Still Serving

Local restaurants that have stood the test of time

Restaurants come and go, in the Square as elsewhere, but, happily, some standbys endure.

Casablanca (40 Brattle Street, 617-876-0999; www.casablanca-restaurant.com) opened in 1955 as the Club Casablanca, a dark and smoky basement watering hole that drew crowds of artists and intellectuals, along with everybody else who sought a looser social milieu. It was a hip haven with a beloved jukebox. Over time, adjacent businesses in the same Brattle Theatre building came and went: various bars and boutiques, including Truc. In 1972 there was a popular disco upstairs. But in a sign of the often unpredictable times, the club’s co-owner was shot dead one night by an angry customer.

That’s unlikely to happen these days in the Square, or at the current Casablanca, now a full-service restaurant. It inhabits the original back bar and dining room, along with a front dining area that borders Brattle Street. (Alגiers Coffee House, which opened in 1971, is its current upstairs neighbor.) There is no longer any smoking of anything inside Casablanca. But with its ochre-colored walls, ceiling fans, and a few
The politically charged new restaurant, Charlies Kitchen (10 JFK Street, 617-492-9646; www.charlieskitchen.com), opened in 1951. It serves a mix of beef and veggie burgers, sandwiches, and dinner entrées—all accompanied by fries—and in recent years has opened a cheerful urban outdoor garden with 18 beers on tap. Leo’s Place Diner (35 JFK Street, 617-354-9192), established in 1949, is another casual spot. The current owners are brothers who do all the cooking at this 25-stool breakfast and lunch joint, which has yellow counters and lots to look at—including framed photos of musicians and actors (Ben Affleck is a fan of Leo’s)—while eating from a typical diner menu, complete with terrific homemade soups. For more voluptuous burgers with clever names, hit Mr. Bartley’s Burger Cottage (1246 Massachusetts Avenue, 617-354-6559; www.mrbartley.com), opened in 1960. The politically charged side of the menu offers the “Scott Brown burger” (with bacon, American cheese, onions, and jalapeños) alongside the “Ted Kennedy” (“a plump, liberal amount of burger with cheddar cheese and grilled lemon ($3). Full entrées are also available, such as the fresh sautéed bluefish topped with spices, accompanied by almost-bitter pea tendrils and vine leaves and fried green tomatoes with a dollop of charmoula ($24).

Another veteran of the Square, Casablanca thrives, packing in people for an eclectic mix of Mediterranean-style food and some of best-made cocktails in town. The attentive waitstaff do not rush you; the place feels relaxed and easy to be in on any occasion. The prices help. One can make a meal of deviled eggs ($4) and ricotta dumplings ($5), or the tasty lamb taco with slices of potted palms, the place does have a faint whiff of an “anything goes” Moroccan outpost. Window shutters block out distractions from the street; wicker settees and benches in one corner are leftovers from a previous bar that also briefly cashed in on the Casablanca movie theme. The colorful murals depicting characters and scenes from the classic film still adorn the walls.

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For a wholly different atmosphere, head around the corner to the European-style Café Pamplona (12 Bow Street, 617-492-0352). Serving coffee and soups, salads, and sandwiches for dining in or out on the patio, Pamplona opened in 1959 as one of several such cafés in the Square that first introduced Cantabrigians to the joys of lingering over really good coffee with friends or colleagues.

Grendel’s Den and Restaurant (89 Winthrop Street, 617-491-1030; www.grendefsden.com), meanwhile, is celebrating its fortieth anniversary of healthy, affordable food. Gone is the laudable salad bar, but the half-priced dining hours (check the website for details) still lure crowds, as do its vegan and wheat-free menu items. Its former high-ceilinged dining room is now home to the pricier Upstairs on the Square (91 Winthrop Street, 617-864-1933; www.upstairsonthesquare.com), which began life in 1982 as Upstairs at the Pudding and is still going strong with innovative cuisine served amid quirky, colorful décor. For similarly higher-end, inspired food, head to the Harvest, which opened in 1975 and was named one of the best pick-up joints by Playboy in the early 1980s. After closing briefly, it was reopened in 1998 by new owners who polished its interior but kept the emphasis on fresh “contemporary New England cuisine.”

~N.P.B.