

The Lone Star State may be famous for its cowboys and oil wells, but it's also home to some great finger-lickin' food, from tacos and tamales, to the smokehouse BBQ fare y'all know and love. Laura Swanepoel hired a campervan and set off on a quest for the best



# Big in Texas

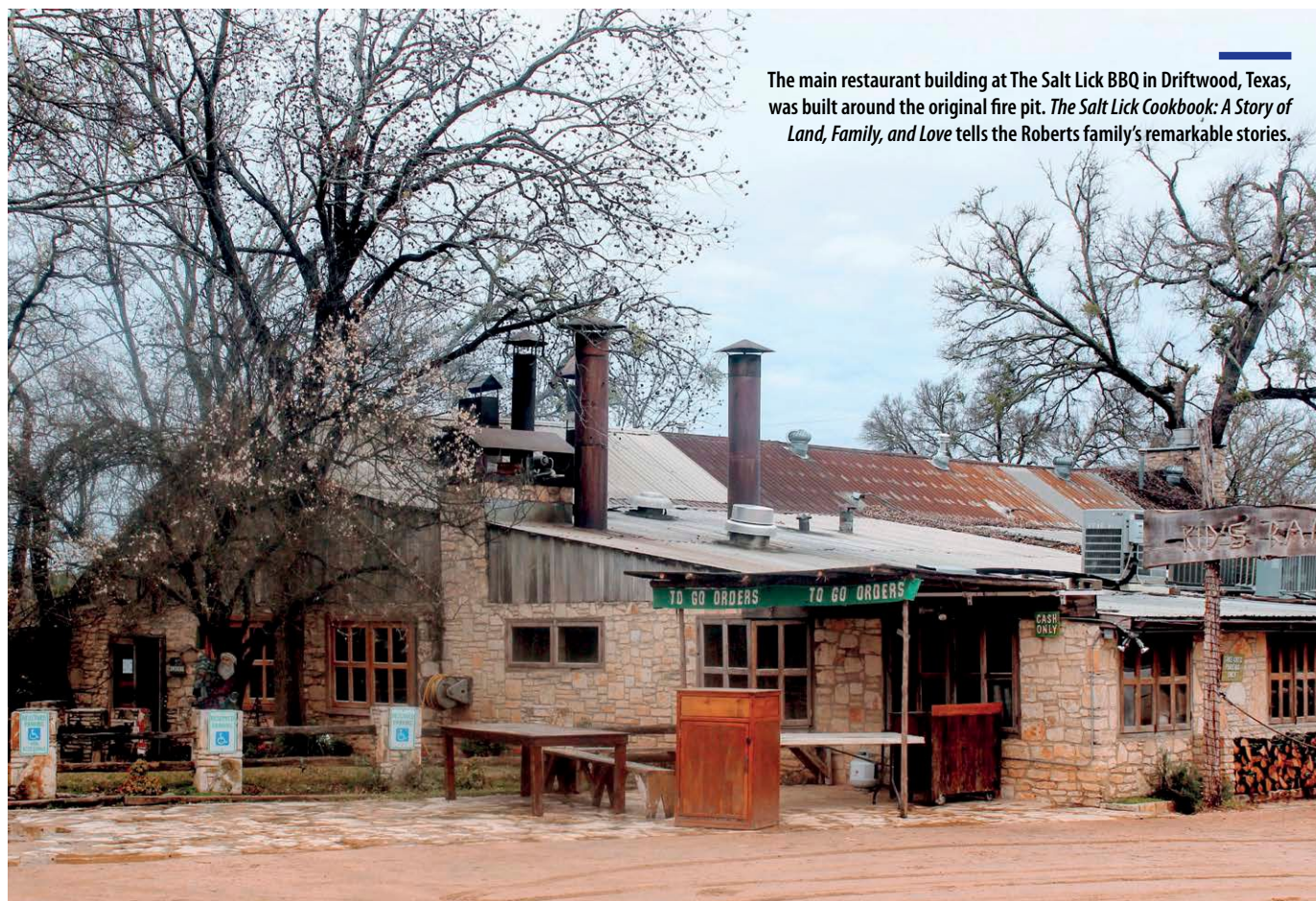
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PHOTOGRAPHS AND TEXT LAURA SWANEPOEL



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Opposite: The limestone barbeque pit at The Salt Lick BBQ in Driftwood, Texas has been going non-stop since 1967 and serves mouthwatering barbeque to thousands each week.



