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DINING OUT

Om Cooking

An unexpected new addition to Harvard Square, Om's Tibetan-inspired décor and New American cuisine are quite unlike anything else on the city's dinner circuit.

BY CORBY KJUMMER

Om is an exotic arrival in the middle of Harvard Square, a place that doesn't lack for good restaurants, or striking ones. But Harvard Square hasn't had something spectacular, chic, foreign, and sexy in a long time. Maybe ever. Finally, a place where well-heeled international students and their parents don't have to dress down!

You might have read about the interior: the elaborate Nepalese carved door signaling a change of worlds from Winthrop Street, the dark wood and dark-lighted downstairs bar with a waterfall along one wall, the bronze Buddhas wherever you look. The upstairs dining room is lighter but no less luxurious or Asian-themed, with more Buddhas set into fieldstone niches, gold sculptures on shelves, and huge murals on the walls and ceilings, painted by co-owner Bik Yonjan's father. The atmosphere, however, is anything but Zen. On our first night, more than two dozen young people were celebrating a birthday, all of them looking more 90210 than 02138.

The food has fewer fusion elements than the atmosphere promises. On the opening menu, there were more entries like "steak & eggs" than Korean beef. At two dinners, guests were puzzled when they opened the menu, having expected some elegant, hip version of Thai or Indian food. The cuisine is more New American (loose as that term is) than anything else, and it's simply a mismatch with the décor.

But! Most of it is good, some of it really good, and pretty much all of it is something Boston hasn't seen before. The chef, Rachel Klein, trained in New York and made her reputation in Providence. She knows high-style New York fusion and farmers' market American-Mediterranean from her long stints at the trendsetting New York restaurant Annisa, with Anita Lo, and Peter Hoffman's Savoy. The food she's chosen to make is stylish and exciting, but also comfortable and enjoyable.

Take the irresistible Duet of Pork (\$26). Pork can be sweet, succulent, the best of meats. (Or it can be tasteless and tough.) The pork belly is the best I can remember eating, and I try a lot. Slow-cooked for hours, it's marinated in the braising liquid for two days, reheated and coated with a glaze of the reduced sauce with star anise, cinnamon, shiitake mushrooms, and soy sauce. There's very nice roast pork loin on the plate, too, with an apple *mostarda* and some fried fingerlings. But with meat this good, it's hard to think of anything else.

One other dish met this standard, or nearly: Muscovy duck with duck confit *bisteeya*, Medjool dates, and mustard greens (\$28). Where the pork is ever so vaguely Asian, the duck is Moroccan inspired, with slices seared perfectly and served a proper pale pink, and a darling little cast-iron skillet of sweet and nutty *bisteeya*, a Moroccan-style pie, with a wonderfully flaky phyllo crust. The sautéed mustard greens were bright and had real character, no easy trick when spring vegetables remained a tantalizing promise.

Nothing else I tried had quite this focus, or was this fully satisfying. The Thai bouillabaisse (\$32) was a cornucopia of fresh seafood heaped in a celadon-colored, coconut-milk green curry, with deep-fried shrimp toast—a step up from standard Chinese restaurants. Everything was fresh, and you get plenty of seafood for the money, but it isn't personalized or exceptional. The black pearl salmon (\$26), lightly smoked and roasted, was a fine piece of fish, but hardly tasted of the wasabi crème fraîche or Meyer lemon *gastrique* (a quickly made, thin sweet-and-sour sauce) listed on the menu. Colorado lamb (\$38) was a laudable attempt to serve American lamb, which is older than New Zealand lamb and thus more lamb-y than some diners like, but the loin slices were brown and tough, and the deep-fried artichoke hearts and sweet olive relish were fine but too disparate. Perhaps Klein could try a more interesting cut, like shoulder, and charge less for it.

First courses are stylish and some even help give definition to a menu in need of it: Korean beef (\$17), carpaccio-thin chili and brown sugar-rubbed sirloin over a cooling, neat-looking chunk of yellow watermelon; and Okinawa sweet potato ravioli (\$15), named for the filling's main ingredient, with a surprisingly hot broth spiked with Thai red chilies. These two will be signatures, and so should a deconstructed Caesar (\$12), trendy though the idea is and scant of Asian touch. It's spare and stunning to look at and fun to eat: a soft-poached egg you can eat out of the cup or spread over the rest; soaked and deep-fried white anchovies that have none of the fishy flavor many object to (and many like); a tiny stack of dressed fingerling slices; asparagus; and, as the anchor and *pièce de résistance*, a perfectly dressed heart of romaine that had more flavor than I thought romaine had anymore.

Desserts, by Cristina Valente, are very good. She is another newcomer by way of New York and Providence. (It's no coincidence; she met Klein in Rhode Island and followed her to Boston.) Like the entrées, the desserts are finding their way into some sort of fusion identity while staying predominantly Western. Valente makes grainy, rich-flavored ice creams that aren't too sweet and seem like old-fashioned ice milk; her halvah ice cream, made with the Middle Eastern sesame confection, is especially impressive, and an ice cream sandwich with layers of carrot cake and parsnip with habanero caramel sauce (\$10) was neat to look at and bite into. Little touches like that habanero sauce appear elsewhere—for instance, a jalapeño-spiked pineapple confit with a lemon olive oil cake (\$10) or a chai-spiced cake with a white chocolate and mint tea tart and tea cream-filled profiteroles (\$12). But the touches seem more theme-mandated flourishes than integral to the conception of the dessert.

Om is a funny hybrid that works a lot of the time. Klein's talent is large, and so are the owners' ambitions. Whether they can align—and satisfy the tastes of the gilded international youth who have made the downstairs such an eye-and-ear-filling scene—is an open question. But I know I intend to follow Klein and keep up with her evolving tastes.

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Duet of Pork, detail photo; Korean beef, above. All photos by Heath Robbins.

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