Innovation in Play: Frisco's Tech Boom

by **Lisa Dawson** in **City Development**, **Living**

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Frisco EDC Director of Innovation Jeremiah Anderson and Mayor Jeff Cheney | Photo courtesy of Plug and Play

From Sports to Startups, How Frisco is Attracting Top Talent and Investment

By Lisa Dawson

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If you look closely, it's easy to see Frisco giving Silicon Valley a run for its money when it comes to tech startups. With a business-friendly environment and attractive qualities that keep people moving here from other parts of the country and the world, Frisco is swiftly becoming an economic powerhouse for innovative companies looking to attract investment funding, network with other companies and hire talented IT professionals. Frisco was recently named one of the top ten tech cities in an industry ranking for tech professionals. And with a lower cost of living than other larger cities like San Francisco and New York, Frisco is becoming an increasingly attractive city to live and work.



Michael Olmstead, Plug and Play CRO | Photo courtesy of Plug and Play

Plug and Play is one company helping foster the tech hub startup boom in Frisco. A global innovation platform with a local presence, Plug and Play has a vast network of over 650 corporate partners, 300 venture capital firms, and has helped launch 80,000 startups worldwide. Frisco is now one of their fifty locations worldwide, including Abu Dhabi, Hamburg and Paris, making them a global leader in bringing together an ecosystem of startups, corporations, venture capitalists, governments and universities. By joining Plug and Play, startup founders gain access to their network which gives them connections to companies and investors they may have yet to find on their own. Plug and Play also provides mentorship and resources tailored to the business's specific needs, such as co-working space with meeting rooms, event space, workshops and boot camps that teach companies how to succeed in the competitive startup world.

One of the most significant benefits of being part of Plug and Play is access to their community of like-minded entrepreneurs, innovators, and industry experts. These communities are popular in other cities for attracting top talent and providing access to investors and funds startups need to launch their businesses. But the fuel that powers startups goes beyond funding. Founders need a collaborative environment that fosters knowledge sharing, networking, and mutual support. "We connect startups with potential investors and venture capital firms, increasing the chances of securing the necessary funding to grow the business," says David Steele, Director of Frisco - Sportstech Plug and Play



StadiumDrop TEAM | Photo courtesy of StadiumDrop

A Playground for Sports and Tech

As the home to multiple professional and college sports organizations, the Dallas Cowboys, PGA, FC Dallas and a flourishing pre-professional and youth sports program, it's not surprising that Plug and Play is running a Sportstech accelerator program as one of its initial focuses, as well as a fintech startup accelerator program. Sports in Frisco extend beyond the physical playing field. With companies like game developer Gearbox Software and esports company Complexity Gaming, Frisco is at the forefront of digital gaming and esports. The ecosystem continues into the education realm, as well. The University of North Texas (UNT) has corporate sponsorships with the Dallas Cowboys, Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders, Dallas Mavericks and offers MBA and bachelor's degrees in Sports Management. With a wide network connecting the business and investment community with sports, sports management, gaming and more, Frisco is carving out an undeniable Sportstech niche in the startup market.



Photo courtesy of Plug and Play

Rijo Walker, Program Manager for the Sportstech innovations vertical at Plug and Play, says Frisco is a jewel in North Texas, and the energy and resources city leaders are putting into making Frisco an attractive startup destination can be felt and seen. "Plug and Play is equipped to provide a worldwide innovation platform right here in Frisco. We are excited to continue meeting local entrepreneurs and making connections with investors and mentors or to even just provide educational resources for their businesses," says Walker. "We are actively cultivating an ecosystem that will be attractive to both founders and venture capitalists. If we can make a strategic connection for you [as a founder], we will gladly do that."

The relationship between Plug and Play and Frisco Economic Development Corporation (EDC) is a performance-based incentive agreement that started in late 2021 after Mayor Jeff Cheney announced Frisco would become the venture capital capitol of the central U.S. by 2024.



David Steele | Photo courtesy of Plug and Play

"We started working with local partners to develop a request for proposals (RFPs) that we put out publicly to help find the operator that would run the program, create connections and open doors to investors and venture capitalists that would help us meet that goal," said Jeremiah Anderson, Director of Innovation for Frisco EDC, adding that it was a two-year long process to negotiate the details of the Frisco and Plug and Play relationship. Anderson says direct access to funding is what startup-stage companies need to grow, and a partner like Plug and Play can help those companies find the resources they need, including funding, to ensure they succeed. "A gap in funding exists here in Frisco and throughout DFW," he says. "We need to bring more capital into the market to support those early-stage companies."

