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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

## Allston tavern opens after transformation from former nightspot

Posted by Matt Rocheleau November 23, 2010 10:35 AM [E-mail](#) | [Print](#) | [Comments \(0\)](#)

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

Since its recent opening, a new Allston restaurant and bar has been surprising some local residents who remember what the space had looked like for 15 years prior as a popular nightspot.

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“It’s fun to watch people’s reactions if they had been to the Kells,” said Shawn Ahern, a co-owner of [Tavern in the Square](#) – the fourth restaurant to open in a local chain of taverns – on Brighton Avenue near the Harvard Avenue intersection. “The people that come in are blown away by the space and what we’ve done

with it.”

The restaurant’s 12,000-plus square-foot interior was opened up by lining its street-front wall with windows, moving the kitchen to a larger space downstairs and making the first floor space essentially all one large room with a long wrap-around bar in its center surrounded by a mix of booth, table and bar seating.

A 170-person-capacity side room with its own centered bar area was added by knocking down a wall to connect the space that was Privus Lounge and Sushi. That eatery’s ownership relocated to Harvard Square under a new name.

Tavern in the Square’s 2,000 square-foot kitchen encompasses much of the basement that had formerly been a dance area for Kells guests. Likely the only reason patrons will travel downstairs will be to use the restrooms.

Though its first-floor has been opened up more, the basement’s conversion into a kitchen and offices has reduced the restaurant’s overall capacity from 687 to around 500, Ahern said.

Including personal TVs in each of the restaurant’s booths, there are 53 screens which are most likely to be [displaying live sporting events](#) via nearly every major DirecTV sports subscription packages, he said.

And, the new restaurant brings more than just an aesthetic overhaul. Ahern vowed the new business will not run into the same nighttime problems the Kells had run into when it managed the space.

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After a 15-year run as a popular nightspot, the Kells closed in early 2010. Particularly in its final months, the bar had become known as a trouble spot after multiple violent altercations that reportedly took place in and outside of the bar, including two deadly stabbings on the Kells' front sidewalk – the first was in Nov. 2009 and another less than four months later. The Kells had also reportedly become a popular destination for underage drinkers and disruptive patrons.

But the problems that had plagued the previous establishment won't return, the new restaurant's owner said. Ahern points to the trouble-free record of the other three Tavern in the Square locations and that a member of his business partnership serves on the Cambridge Licensee Advisory Board, which aims to curb underage drinking.

"We've never been in front of any licensing board before," he said in an initial interview several weeks ago. "I think in the beginning the neighborhood was a little worried because maybe they weren't familiar with our concept," Ahern said. "We're a restaurant/bar."

The business also plans to be involved and attentive to the neighborhood. Ahern said the tavern helped sponsor the Brian-Honan 5K road race before its Allston location had opened and will participate in Toys for Tots.

Later this week, the restaurant chain's tradition of holding a free Thanksgiving Day feast – from turkey to stuffing to pies and coffee – for senior citizens, homeless and needy families will also be hosted at the new Allston spot, where Ahern said between 200 and 300 are expected to dine Thursday from 11 a.m. to 2 p.m.

The Allston eat-and-drink spot will have a similar feel to and be managed like the other three local chains in the establishment, he said. The flagship Tavern in the Square was opened in Central Square in Cambridge six years ago, then a Porter Square locale opened in 2007, followed by a third in Salem last year. The Allston and Salem taverns are likely to be the most similar in terms of physical size and business volume, Ahern said.

Though the area's demographic is somewhat younger than the residents surrounding the other three restaurants, "We feel like our concept works with this kind of demographic," he said. "We're going to be doing a lot to keep everyone entertained."

"We're committed to food, service and hospitality, and we're very focused on that," he added.

Ahern said he was particularly interested in the location when the process of purchasing the space began in early 2010 because of how many people are drawn to and around the intersection.

But, that stretch has also seen some major changes in recent months.

In early October Harpers Ferry, a popular, 40-year-old live music club directly across Brighton Avenue, announced it would be closing – and it did on Halloween night. But recently plans were unveiled for the spot to reopen and continue hosting shows under a new ownership and name, Brighton Music Hall.

Meanwhile, a local corner café closed less than two weeks ago after a 26-year-run.

Still, "Harvard and Brighton Ave. is amazingly busy," Ahern said.

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So was the hiring process. The restaurant interviewed around 500 people to fill around 80 front-of-the-house positions in recent weeks, said Ahern.

"It's exciting to see there's a response like that," he said, adding that the hiring managers had a great selection of staff with restaurant and service experience.







The restaurant opens at 11:30 a.m. on weekdays and 10:30 a.m. on Saturday and Sunday; it stays open until 2 a.m. all week long, with full dinner service until midnight.

After 10 p.m. on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, the restaurant will become 21-plus. The tavern has a full bar menu, and will often feature a bar-type form of entertainment, including nights designated for trivia, live acoustic performances and guest DJs.

The location also hosts private functions, breakfast is served Saturdays and there is an all-you-can-eat brunch buffet on Sundays, which has been a major draw thus far, Ahern said.

The menu is traditional American fare. The drink menu features an extensive beer selection, including 48 draughts, as well as wine and cocktails.

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