

Al fresco dining in Boston's suburbs



JOHN BLANDING/GLOBE STAFF

Diners inside Rosaria Steakhouse in Saugus look out at the patio and rock garden.

By Kathy Shiels Tully | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JULY 20, 2014

Alleys. Sidewalks. Parking lots. Hectic intersections and interstate highways. And don't forget "parklets."

Al fresco dining spots are popping up all over, and most of them can't boast scenic waterfront or mountaintop views.

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Instead, they're being incorporated into new restaurants or added to venerable establishments, amid some of Greater Boston's least-scenic venues.

And restaurants aren't just simply plopping some wobbly tables and folding chairs on bare concrete, but are spending some serious cash to dress up their decks and patios.

Next to a parking lot in Abington, for example, a white fence encloses the patio at Mia Regazza, with red and blue umbrellas shading round tables.

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Photos: Al fresco dining

On Route 1 in Saugus, near a mall anchored by a Kmart, the Rosaria Steakhouse has built an extra-long patio that runs parallel to a stunning rock-wall garden, complete with lights and a cascading waterfall.

In Needham, meanwhile, the patio at the front of Spiga Ristorante has arranged potted flowers, herbs, and bushes to block the view of the parking lot.

"It's almost insane," said Spiga's general manager, Ming Jung. "It could be 85 degrees, and customers still want to eat outside — especially after the long winter we had."

“Restaurateurs are pouring in capital to build these outdoor patios,” said Tom Clark, president of Boston-based Ashling Inc., a consultant for restaurants and retailers. “It’s an amenity. Everyone seems to have one.”

But it’s not necessarily a money-maker, Clark said.

“If you get 90 days of outside dining [per year] in Boston, you’re lucky. Ninety days to break even on what you spent on your patio,” said Clark.

Billy Lyons, owner of Menotomy Grill & Tavern in Arlington, said he spent \$25,000 for a brick patio off Massachusetts Avenue. The cost included design, construction, legal fees, and an irrigation system for apple trees. And rather than rely on the smell of citronella to repel mosquitoes, Lyons installed a silent sound-wave machine.

Thirteen months after his restaurant opened, Lyons said, the investment in the patio is paying off.

“People come for the food,” Lyons said. “But now, they’re starting to find out and ask specifically for [the patio]. The best is yet to come. People are discovering it.”

Not every restaurant can pinpoint its return on investment, but the benefit is real, said Allison Yee, marketing director at W.S. Development. The company developed The Street in Chestnut Hill, where Legal Sea Foods and Shake Shack have outdoor patios, and one is in the works for The Cottage.

“The Greater Boston area is really upping the ‘cool’ factor,” said Yee.

Like those restaurants, Mia Regazza had to create its ambience rather than rely on the locale.

“We’re the anti-ocean,” owner John Martin said with a laugh. “I’ll tell customers, ‘Ever since I cut down the trees, you can see the ocean.’ We’re 25 miles from the ocean.”

Still, the outdoor business “carries us through the summer. It’s amazing what it does for us.”

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Pro ‘Even though it’s in the middle of a rotary, it’s very relaxing.’ ‘Here in New England, there’s very little time to enjoy the outdoors.’

Laurie Miyazaki of Framingham said that she and her husband, Hiroshi, like to eat outside at the waterfront. But recently they found themselves enjoying drinks and a late lunch on the porch of the Colonial Inn in landlocked Concord.

“Even though it’s in the middle of a rotary,” she said, “it’s very relaxing.”

A subtle breeze was blowing. A US flag in Monument Square waved gently in the wind. Bicyclists — both recreational and the serious, Spandex-clad varieties — rolled by. A resident walked her golden retriever.

Seconds later, a line of motorcyclists rumbled around the rotary, rock ‘n’ roll music blaring from the bikes’ speakers.

The Miyazakis and other diners on the nearly full, 75-seat porch, showed no distress.

Elissa Vancura, who opened Artistry Kitchen in Franklin this February with her partner, Martha Collins, has her own opinion of why outdoor dining is so popular.

“People are working. They’re indoors, for the most part,” she said.

The restaurant, including the patio, was designed by Collins and Vancura, who used to work in interior residential design.

“We wanted the feel of being at someone’s outside patio at home versus feeling like you’re in a parking lot — even though we do overlook a parking lot,” Vancura said.

The key, she said, is “paying attention to the little details that diners might not be able to articulate” — the hand-picked patio stone, furniture that “feels comfortable, not just a bunch of two-top or four-top tables,” fresh flowers, music, lighting, umbrellas, candles.

The planning stage also has to satisfy government regulations, such as the number of bathrooms or exits — issues that arose while Clark’s firm worked on Menotomy Grill & Tavern, the first outdoor patio in Arlington to serve alcohol.

“Municipalities have to figure out what the real rules are,” Clark said. “For example, when you’re serving liquor outdoors, you’re supposed to have a 42-inch-high railing with a three-foot offset, so you can’t hand a drink to an underaged person.”

Despite the hurdles, many owners continue to stretch the concept of outdoor dining.

To distinguish its 50-seat patio, the Brass Union in Somerville installed oversized, interactive games such as Jenga and Connect Four for customers to play. Owner Ken Kelly credits Brass Union's manager, Scott McDonald, with the idea.

Two doors away, "parklets" were rolled out last summer at The Independent, another of Kelly's restaurants. Adapting an idea that has been popular in such cities as Montreal and San Francisco, the Independent rents three parking spots from the city and has built a 50-seat patio that is level with the sidewalk. Off-season, the parklet is removed.

The Legal Sea Foods chain creates outdoor spaces with a sliding glass door at its Braintree location, and with a retractable glass ceiling and walls at its Legal Harborside Floor 3 in Boston.

"People are clamoring to get out," said Roger Berkowitz, Legal's chief executive officer. Outdoor space "is becoming a great part of what we do with the restaurants."

Still, open-air eating isn't for everyone.

Bugs and the lack of air conditioning are two big concerns, said Holly Stafford, who owns Duxbury's Winsor House Inn with her husband and two sons. But, she added, "We sell out the patio on any night with reasonable weather, from mid-May to early October."

Another quirk shows up often at Mia Regazza, Martin said.

"When we ask people if they'd like to eat outside, they'll ask us, 'What's it like out?' We laugh. 'You just came in from the parking lot!'"

Be careful how you phrase it

While traveling through Italy, be careful how you invite someone to dine "al fresco."

The phrase literally means "in fresh [air]" and was used as far back as 1753 to describe eating outdoors, according to the [Online Etymology Dictionary](#).

The term is still commonly used that way in Italy, said Francine Segan, a New York-based food historian and author of “Opera Lover’s Cookbook.” But she cautioned that the phrase for “going al fresco” (andare al fresco), said in a joking tone, is slang for “going to the cooler,” or jail. “In the past, the prisons in Italy were open to the elements, and thus the term,” Segan wrote in an e-mail while traveling in Italy this month.

She added, “The term [al fresco] became popular in England in the early 1800s during the ‘Grand Tour’ period, but didn’t become common in the USA until after World War II.”

To avoid confusion, anyone looking for a phrase that’s more continental than “eating outdoors” could try “cenar al aire libre” in Spanish, or “en plein air” in French.

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