FEATURE

Boston's 25 Most Important Restaurant Openings of 2016

BY SCOTT KEARNAN | DECEMBER 19, 2016



It's been a blockbuster year for restaurant openings in Boston. But what were the most important new dining destinations to roll out in 2016? We took a look back at 12 months' worth of debuts, from a fine dining guru's foray into fast-casual to a star chef's Italian dining emporium. Here are the openings that mattered most.



Credit: Kyle Bianch

25. Casa Verde

A restaurant team in one of Boston's most underrated dining neighborhoods completed a hat trick in 2016, adding this modern Mexican locale to a family of eateries that already included Spanish tapas spot Tres Gatos and the Italian-inflected Centre Street Cafe. The crew told us this is their final project for the foreseeable future, but here's hoping they get the itch to add another spectacular sibling soon.

Must-order: The charred chipotle-cauliflower tacos are an addictive thing of beauty.

711 Centre St., Jamaica Plain; 617-477-9977



Credit: Courtesy of Jose Luis Martinez/MIDA

24. MIDA

In his debut as a chef-owner, Douglass Williams has the makings of a neighborhood hit on his hands with this intimate, modern Italian at the nexus of the South End and Roxbury. The comfortable space has the cloistered-feeling appeal of an East Village enoteca, and Williams' deft technique, honed previously in Boston spots like Radius and Coppa, is already earning a well-deserved audience after MIDA's recent opening. **Must-order:** Among the handmade pasta plates, the spicy duck orecchiette is particularly out-of-this-world.

782 Tremont St.; 617-936-3490



Credit: Courtesy of Brian Samuels Photography/haley.henry

23. haley.henry

The tinned seafood trend has finally stormed into Boston, and at her Downtown wine bar, Sportello alum Haley Fortier is doing it right. The pint-sized hangout offers an inventive array of imported fish swimming in EVOO, simple but superb small plates from Menton vet Carolina Curtin, an impressive bottle list and a chill vibe that's inviting to corporate suits and tattooed creative types alike.

Must-order: Though most of the tins come from Spain and Portugal, we're also partial to the Washington State Ekone oysters soaked in BBQ sauce.

45 Province St.; 617-208-6000



Credit: Scott Kearna

22. Kava Neo-Taverna

The Greek cuisine trend, one of last year's biggest in Boston, extended itself into 2016 — and this snug, stylish corner restaurant on a South End side street has emerged as a Hellenic highlight. Unassuming but excellent, and usually buzzing with a lively crowd, Kava is the kind of low-hype, high-caliber neighborhood place we'd love to see more often.

Must-order: A cast-iron mini-casserole of stuffed eggplant with tomato and kasseri cheese is a rib-sticking delight.

315 Shawmut Ave.; 617-356-1100



21. Villa Mexico Cafe

After almost three years — three long, taco-stranded years — a cult-favorite taqueria that formerly inhabited a Beacon Hill gas station reopened in its own dedicated Downtown location. Villa was one of those awesome cheap-eats gems we were panicked to lose, but luckily, 2016 had other plans in store.

Must-order: Those tacos are iconic, but don't snooze on some excellent chorizo-stuffed quesadillas, either.

121 Water St.; 617-957-0725



Credit: Courtesy of Brassica Kitchen + Cafe

20. Brassica Kitchen + Cafe

Jeremy Kean and Phil Kruta, the chef duo known as Whisk, had an overdue homecoming this year, returning to their old stomping grounds in JP, where they launched their pop-up years back, to open their first dedicated restaurant inside the former Fazenda coffeehouse. Brassica is a day-to-night outfit offering artisan breakfast and lunch goodies, innovative New American dinners emphasizing set menus, a full bar and a friendly neighborhood vibe.

Must-order: The signature seaweed tagliatelle, a pasta of Maine coast kelp and dehydrated kale with cauliflower, with a tomato-miso sauce and charred octopus, has been a Whisk staple since the beginning.

