In search of Greater Boston’s quieter restaurants

After spending the evening at an unnamed establishment, hollering at fellow dinner guests just to be heard, we were inspired to find a few reliably conversation-friendly haunts. A call to the Massachusetts Restaurant Association, seeking guidance and maybe the names of a few of its 1,800 members who had successfully assuaged customers’ concerns over noise levels, prompted an e-mail from president/CEO Bob Luz.

“I think restaurants purposely manage their environment to meet the expectations, needs and desires of their prospective guests,” he wrote. “Most want to create a room that will exhibit a buzz and a certain level of excitement, and acoustically work towards achieving that goal within the buildout, furniture, music systems, genre of music and volume. Others want to create a more businesslike atmosphere, where deals/business/or more intimate moments can occur.”

Given that full industry disclosure, the following is a select list of places that we found—at least on the nights we were there (i.e., no guarantees)—conducive to conversation without feeling like a monastery.

The town of Belmont, it turns out, offers two such spots. For fresh, solid Italian food and evening themes—Wednesday is Girls Night Out and Thursday is reserved for live jazz—try Savinos Grill (www.savinosgrill.com). The place has a friendly staff and warm-toned décor (creamy whites and autumnal rust), along with inventive triangular-shaped partitions that jut out from the main walls, offering privacy to many tables, and welcome dimensionality in the otherwise boxy space. Most important: the bar, close to the entrance, is tiny, which precludes any gathering of loud drinkers.

Across the street is Kitchen On Common (www.kitchenoncommon.com), where chef/owner Joh Kokubo serves simple, fresh meals in a casual setting with eight tables. There is no music. At all. Soft talk among diners seems to be the rule—except when the phone rings at the hostess station. (That jarring sound could be turned down.)
More polished and a little less muted is West Newton’s Lumière (www.lumiererestaurant.com). From a nuanced color scheme and velvet curtains to flattering mood lighting, this established French bistro fosters calm consumption of its meticulously prepared food. Plan for an early movie at the West Newton Cinema, down the street, then linger over dinner and dessert. We recommend the dark chocolate crémeux with coconut cream and salted rum caramel ($12).

Sycamore (www.sycamorenewton.com) is newer, and newly lauded with a 2015 nod from Boston Magazine’s “Best of Boston” list. The Newton Centre restaurant has a hip vibe amid naturalistic décor: lots of wood, exposed brick, and a few soft brown banquettes. Mature Newtonians mix with younger folks; all seem devoted to chef David Punch (formerly of Ten Tables in Cambridge) and his inventive Mediterranean-style dishes, which bring out the best in any vegetable. Pickled ramps, fried okra, charred Japanese eggplant, and a chanterelle mushroom soup topped the fall menu. Even smaller and quieter than Sycamore, however, is the nearby Farmstead Table (www.farmsteadtable.com). This modern space washed in white tones serves food with a rustic New England bent—slow-cooked meat and potatoes—and folksy desserts, like the “s’mores tart,” dressed up with ganache ($9).

For quiet and cozy, the Beacon Hill Bistro, on the first floor of the eponymous hotel (www.beaconhillhotel.com), is a good bet. Even with 60 seats in a relatively small storefront space, the restaurant rarely seems overcrowded. Enjoy the French-style comfort food in peace, then take a stroll down Charles Street, where window shopping at night can be more pleasurable than buying.

Late nights at the Museum of Fine Arts (Wednesday through Friday) are also the best time to view exhibits. Crowds have likely waned at Class Distinctions: Dutch Paintings in the Age of Rembrandt and Vermeer, up through January 18, and Bravo (www.mfa.org) is open for drinks and “new American” cuisine at its festive bar or at a distinctly separate area with tables. Delightfully low-key jazz trios play on Friday nights.

Harvest, the Harvard Square mainstay, shares an equally equable ambience. Neutral tones and natural fibers offer a chic airiness, yet Harvest feels solid—like its “classic” shrimp cocktail ($18)—and the bar is a snug haven on a cold, dark night.

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terned carpet that invisibly soaks up spilled beverages, warm spot lighting, and the large-pattered carpet that invisibly soaks up spilled tea and soy sauce. Somehow the acoustics here dull sounds—even those emanating from the large parties of chin-wagging academics often in attendance.

For those desperate for serious quietude surrounded by floors of utter silence, there’s always the Boston Public Library’s Courtyard Restaurant (www.thecateredaffair.com/bpl/courtyard). It’s not open for dinner, but does serve a lovely, if pricey, lunch. Try the poached hen egg and bitter greens ($14) or the more griddled open-face sirloin sandwich ($21). And the afternoon tea—the sample menu mentions raspberry thumbprints, scones with lemon curd, and savory cucumber and lemon cream-cheese sandwiches—might please even the pickiest Anglophile. But no lusty munching, or exclamations...Please!

枢机们: Picking Up a Hobby

William Blake saw “a World in a Grain of Sand.” Stan Munro saw the Taj Mahal in a toothpick—or, more precisely, thousands of toothpicks stuck together with Elmer’s Glue. He also envisioned Stonehenge, the Eiffel Tower, and the International Space Station, and reproduced them, too, along with more than 200 other architectural wonders, at a scale of 1:164 in the basement of his home in North Syracuse, New York.

“We decided these would be very intriguing to see,” says Michael McMillan, associate curator at the Fuller Craft Museum. And so 22 of Munro’s structures, including models of Boston landmarks Trinity Church, Fenway Park, and Hancock Place, will be on display at the Brockton, Massachusetts, museum in Toothpick World: From Sliver to Skyline, starting December 19.

Photographs don’t do the work justice. Adults and children alike, looking for a day trip during school vacation especially, will enjoy seeing these astounding works up close. They are educational—lessons in architecture, engineering, and charm—but they also testify to a capacity for zeal. “We spend a lot of time, whether because of academic gravitas or the stigma attached to ‘craft,’ differentiating between applied arts and fine arts,” says McMillan. “What Stan does gets to the core of what we do at the museum, which is to highlight the power of the handmade. This is an examination of the passion of working with the hands, and it’s done in a successful way that people can relate to.”

Munro has worked as a TV reporter, true-crime writer, and hospital administrator, and has been “toothpicking” (his term) for fun since fifth grade. It became a vocation around 2003, when he was staying home to care for his wife, who had been diagnosed with polycystic kidney-liver disease. She is now doing well—yet toothpicking stuck for Munro, and is now his full-time job. The iconic Basílica de la Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, for example, took him about nine months to construct, but he erected the Washington Monument in one very long day.

He sold his first collection, Toothpick City I—50 of the world’s tallest buildings—to a museum in Spain in 2006; it was later acquired by Ripley’s Believe It or Not!, in Baltimore. He currently has two traveling exhibits—Toothpick City II, which includes Yankee Stadium, Tokyo City Hall, the Queen Mary II, and Burj Al Arab (the luxury hotel in Dubai)—and the larger but equally eclectic Toothpick World. Where else could the Stratosphere Tower (Las Vegas), Grand Mosque (Mecca), and headquarters of MI-6 (London) be corralled? In all, Munro has employed more than four million toothpicks (now bought wholesale), along with untold vats of glue.

“Stan’s used to showing a lot of his work in libraries, more casual places, a bar or a restaurant,” says McMillan, who is excited to widen the audience for fine folk art. “When he came here to visit, he looked around and said, ‘Oh, this is a real museum.’”

～N.P.B.