

Erasing the threat of a shutdown, the White House and top lawmakers endorse a \$1.1 trillion spending bill, an agreement underscoring that Democrats retain considerable clout in Donald Trump's turbulent presidency. **Page A2**

BUSINESS



Brett Coomer / Chronicle
Silvia Salinas greets customers at the farmers market.

Heights-area farmers market poised to grow

A deal is in the works to sell the farmers market, which could lead to the upgrading of facilities and parking and the addition of food services and attractions. **Page B3**

Ortega wins Beard Award

Houston culinary star named Best Chef Southwest

By Alison Cook

Hugo Ortega, long a key figure on Houston's culinary scene, was named Best Chef Southwest at the James Beard Foundation Restaurant & Chef Awards in Chicago on Monday night.

It was Ortega's sixth year as a finalist for the prestigious award. To fans of his landmark interior Mexican restaurants Hugo's, Caracol and Xochi, the honor seems overdue.

"What a moment," he said, speaking from the black-tie gala at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, before dedicating his award to "the great city of Houston."

"America is beautiful," he added, "and I am living the dream."

Born in Mexico City, and reared partly on his family's Puebla state rancho bordering Oaxaca, Ortega immigrated to Houston in 1984 as a 17-year-old. Here he became one of the city's fa-

Ortega continues on A12

Pension plan nears reality

Landmark reforms earn Senate's OK, edge closer to fixing city's fiscal woes

By Mike Morris

Houston's pension reform package breezed through the state Senate Monday afternoon, setting up a Saturday vote in the Texas House that could put the city inches away from solving a fiscal crisis that officials long have warned could threaten the

city's solvency and force the layoffs of hundreds of employees.

Mayor Sylvester Turner cheered the 25-5 vote, made possible because a threatened political blockade dissolved, giving the landmark proposal a speedy passage.

"Today, the Senate approved a locally developed



Mayor Sylvester Turner has "full confidence" in House vote.

and agreed-to solution that will place the city of Houston on a sustainable financial path," said Turner, who was a state representative for 26 years. "The Senate has listened to the will of stakeholders

in Houston. We now move forward to the House of Representatives, where I have full confidence my former colleagues will follow suit."

Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston, had planned to offer a controversial amendment to allow voters to impose 401(k)-style "defined contribution" plans on future city employees, which worker groups view as insufficient. *Measure continues on A11*

Mood brightens at OTC



Michael Ciaglo / Houston Chronicle

Conventioners examine an exhibit Monday at the Offshore Technology Conference at NRG Center.

Ortega gained national fame with debut of Hugo's in 2002

Ortega from page A1

favorite success stories. Starting out in a dishwasher position with no English and no documentation, he rose to oversee a popular group of restaurants with his wife, Tracy Vaught.

He is now a U.S. citizen, and the daughter he has with Vaught, Sophia, is a student at Tulane University in New Orleans. She was in the audience in Chicago to see her father win the award.

"Hugo has accomplished so much in his life since coming to the United States," said Vaught. "I am immensely proud of his hard work, his perseverance, his grace, and his heart."

Talent is recognized

As owner of Backstreet Cafe, Vaught was among the first to recognize Ortega's promise. He climbed through the kitchen ranks at that restaurant, taking time out to attend culinary school at Houston Community College before returning as the restaurant's executive chef.

Over the decades, the couple added the Italian restaurant Prego to their H Town Restaurant Group, along with Trevisio (now Third Coast) at the Texas Medical Center.

But it was the debut of Hugo's in 2002 that put Ortega on the national map as one of the country's foremost champions of interior Mexican cuisine. Hand-ground masa for tortillas,



Jon Shapley / Houston Chronicle file

Hugo Ortega, 51, has come far in Houston, beginning as a dishwasher speaking no English and rising to oversee a popular group of restaurants with his wife, Tracy Vaught.

desserts from the chef's brother, Ruben Ortega, plus longtime collaborator Sean Beck's inventive wine list and agave-spirits cocktails all factored into the restaurant's appeal.

Those elements became vital to the success of Ortega and Vaught's Mexican coastal cuisine restaurant near the Galleria, the glamorous Caracol; and to

Xochi, which opened just before Super Bowl LI in downtown's new Marriott Marquis hotel. With its Oaxacan emphasis, including earthy masa specialities and an impressive roster of complex moles, Xochi is one of the year's most exciting openings.

He and Vaught also partnered financially last year with chef Rodolfo Castellanos in his res-

taurant Origen, located in Oaxaca, Mexico.

Houston chef Jianyun Ye of Mala Sichuan Bistro was among this year's finalists for Best Chef Southwest, along with Texans Bryce Gilmore (of Austin's Barley Swine) and Steve McHugh (of Cured in San Antonio). Steve Redzikowski of Denver's Acorn and Santa Fe's Martín Rios of

Restaurant Martín also were in the mix for the title.

3 other local chefs have won

Three Houston chefs have won a James Beard Award as Best Chef Southwest: Justin Yu in 2016, for his recently-shuttered Oxheart; Underbelly's Chris Shepherd in 2014; and Cafe Annie chef-owner Robert Del Grande in 1992.

Houston native Sarah Grueneberg, a graduate of the Art Institute of Houston, took home the Best Chef Great Lakes award Monday for her work at Monteverde, an Italian restaurant in Chicago. Grueneberg cut her culinary teeth at Brennan's of Houston.

For the party that takes place immediately afterward, Ortega and his crew cooked crispy cabrito on a ceniza (ash) tostada with huaxmole, a prehispanic mole made with huaje seeds. It's one of the recipes that has kept the chef's flagship restaurant, Hugo's, at the top of its game.

"This is overwhelming for me," said Ortega, 51, as he prepared to work his food station personally, wearing his new award medal.

"I've come so far since I came to this country as a teenager, illegal, without a peso in my pocket. To accomplish this is a completely new feeling."

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