3710 Washington St., Jamaica Plain; 617-477-4519



Credit: Joel Benjamin

19. Tapestry

We were bummed to lose the restaurant-slash-rock hall Church, especially since local live music venues seem to be dwindling in Boston. But if the space had to go to new owners, we're glad they're married chefs Meghann Ward and Kevin Walsh, whose eclectic Tapestry — composed of two distinct rooms, a casual Expo Kitchen and more formal Club Room — weaves together some truly memorable menus. Check out our opening report here.

Must-order: The pizzas are pretty awesome, especially the pancetta and broccoli rabe pie loaded with Calabrian chile.



Credit: Courtesy of Ken Rivard/Saloniki

18. Saloniki

She's enjoyed a storied career, but Beard award-winning chef Jody Adams had a pivotal 2016. She closed Rialto, her revered 22-year old fine-dining institution, and opened two new eateries — including Saloniki, her fast-casual Greek debut just steps from Fenway Park. Adams told us she has plans for multiple outposts — a second location is already planned for Central Square — so expect her to expand her brand in 2017.

Must-order: We're addicted to the Despena, a pita filled with zucchini-feta fritters, garlic yogurt, tomatoes, onions, an herb salad and Greek fries.

4 Kilmarnock St.: 617-266-0001



Credit: Courtesy Cesar Morales/Fat Her

17. Fat Hen

It was a good year for Italian dining in Boston. And we've loved taking up roost at Fat Hen, a homey, 30-seat sibling to neighboring La Brasa, where chef Michael Bergin, previously of NYC's Del Posto and A Voce, spotlights region-hopping fare that ranges from handmade pastas to slow-cooked meats. Stuff us silly, please.

Must-order: Among our favorite plates has been chicken al mattone, a Tuscan-rooted preparation with a chicken jus vinaigrette, burnt cipollini onions, taggiasca olives grown in the Liguria mountains, and fairy tale eggplants.

126 Broadway, Somerville; 617-764-1612



Credit: Courtesy of Erik Jacobs/Benedetto

16. Benedetto

Speaking of Italian, chef Michael Pagliarini managed to slide in this highly anticipated opening before year's end. The follow-up to his acclaimed Giulia, Benedetto inhabits the Charles Hotel space that formerly belonged to Jody Adams' (also Italian) Rialto. The farmhouse-chic spot puts his own unique spin on the cuisine, though, taking a refined yet rustic approach to handmade pastas and more.

Must-order: The tagliatelle alla Bolognese, with a ragù made with beef short rib, pancetta and chicken livers.

1 Bennett St., Cambridge; 617-661-5050



Credit: Joel Benjamin

15. Oak + Rowan

Restaurateur Nancy Batista-Caswell turned Ceia Kitchen + Bar and Brine into destination restaurants in Newburyport. With Oak + Rowan, her team's first venture into Boston, she's unveiled a cool, contemporary surf 'n' turf outfit with a top-notch team, including former 30 Under 30 honoree chef Justin Shoults and award-winning pastry chef Brian Mercury. From its killer caviar service to inventive ice cream flavors, they're bringing their A-game to O + R.

Must-try: Whole butchery is emphasized here in dishes such as the lamb three-ways — braised lamb, roasted lamb and lamb tartare. Expect seasonal accompaniments, which right now means braised parsnip and flint corn polenta.

321 A St.; 857-284-7742



Credit: Courtesy of Melissa Ostrow/RUKA

14. RUKA Restobar

The team behind swanky hot spot Yvonne's, one of last year's most important openings, returned in December with RUKA, a Peruvian-Asian restaurant inside the new Godfrey Hotel. Also known for Back Bay's sexy Lolita Cocina & Tequila Bar, this crew has a knack for stunning spaces — and the creative cuisine from chef Preston Miller lives up to the look.

Must-order: Crunchy salmon tacos with avocado and pickled radish.

505 Washington St.; 617-266-0102



Credit: Courtesy of The Table at Season to Taste

13. The Table at Season to Taste

Tasting Counter, last year's most important opening of the year, reinforced the popularity of prix fixe-only approaches in Boston. And fresh off his stint on *Top Chef*, Cambridge native Carol Dooley contributed to the phenomenon by opening this intimate Harvard Square-side restaurant offering four-course feasts of fantastic, internationally inspired cuisine.