The main restaurant building at The Salt Lick BBQ in Driftwood, Texas, was built around the original fire pit. *The Salt Lick Cookbook: A Story of Land, Family, and Love* tells the Roberts family's remarkable stories.

## THE FIRST THING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT TEXAS IS IT'S BIG.

Yuuuge, as the locals say, even bigger than France. So if you only have a couple of weeks, you need to plan your route carefully. This isn't a place you'll be exploring in a rush. For our once-in-a-lifetime journey, my husband Ben, our daughter, Loulou, and I planned a route through west Texas – from Austin to Fredericksburg, on to Marfa, Big Bend National Park, Terlingua, and back to the Hill Country and Austin. We rented a four-sleeper campervan to have more freedom and get a feel for the RV trailer-park travel trend in the States, and when we occasionally felt we needed more space, we simply pulled into a motel for the night.

### AUSTIN POPULATION: 2 056 405

The state capital is a hip, eclectic city on the edge of the Hill Country, a.k.a. the Heart of Texas, bustling with innovation of all sorts, from tech to food, music, art and design. It's known as the live-music

capital of the world, but it's also a foodie's heaven where hipsters have developed a taste for comforting Southern food such as pickles with butter, smoky hen and cornbread, down-home chicken-fried steak, mac 'n' cheese, or no-frills chicken and greens with fluffy biscuits topped with gravy. (Tip: Book a table at Olamaie – [olamaieaustin.com](http://olamaieaustin.com) – where much of the food is based on the cooking of the matriarch of Southern food, the late Edna Lewis.)

Austinites love everything organic, so on weekends head to the farmers' markets packed with produce from central Texas and local foodie entrepreneurs. The city is also famous for its food trucks serving everything from vegan BBQ to

Louisiana-style “damn good Cajun”. One food truck called Hand Helds does an “Early Burg” – a burger patty dusted with freshly ground coffee and topped with an over-easy egg and bacon jelly. Visit [roaminghunger.com](http://roaminghunger.com) for the latest sightings and ratings.

Austin's proximity to Mexico means tacos and tamales are always on trend, whether for breakfast, lunch or dinner, and they're often served with Mexican *elote*-style corn, hot sauce and fresh *pico de gallo* salsa.

Locals insist that the city is home to the best Texas barbeque on the planet – and it's best not to argue. Black's Barbecue ([blacksbbq.com](http://blacksbbq.com)), a town version of the legendary Black's in Lockhart up in Hill Country, is where you can get a taste of the real thing (but more about Texas BBQ later). Visit [austin.eater.com](http://austin.eater.com) for more info on where to eat in the state capital.

### FREDERICKSBURG POPULATION: 11 094

This quaint town, founded by German immigrants in 1846, is small enough to cover in a day or two. A stroll down Main Street offers inspiring shopping and eating opportunities, from Amish supply

**“CHILLI MIGHT BE THE OFFICIAL STATE FOOD, BUT BBQ IS SOMETHING OF A RELIGION. LOCALS FLOCK TO THE SMOKEHOUSES IN THE HILL COUNTRY, STANDING IN QUEUES TO GET THEIR FIX”**



Clockwise, from top: The view over the prairie and ghost town of Terlingua; brisket with pickled cucumber at Black's Barbecue in Austin, Texas; locals love The Salt Lick BBQ in Driftwood; barbeque is never far away; Doa De Los Muertes "Death Becomes You" Amber Ale from La Kiva; the famous Ms P's Electric Cock fried chicken trailer on South Congress Ave in Austin; classic Texas chilli served with fresh cornbread, Cheddar cheese and sliced red onion at Wheeler's restaurant in Fredericksburg.





Clockwise from top left: Pecan pie for dessert; The Hoghouse at Spier's smoke master, Luzuko Mpulu (see page 109 for more BBQ spots closer to home); a Reuben sandwich with German potato salad, red cabbage and mustard.

stores to lively *biertagens* where you can sample a variety of ales and lagers made according to traditional German brewing techniques.

The Ausländer ([theauslander.com](http://theauslander.com)) is famous for classic pork schnitzel with a Texan twist – served with ranchero sauce, Monterey Jack cheese, sour cream and guacamole. And at Wheeler's ([wheelersfredericksburg.com](http://wheelersfredericksburg.com)) you can enjoy a great bowl of Texas chilli served with cornbread, and a glass of ice-cold sweet tea (see recipe on page 109).

