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ALLSTON BRIGHTON

## Refuge Cafe hopes to keep relaxed vibe of Allston predecessor

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The new café's logo is painted on an interior wall to the right of the main counter area. The rest of the space was not quite ready for photograph's during a visit Thursday, the business owner said.

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

When a busy, beloved Allston cafe opens its corner doors Monday for the first time in nearly one year, the new owner hopes her recently leased space will maintain the relaxed, comforting feel the location's predecessor established during its 26-year tenure.

"Within the city, it's like a very comfortable place," said [Refuge Cafe](#) owner Jennifer Lee, explaining why she picked the name she did for her new eatery that plans to begin welcoming customers Monday at 7 a.m. "It's really chill, laid back. A neighborhood spot."

For as many years as Lee is old, one of the four corners where Brighton and Harvard avenues meet housed [Allston Cafe](#), a cherished neighborhood spot known for its quirky, alternative, punk-rock style.

The café, [formerly part of the Herrell's Ice Cream chain](#), served up its final orders of coffee, ice cream, breakfast, lunch, and vegan food late last fall, after its owners [said they were forced to shutter](#) because the landlord had significantly and unexpectedly raised rent.

"I used to come here all the time," said Lee. "It's a great location. You have a lot of potential here."

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lot of potential here.

She hopes the café will have a similar feel as the space had for the two-and-a-half decades prior.

During a 10-month renovation, the exterior storefront was rehabbed with help and funding from Allston Village Main Streets. The interior was overhauled. There is no longer an office. The 37 seats are about 10 more than the old café offered, and will allow for “more hanging out.” Fitting that theme, the 1,500 square-foot space has a more open look than before. Beer, including four draft options, will now be offered. The business is also licensed to serve wine and cordials. Mimosas and Bloody Mary cocktails will likely appear on a future brunch menu.

The kitchen and food preparation equipment are new. The menu written on a chalk-board behind the counter will have some familiar, and some new, choices. The options are likely to change regularly with rotating and seasonal options.

Still, “she kept a lot of the same vibe,” said employee Stacey Sullivan, the lone staff member of the defunct Allston Cafe who has been hired to Refuge Cafe’s crew of 15 part-timers. “I know that everyone in the community is really excited ... People come here for comfort. You know you’ll bump into someone you know here.”

For Sullivan, a five-year resident of Allston and MassArt alumna, the changes represent a bit of a welcomed “fresh start.” Some of the appliances the former café stocked were less reliable; they were “still stuck in the 80’s,” she said.

Despite upgrades, new paint and décor elsewhere, one part of the space’s ceiling right above the café’s entrance will remain stuck in the 16th century – a painted copy of Michelangelo’s Sistine Chapel fresco, “The Creation of Adam.”

Other constants from the old café will be a focus on quality, but reasonably-priced coffee; the same Coop’s Ice Cream, formerly Herrell’s, will be available as will a growing list of vegan and gluten-free items.

The menu will have a section dedicated to comfort foods like macaroni and cheese and lasagna, the owner said.

“We know a lot of the college kids miss having home-cooked meals,” said Lee.

The walls, bare during a visit Thursday, will display work from local artists. The business is licensed for live entertainment and space has been set aside for local acts to perform.

Lee is Haverhill native who has lived in Allston for three years. She runs two Korean restaurants on either side of her new café.

Around eight years ago, her Korean-born parents opened the family-style [Buk Kyung II](#) on Brighton Avenue. With her father’s help, Lee, opened [Myung Dong 1st Avenue](#), a Soju bar on Harvard Avenue.

When the café space between her two restaurants, all of which are owned by the same landlord, became available late last fall she became determined to rent the space.

The competition was tough.

“So many people were trying to get this location,” she said, including, her landlord told her, Starbucks.

While Lee said she wanted to lease the space regardless of who else was in the running, hearing the Seattle-based coffee chain was interested provided some added incentive.

“All in all, it’s a great location and I think it’s a good fit for what we’re doing here.”

“Aliston has a lot of mom and pop shops and I think a lot of people like it that way,” she said. “I didn’t want something so corporate to come here.”

She said she’d call her landlord multiple times each day and would even keep an eye out for him at the gym they both go to.

“Finally, he was like, ‘OK, Jennifer, you can have it,’” she recalled, smiling.

Rushing around the café Thursday where final preparations were being made, Lee said she’s “very excited.”

Her first job was busting tables at age 13, and she’s been in the food industry since, including earning a culinary degree at a Florida school. Despite her Korean heritage, she said she feels more comfortable managing the café than she does running her other two abutting eateries.

Nonetheless, “I’m very nervous,” she said. “You just don’t know until you open.”

Refuge Cafe will be open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Sunday through Thursday and 7 a.m. to 1 a.m. on Friday and Saturday.

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