

## The Woman Behind Houston's Booming Bar Scene

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*Alba Huerta: Houston bartender extraordinaire*

The Lone Star State, despite its geography, is less the South than its own distinct entity. So say many Texans. It's more brisket than fried chicken, more Whataburger than Waffle House. And **Alba Huerta's** just-opened, long anticipated Houston bar, **Julep**, is an homage to the entire region, illuminating Texas' vibrant culture, rich tradition and sultry weather.

Huerta, a native Houstonian, might best be known as barman Bobby Heugel's right hand, the warm, dedicated general manager of the city's first true cocktail haunt, **Anvil Bar & Refuge**. Last year the duo strengthened their collaboration by opening the Pastry War, a showcase for obscure Tequilas and Mezcals.



*The architecturally inviting interior of Julep.*

Now, set in a one-time uniform factory in the Old Sixth Ward, Houston's oldest, intact neighborhood, Huerta presides over Julep. Here, graceful accents like lace curtains, a copper bar and a welcoming porch in which to sip the joint's namesake libation channel the historic Victorian homes—some dating from as far back as 1854—that dot the surrounding streets. “The attention to detail in Julep’s design fits perfectly into this neighborhood,” says Huerta.

A rotating cast of julep concoctions that move beyond the bourbon-sugar-crushed ice-mint classic will be the stars at Julep. One variation is headily spiced (Laird’s Bonded Apple Brandy, Ed Hamilton’s Jamaican Pot Still [Rum](#), Angostura bitters, lemon peel zest, burnt spices, mint, Turbinado [sugar](#) syrup). “My many reasons for loving the Mint Julep—and for naming a bar after it—have to do with people,” says Huerta. “Formerly prescribed as medicine, the julep can be found in family cookbooks, and has deep roots in many Southern homes,” she explains.

A quick glance at Julep’s menu, inspired by vintage *Ladies’ Home Journals*, shows that other drink schools are also featured prominently. Two especially fine examples: [the Creole Crusta](#) and Topps and Bottoms (sunflower seed-infused Plantation Overproof [Rum](#), Pamplemousse Rose, and Byrrh Quinquina).



*The Creole Crusta (left) and Topps and Bottoms (right) are just two of Julep’s standout cocktails.*

Huerta began her career serendipitously at the now-shuttered Timberwolf Pub. Her friend worked there, and when a bartender suddenly quit, they asked the 20-year-old (18-year-olds can serve booze in Texas) if she was interested in making drinks. She said yes, and although she wasn’t very good at it at first, she persevered. “No one who could outwork me,” she admits. Several years later Huerta made the move to Las Vegas and realized bartending “was a career path, not a stepping stone.”

After returning to Houston she worked at places like Twelve Spot, Branch Water Tavern and Grand Prize Bar. Then Heugel expanded his empire and called on Huerta in 2011 to run the show at Anvil. “It was one of the most challenging jobs I’ve ever had,” she recalls, “but I was—and still am—blessed to work with such creative, dynamic people. I just want to earn my place at the table.”

(Photos: [Julie Soefer](#))