

SUMMER FUN ISSUE

THE STATE
OF RACE
WHAT'S
HAPPENED
TO BLACK
POWER?
PAGE 49

Boston

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ICE CREAM SPECTACULAR

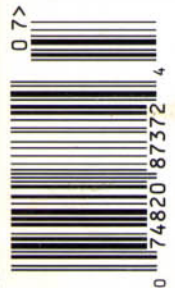
THE 25 BEST PLACES FOR SCOOPS // GELATO // FLOATS //
FRAPPES // SUNDAES // SPLITS // AND SOFT-SERVE

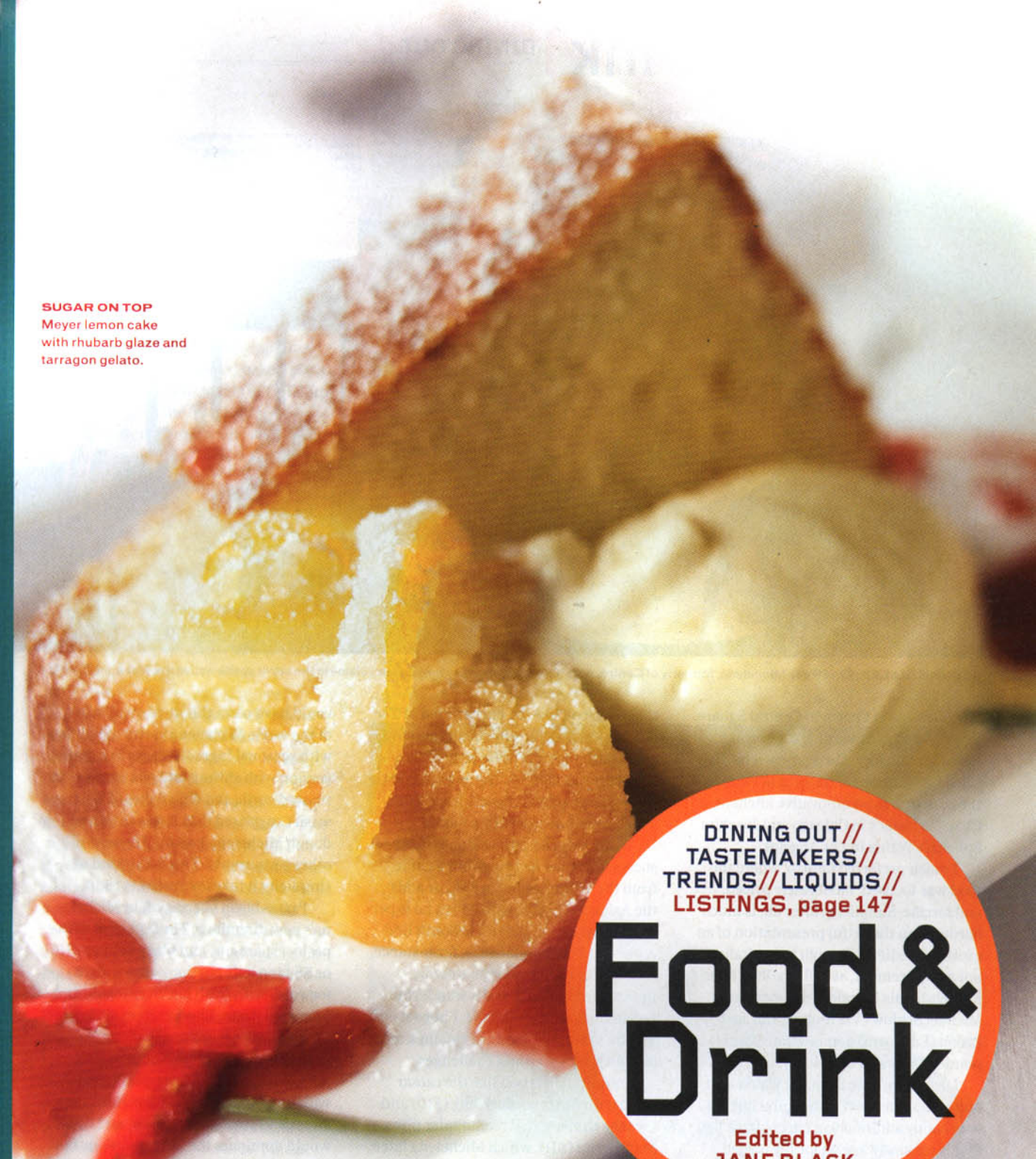


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SUGAR ON TOP
Meyer lemon cake
with rhubarb glaze and
tarragon gelato.