Must-order: The menu changes constantly, but recent highlights have included roasted cauliflower tikka masala with shrimp, yogurt and curried cashews.

2447 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge; 617-871-9468



Credit: Courtesy of Hien Nguyen/Uni

12. UNI

It's sort of cheating to file Uni away as a new opening. But after extensive renovations that saw it take over the adjoining space that formerly housed Clio, Ken Oringer's eclectic Asian restaurant is basically a brand-new entity. The space is larger and so is the menu, expanding on the cuisine that Bostonians first fell in love with two decades ago, while giving us a new reason to return.

Must-order: Whole roasted lobster with black pepper glaze and yuzu butter.

370 Commonwealth Ave.; 617-536-7200



11. Mamaleh's Delicatessen

There's no doubt that there's a dearth of Jewish delis in the Boston area, which is probably why so much buzz accompanied the opening of Mamaleh's; that it came from the same team behind State Park didn't hurt, either. The best part, though, is the way the kitchen combines classic traditions with new, modern ideas, as in a deli-inspired take on steak tartare that's accompanied by Russian dressing, cured egg yolk and fried rye bread.

Must-order: Splurge on a fish platter so you can graze on options like smoked sable, kippered salmon and pickled herring.

1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge; 617-958-3354



Credit: Joel Benjamin

10. Eataly

It's always a big deal when Mario Batali comes to town — and in this case, we mean that literally. Eataly, housed inside Back Bay's Prudential Center, is a sprawling, three-floor, 45,000-sq.ft. Italian dining emporium with about a dozen restaurants, including II Pesce, helmed by Boston's own Barbara Lynch. It may wind up filled with tourists, and Bostonians tend to favor our local star chefs over even the most prominent out-of-towners, but there's no doubt that Batali's second Boston venture is one substantial addition to the city. Learn more about Eataly here.

Must-order: II Pesce's fabulous plate of fusilli with mint, lemon butter and heaps of sweet crab meat.

800 Boylston St.; 617-807-7300



Credit: Scott Kearnar

9. The Smoke Shop

After years spent snapping up awards on the national competitive barbecue circuit, chef Andy Husbands (Tremont 647) finally opened his own 'cue joint in Kendall Square. The Smoke Shop specializes in traditional BBQ meats, from pulled pork to ribs, but also adds some interesting global touches too: think brisket with Korean vinaigrette and kimchi.

Must-order: As sides go, they don't get more addictive than the bacon-pimento mac 'n' cheese.

1 Kendall Sq., Cambridge; 617-577-7427



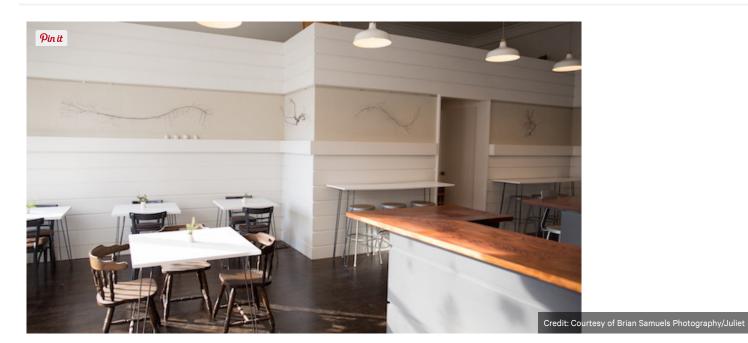
Credit: Joel Benjamin

8. Stoked Wood Fired Pizza

Stoked managed to exceed lofty hopes for the first brick-and-mortar eatery spawned from its sensational food truck. Musician/chef Scott Riebling's 50-seat Brookline joint still crisps awesome, inventively topped pies in a wood-fired oven, but also rounds out the experience with some additional eats, like charred Brussels sprouts, and a nifty bar program.

Must-order: The delish Buffalo wings will satisfy spice lovers.

