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First Bite at 94 Mass Ave

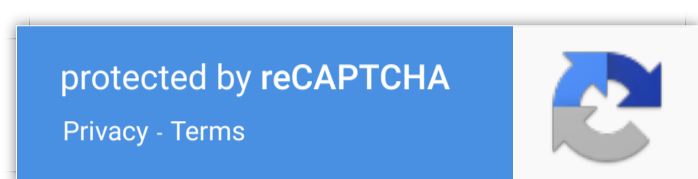
One of the Back Bay's most troubled restaurant spaces gets a promising makeover.

by ALEXANDRA HALL • 4/22/2011, 12:27 p.m.

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Photograph by Zack Bowen

It's a cursed address, or so they say. And with good reason: Over the past 10 years several restaurants at 94 Mass. Ave. have opened, flailed, and shuttered faster than you can say *mediocre*. All of them served substandard fare, and were concerned with pulling in trendoid, ultrashiny drinking crowds rather than drinking crowds that also appreciate dependable, unpretentious food.

Now comes the latest incarnation. This one, named after the unfortunate address itself, looks ready to challenge the spot's history of failure head-on. First there are the whimsical, impressively shaken cocktails. The Sienna (\$12), a froth of spiced rum, elderflower, *yuzu*, and basil, went down easy yet delivered an impressive thwack. Then there's the menu, which requires no culinary seatbelt-fastening but is solid. As is the norm these days, dishes are tapas-size (though of a non-Spanish ilk), which allows diners to sample several items — a bonus when the food is delicious *and* adorable. The grilled cheese plate (\$8, pictured at left), flanked by four mini ceramic mugs filled with sweet, tangy tomato soup, featured a prim row of buttery, crisped-up mini triangles that oozed cheese. Gnocchi (\$6) was pillowy, almost dessertlike, and arrived in a rich brown-butter sauce. And the grilled artichokes (\$5) with olive oil and lemon-caper aioli are, no doubt, a future addiction: I downed an entire portion, then requested another. The only lowlight was the burger (\$7). Thin, remarkably dry, and flavor free, it was smeared with a lifeless, not particularly special "special sauce."

The service? Those small plates keep the waitstaff busy because they come out as they're ready, not necessarily according to when you ordered them. So servers must be — and generally are — nimble, good-humored jugglers. ("It's like playing *Tetris*," observed our waiter, trying to fit all of our mini dishes on the table.)

The design, meanwhile, is almost completely new. An extra-wide gas fireplace now anchors the space, dividing the bar and dining room areas. The owners also extended the bar, made it less cold and angular, and took nearly everything out that was here before. Including, quite possibly, the curse.

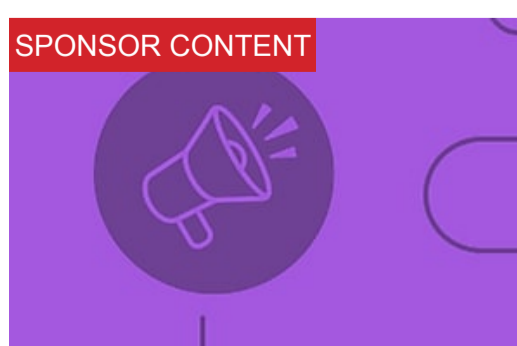
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