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Blame it on Rio

BY SAM ARMSTRONG | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MICHAEL THAD CARTER

For about a week each year, work in Brazil comes to a grinding halt and brasileiros across the country get even more passionate and party crazy than during the other 51 and embrace their senses during the celebration of Carnaval. For business- and life-partners Ben Googins and Elias Martins, their business dreams came to a similar grinding halt almost ten years ago. “In Rio de Janeiro, Elias went to tourism school and we started Our Family Tours, a gay-friendly tour service,” Googins said. “We were open for a year when 9/11 happened. We were already having major challenges with the business including ‘nothing in Brazil works,’ crime, trying to exchange money and then just the day-to-day trying to get customers and make it all work. After 9/11 we gave it up.”

But much like regular life splits open to let in the magic of Carnaval, the door that slammed in Googins and Martins’ faces opened up to a long and colorful parade for two, a celebration of the senses and the story of a traveling family that has made its home in Brazil, Philadelphia and Texas.

“I’ve always been impressed with the way Elias can cook,” said Googins, a Florida native. “We lived together in Brazil and I’ll never forget; one day we were really low on funds and I opened the fridge and saw, essentially, a tomato, half an onion and a bottle of ketchup. I was complaining about our situation, punctuated by the fact that we had no food, when, in a few minutes Elias was able to put together an awesome meal, out of ‘I-don’t-know-what.’ It totally changed my outlook on the day, and I was impressed how he could see something when all I saw was nothing.”

Their fortunes next brought the couple, who have been together for more than 12 years, to Philadelphia. An ad for dish- and prep-work ushered Martins into employment that wasn’t relevant to his degrees in history and psychology but quickly grew relevant to something he studied with less formality and more passion in his youth — cooking. “There’s no question Elias has gotten culinary talent from his mom,” Googins said. “When I used to go from Sao Paulo to Rio to visit Elias, he’d often have to work a lot and I’d end up hanging with his mom and sister and brother and stuffing my face.” Martins built his skills for four years in Philadelphia, working in the kitchen of the acclaimed Forks restaurant and at Penne, a Hilton signature hotel.

But their dream of having their own business remained. While in Philadelphia, they began discussing the idea of creating a business built around Martins’ food. When they moved to Austin to be closer to Googins’ family, they found a great opportunity. “My mom suggested we try a booth at the downtown Austin Farmers’ Market,” Googins said. Martins prepared some offerings and the couple assembled an impromptu tasting. When the participants suggested

providing a sauce, they agreed on a variety of traditional Brazilian Malagueta sauces. “Those were our first packaged products, and the first we got into Whole Foods,” Googins said. They committed to building their brand at the market, expanding their offerings to include gluten-free frozen Brazilian cheese bread.

As they expanded their product line into more stores, including Whip-In, Royal Blue Grocery and liquor giant Spec’s, their desire to embrace their work completely was given another boost in the form of an opportunity to open a restaurant space in ever-changing East Austin. They now offer a full menu of Brazilian and Brazilian-inspired recipes like savory salgadinhos, soups, salads and a remarkably good cup of Brazilian java.

Not sure how to pronounce a dish? Just make your best guess, Googins and Martins will meet you halfway. For diners hoping for a snooty, alienating experience, Rio’s probably isn’t the place for them. Not only are the proprietors proud of the food they offer, they’re excited to know what you think about it. Martins that says his menus will reflect a seasonal approach to cooking; don’t get too used to anything — expect new, fun and delicious to surprises on each visit. While the restaurant is not yet licensed to sell alcohol, for a small cost they provide the fruit, sugar, and muscle to add to your own vodka (or preferably Cachaça, a liqueur used in the national drink of Brazil, the Caipirinho).

“We’re getting to a real comfortable state, the core team, where we’re working, joking, razzing, telling stories and then having comfortable silences,” Googins said, jokingly adding, “Hurt feelings and fights are already in the mix, too, so we must be like family.” Googins’ brother is a silent partner in the endeavor, and the couple says that as they work out the details in staffing and running the restaurant, which features a small and stylish seating area, a comfortable patio and a drive-through window for coffees and other offerings, it feels like they’re building a family. And while the restaurant is foremost in their minds, it’s easy to tell when they talk of their booth at the farmers markets their hearts can’t be contained in one location. “We’ve been fortunate to meet couples when they first moved to Austin who now have kids here,” Googins said. “We’ve seen couples get together and then break up. Elias remembers everyone and their details ... but he’s also very forward in his questions. So, every Saturday we get updates from our family on who’s sick of their jobs, how peoples’ moms, grandfathers, and dogs are. We’ve seen peoples’ children go from pregnant belly to the crazy kid eating too many bread samples. Lots of hugs, jokes and even some kisses go on at our booth. The only thing we’ve been missing is some loud Brazilian music under our tent.” ■