

# *the* **Improper** *Bostonian*

DINING

## Off the Chain

Boston Chops Downtown adds uncommon zest to a hidebound format

By MC Slim JB | Photo Credit: Holly Rike | Aug. 3, 2018



Americans adore luxury steakhouses, and our great local seafood notwithstanding, so do Bostonians. At last count, there were 16 glittering temples to expensive beef within five miles of the Statehouse, the vast majority of them outposts of national chains. It's easy for food nerds to be stupefied by their dull sameness, the interchangeable menus of supersized slabs o' beef, wedge salads, shrimp cocktail and baked potatoes. While this ancient, vanilla idea of American high-end dining is inarguably popular, some of us pine for traces of wit and creativity in the format, a handful of thoughtful differentiators from the humdrum herd. Their uncommon presence mainly accounts for our five-year patronage of the original Boston Chops in the South End, and our admiration for its bigger, shinier new sibling, Boston Chops Downtown.



The new space will wow your expense-account customer, celebratory-occasion honoree or special date-night companion. A dramatic, barely-marked entrance (suggesting an opulent brothel or very groovy church) gives way to a breathtaking room carved out of a 19th-century bank with details that modernize the clichéd Brahmin-boys'-club aesthetic: white marble, burnished leathers, dark woods, gleaming chrome, softly glowing pendant lamps on swooshing cast-iron stalks. (There's also a much-ballyhooed booth with custom lighting for obsessive Instagrammers.) The waitstaff embodies that elusive quality—mostly invisible, magically appearing when you need them—that one hopes to find at any place with lordly prices. The globe-trotting wine list staggers under the weight of nearly 400 bottles, with some affordable values sprinkled among the many rarified trophy options, plus 21 by-the-glass pours (\$10-\$31), while beer drinkers can choose from 10 mostly local craft brews (\$7-\$15). The bartending staff shows equal ease with crafty specialty cocktails (\$13-\$15) and the greatest hits of the Golden Age, including a \$23 fancy-vodka martini served with tableside flourish. And there are plenty of swish potables for after dinner, including a 31-deep list of whiskeys (\$10-\$125).



Chef/owner Chris Coombs and chef de cuisine Matt Wool execute the default roster of fancy-steakhouse classics with tremendous consistency. Raw Malpeque oysters (\$3/each) are impeccable; fine crabcakes (\$19) are modestly dressed up with bacon and Old Bay remoulade. A 14-ounce prime New York strip (\$52) and 18-ounce prime bone-in rib-eye (\$59), the latter lightly jazzed up with garlic and fresh herbs, had better be perfectly seasoned, just-charred and cooked to temperature—and they are. (The big steaks include a choice of lily-gilding side sauces for \$3.) These are Nebraska Black Angus steer cuts, wet-aged for 28 days, though there's one pricey "butcher's cut" per night, delectable if you prefer that richer, more concentrated flavor. The creakier a la carte sides are big and expertly done, like a fresher- and lighter-than-average creamed spinach gratin (\$9), a tower of beautiful onion rings (\$11) the size of a paper-towel roll, a raft of grilled asparagus (\$12) and a mini-cocotte of garlicky roasted mushrooms (\$13). Ooh: The "poutine-style" baked potato (\$12) is tarted up with cheese, bacon and an injection of gravy; aah: The super-creamy mac and cheese (\$13) sports a big crown of pork belly. But the competition generally reaches this ordinary threshold.



The fascination here begins in occasional flashes of the French-inspired refinement for which Coombs has won awards at his Back Bay place Deuxave, seen in delicately wrought starters of lightly fiery ceviche (\$14), subtle steak tartare (\$16) and a pretty tuna tartare (\$16) layered atop avocado mousse. A vibrant tomato and burrata salad (\$17) gets a jolt from pistou, basil leaves and a few crisp-fried shallots. Seared foie gras with tart Rainier cherries and cherry puree (\$27) nestles ironically atop carnival-food funnel cake: a clever, fennel-scented alternative to brioche. The superb ricotta cavatelli (\$22) features verdant peas and pea tendrils, wild mushrooms, a shower of Parmesan and a soft sous-vide egg to swirl in.

Coombs also shares our love of beef off-cuts, exhibited in brilliant offal dishes like a transversely-sliced roasted marrow bone (\$11) with good bacon/onion jam, a meltingly soft braise of cheeks “machaca” (\$9) served with little tortillas, and ruby-red, grilled slices of heart (\$10) marinated to tenderness, with wild mushrooms and crisp/fat lardons. We especially appreciate the half-dozen value-priced steak-frites entrees that make Chops a reasonable target on ordinary weeknights. The prime, grilled versions of hanger (\$27) and skirt (\$25), served in sensible eight-ounce portions with good arugula salad and a bottomless mess of outstanding frites, are a steal. Pastry chef Olivier Maillard crafts elegantly plated but not-too-rarified crowd-pleasers like sticky toffee pudding (\$12) in a pool of butterscotch sauce with rum-raisin ice cream and pineapple gelée cheesecake (\$12) flanked with a tart lime sorbet.

You may know the pain of encouraging Boston visitors toward places helmed by brilliant indie chefs showcasing great local ingredients, only to end up at another expensive chain steakhouse. But at least you have choices here, some with flashier gimmicks and better views than others. If you prefer to support locally owned places instead of chains when you can, aren't always dining on the company card and occasionally get bored by the well-worn tropes of sumptuous steakhouses, the glamorous new Boston Chops is your best option in the city. Look for us at that swank bar: We'll be having a steak-frites, some beef cheeks and a modest glass of red. ♦

### ***MC's Picks***

Prime bone-in rib-eye  
Onion rings  
Poutine-style baked potato  
Pork belly mac and cheese  
Ceviche  
Tomato and burrata salad  
Seared foie gras fennel funnel cake  
Machaca beef cheeks  
Grilled beef heart  
Grilled prime hanger steak-frites  
Pineapple gelée cheesecake