

Harvard Square's new restaurant features Fil-Am executive chef

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Executive chef Joseph B. Santos. (Rose Lincoln/Harvard Staff Photographer)

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Harvard Square's new restaurant towers above the rest, literally.

The Heights, which opened in early March, sits on the top floor of the Smith Campus Center, giving diners a bird's-eye view of the Charles River and the southern part of campus, including the bell tower of the Baker Library and inside the U-shaped Harvard Stadium.

Offering lunch, dinner, and even cocktails for Harvard affiliates and their guests, The Heights puts flavorful twists on familiar favorites.

"Everybody's trying to fit a niche," said executive chef Joseph B. Santos, a veteran of the New York City food scene.

"What I'm trying to do here is break the mold a little bit."

He's doing that with an 80-seat venue that offers quick-service lunch and full-service dinner featuring modern cuisine inspired by tastes from his childhood, his culture, and his travels in Europe, Asia and the U.S. dishes range from a Rhode Island-style calamari with Korean gochujang aioli instead of the usual marinara sauce, to a mac and cheese plate served Mediterranean-style with Greek olives, spinach and artichokes.

There's also garden-style mac and cheese, Black Angus burgers, Cuban sandwiches, a Cambridge-inspired salad, and even an Instagram-ready vegetable dish called the "Meze Hall."

"It's a lot of flavors that are familiar to a lot of people. We're calling the food contemporary American [because] what the face of America is now is a melting pot," said Santos, who is

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Asian and Filipino-American and loves seeing what other cultures eat and how they cook it.

The menu shows off Santos' passion for homemade ingredients and dishes that are camera-ready.

He buys local and cooks from scratch when he can.

"The Toast" pops with a mix of colors from kale, radishes, red onions, and egg that tops it off.

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich uses a house-made peach jam and is stuffed with Applewood bacon.

French fries, sprinkled with a vibrant blend of red spices, come with a side of homemade barbecue sauce.

All are perfectly made for social media.

"Part of it is actually seeing it prepared properly and putting some love into it to have it look beautiful," Santos said.

"We take a minute or two extra just to make sure it's done right."

The Heights offers daily dinner and pasta specials, with five cooks behind the line flexing their creativity.

Though according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics only about 40 percent of professional cooks

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in the U.S. are female, all five line cooks at The Heights are women.

“In all my years of cooking this is actually the first time I’ve ever had a full female hot line,” Santos said.

“When I was looking at these resumés I wasn’t looking at names, I wasn’t looking at gender, I was looking at skills, and I’m glad it worked out organically like this.”

Along with food, the restaurant features a refreshing cocktail, beer and wine menu Tuesdays through Fridays from 5 p.m. to 11:30 p.m.

One cocktail, a creation of Santos’, is called the Bad Bunny.

The drink, a twist on the Bloody Mary, uses carrot juice, vodka and other ingredients.

The vibe at The Heights is casual, and the elevated tableside view of the Charles and Allston make it unlike any other eatery in the Smith Campus Center.

“It’s an amazing treat to come upstairs,” said Elizabeth Osgood, a Harvard employee there with colleagues for lunch.

The restaurant is the seventh dining option brought in by Common Spaces, rounding out a well-balanced lineup in the Smith Center.

The space is tucked away in the River View Commons wing of the 10th floor, which at least one person in the party must have a Harvard ID to access.

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So far, The Heights has been a welcome addition.

Osgood had the day's special, pulled-pork sliders.

She said she had trouble deciding what to eat because "the menu is awesome."

Hana Seita, a Harvard College senior there with a classmate, agreed.

"I like how there are a lot of vegetarian and vegan options," she said.

When the waiter arrived with her order — The Toast — Seita's eyes widened.

"Oh, wow!" she said. "It looks so good."

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