

FOOD & DRINK

One Decadent Weekend in San Antonio, I Finally Became the ‘Fancy Mom’

After raising three kids on a budget, novelist Amanda Eyre Ward indulges her teen fantasy of being the parent who says, “Order whatever you want.”

By Amanda Eyre Ward

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Breakfast at Full Goods Diner.
Courtesy of Paperboy

I was always the scholarship kid; first, in a Connecticut boarding school when I failed out of high school and was sent off to get my act together, and later, in a Massachusetts college. I vividly remember fabulous parents coming to visit their children and whisking them off to restaurants that offered linen napkins, chairs pulled out for you, filet mignon, and desserts made of hot brownies and ice cream with fudge sauce or some soufflé thing in a ramekin.

Sometimes I was invited along to these dinners. Scholarship kids are quick studies. In winter, I knew I should wear a navy peacoat, wool sweater, slim wool skirt with black tights, and borrowed L.L. Bean duck boots. I understood the spring dress code as well: floral Laura Ashley dress with puffed shoulders and espadrilles.

I was a waitress at one of these expensive restaurants through college, and oh, how I yearned to be at a table, ordering whatever I wanted and having a mythical dad pull out a leather wallet fat with credit cards that were paid in full every month.

My mom, it must be said, was just as glamorous as my friends' moms—she'd been a magazine model before she married my father, and nabbed the latest fashions from Bloomingdale's. "I have the *best news*," she once called to tell me when she was unemployed.

"You got a job?" I said.

"No, but the cable-knit sweater you loved went on sale at Saks—it's in the mail to you!"

Each time a kind and wealthy friend invited me to dinner, I vowed that someday I would become a Fancy Mom. I would arrive in a Mercedes-Benz; wear a swingy wool coat or a cashmere cape and tasteful jewelry; and listen to classical music on my car stereo, engine purring as I waited for my child. He or she would be ravenous for delectable food and parental attention, and I would be ready and willing to provide both. We would drive to the best restaurant in town, where I would say the words I'd dreamed of speaking since I was fourteen years old: "Order whatever you want! It's my treat."

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At Davila's BBQ, It's All in the F

Who could have imagined that by the time I spoke these words, I would be an Austin mom driving a Toyota RAV4; listening to the Chicks; and wearing a rented silk dress, earrings from Target, and Chapstick?

The writer and her son at Carriqui.

<https://www.texasmonthly.com/food/amanda-eyre-ward-culinary-tour-san-antonio/>

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Courtesy of Amanda Eyre Ward

But there I was, fifty years young and with a head full of Texas-blond highlights, piloting into my nineteen-year-old son's college dorm parking lot in San Antonio. I had a weekend of fabulous reservations booked, ready to live out my childhood fantasy of finally being the Fancy Mom.

My son had headed to college just weeks before, and I missed him a lot. My firstborn is a great cook and an even better eater, even more so now that he is running up to fourteen miles a day with his college cross-country team. I decided to use my Hyatt points to book myself a hotel room and enjoy two days of fine food and reconnection to tide me over until he came home again for the holidays. To assuage the sadness I felt when I walked by his vacant room in our home, I researched restaurants.

My son emerged from his dorm in an "I Love Cozumel" T-shirt and running shorts. (He has never been to Cozumel but is an avid thrifter.) We headed to the luxurious La Cantera Resort and Spa, located near Six Flags in San Antonio. At Signature, a sumptuous restaurant with gleaming copper pots above the open kitchen, we watched executive chef John Carpenter work. He's known for his innovative French-Texan cuisine—a vegetarian friend had raved about his charcoal-grilled king trumpet mushrooms paired with a seasonal Bee's Knees cocktail.

I am sober, so I was thrilled to find a variety of spirit-free libations on offer. I chose the Fruit of the Flower with yuzu, hibiscus, blackberry, and Topo Chico, which was as delicious as it sounds.



Signature's dining room at La Cantera Resort and Spa.
Courtesy La Cantera Resort & Spa

My son, ever the cheapskate I raised him to be, had tap water. I insisted he order starters, and he chose octopus a la plancha and king salmon crudo with beet, passionfruit, sweet potato, and orange. We savored the dishes. "Order the filet mignon for your main course," I told my son. "Don't even look at the price."

"Seriously?" he said.

I understood his hesitation: to research my novels and enliven summer with three children, I'd taken my son and his siblings around the world, but always

on a shoestring budget. For my novel, *The Nearness of You*, we went to Galveston, where I learned that the motels along the seawall are better suited to bachelor party weekends than mom-and-toddler getaways.

