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Conquering the Castle

TIQA Cafe takes The Castle in Deering Oaks by storm with pan-Mediterranean flair.

By Robert Witkowski

The fanciful stone Castle in Deering Oaks Park is being invaded by hungry marauding hordes this summer, after many years in the wilderness. Standing sentry by the pond in Portland’s crown jewel public park, TIQA Cafe houses seating for 20 indoors, with outdoor seating for over 80. Distractions such as bocce ball, horse shoes, beanbag toss, chess tables, and live music adorn The Castle’s new reign.

The rejuvenation of this 1894 landmark is due to the joint efforts of the Friends of Deering Oaks and City Hall, who began soliciting proposals this year from local businesses keen to take over the space. Competition was stiff. The five finalists included Sinful Kitchen, Arabica, Miss Portland Diner, Black Cat Coffee, and TIQA. A well-developed pitch from TIQA owners Deen Haleem and Carol Mitchell secured the project. Park director Ethan Hipple says the pan-Mediterranean eatery impressed the panel with “its creative menu and outdoor dining concept.” Haleem and Mitchell’s vision has been to create “a year-round cafe that is warm and cozy that will attract visitors to the park.”

However, converting such an iconic building has had its drawbacks. Construction restrictions prohibit the installation of hood vents that would be necessary for on-site cooking, while the relative lack of kitchen space and amenities also limits the cafe’s production potential. Haleem found a way around this problem, thanks to the proximity of TIQA’s already well-established Commercial Street kitchen. Executive chef and partner Bo Burns prepares his popular pan-Mediterranean fare daily before trucking the food down to the tiny cafe. The food on offer in the cafe reflects TIQA’s new lunch menu: grilled beef kabobs slathered in tzatziki, colorful fattoush salads, and spicy gazpacho soup. The space has also been approved for a wine and beer license, so expect plenty of sun-soaked adults enjoying a cold beer in the outdoor area.

In addition, patrons can start their day with freshly made treats from TIQA’s pastry chef, Rachel Ray, as well as house-made gelato and sorbet. They’ll also be serving Portland’s favorite fuel, Coffee By Design.
Haleem knew that “to figure out how to make such a small location work well” and be true to the historic location, he needed TIQA-builder Bill Nason of PM Construction to lead the job. Originally designed by Frederick A. Tomp-son (1857-1919) and built in 1894 for $900 by volunteer laborers, The Castle is a nod to a simpler time of architectural ingenuity, making it an oasis of cool in summer and a warming shelter in winter. Its vaulted wood ceiling gives it an airy atmosphere, while the small, well-placed stained-glass windows allow light to filter in. Meanwhile, the granite and beadboard walls block the colder temperatures in winter and retain warmth from the large fireplace (now gas-fueled), creating a feel that emanates Victorian charm.

“The Castle was for public use right from the beginning,” says Friends of Deer-ing Oaks president Anne Pringle. “There’s been food service there for a long time.” The Castle originally served as an ice-skating warming hut, meeting place, and even ticket window for swan boats—yes, just like Bos-ton Public Garden. The addition of a larg-
er adjoining building in the 1950s relegated the elegant jewel box to mere public bathrooms and storage unit for 50 years. Its larger and more modern successor was, most recently, the site of The Barking Squirrel cafe from 1995 to 1998, until “a port-a-potty fire spread to the newer building and the decision was made to focus on restoring just the Castle,” says Pringle. In 2006, The Friends of Deering Oaks community organization raised $310,000 toward restoring the landmark to its former postcard-perfect elegance.

“Everyone wanted the building open,” Pringle says. After failed attempts to secure an eatery, due to an arduous approval process, The Greater Portland Convention & Visitors Bureau opened the space as a welcome center from 2006 to 2012. “The vision was always to have a restaurant in Deering Oaks again, not just to serve people in the park, but to actually bring people to the park.”

Haleem agrees the historic site is something special. “The Castle is so beautiful, the location and view are arguably the best in the city.”

TIQA cafe is open 7 a.m. until dusk.

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