

12TH ANNUAL RESTAURANT ISSUE

# BON APPÉTIT

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## AMERICA'S TOP 5 RESTAURANT CITIES

NEW YORK

SAN FRANCISCO

CHICAGO

LAS VEGAS

NEW ORLEANS

Ancho-and-Coffee-Rubbed Beef  
with Wild Mushroom Sauce  
from Mesa Grill in Las Vegas



*Plus*

*103 Restaurants—Where to Eat Now  
Around the Country*



A friendly crew and homespun dishes take the cake at Flour Bakery + Cafe.

# Boston Goes South

Could Washington Street in the city's South End neighborhood become the next restaurant capital of the Northeast?

BY ALEXANDRA HALL

At its core, Boston has always been a city of insular neighborhoods. But where street names and historic squares once clearly defined those geographical boundaries, today restaurants are the landmarks. A sign of the city's communal food fixation? To be sure. But navigating that way can make for tricky business when the culinary landscape is evolving as rapidly as it is in a neighborhood like the South End.

Crisscrossed with brick walkways and Victorian townhouses, the area's Tremont Street has been a dining destination for almost two decades, with places like Hamersley's Bistro and Icarus. But the most dynamic evolution is under way a few blocks over in the stretch known, however checkily,

as SoWa (South End's Washington Street), where seemingly every other building is under construction, and the first waves of renovators have settled in to form a bona fide neighborhood.

Among the pioneers was **PHO REPUBLIQUE**, with its jumble of gleaming Buddha statues and kitschy night in Saigon decor, which paved the way by drawing the city's hippest, most diverse crowds. They still come for the flavorful but inexpensive pho and bracing lychee Martinis—and now have a new reason to stay devoted: Chef Victor Sodsoos, who led everyone from Madama to Imelda Marcos at Siamsee Princess, his erstwhile Beverly Hills spot, has recently taken up behind the stove. ➤

## Restaurants Going Out



Union Bar and Grille excels at upscale New England bistro fare.

burgers, plump two-fisted affairs of beef mixed with smoky andouille sausage, cozy Vermont cheddar. Not rich enough for you? The banana cream pie comes smothered with Valrhona chocolate ganache.

Further proof that the neighborhood lacks nothing on the modern bistro front can be found a few doors down at the brick-walled **CAFFÈ UMBRA**, decked with calla lilies and lunar light fixtures. Over the years, chef and owner Laura Brennan has run some of the town's most respected kitchens. And now here she is, with her own sophisticated but ever-so-soothing Mediterranean spot. "I wanted a totally unpretentious place," says Brennan, who first learned to cook at age ten from her mother. "You know, food that's easy to eat every night of the week, but tastes like something a little special."

Settle in at one of the long wooden tables and sample the results of Sodsook's labors. The shrimp curry and banana fritters with mango-pineapple salsa are collisions of sharp and mellow flavors. And the pre-Sodsook favorites are still here, still popular, and still addictive. The oversize spring rolls, for example, are filled with velvety raw tuna, avocado slabs, and fresh wasabi, and packaged in crispy, feather-light dough.

Merely steps away at **UNION BAR AND GRILLE**, a more patently chic (but no less energetic) vibe awaits. Owners Seth Woods, Jell Gates, and Matt Burns, along with *chef de cuisine* Stephen Sherman, have tuned out the first undeniably push place in the area—and balanced it with simple dishes. "It's naive New England food made contemporary," says Sherman. "Nothing fancy, just basic and good."

Since opening with a huge splash two years ago, Union has gracefully walked the line between cosmopolitan and comfy. The bar may be poised three-beautiful-people deep, but the streamlined dining room—all oversize square chandeliers and shiny black banquettes—is surprisingly pomp-free.

