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In Harvard Square, OM meditates on inventive food

By Joe Yonan, January 20, 2006

With a name like OM, a restaurant becomes ripe for every home-related headline in the book: "There's no place like OM" would open the door to comparisons with Oz, and "OM is where the art is" could lead off a discussion of the wild Tibetan paintings. Stop us before we pun again, because Om the word deserves more than that -- in Sanskrit it's the sacred beginning to meditative mantras -- and so does OM the restaurant.

All in all, this newest player on the Harvard Square dining scene is more Wonderland than Nirvana, starting right at the Winthrop Street entrance. We push through a heavy, ornately carved wooden door into a hallway as dark and mysterious as an amusement park tunnel. Past the wall of water, the bar is backlit with blue light against stone, and a monstrous-looking figure in a huge painting glares from one side of the room to the other.

Upstairs, more eye candy awaits. We sit at a table against the picture windows, which offer a view of young women in thigh-high boots smoking outside Grendel's Den and, through another set of windows, waiters milling among the privileged at UpStairs on the Square.

There's no shortage of things to gawk at inside, from the kaleidoscopic ceiling art to the museum-like shelves that hold brass statues above and minimalist floral arrangements below. On one wall, two more large Tibetan paintings in sky blue, brown, and gold combine puffy clouds and more deities, all apparently painted by the owner's father.

In an atmosphere this stimulating, the food should either be serene counterpoint or whimsical complement. Chef Rachel Klein's intricately composed plates are very much the latter, proving that all the praise she received while at Lot 401 in Providence was no fluke.

It starts with the popcorn, spiked with truffled Parmesan, a welcome diversion from the old bread and butter, and a round of exquisite drinks: a Manhattan sweetened with orange essence and Campari, and the light and lemony Fred and Ginger.

We haven't had such difficulty ordering food in recent memory, hemming and hawing with our charming waiter and even running up to the wait station and shuffling things around.

When the plates arrive, they're little works of art in themselves. A "deconstructed Caesar" lines up hearts of Romaine, fried white anchovies, a crisscrossed stack of asparagus spears, a mini-tower of mini-potato slices, and a soft poached egg, still in its shell and served with a little spoon. Eating it is a game: Smear one thing at a time in the Parmesan emulsion streaked across two sides of the plate, dip it in the egg, or both.

Om Restaurant and Lounge[Add your own review](#)

Location: 57 JFK Street,
Harvard Square / Cambridge;
617-576-2800

Cuisine: Eclectic/New
American

Prices: First course \$10-\$18.
Second courses \$18-\$34.
Desserts \$8-\$12.

Hours: Dinner nightly 5-
10:30; lounge menu until
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Credit Cards: All major
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Klein's riff on tuna tartar is brilliant. Underneath a bruleed top, the square of chopped raw tuna is sweet, spicy, sour, and salty, thanks to pine nuts, currants, and a chile-lime vinaigrette. A shot of hibiscus spritzer sits in a glass that sits on a little cucumber coaster, and a spoon holds tiny cubes of ginger gelee.

The same goes for the tomato and grilled cheese, in which tapioca and vegetable "pearls" sit in a spicy tomato consomme, deeply flavored with Asian herbs, alongside a little grilled sandwich of farmhouse cheddar.

You get the idea. Suffice it to say that main course dishes such as steak and eggs (grilled filet mignon with a fried truffled egg sitting on top), surf 'n' turf (sliced tuna alongside short-rib dumplings), and duet of pork (grilled loin alongside braised belly) come with more elements than space permits us to detail. Each follows the same swipe-this-through-that philosophy that makes dining at OM captivating.

At dessert, an ice cream sandwich means carrot cake and parsnip ice cream with habanero caramel, and an olive oil cake comes with a ginger-beer float.

It's all a bit trippy but satisfying, so much so that when the check comes we start to miss all those flavors before we've even left. On the way out, we head back downstairs, where the bar is packed with hipsters. We consider telling them that the better action is where the food is, but then we remember that down here they serve chili-flavored caramel corn. Tempting.



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