

# Flight of the Swan

Trading school days for runways, one-time "ugly" duckling Jacob Riley takes off.

By Tara Seetharam | Photography by Julie Soefer |

Versace is kind of a big deal. But, perhaps not surprisingly, that came as news to Houston high school kid Jacob Riley, more of a Ralph Lauren kind of guy.

Chosen to model not the typical one but rather two looks for the fashion house's spring-summer 2012 show in Milan a few months back, the 17-year-old was unaware of-and unabashedly unimpressed with-the brand. "They called me and said, 'Versace wants to see you," says Riley, "and I was like, 'Dude, who's Versace?"

Once he arrived in Italy's fashion capital, the Page Parkes talent agency's rising star, who's often told he has an "expensive look," soon realized he'd stumbled into the big time-gorgeous modelsturned-friends everywhere, racks of luxurious clothes, and a slamming after-party rubbing elbows with the likes of actor Chace Crawford and pro athlete Dwyane Wade. The experience inspired the former Lamar High School student to temporarily relocate to New York, where he lives in SoHo with a model he met in Milan as a roomie. (He's taking online courses through Texas Tech in order to graduate.) Last month he appeared in New York's Fashion Week, at the big Custo Barcelona show.

"I want an intense, 'that guy has the whole world in his hands' type of look," says Riley of the swagger he hopes to affect. CONTINUED ON PAGE 191...

# Tiny Boxwood's 0

Gardening gurus mix fine food with flowers at Thompson+Hanson's popular, chic on-site eatery. Dig into Baron Doke and Freddy Lemon's woodfired pizzas or buffalo burger—or the place's new sister location, Tiny's No. 5, which recently opened in West U. Breakfast, lunch and dinner Tue.-Sat., brunch Sun. 3614 W. Alabama St., 713.622.4224, and 3636 Rice Blvd., 713.664.0141, thompsonbanson.com \$\$

#### Tony's

Tony Vallone's motto ("first in season, first at Tony's"), the pampering service, the more than 1,000 well-priced vinos, the fine food and the careful stewardship of Vallone himself are what make this classic restaurant world-famous for foodies. Reservations on weekend evenings a must. Lunch served Mon.-Fri., dinner served Mon.-Sat. 3755 Richmond Ave., 713.622.6778, tonyshouston.com \$\$\$\$

# Toyama 0

With daily happy hour specials—and a bonus reverse happy hour Thursdays after 10 PM—this Japanese restaurant's semicircular full bar and patio are always packed. The sushi bar boasts great specials, too, like the mega lobster tuna roll with mango and tobiko. Lunch and dinner daily. 2802 S. Shepherd Dr., 713.528.8527, toyamahouston.com \$\$

# **TQLA**

Classic Tex-Mex is combined with Southwestern flair at this Wash Ave spot to create dishes such as wild-mushroom tamales, crawfish-and-spinach enchiladas, and pumpkin-seed-crusted salmon. The winding bar offers an abundant selection of tequilas and mezcals. Lunch and dinner daily. 4601 Washington Ave., 281.501.3237, tqlahouston.com \$\$

# Truluck's

The stone crabs here are hard to pass up, but be sure to explore the entire menu. The crab and corn chowder is a lively way to begin any meal. A "power lunch" option makes quick work of lunch. Lunch Mon.-Sat., dinner nightly. 5350 Westheimer Rd., 713.783.7270, trulucks.com \$\$\$

### Up Restaurant 0

Perched atop the Highland Village shopping center, this scene-savvy hot spot boasts a swanky bar, a sexy wood-wrapped sunken dining room and great views. For more, see Food Drink Review. Lunch and dinner daily. 3995 Westheimer Rd., 713.640.5416, uprestaurant.com \$\$\$

# Vic & Anthony's

The classic Downtown steakhouse attracts a regular crowd for its lobster bisque, tender-aged steaks and fab lunchtime burgers! Lunch on Fri., dinner nightly. 1510 Texas St., 713.228.1111, vicandanthonys.com \$\$\$\$

#### Vincent's

Vincent's wood-fire rotisserie cranks out prime cuts of veal and mouthwatering chicken dishes. Vincent Mandola, wife Mary, and their two daughters head up this restaurant, adding seafood flare to a robust Italian menu. Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner daily. 2701 W. Dallas St., 713.528.4313, ninos-vincents.com \$\$\$

