

## EDDIE RODRIGUEZ

BY RHEA MAZE • PHOTOGRAPHY BY KATE LESUEUR

If there's one thing Representative Eddie Rodriguez loves more than eating good food, it's talking about good food. Founder and chair of the Texas House Farm-to-Table Caucus—the first of its kind in the nation—Rodriguez's passion for supporting and connecting people to the local food scene is contagious. And, naturally, it all came to be by way of a couple of inspiring conversations over dinner...but we'll get to those in a minute.

Right now, Rodriguez and his wife of two years, Christine Garrison, are whipping up a batch of pesto in the kitchen of their 100-year-old minimalist farmhouse. With the original wood walls painted white, unfinished floors that gave them splinters before they put down rugs, and steel countertops, the kitchen is a cozy blend of classic old and polished new. But what Rodriguez loves most about it is its treasure trove of spices.

"Last year we made our first batch of this homemade pesto with basil, pecans and jalapeños," Rodriguez says. "I added the jalapeños. Being from South Texas, I like to add a little spice—just enough to give it a kick, but not so much that the kids won't like it."

Since becoming a stepfather to Sophie, 8, and Jack, 10, Rodriguez has had to adjust to life with kids' palates. Gone are the days of making his signature date-night dish of Brussels sprouts with bacon and blue cheese for Christine at his bachelor pad. "I went from being able to cook whatever I wanted to having to cook things that kids like," he says. Sophie, who doesn't like pine nuts, inspired the pesto's pecan twist (which gives it just a hint of sweetness), and the current mash-up of Christine's green thumb and talent for fresh cooking, the kids' preferences and a bit of spice from Rodriguez seems a fitting representation of the homey amalgamation that is their new life chapter.

Rodriguez has always been a foodie in the sense that he enjoys good food and knows good-quality food when he tastes it, but it's only been in the past few years that he's become deeply passionate about food issues. That journey began when a friend took him to East Side Showroom, introduced him to former Executive Chef Sonya Coté and tipped the first domi-

no in the aforementioned inspiring conversations over dinner. "She explained to me the model of trying to locally source as much as possible," he says. "I was fascinated with the whole concept." When she mentioned the farmers with whom she worked, Rodriguez was surprised to learn that many were from his district, but he had never heard of them.

Intrigued, Rodriguez invited several farmers from Travis County to a roundtable discussion over cured meats, cheese and wine. "I just listened to them," he says. "If you've ever known a farmer, you know they're very opinionated people who tell you exactly what they think." They expressed that there was too much bureaucratic red tape hindering their ability to make a living providing healthier food for people. Rodriguez took their ideas to heart.

He later joined Representative David Simpson and Congressman Marc Veasey for a pre-session dinner, and the three of them began talking more about food issues. "We agreed on just about every single thing," Rodriguez says. "It dawned on me that food is not republican or democrat, it's not conservative or liberal. It's just food. Everyone likes the idea of helping a farmer out."

Rodriguez left the dinner determined to do something, and the Farm-to-Table Caucus was born. Now, two-years-old and 28 members strong, the caucus has remained bipartisan and representative of both rural and urban populations—greatly due to Rodriguez's watchful eye. "The caucus is the product of a food movement happening all around the country, as well as here in Texas, and I'm very proud of it," he says.

Working to address issues such as childhood obesity and the food desert situation in Texas by making it less burdensome for small producers to do what they do has also strengthened Rodriguez's love of garden-fresh greens. "I'm from McAllen, deep-south Texas," he says. "Growing up, we didn't eat chard or kale or mustard greens. Now we have a green of that sort with dinner every night."

For Rodriguez, the family pesto brings it all home. "It's fresh, green, light and straight from the garden," he says. "It reminds me of my family and what we have together."



## EDDIE AND CHRISTINE'S AMALGAM PESTO

*Makes about 3 cups*

30–40 fresh basil leaves, washed	1 fresh jalapeño, chopped
$\frac{1}{3}$ c. olive oil	$1\frac{1}{4}$ c. grated Parmesan cheese
5 garlic cloves, peeled	Salt, to taste
$\frac{1}{2}$ c. pecans	Lukewarm water

Place the basil in a food processor and chop—adding the olive oil slowly to help the process. Use a spatula to move any stray leaves closer to the chopping action until all leaves are tiny. Add the garlic, pecans and jalapeño and process until the ingredients are thoroughly blended. Lastly, add the Parmesan cheese and salt and continue to blend—adding water as needed if the mixture becomes too thick. Rodriguez suggests serving the pesto on whole-wheat bowtie pasta with extra parmesan cheese on top. Leftover pesto can be frozen and thawed for future meals.