Anderson says there are benchmarks the city is using to ensure the lofty goal of making Frisco the Silicon Valley of the central U.S. happen. "The easiest one for us to track is the engagement of venture capitalists and investors that are visiting Frisco through Plug and Play and learning how to work with startups here. Plug and Play is helping host these meetings and also the investment dollars that are coming to local companies." Anderson says 7.5 million dollars has been raised to date into early stage Sportstech companies that have come directly from the partnership between Frisco EDC and Plug and Play. "That number will certainly grow with more partnerships that are forming," he says.



Frisco City Council Members and members of Frisco EDC at Plug and Play's March 2024 Frisco launch event at the National Soccer Hall of Fame

AI and Apps Enhance and Deliver

One company that's established in Frisco with the support of Plug and Play is StadiumDrop, a mobile ordering delivery app that allows fans to order food, beverages and merchandise from their seat and have it brought to them. Adam McAbee, Co-Founder and Chief Operations Officer says by working with Plug and Play, they have secured their largest client, AT&T Stadium, and expanded partnerships with the Frisco RoughRiders and FC Dallas. "Frisco is a major hub for DFW sports action, and it's only growing as we approach the World Cup. It's exciting to see where Frisco will be in the global sports landscape over the next ten to fifteen years," he says.

While the influx of business has a great economic benefit for Frisco, there's also a keen focus on effectively managing growth. Anderson says all the city departments play a part in Frisco's growth. "We're benefitting from steady leadership at the highest level, and the theme of being forward-facing and looking ahead has been consistent and has led to where Frisco is today." Anderson says residents' voices are being heard during this growth phase through the Comprehensive Plan Advisory Committee, a group comprised of citizens and business owners assisting the city with managing the challenges and opportunities presented by the city's from traffic and planning and zoning to its public parks and entertainment venues.