It's possible to spend hours in the famed Rustlin Rob's Texas Gourmet Foods ([rustlinrobs.com](http://rustlinrobs.com)), where you can try before buying over 350 sauces, jams, pickles, glazes, rubs, mustards, preserves, chilli "fixins", oils, sweets and artisanal butters. There's something for every pocket and loads of novelty gifts, such as a spent 50-calibre bullet filled with Cyprus lava salt infused with pepper extract ranked at five million Scoville heat units (SHU), along with some dried ghost peppers. A single crystal will add heat to an entire bowl of chilli! To put it

into perspective, Tabasco sauce is rated at 2 140 SHU.

If you like the sound of Fredericksburg, stay a couple of days and visit the many wineries and breweries in the lush Hill Country while overnighing at an authentic Sunday house (essentially city cabins built by farmers in the late 1800s and early 1900s for weekend visits to town – see [absolutecharm.com](http://absolutecharm.com)). Or book your stay at a working ranch where you can practise your lassoing skills on horseback before relaxing around the campfire, toasting s'mores over the flames.

#### MARFA POPULATION: 1 819

As you leave the Hill Country heading south, Texas becomes barren and desolate, much like the Karoo and just as beautiful. The landscape is interrupted by huge cacti, massive oil wells and tiny towns where cowboys fill up on gas and supplies.

Which brings us to Marfa, a town best known for its reclusive arts community; the iconic Prada Marfa store replica, an art installation plonked on the highway as you enter town; and the mysterious Marfa

### TEXAS BBQ WITH WOOLIES

Recreate a true Texan BBQ at home with these classics available at Woolies and [woolworths.co.za](http://woolworths.co.za)

- ☐ Apple-and-blackberry buttermilk pudding
- ☐ Baked beans in tomato sauce
- ☐ Barbeque beef sirloin or rib-eye steaks
- ☐ Barbeque beef ribs
- ☐ Chorizo pork sausage
- ☐ Classic potato salad
- ☐ Pecan and cashew tartlets
- ☐ Easy to Cook pulled pork shoulder
- ☐ Free-range bone-in brisket pieces
- ☐ Fresh watermelon (in season)
- ☐ Tangy mayo coleslaw salad
- ☐ White thick-slice bread
- ☐ Macaroni cheese and bacon
- ☐ Peach-flavoured brewed iced tea
- ☐ Napa Jack's Original Bar-B-Q Sauce
- ☐ Smoky barbeque marinade
- ☐ Smoky BBQ grind
- ☐ Sliced jalapeños



Pork belly  
with bread-and-  
butter pickle

Create your own BBQ platter at  
Spier's Hoghouse BBQ and Bakery.

Pastrami  
lamb rib

Brisket  
burnt ends

Coal-roasted sweet  
potato with smoked  
orange yoghurt, spring  
onion and chilli

Roast cauliflower  
with labneh,  
za'atar, sultanas  
and sumac

lights that appear at random in the night sky on the outskirts of town. We headed out one night to see whether we could spot the aliens said to hover above the desert floor, shining their ship lights into the intense darkness. We had no luck but there is some evidence of their presence at [marfatxlights.com](http://marfatxlights.com).

We set up at The Tumble In RV Park ([tumbleinmarfa.com](http://tumbleinmarfa.com)) where we could take in the big Texas sky and wild prairie where the Coen brothers shot *No Country for Old Men*. There are two decent places to stay: the vintage Hotel Paisano ([hotelpaisano.com](http://hotelpaisano.com)) where the 1956 movie *Giant*, starring James Dean and Elizabeth Taylor, was filmed (this is now the town's social HQ); or the vintage trailers, Sioux-style tepees and Mongolian yurts at nomadic hotel, El Cosmico ([elcosmico.com](http://elcosmico.com)).

Marfa is not a foodie destination as such, but you're guaranteed a real good time at the Lost Horse Saloon ([losthorsesaloon.com](http://losthorsesaloon.com)), where you can cool down with a Michelada (*ojo rojo* or red beer) made by its legendary cowboy owner, Ty Mitchell. This border-

**"SPEND HOURS IN  
RUSTLIN ROB'S  
TEXAS GOURMET  
FOODS, WHERE YOU  
CAN TRY BEFORE  
BUYING OVER 350  
SAUCES, JAMS,  
PICKLES, GLAZES,  
RUBS..."**

country staple is made by combining a Mexican beer with ¼ cup tomato juice and ¼ cup lime juice over ice, and spicing it up with dashes of Worcester, Tabasco and soya sauces, salt and pepper, and is served in a tall, salt-rimmed glass with a straw.

