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Folio Marks a New Chapter for the Boston Athenaeum

The historic library's onsite restaurant, opening soon in 2024, aims to tell a story with French-meets-Mediterranean fare.

by **NATHAN TAVARES** • 1/16/2024, 2:05 p.m.

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If you're anything like the tourists who've been wandering off Boston Common and peering into the dark green jewel box attached to independent library [the Boston Athenaeum](#), chances are you're curious about the space. Fitting, since Folio—the soon-to-open Beacon Hill restaurant that boasts a Mediterranean-meets-French twist—comes with the book logline-like descriptor “for curious palates.” After [years of planning](#), and as part of the historic library's staggering [\\$17 million renovation](#), the restaurant is almost ready to start its first chapter and announce an opening date.

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So let's judge a book by its cover, shall we? A library-chic vibe infuses the 40-seat space, with custom bookshelf wallpaper, hanging sculptural light fixtures that evoke folded pages, and reproductions of artworks from the Athenaeum's vast collection on the walls. Open to both the library's membership and the general public, the cushy banquette seating and little nooks invite you to hang out a while—for breakfasts of flaky pastries, to lunches of arugula salad with thyme-roasted apricots and feta mousse, to dinners of duck confit with parsnip puree, grapes, and pickled rhubarb. It's a menu that will have you planning a sequel once you finish

that first trip.

When the Athenaeum first tasked the Catered Affair—a catering and hospitality company that also operates the [Map Room Tea Lounge](#) in the Boston Public Library and other spots—to create a retail food space, the library's team used the word “café.” What could've been a simple space to grab coffee and prepared sandwiches instead became a novel-length journey of European wine bar-inspired bites and small, seasonal plates.

“We decided [to create] a place where someone would have a really amazing glass of white burgundy and pea rollatini, then go into the library and read a book,” says Ken Barrett-Sweet, vice president of catering at the Catered Affair. There are plenty of [cafés](#) in the [neighborhood](#), along with [larger restaurants](#), but what was missing was an in-between place to stop in for a few bites and drinks before the theater or after the work day. “You can come



Folio. / Photo by Samantha Barracca Photography

Thumb through the menu—its leather cover created by a Ukrainian craftsman, the rough-edged papers evoking a book—to see a selection of soups, salads, warm and cold small dishes, and larger entrees. As a whole,

characters involved: Folio's chef de cuisine, Peter Laspia, specializes in Mediterranean cuisine; Barrett-Sweet studied at the famed Le Cordon Bleu in Paris; and Knibbe hails from Orsay, France.

A chilled asparagus soup sings with basil, while lumps of crab dot the corn and crab soup, which is poured tableside. Olives, toasted ricotta, orange, and a charred ramp vinaigrette top a salad of caramelized gem lettuce. Seared tuna with cannellini is a standout among cold small plates, with spears of carrots atop carrot hummus and a tahini verde. The smaller plates are meant to share, yes. But spoiler alert: You might want to be the villain of this story and hoard the manchego gougères—four savory profiteroles with serrano ham, quince, and apricot mostarda—for yourself.

While much of the menu's draw is adventuring through the offerings as you sip from the French-leaning wine list, heartier plates sate solo diners. Take the croque monsieur, a quintessential café meal, according to Laspia. His version is a tale of rosemary ham, Gruyère, Dijon mustard, and pickles. The piadina sandwich, too, features “a handmade flatbread, locally cured meat, and Italian cheese,” he says. “It's not street food per se, but it's café food.”



Folio's manchego gougères with Serrano ham and quince-apricot mostarda. / Photo by Samantha Barracca Photography

Knibbe describes the café-with-class cuisine as “bistronomy”—a portmanteau of bistro and gastronomy. “It's in the details that you can tell

Besides the décor and tableware—the linen napkins and sculptural salt and pepper shakers are all imported from Italy—the height of that elevated experience just might be the coffee and tea service. Come in for French press tea by Boston-based Mem Tea and bold coffee from Jim’s Organic Coffee in West Wareham served with mignardises, or bite-sized jewels of desserts. The cozy space where you can see chefs prepare everything in a small kitchen behind the bar makes for a luxe lean to the service, with frills like soups and cocktails poured tableside. The list of six cocktails (three shaken, three stirred) includes a milk-washed bourbon beauty and a gin-and-tonic-meets-martini hybrid with a bold, quinine-y tonic reduction.

The wine completes the experience. “I wanted people to stop having that idea that French wine is expensive,” says Knibbe, who curated the list. “We don’t need to spend \$100 on a bottle of Bordeaux. You can have good wine for an affordable price.”

But for all the European inspiration, Folio knows when to highlight things closer to home. “Part of our storytelling is some of our menu elements are from the initiative that we call the Community Table,” Barrett-Sweet says. “The Catered Affair is actively invested in the future of hospitality and diversity. And the way we’re doing it is by buying and selling the products from small businesses and restaurants, and helping them perpetuate their business.” Check out the meat pies by Roxbury’s Suya Joint and the sweets by Marlborough-based Doris’ Peruvian Pastries. They’re even more of a reason that—just like a favorite book—Folio will be a spot to revisit over and over again.



Folio's piadina with cured meat, robiola, arugula, and truffle chips. / Photo by Samantha Barracca Photography

Stay tuned for an opening date. 14A Beacon St., Beacon Hill, Boston, thecateredaffair.com/folio.

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