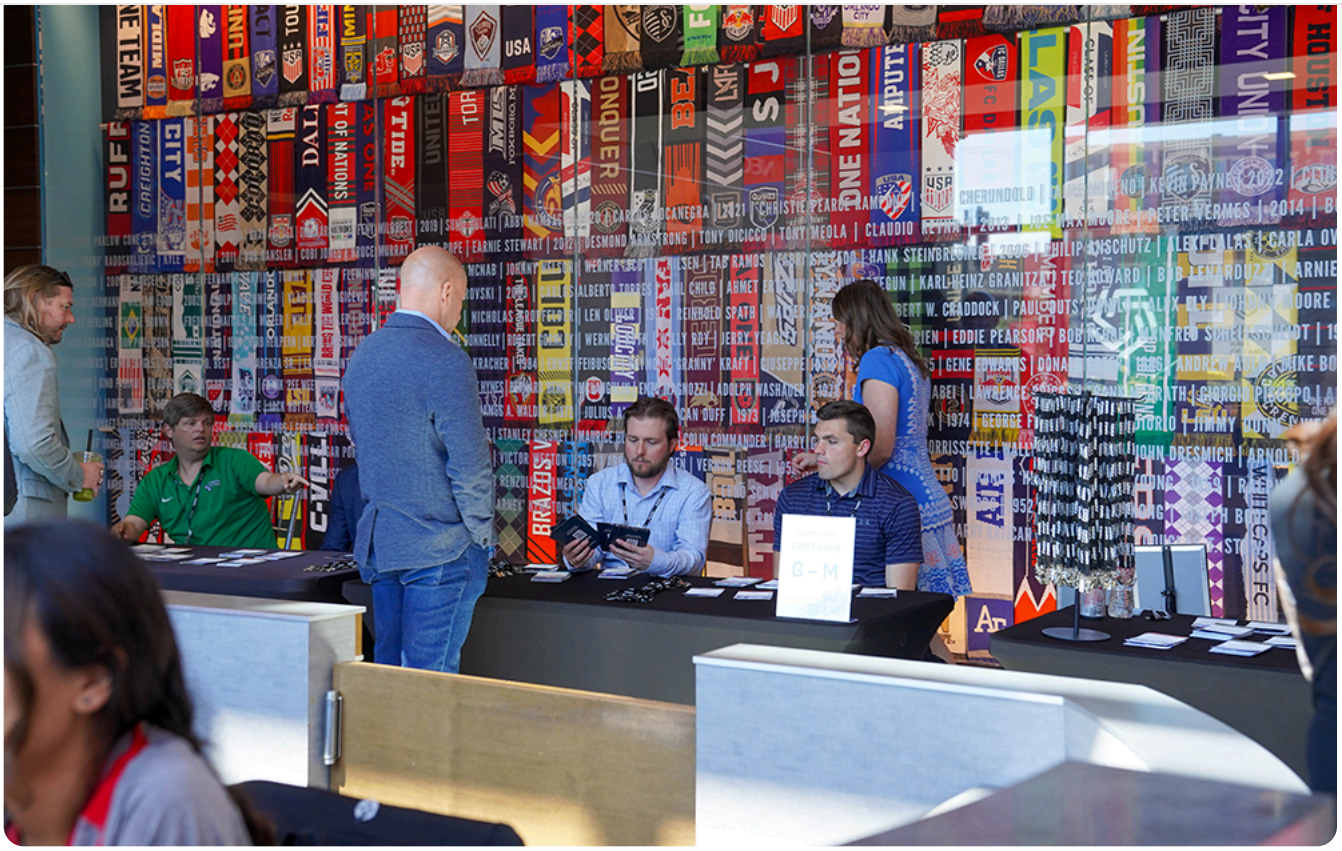


Photo courtesy Plug and Play

Plug and Play say they have had a lot of support from long-term partners in Adidas and PepsiCo and have welcomed the local support of Baylor Scott & White, Dallas Cowboys, PGA of America, Dallas Stars, Dallas Mavericks, and UNT. As they continue to grow their newest vertical in sports, they will be continuing to add partners to help build the best Sportstech innovation platform in the world.

"We are excited at the opportunity to see our model flourish in Frisco. The foundation for their innovation ecosystem has already been built and has strong support from the public and private sector," says Michael Olmstead, Chief Revenue Officer of Plug and Play.

Uplift Labs, a Palo Alto company that's now part of the Frisco startup scene, is focused on optimizing human movement performance with A.I. and is already a part of Major League Baseball and many professional sports teams. Company Co-Founder and CEO Sukemasa Kabayama says Plug and Play invited them to participate in their inaugural sports tech cohort. "I love how Frisco is positioning itself to be the sports hub in the U.S., given the presence of many sports teams, the PGA of America, healthcare organizations, and other key entities in the vicinity. That vision really resonated with us," explains Kabayama. "The team at Plug and Play Frisco has been outstanding in their outreach and in connecting us with potential partners in the greater Frisco area."



Uplift Labs Co-Founder and CEO Sukemasa Kabayama and Sales Manager Jonathan Moscot | Photo courtesy of Plug and Play

Dreams for the Future

In August, the DEC Network, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization that drives innovation and economic impact for entrepreneurs looking to start businesses, held Dallas Startup Week in Frisco at Embassy Suites by Hilton Dallas Frisco Hotel & Convention Center. It was the second year the event was held in Frisco, a testament to the city's commitment to attracting businesses and talent to the area. In meeting rooms filled with excitement about Frisco's future, city leaders and entrepreneurs spoke about the area's potential. Deputy Mayor Pro Tem Tammy Meinershagen addressed the crowd with examples of how Frisco is leading innovative efforts with drone deliveries and robotics in restaurants. In January, Walmart expanded its airborne drone delivery footprint to reach up to seventy-five percent of the Dallas-Fort Worth area, the largest drone delivery area a U.S. retailer has in a single market. "We consider our entire city an innovation lab," she said. "We want people to come here with big dreams because this is where dreams are made."

Lisa Dawson is a freelance writer living in Frisco.

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A Night in The Rail District

by **Ashli Urano** in **Dining**

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As Frisco's historic downtown undergoes an estimated $58.5 million redevelopment, The Rail District finds itself at the heart of change. While construction crews work tirelessly to widen sidewalks, upgrade infrastructure, and make the area more walkable and pedestrian-friendly, The Rail District's beloved restaurants continue to serve delicious cuisine.