Likewise, the menu: Dig into the Alaskan halibut with manate mushroom, English peas, radishes, and green garlic butter to taste just how fresh simply prepared fish can be. The

## One to Watch

## THE NEWEST KID ON THE BLOCK

Brennan's dishes are built to fill that very bill, and it shows in country French and Italian offerings like warm goat cheese flan with black trumpet and shitake mushrooms. Even her salads (like the artichoke, prosciutto, and arugula) sing with intensity—as does her traditional cassoulet, one of the most deeply flavored, casseting versions this side of Gascony.

Head even deeper into comfort food territory down the street, where Jaanne Chang, owner and jassy chef of **FLOUR BAKERY + CAFE**, has recently started serving dinner. The minimalist space (cheery powder-blue walls, gargantuan chalkboards, and a handful of simple tables) does nothing to detract attention from its focal point: the counter, loaded up with pastry and platters of specials.

The neighborhood, not surprisingly, is eating it up. Do so yourself by ordering any of a handful of amazing breads (chewy pecan-raisin loaves and thick-crustied country rolls among them) or plates heaped with tuna salad, red-skinned potatoes, and fresh peas. If the oven-fried buttermilk chicken with honey-thyme-glazed carrots is on the specials board, don't even think twice. Ditto the rustic huckleberry tart.

One of the biggest beneficiaries of the area's renaissance has been **THE RED FEZ**. A groovy, hummus-slinging hangout during the '70s, it was turned into a warehouse for decades when the neighborhood took a downturn. But in 2002 the Fez was reborn, and now it's a favorite once more for its exotic, candlelit setting. Cofplay bounces off of the Moroccan tiling, and Persian rugs and lanterns flank wide windows. The Middle Eastern dishes draw their own crowd; mezeles such as traditional chicken-almond *bak* turnovers lead the way to Moroccan spice-rubbed skirt steak and *harissa*-marinated Cornish game hen.

As much as Boston's South End loves a renovation, it all but falls to its knees for a promising newcomer. One culinary genre the area lacked for some time was Italian food. That's an oversight now rectified by **STELLA**. Named after the baby daughter of chef and owner Evan Deluty (his first baby is the successful Beacon Hill bistro *Torch*), the white-lacquered space is a study in Italian mod. "There are so many dark and red dining rooms out there," says Deluty. "We wanted the room to feel refreshing and the food to feel approachable."

And approachable it is: Seasonal specialties like ravioli with pumpkin, goat cheese, and fried sage are as easily understood as they are consumed. Or just marvel over the Roman potatoes—blanched in chicken stock, jacked up with garlic and herbs, smashed, and then sautéed in olive oil. They're crispy outside, fluffy and soft inside.

"It's a spot for everyone, where locals feel comfortable all the time," says Deluty. "People in the South End love to eat out so much. And Washington Street has become its own thing, its own neighborhood. We want to encourage that." ■

Crowds are already buzzing over the creatively tweaked Spanish fixings at **TORO** (at press time, a late-August opening was planned). "It's basically a Barcelona tapas joint," says chef and owner Ken Oringer, of *Olio* and *Uni* fame. "Very down and dirty style—and inexpensive." Oringer and *chef de cuisine* John Critchley will be whipping up tiny plates of hash-fried ahi toro with black-olive oil and pickled pumpkin, and making clever plays on mole with a savory chocolate-onionzo pate slathered over grilled bread. But the most authentic thing about the 55-seat restaurant will be the garden terrace out back. That's where you'll surely find late-grazing locals sipping from the all-Spanish wine list until midnight. (1704 Washington St.)

## Getting There

**CAFFE UMBRA**  
1595 Washington St.  
617-867-0707  
caffumbra.com

**FLOUR BAKERY + CAFE**  
1595 Washington St.  
617-267-4300  
flourbakery.com

**PHO REPUBLIQUE**  
1415 Washington St.  
617-252-0205  
phorepublique.net

**THE RED FEZ**  
1222 Washington St.  
617-658-6060  
theredfez.com

**STELLA**  
1525 Washington St.  
617-247-7747  
bostonstella.com

**UNION BAR AND GRILLE**  
1357 Washington St.  
617-423-0558  
unionrestaurant.com