DINING OUT//
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Food & Drink

Edited by
JANE BLACK

Shooting Star

Chef Rene Michelena has made a habit of loving, then leaving, his restaurants. Get to Domani, an inspired Italian trattoria, before he moves on to his next project. By Corby Kummer

Here's my first piece of advice about Domani Bar & Trattoria, the new restaurant above the superchic downstairs club Saint in the Copley Square Hotel: Go while chef Rene Michelena is devoting

all his attention to it. One of the most talented chefs in Boston, Michelena has had a tendency to settle at one stove, delight diners with his skill, range, and imagination, and then move on.

Now he's here, and along with chef de cuisine David Robinson and fellow co-owner Brian Lesser, he's created a menu similar to but a bit more freewheeling than the classic Italian one he designed a



SCENE STEALER: Chef Rene Michelena, formerly of Centro, puts his own spin on modern Italian cuisine in the sunlit space above the nightclub Saint.

few years ago at Centro in Central Square. Centro was a high point in Cambridge restaurant history. There Michelena distilled his exceptional training at two of the country's most innovative kitchens: Charlie Trotter's in Chicago and Joachim Splichal's Patina in Los Angeles.

I much preferred Centro, where the food was focused, moderately priced, and terrific. Simplicity, after all, is much harder than the artful presentation of an exotic ingredient. Though being Italian is not a requirement, as Bill Bradley (Rustic Kitchen), Luis Morales and uber-chef Michael Schlow (Via Matta), and Josh Ziskin (La Morra) demonstrate, Centro pointed the way. I miss it still.

Luckily we have Domani, which isn't quite the same bowl of tagliolini but is a very happy addition to a part of Back Bay that is curiously low on locally owned restaurants. Note, too, that it's open for lunch and brunch (unlike, say, Robert Fathman's Azure, in the Lenox) and is right on the street, with outdoor seating in good weather—big pluses in a city whose most careful chefs seem allergic to lunch. The designer, Stephen Sousa, has chosen burnt orange and brown tones, along with dark wood tables (no tablecloths), and mod wallpaper with cheerful, fat alphabet letters and numbers. Some walls have deeply molded beige waves

that may look like the background of *The Scream* but provide a cool and soothing effect (although the noise level of the hard surfaces do not). The crowd is part hotel guests, part clubgoers from Saint, which has its own separate menu.

To my surprise, Michelena is most successful when he brings out a ruffle from the Trotter-Splichal days or adds the Asian flourishes with which he experimented at La Bettola in the South End. A pheasant consommé (\$8), for instance, has the expected wild mushrooms, unexpected crayfish, and a wonderful balance of sweet and acidic. I hope it will inspire others to try one of cuisine's most dreaded yet rewarding challenges.

Traditionalists will like the caesar salad with fresh-poached egg (\$10) and love the thin-crust rectangular pizza Margherita (\$11), which Michelena later dismissed as something he tosses off for "common folk who want something really simple." Well, call me common. I

could have pizza this good every night of the week. Michelena varies the pizzas with seasonal ingredients, as in a spring version with shrimp and pea stems with roasted garlic and chili flakes (\$12). I wasn't surprised that it was the same dough Michelena had used at several other restaurants: This is the kind of simplicity it takes years to get right.

Pastas begin veering off in Michelena's new directions. The tagliolini with pesto, asparagus, and black pepper (\$14 or \$8 for a half-portion) was straightforward, with fresh herbs, good oil, and imported pasta. The tortellini (\$15, \$9 for half) were more unusual, shaped as they were like plump, square little gifts. But the menu description ("filled with peas and favas") gave no hint that sweet and strong orange zest and mint would dominate the vegetables—or that those vegetables included soybeans. The sauce, a burnt orange syrup, made for a dish that could have been dessert (sugar



Corby's Picks // DOMANI BAR & TRATTORIA

51 HUNTINGTON AVE., BOSTON, 617-424-8500. CHEF Rene Michelena
APPETIZERS Pheasant consommé with wild mushrooms and crayfish (\$8); caesar salad with fresh-poached egg (\$10); pizza Margherita (\$11); tagliolini with pesto, asparagus, and black pepper (\$14) **ENTRÉES** Baked black cod with carrot-truffle glaze and sliced Yukon gold potatoes (\$21); *bistecca Fiorentina* (\$32) **DESSERT** Pistachio *millefoglie* (\$8); banana-butterscotch Napoleon (\$8)