A must for lunch is the famous Marfalafel from the Food Shark food truck ([facebook.com/foodsharkmarfa](http://facebook.com/foodsharkmarfa)). It's served with tortillas, hummus and salads, and is best with a Mexican Coke – Coca-Cola that is *hecho en México* (made in Mexico) and contains cane sugar rather than the bad-rep high-fructose corn syrup that hipsters are avoiding like the plague.

## BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK

This park in southwest Texas includes the entire Chisos mountain range and a large swathe of the Mexican Chihuahuan Desert. The Rio Grande River that runs along the edge of the park forms a natural border with Mexico. If you visit this expansive park, the Boquillas border crossing offers a unique opportunity to hop onto a river boat and visit the small town of Boquillas del Carmen in Mexico for some souvenir shopping or a plate of *chiles en nogada*, one of the country's most patriotic dishes. It is the colour of the Mexican flag – green represented by poblano chillies filled with chopped meat, fruits and spices, white from the walnut-based cream sauce, and red from pomegranate seeds.

## TERLINGUA POPULATION: 881

Once a mining town, this is the most famous ghost town in Texas. It's a strange outpost filled with drifters and dropouts, Vietnam vets, Big Bend river guides and artists. None of them is keen on the flow of tourists attracted by the



Above, from left: David Fairchild, our super-friendly server at Black's Barbecue in Austin, preparing our meal; a jar of pickles at The Salt Lick BBQ.

famous murder of the La Kiva bar owner Glenn Felts in 2014, which inspired National Geographic's series *Badlands, Texas*. Nor are they keen on the influx of "rurbanites" who want a slice of the country without straying too far from a decent flat white.

Maybe you'll just drive through, stopping for some shopping at the miners' trading store, or popping in at La Kiva for the infamous Mind Eraser: a mix of vodka and Kahlúa topped with club soda, which you must drink as fast as you can through a straw from the bottom up.

If you stay, go to the Starlight Theatre Restaurant & Saloon for a cup of their award-winning Terlingua chilli with cheese, onions and chips, and let loose with some lively two-step dancing.

There are dozens of places to overnight, from outlying ranches to The Big Bend Holiday Hotel that offers a variety of authentic trapper, prospector, miner and pioneer homes, preserved as they were made 100 years ago. Visit [ghostowntexas.com](http://ghostowntexas.com) for more info.

#### IT'S TEXAN BBQ OR NOTHIN'

Finally, we're getting to Texas BBQ. Chilli might be the official state food of Texas, but BBQ is something of a religion. On weekends, locals flock to the smokehouses in the Hill Country to queue for hours, come rain or shine, to get their BBQ fix that typically consists of four to six types of meat and three to

**"TRAVELLING IN OUR TRUSTY CAMPERVAN WAS POSSIBLY THE BEST DECISION EVER. IT MADE IT EASY TO PULL UP AT WHOLE FOODS FOR SHOPPING, SLEEP UNDER THE STARRY TEXAS SKY, AND EXPLORE OFF-THE-MAP TOWNS"**

six side dishes, served on a plastic tray covered in butcher's paper.

Meats include oak- or mesquite-smoked brisket, brisket burnt ends, beef or pork ribs, juicy steaks, tender pork loin, pulled pork, turkey, half chicken, pork chops, pulled pork and smoked sausages.

These are served with fixins: anything you serve with the star of the plate. For instance, a hamburger's fixins would be pickles, tomatoes and ketchup. And even fixins can have fixins – baked beans could have cheese and bacon. Texas BBQ fixins are just the right combo of sweet and tangy to complement the rich, smoked meat and include a choice of baked beans, coleslaw, pumpkin mash, potato salad, corn casserole, roast corn or cornbread, mac 'n' cheese, pickled jalapeños, assorted wood-fired crispy pickles, sliced onions and thick slices of white bread.

For dessert you will be offered a

slice of pecan pie or peach cobbler with buttermilk ice cream, banana pudding made with plenty of soggy vanilla wafers, or chargrilled watermelon slices.