When I set my novel, *The Jetsetters*, on a cruise ship, I booked the Carnival Vista from Athens, Greece, to Barcelona, Spain. It was one of the ship's maiden voyages, and rooms cost a few hundred dollars, including all the food and nonalcoholic drinks you could inhale. (A cruise ship comedian noted, "Every time you're not eating, people, you are *losing money!*") As a newly sober mom with two growing boys, we made our money back in virgin drinks and at the poolside Guy Fieri's Burger Joint.

At one point, I thought I would set a novel in Costa Rica, so I took my three children to Manuel Antonio. Our resort had a sloth, a mini golf course, and room for the kids to roam while I worked, but it used up all of my budget. To make it work, we stashed cinnamon buns from the free breakfast buffet in our beach bags for lunch and kept grocery items in our room's mini fridge for dinner: vegetables from a local stand we'd cut up with my son's Swiss Army knife; quesadillas made on an ironing board, following a YouTube tutorial. We sashayed around the glamorous resort feeling like movie stars, if a bit hungry.

But during my Fancy Mom weekend, I'd decided, I would splurge.

"Seriously," I insisted, holding up the menu. My son ordered the Gulf redfish with PEI mussels, potatoes, and Spanish chorizo; he said it was "fire." I went nuts with a few more drinks and the filet mignon.

The next morning, we met at the Pearl District, a culinary hotspot in San Antonio, ready to do some damage at Full Goods Diner, an airy, contemporary space serving Mexican and American comfort food. I got a bit hopped up on coffee and ordered a peaches and cream pastry, Mexican hot chocolate muffin, guava lemon curd danish, and an empanada to start. My son happily dug in and sipped a Lil' Chap, a concoction of a cappuccino and spiced chocolate served in a martini glass.

I attempted moderation for my main course with a granola bowl, while my son loved the migas and Texas hash with pecan mole. Our server told us to try the famous Paperboy pancake with brown butter and salt, and we did, and I think about it to this day.

After lunch, we decided to amass enough food for an insane picnic. We hit the Food Hall at the Pearl, ordering masala fries and coconut cornbread pudding with rum glaze to-go from **Mi Roti**, the Caribbean street food outpost from chef Nicola Blaque. At **Best Quality Daughter** at the Pearl—an Asian-fusion gem helmed by Jennifer Hwa Dobbertin, perhaps my favorite San Antonio restaurant—we grabbed some Impossible potstickers, mochi cheddar hush puppies, and Taiwanese popcorn fried chicken. We headed downtown and stopped into **La Panadería**, ordering every French-Mexican pastry on the menu, from tequila-almond croissants to the house specialty, a delicacy created by owner David Cáceres, called the "Croncha," a croissant-and-concha combo that features the icing top in the seashell pattern of the conchas his late mother, Doña Josefina, served in her Mexico City bakeries. Clearly, this picnic was going to be epic and have lots of leftovers for my son to bring to the dorm to share.

At San Antonio's vibrant Historic Market Square, we met one of my son's new friends and started eating our loot, adding fresh-squeezed lemonades the size of goldfish bowls from a street vendor. As we shopped for Mexican handicrafts and listened to live music, I felt grateful my son had ended up in such a fascinating city. I dimly remembered spending my rural Connecticut free time staring at old snow, smoking pilfered cigarettes, and feeling sorry for myself.

After lemonades, my son and his friend went back to campus, and I took a nap.

By dinnertime, I was still stuffed, but we had reservations at the newest hotspot in town, Carrigui. The restaurant is housed in the historic Boehler's Liberty Saloon, which has been lovingly and painstakingly restored. My son and I ordered one of the botana platters to share, which came with ceviche, pescado a la plancha, quesadillas, shrimp tacos, and all the fixins. It was as glorious and decadent as I imagined those New England dinners to be, but with a Texas twist.

At one point, I asked my son to tell me about his favorite class. "Mom, I'll tell you about all of them!" he said. As he spoke, I was filled with so much love, pride, and gratitude that I almost didn't have room for our dessert of churros with Mexican Txocolate.

The following morning, I arrived on campus with a list of must-try eateries to ensure I maxed out my credit card limit. But my son had another plan. He wanted to show me a bit of his new college life, keeping in mind that my favorite food is a cheeseburger. He gave me directions and I met him at Armadillos Texas Style Burgers. I parked at the bright orange, corrugated-metal storefront and crumpled up my list of five-star luxury establishments.

We started with Armadillo Eggs: nachos made with jalapeños and cheese arranged to look like fried eggs. My bacon cheeseburger, served in a red plastic basket with tater tots, was huge and juicy. I'd raised my son right: he knew a good burger when he found one.

When the bill came—totaling less than the appetizers at the restaurants on my abandoned list—my son grabbed it before I could open my purse.

"This is my treat," he said.