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A New Sense of Adventure Sweeps the Dining Scene

By RUTH REICHL

BOSTON

ON the night in May 1995 that Jasper White closed his restaurant, he walked in to discover a roomful of chefs. For weeks, cooks all over Boston had been reserving tables under assumed names, planning the surprise. "We couldn't just let the restaurant close without letting him know how much he meant to us," one said.

It is a typical restaurant story from a town that loves its chefs. People call them by their first names, as if they were members of the family, and they support Jasper, Lydia (Shire), Gordon (Hamersley) and Todd (English) with a passion that chefs in less loyal cities can only envy. And in Boston, chefs can always count on help from their friends.

"When someone in Boston opens a restaurant," said a New York transplant, Michael Schlow, "every other chef in town shows up to wish him well. It's the reason I came here: It makes working here extremely appealing."

Appealing as it was, that very clannishness kept others out. Boston liked its chefs homegrown, and the city seemed too small, too closed, too fond of its existing restaurants to attract outsiders. For a long time, a mere handful of chefs were responsible for maintaining Boston's gourmet profile. But the recession ended a few years ago, and the restaurant scene exploded, changing all that. Older chefs expanded existing restaurants and opened new ones; younger chefs swept into town. At the same time, a new group of ethnic restaurants opened, making eating out in Boston more exciting than ever.

Last month I spent a few days exploring Boston's newer restaurants; here are a few of my favorites...

Lala Rokh

"If you were served this in a Persian home," said the waitress as she put down a dish of kashk-e-bademjan, "you would know that the family really respected you." No wonder; the appetizer of roasted eggplant and caramelized onions is a complex preparation, surrounded by minced beef and mint oil, with a drizzle of goat's milk yogurt running through the middle.

The owners, Azita Bina-Seibel and her brother Babak Bina, also have a chic Northern Italian restaurant called Azita's, but in this new restaurant they honor their Persian heritage. They have covered the walls with their own heirloom art and trained the staff in the finer nuances of the cuisine.

Persian cooks employ a flavor palate alternating sweet and bitter in a fascinating way. Yogurt is mixed with aromatic herbs, and meat is often combined with saffron, fruit and cinnamon.

Torshi, little relish side dishes, act much like chutneys in India. They include sir, whole garlics that have been aged in the sun; anbeh, a mango and tamarind relish, and bademjan, whole baby eggplants stuffed with garlic and herbs. Eaten with pollos, classic dishes of rice mixed with meats and vegetables, they make the food especially fragrant. I particularly liked adass, a sweet polo combining veal, lentils, caramelized onions, currants and dates.

For dessert, don't miss the saffron ice cream, which is textured with nubby little lumps of frozen cream.

Lala Rokh, 97 Mount Vernon Street, Beacon Hill; (617) 720-5511. Dinner entrees, \$12 to \$16.