To celebrate and support them during this period of transition, we headed out on a progressive dinner through The Rail District. This unique dining experience, where each course is enjoyed at a different restaurant, allowed us to sample the diverse flavors of the neighborhood while navigating the temporary challenges of construction.



Eight 11 Place: Drinks

Eight 11 Place, with its mix of rustic and modern touches, provided an ideal starting point for our progressive dinner. When I arrived, the host said my friend, Jana, was already seated comfortably outside on the patio. As he led the way through the dining room, I admired the restaurant's

The interior's brick walls are painted deep blue, accented by wooden wainscoting. A mix of natural wood tables pairs perfectly with white cross back chairs and cushioned metal stools. The space has recessed lighting and delicate pendant fixtures, while the ceiling is painted dark blue with exposed wooden beams.

Once outside, I took in the beauty of the patio's design. A wooden pergola with string lights hangs overhead. Comfortable gray wicker chairs and wooden tables create intimate seating areas, along with picnic tables and patio umbrellas. There are several barrels repurposed as high-top tables, adding a rustic touch. A standout feature is the rectangular fire pit tables, complete with glass wind guards - perfect for cooler evenings.

Our server recommended his two favorite signature cocktails, the Berry Passion and the Ocean Breeze. The Berry Passion arrived first, a mix of Tito's vodka, Malibu rum, and Chambord. Blackberry juice added depth to the raspberry's sweetness, while a splash of lemon provided a refreshing twist. With each sip, the smooth vodka base allowed the fruit flavors to shine through. The cocktail was garnished with a sprig of fresh mint and a few plump raspberries.





When the Ocean Breeze arrived, Jana became ecstatic after seeing the garnish. A rock candy swizzle stick encrusted with blue crystals was placed across the top of the glass. The rim was dusted with purple and blue sugar crystals, adding to the presentation.

Tito's vodka, with muddled lime and a hint of lime juice, brought the Ocean Breeze cocktail to life. After taking a sip, a burst of lime was followed by a gentle sweetness. Each sip tasted smoother than the last. As the swizzle stick slowly dissolved, changing the drink's color and taste, it felt like a little touch of magic inside the glass.

Eight 11 Place's extensive drink menu features a selection of wines, creative cocktails, local craft beers, and domestic favorites. The restaurant's happy hour specials run Tuesday through Thursday, offering discounted food and drinks, including charcuterie boards, pizzas, and house wines.

As we enjoyed our cocktails, we knew the evening was off to a fantastic start. Eight 11 Place set the bar high, leaving us eager to discover what the next stop would bring.

Parking Tip: For those driving to Eight 11 Place, a small parking lot is conveniently located behind the restaurant.

After finishing our cocktails, we were ready for the next course at Haystack Burgers and Barley. As we walked to the counter to order appetizers, the decor felt bright and cheerful, and large windows flooded the interior with natural light, creating an open, airy feel.

The ceiling's painted white beams, ductwork, and piping add an edgy industrial feel, softened by warm, diffused lighting. Walls showcase white paint on exposed brick, maintaining a clean, bright ambiance. This neutral backdrop allows colorful accents to pop, while hexagonal tiles on the bar front add a unique touch.



After placing our order at the counter, we chose a table near the open kitchen, allowing us to observe the chefs hard at work. There were plenty of seating options, from high-top tables with metal stools to traditional wooden tables surrounded by white spindle-back chairs. A comfortable gray upholstered banquette lined one wall, situated beneath a yellow neon sign.

We decided to start with Haystack's Pick Three appetizer, selecting guacamole, queso, and salsa with tortilla chips. The guacamole immediately stood out as being freshly prepared. Jalapenos added a noticeable kick to the chunks of ripe avocado and diced tomatoes. Each bite provided a balance of creamy and spicy with a subtle garlic aftertaste.

The queso, a family recipe from owner Kevin Galvan, surprised us with its super thick consistency. American cheese, flour, and milk formed a creamy base for the diced bell peppers. Cumin and other spices easily sealed the deal. The salsa was also thick, with bold, fresh flavors coming through with each bite. Jana and I layered the house-made tortilla chips with a combination of all three.