We joined the queues at The Salt Lick BBQ ([saltlickbbq.com](http://saltlickbbq.com)), which has been slow-cooking meat over the same pit since 1967, but others in the Hill Country include Black's Barbecue in Lockhart, Cooper's Old Time Pit Bar-B-Que in Llano, Opie's BBQ in Spicewood and Snow's BBQ in Lexington.

One of the hallmarks of a good brisket is a coarse crust, the secret to which is rubbing it with coarse black pepper and salt in a ratio of 5:1. Occasionally cumin, chilli and cayenne will be added. Salt Lick doesn't use tomatoes in its BBQ sauce, maintaining that they make it burn and go bitter. Rather, they add lots of sugar along with tamarind concentrate and vinegar to ensure caramelisation, basting the meat often to retain moisture.

Travelling in our trusty campervan was possibly the best decision ever. It made it easy to pull up at Whole Foods for shopping, sleep under the starry Texas sky, and explore off-the-map towns and back roads. Plus, its small but adequate kitchenette meant we could experiment with the wonderful and sometimes weird American produce we bought along the way. If I could, I'd do it all over again. **W**

Visit [traveltexas.com](http://traveltexas.com) to find out more about things to do, eat and drink in Texas.

## WHERE TO GET YOUR SMOKY BBQ FIX IN SA

*From Grabouw to Braamfontein, juicy, smoky, flavour-packed meat cooked in the tradition of good ol' Texas BBQ is there for the feasting. Find everything from spare ribs to pulled-pork sandwiches at these eateries across the land*

**THE HICKORY SHACK** near Grabouw, Western Cape. [hickoryshack.co.za](http://hickoryshack.co.za)

**HOGHOUSE BARBEQUE GARAGE AND BREWERY** in Ndabeni and **HOGHOUSE BBQ & BAKERY** at Spier, Western Cape. [hhbc.co.za](http://hhbc.co.za)

**KNIFE RESTAURANT** at Century City, Milnerton, Western Cape. [knife-restaurants.co.za](http://knife-restaurants.co.za)

**SMOKING JOE'S RIB SHACK** in Fourways, Gauteng. [facebook.com/ribse4u](https://facebook.com/ribse4u)

**THE NATIONAL EATERY AND SPEAKEASY** in Parktown North, Gauteng. [facebook.com/TheNationalJHB](https://facebook.com/TheNationalJHB)

**THE SMOKEHOUSE AND GRILL** in Braamfontein, Gauteng. [thesmokehouseandgrill.co.za](http://thesmokehouseandgrill.co.za)

**MR BROWNS BBQ & SMOKED FOOD**, in Amanzimtoti, KwaZulu-Natal. [mrbrownsbbq.co.za](http://mrbrownsbbq.co.za)

## SWEET TEA

*The Texans love their tea, but it's not the warm, comforting drink you're thinking of. Rather, it's a sweet, refreshing, icy cold drink, often served in a jar. Adding a pinch of bicarbonate of soda neutralises the tannins and creates a smoother taste.*