1632 Beacon St.; 617-879-0707



7. Juliet

Two former 30 Under 30 honorees, chef Josh Lewin and Katrina Jazayeri, opened this European-style cafe in Somerville's Union Square, earning local attention, some national press and dedicated crowds who appreciate the thoughtful technique employed for prix fixe breakfasts, lunch items and refined but accessible dinner plates. But we also love the duo for leading the conversation about improving the service industry, and making choices — like staff profit-sharing and gratuity-inclusive pricing — that reflect that ethos.

Must-order: Oft-changing breakfast tacos are a highlight for early risers.

257 Washington St.; 617-718-0958



Credit: Joel Benjamin

6. Bar Mezzana

What happens when the executive chef of the Barbara Lynch group, Colin Lynch (no relation), breaks away to open his own restaurant? This coastal Italian in the South End, that's what. Bar Mezzana is a masterful addition to the neighborhood, from its housemade pastas to fantastically fresh crudo that will have you thinking SoWa is suddenly on the Amalfi coast.

Must-order: Paccheri pasta with lobster, green onion and tomato.

360 Harrison Ave.; 617-530-1770



Credit: Courtesy of Ken Rivard/Porto

5. Porto

Saloniki may have satisfied a fast-casual craving, but Porto is the more proper follow-up to Jody Adams' shuttering of Rialto. The elevated Back Bay restaurant takes a Mediterranean seafood-focused approach, casting a wide net for its influence and washing down each plate with pours mixed from a roving cocktail cart. Rialto was a legend, but Porto is an energetic upstart with lots of promise.

1 Ring Rd.; 617-536-1234



Credit: Courtesy of Mike Diskin/PABU Boston

4. PABU Boston

Last month, chefs Michael Mina and Ken Tominaga brought Boston a new branch of their upscale San Francisco izakaya. Tucked away inside Downtown's sky-high Millennium Tower, PABU Boston is a cool class act, from its sophisticated sushi bar to its lantern-bedecked lounge that boasts one of the East Coast's largest collections of sake and Japanese whiskeys. Plus PABU represents Boston's growing appeal to national chef names looking to expand their empires.

Must-order: Start every meal with the signature Happy Spoon, a single-bite starter that combines an oyster with uni, ikura, tobiko and ponzu crème fraîche.

3 Franklin St.; 857-327-7228



redit: Courtesy of Morgan Ione Yeager/SRV

3. SRV

One of the biggest hits of the year was this small plates–focused, Venetian-inspired wine bar in the South End. Co-chefs Kevin O'Donnell and Michael Lombardi (a former 30 Under 30 honoree) hit every plate out of the park, from the handmade pastas (overseen by two-time *Top Chef* alum Stephanie Cmar) to a whole host of clever cichetti.

Must-order: The soft-boiled quail egg with white anchovy and capers.

569 Columbus Ave.; 617-536-9500



Credit: Courtesy of Min Kim/Waypoint

2. Waypoint

Some wondered whether chef Michael Scelfo would be able to launch a worthy follow-up to his 2014 hit, Alden & Harlow. He did, and then some: Waypoint is a sophomore standout with inventive pizzas and pastas, contemporary caviar selections (when did you last see roe paired with donut holes?) and a bar stocked with over a dozen varieties of absinthe.

Must-order: Grab a slice of some excellent chopped clam pizza with peperoncino and pecorino.

1030 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge; 617-864-2300



Credit: Courtesy of Andrea Merrill/Little Donkey

1. Little Donkey

Though they've been busy expanding their South End-founded tapas restaurant Toro to NYC, Bangkok and Dubai, it's been nearly seven years since chefs Ken Oringer and Jamie Bissonnette opened their last joint Boston-area restaurant, Coppa. Little Donkey, which started braying in Cambridge's Central Square this summer delivers an updated approach to small plates, with a high-energy bar and dining room underscoring how excited diners are for this twosome's grand return.

Must-order: One of the city's best burgers is Little Donkey's dry-aged Pat LaFrieda beef patty topped with pickles marinated in Buffalo sauce, plus caramelized onions folded around seared pieces of foie gras, crispy jalapeño chips and a slathering of onion soup mayo.

505 Massachusetts Ave., Cambridge; 617-945-1008