#### Willie G's

This Landry's spot has fresh black-andred-hued décor, an al fresco lounge and menu of seafood delights like spiced ahi tuna with veggie risotto—and the house-made Cajun-style gumbos and bisques are top-notch. Lunch and dinner daily. 1605 Post Oak Blvd., 713.840.7190, williegs.com \$\$

#### Xuco Xicana 0

Formerly El Patio, this Midtown eatery features a new menu of interior-Mexican food with a distinctly Texan attitude, from Beaver's Exec Chef Jonathan Jones. Lunch and dinner daily. 2416 Brazos St., 713.523.8181, elpatio.com \$\$

#### Zelko Bistro

Chef-owner Jamie Zelko sends out dishes that make good use of local ingredients, like fried pickles and old-school desserts. Love the meatloaf. Housemade preserves are available togo. No reservations, so get there early. Lunch and dinner Tue.-Sun. 705 E. 11th St., 713.880.8691, zelkobistro.com \$\$

#### Zush

Trendy but laid-back, this Memorial Park-area haunt touts traditional Japanese staples—shrimp tempura and crispy gyoza dumplings—as well as inventive rolls like the salmonpacked Julie's Roll with hot chili paste and spicy mayo. Lunch Mon.-Fri., dinner daily. 5900 Memorial Dr., 713.861.5588, zushihouston.com \$\$

...THE LOOP PEOPLE CONTINUED FROM PAGE 58 He certainly looks the part now; chiseled features and a height of 6-foot-3 give him an unmistakable stature, even in boyish khaki shorts and Jordan high-tops. But for most of his life he didn't think of himself as the world-in-his-hands type.

Growing up in the Heights, Riley says he was "the ugly, chubby kid" in the family, as compared to a beautiful older sister and cute younger brother. "He's had a six-pack his whole life," he says of his bro. "I was just 'the other kid." He battled low self-esteem and got into mischief serious enough to land him in a Minnesota Outward Bound program for at-risk teens when he was 13.

He made it through the military-school-type episode with more pride in himself—and a bit less weight. Thinking maybe he wasn't such an ugly duckling after all, he approached Page Parkes, who suggested he study acting. The happily aspiring thespian did just that, and was surprised when, a few years later, the agency approached *him*, saying that he might just be able to model—if he lost 30 more pounds. With the help of a trainer and a rigorous diet, he shed 50, in just nine months. Enter the swan.

Riley seems unfazed by his extreme makeover and Versace nod, thanks in part to his dad, who reacted to a mild post-Milan ego trip by making the glamorous model dig a ditch.

"It was quite the magical journey," recalls Parkes. "We told him the truth and he listened. Jacob just won our hearts in every way."

The aggressively humble Riley seems unfazed by his extreme makeover and the Versace nod that followed, thanks in part to his entrepreneur father, who reacted to a mild post-Milan ego trip by making the glamorous model dig a ditch. "It reminded me that I can't just let one show blow me ahead of everyone else," says Riley. "It can't be like that."

He also still enjoys hanging with his pals who liked him when he was chunky. They go swimming when he's around, and sometimes burst into bouts of spontaneous free-style rapping. They know the real Jacob. "I hate to quote *Zoolander*, but there's a lot more to me than just being good-looking," Riley laughs. "I never want to be one of those intimidating Ralph Lauren guys. I always swore that if I ever became attractive, I would never let it give me power."

Parkes swears Riley is the next Channing Tatum, a Page Parkes alum himself. But if it were up to Riley, he'd choose to be the next Ashton Kutcher. "I have massive amounts of respect for the guy," he says. "He started modeling to raise money for his brother who has cerebral palsy." (Or, alternatively, Riley would follow hunky Twilight star Taylor Lautner's footsteps. "I am absolutely fascinated by vampires. They're indestructible.")

Riley plans to return home to Houston as soon as Fashion Week and the ad-campaign season wrap in the Big Apple. He misses his girlfriend, Mariah. "These girls [in New York] are some of America's best-looking women," he admits, but hastens to add that there's nothing "like a girl from your hometown."

Plus he's just got Houston in his blood. "There's so much ability here," he says. "There's a possibility for everything. I think it's stupid that they say New York is the city of opportunity. *Houston* is the city of opportunity."