We also ordered mozzarella sticks, which was unusual considering how heavy they tend to be. After a bit of research, I discovered that these would definitely be different. Hand-cut from a block of fresh mozzarella, each stick was rolled in panko crust and then lightly fried.

With their delicate taste from the fresh mozzarella and thin layer of breading, Haystack's mozzarella sticks offered a more refined take on the classic appetizer and were served with house-made ranch and marinara sauce.

Other appetizers include Fresh Cut Kennebec Fries and Haystack Onions, with the option to mix both in a "Half/Half" order. Fried Pickles are a popular choice, while the Ranchero Chicken Stuffed Jalapenos offer a spicy kick.

Parking Tip: Customers can use a newly added gravel turn-in at the front of the restaurant or access the parking lot from the back. If the lot is full, there's additional parking available on the grass across the street.

Randy's Steakhouse: Soup and Salad

Our progressive dinner continued at Randy's Steakhouse, where we arrived for the soup and salad course. The restaurant, set in a converted 1869 Victorian-style home, beautifully combines historical charm with the sophistication of a high-end steakhouse.

Each room's decor tells a unique story. The main dining room's dark wood chairs with vertical slats pair beautifully with crisp white tablecloths. A large crystal chandelier serves as a stunning centerpiece, while the walls are decorated with artwork, including landscapes.

One of the most striking features of Randy's decor is the creative use of photography. Large-scale black-and-white images, backlit with red accent lighting, line the wall above tufted burgundy booths. This modern touch contrasts with the restaurant's overall traditional setting.



We chose to dine at the bar, which offered a slightly more casual atmosphere while maintaining sophistication. Three mirrored backdrops showcase an extensive liquor collection illuminated by warm accent lighting from above. The polished wooden bar top is complemented by barstools with comfortable red cushions. Randy's bar is perfect for enjoying a drink or a meal in style.

The menu presented an unexpected surprise - Turtle Soup. I was unsure how to feel about eating turtle meat, especially when the daily soup special was Lobster Bisque. Before Jana and I could decide, the bartender arrived with great news. Despite its name, the soup is actually prepared using ground filet mignon. It is a clever substitution that maintains the essence of the traditional recipe.

Upon tasting, the soup revealed a complex flavor profile that blew me away. The tomato-based broth was enhanced by a blend of spices, including cayenne and black pepper. Worcestershire sauce added depth, while V8 juice contributed to the soup's overall success. The result was a chili-like soup, each spoonful unveiling new layers to taste.

We ordered the Walnut & Feta Salad to accompany our soup. Served on a bed of baby spring lettuce with arugula, this dish provided a refreshing contrast to the soup. Creamy feta cheese and toasted walnuts were tossed throughout the salad, offering a variety of textures, while a light balsamic vinaigrette tied the ingredients together.



As we enjoyed our soup and salad, we began to appreciate the quality in what is often considered a simple course. The Turtle Soup, in particular, was incredible – a dish that could easily stand on its own as a main course. The salad, while more traditional, was executed with a level of detail that made it better than expected. The toasted walnuts seemed never-ending, which made Jana smile.

Along with the Turtle Soup and daily soup special, the menu's classic salads include the Dinner House Salad and The Wedge. For those seeking a twist on tradition, Randy's Caesar Salad incorporates jalapeno peppers and cumin.

The atmosphere at Randy's Steakhouse, combined with the surprising complexity of our soup and salad course, created a memorable moment. We realized each place had offered something unique and unexpected, making our next stop even more exciting.

Parking Tip: Randy's has its own parking lot.

Didi's Downtown: Entrees

We arrived at Didi's Downtown for the main course of our progressive dinner. With over 30 years of culinary experience, Chef Scott Hoffner opened the restaurant in 2018, naming it after his late mother, Diane "Didi" Hoffner.

The restaurant's atmosphere made us feel alive when we stepped inside. The space showcases exposed wooden beams, from light pine to rich mahogany. White-painted wooden panels brighten select walls, preventing a heavy atmosphere, and string lights can be seen across the ceiling, adding a cozy touch to the design.



A railroad theme, along with Texan influences, is prominently highlighted throughout the restaurant. A large painting of Willie Nelson is on display, while a wooden Texas flag serves as a bold statement of Lone Star pride. Surfboards add an unexpected touch to Didi's ongoing theme. Wooden tables with stylish ladder-back chairs are scattered throughout the restaurant, in addition to booth seating along the walls.

