

# BOSTON BUSINESS JOURNAL



COVER STORY

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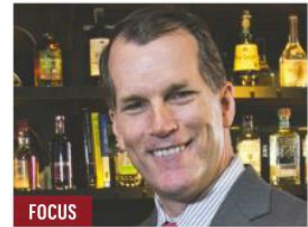
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## FOCUS HOSPITALITY & TOURISM

A look at what keeps them coming to Massachusetts.



ONE ONE ONE | PATRICK LEE

# Home cooking

RESTAURATEUR FINDS  
A NICHE IN NEIGHBORHOOD-  
FOCUSED HOSPITALITY

W. MARC BERNSAU



When Patrick Lee, alongside his brother Peter, and business partners Sean Kennedy and Gerry Sheerin, opened Harvard Square's Grafton Street in 1996, the quartet was probably best known for its family-run restaurants that could also cater to a bustling university crowd. Now, 20 years later, the Square has given rise to corporate staples like Shake Shack, Legal Sea Foods, Wagamama and Pinkberry. But thanks to a friendly hospitality sector, as well as a burgeoning foodie scene, the neighborhood has also cultivated a number of imaginative new eateries, including Grafton Group's three other area restaurants, Temple Bar, Russell House Tavern and Park Restaurant & Bar.

The group expanded last December with the opening of its first Boston spot, State Street Provisions, on the waterfront's Long Wharf. And with plans to open yet another location – this time an oyster bar – back in Harvard Square this year, it seems there's much more to come from Grafton Group's seemingly inexhaustible empire of contemporary restaurants.

Grafton Group's Patrick Lee spoke to BBJ correspondent Margaret Quackenbush about his emphasis on neighborhood-focused hospitality, and how Greater Boston's restaurant landscape has evolved since he and his partners first set up shop two decades ago.

**You're approaching your 20th year in business – what does that feel like?** Part of me feels old and part of me feels like it's a great milestone. We're excited about it.

**How has the Grafton Group changed over the years?** When we opened our first restaurant 20 years ago, it was a little bit more seat-of-the-pants in terms of our operations. But I think over time, we've become more organized and structured. I think the trick for us is combining that structure with creativity and innovation so that our guests are still excited, and we're still excited, about what's next.

**What is the restaurant landscape like in Greater Boston?** It's exploding right now. There are many exciting neighborhoods being developed, which is really spurring restaurant growth. I think local governments, along with developers, have lowered the barrier to entry, which has helped make interesting and innovative new concepts throughout Boston. From great restaurants down in the Boston Design Center, Assembly Row and the Seaport, to local government's giving out licenses to underserved neighborhoods, I think all of these things have combined to spur restaurant, hospitality and hotel growth.

**How does the area's hospitality sector help restaurants?** The GBCVB (Greater Boston Convention & Visitors Bureau) sponsors Dine-Out Boston in the summer and the GBCA (Greater Boston Concierge Association) pushes visitors out to local, independent restaurants. Local governments are trying to figure out new ways to get people interested in particular parts of the city and to recognize how a great restaurant can spur development in a neighborhood.

**You have quite the stake in Harvard Square. How has the area evolved over the past few decades?** Harvard Square is always evolving and improving, but in my opinion, never so quickly that it loses its charm. It continues to be a unique neighborhood full of great independent businesses. Because it maintains that charm and there isn't huge development, you don't see the changes in Harvard Square like you do in Boston, where you have whole neighborhoods seemingly changing overnight. But with that big development in Boston, you also see lots of growth.

**How does the landscape in downtown Boston compare with Harvard Square's?** The actual mechanics of running a restaurant are similar, but the seasons are slightly different. Typically, in Harvard Square, the winter months are our busiest time of year. In the Long Wharf area, we think

the summer will be more vibrant. There's also more of an after-work crowd downtown.

**Why did you choose the Long Wharf for Provisions?** We knew our next restaurant would be in Boston, and we spent a great deal of time looking for the right space. We really loved the history of the Long Wharf, the growth of the surrounding residential area and the Greenway coming into its own. In fact, the Greenway has done an incredible job of connecting both sides of State Street and activating the waterfront. Being a part of that is really exciting for us.

**How are things going at Provisions?** We've all been blessed with a mild winter, so we've really been able to connect with the neighborhood since opening in December. As the warmer weather comes, there's definitely going to be an out-of-town visitor element, but we really see ourselves as a neighborhood restaurant.

**With your sixth restaurant on the way, do you have any secrets to success?** Like in a lot of businesses, I would say perseverance and always trying to get better. It's important to have perspective and to know that you don't need to accomplish everything in one day, but you need to be constantly moving forward and you need to be growing.