**Serves 8**

**EASY**

**GREAT VALUE**

**Preparation: 5 minutes**

**Cooking: 15 minutes**

**For the simple syrup:**

**sugar** 150 g

**water** ¾ cup

**For the tea:**

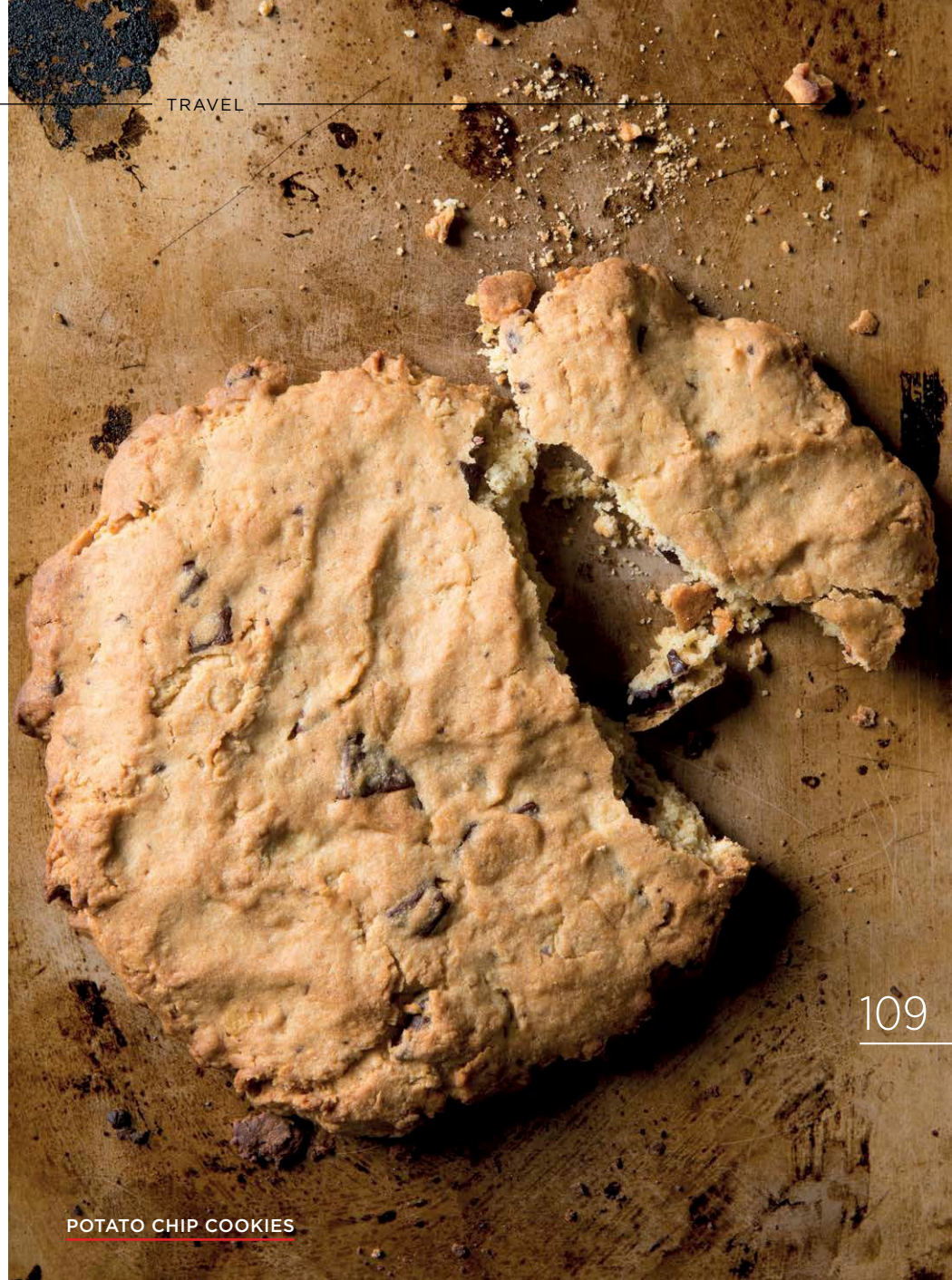
**water** 10 cups

**black tea bags** 6

**bicarbonate of soda** ¼ t

**ice and lemon slices**, for serving

**1** To make the simple syrup, combine the



POTATO CHIP COOKIES

sugar and water in a saucepan and boil for seven minutes, then set aside to cool.

**2** Boil 3 cups water, remove from the heat and add the tea bags and bicarbonate of soda. Allow to steep for at least 5 minutes.

**3** Remove the tea bags and add the syrup while stirring. Pour into a large jug and add the remaining water. Chill and serve over ice with lemon slices or fresh fruit.

**DAIRY-FREE, WHEAT- AND GLUTEN-FREE**

## POTATO CHIP COOKIES

*Austin's salty, sweet and crispy bites of heaven are made with toasted pecans, crushed potato chips, vanilla extract, flour, butter and sugar.*

**Makes 8**

**EASY**

**GREAT VALUE**

**Preparation: 10 minutes**

**Baking: 20 minutes**

**butter** 230 g

**brown sugar** 400 g

**free-range eggs** 2

**flour** 360 g

**bicarbonate of soda** 1 t

**salt** 1 t

**Lays salted crisps** 100 g

**chocolate** 100 g, roughly chopped

**1** Preheat the oven to 180°C. Cream the butter and sugar until light and fluffy. Whisk in the eggs, one at a time. **2** Sift the dry ingredients into the bowl and mix. Fold in the chips and chocolate. **3** Roll the mixture into balls and place onto a greased baking tray. Press down using the back of a fork. **4** Bake for 15–20 minutes, or until golden and cooked through.