Jana and I sat at a booth near the bar since the patio area was full. Our server greeted us with a warm smile, explaining the evening's specials before recommending a few of Didi's signature dishes. Standout options include the Texas Chili and Jalapeno Barbeque burgers. Entrees feature tempting dishes like the Redfish and Grits (creamy jalapeno smoked Gouda grits) and Blackened Catfish Pontchartrain. The sandwich section offers creative options like the Hot Honey Buttered Fried Chicken and General Tso's Chicken sandwiches.



During our visit, we shared two popular dishes - Mahi-Mahi Tacos with a side of Mexican Street Corn (elote) and the Grilled Chicken Club with fries. The blackened mahi-mahi tacos were nestled inside flour tortillas, complemented by jalapeno aioli, pico de gallo, slaw, and queso fresco. The side of Mexican street corn, charred and topped with cotija cheese and chili powder, elevated the entire dish.

The Grilled Chicken Club sandwich, served on thick slices of toasted sourdough bread, featured a juicy, perfectly seasoned grilled chicken breast covered with melted provolone cheese. Thick bacon added a smoky crunch to the creamy slices of ripe avocado. Fresh lettuce and tomato brought a refreshing crispness to each bite, while dijon mayo made the sandwich feel complete. I enjoyed the fries more without ketchup due to the chef's use of spices.



As we prepared for our final stop, we left Didi's Downtown impressed with the entree course and the fantastic service we received. Jana and I agreed that we would definitely return for more than entrees after having such a positive experience.

Parking Tip: Didi's has its own parking lot next to the restaurant. If full, additional parking is available in the lot to the left of the building when viewed from Main Street. Coming from Preston, drivers can turn right just after the restaurant and will find the overflow lot on the left.

Heritage Table: Dessert

Our progressive dinner through Frisco's Rail District concluded with the dessert course at Heritage Table, a converted 1917 Victorian-style home. Chef Rich Vana opened the restaurant in 2013 and recently became a James Beard Award Semifinalist.

When Jana and I arrived, the dining room was packed. We secured the last two seats at the bar, where pendant lights with large gold-toned shades hung above the dark wood counter. Everyone surrounding us seemed to be happy as the room was filled with lots of laughter and conversation. Before diving into desserts, we ordered espressos to recharge.



Heritage Table's dining room has a mixture of dark and light wood tables paired with cross-back chairs. Framed black and white photographs hang on the walls, along with Texas-inspired artwork. Large windows provide plenty of natural light during the day, while string lights and brass chandeliers add to the relaxing atmosphere during the evening.

The bartender stopped by to share his thoughts, recommending two of his favorite desserts. The Chocolate Silk Pie arrived first, with a perfectly piped swirl of vanilla whipped cream on the side, ready to cut through the richness. With the first bite, the Oreo cookie crust and silky-smooth chocolate filling instantly came together as one. The bartender explained that the filling was made with a minimal amount of ingredients, resulting in a rich, yet not overwhelming taste.

When the bartender delivered the Basque Cheesecake, Jana said she could already tell this was her favorite. Unlike traditional cheesecake, this crustless version featured a caramelized, bronzed top layer. While the center was light and creamy, it was also decadent. A base made from almond Florentine cookies added a nutty flavor and texture to the cake. The dessert was elegantly garnished with an additional almond Florentine cookie, fresh strawberries, and a sweet strawberry coulis.



The desserts at Heritage Table were a fitting end to our progressive dinner. Chef Vana's approach honors classic recipes while adding subtle, chef-driven improvements. The dessert course managed to feel both comfortingly familiar and refreshingly new.

Parking Tip: Heritage Table has its own parking lot. If it happens to be full, additional parking can be found on nearby side streets.

Our progressive dinner through Frisco's Rail District was a great way to experience Main Street's restaurants during the ongoing renovations and construction. Each stop offered something unique, from cocktails at Eight 11 Place to desserts at Heritage Table. The construction has not stopped these establishments from delivering fantastic food and drinks while providing exceptional service. In fact, the dining scene in Frisco's Rail District continues to be a wonderful place to make lasting memories for years to come.

Ashli Urano is a freelance writer obsessed with competitive tennis, true crime, and her Golden-doodle named Sadie Kirenia.

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