

The curious case of Tiny Boxwoods' huge following

Story and photos by J.C. REID

TINY BOXWOODS is one of the more confounding restaurants in Houston. First, as far as I know, it doesn't advertise or solicit publicity. It rarely, if ever, sponsors fancy wine dinners or celebrity chef-type events. Recently, pastry chef Vanarin Kuch competed on the reality show *Top Chef: Just Desserts*. That's just about the most publicity I've ever seen for Tiny Boxwoods.

And yet with little or no publicity, during peak times, Tiny Boxwoods can be one of the hardest tables to get in Houston. Going to the original location on West Alabama for lunch can be futile — the crush of well-heeled River Oaks clientele is impressive — with a long line to order (counter service for lunch) and nowhere to sit. There's a serene, Zen-like patio surrounded by tables, which most anywhere else would be unusable in the heat of summer. However, at Tiny Boxwoods, people suffer through.

In the fall, the patio is easily my favorite place for an upscale dinner in Houston. Table (waiter) service is provided, but reservations are not taken. If you show up at Tiny Boxwoods for a meal on a



THE BLT NO. 5

cool fall evening, you will wait or leave. If you wait (sometimes an hour or more), the usual procedure is to buy a bottle of wine at the bar, finagle a bench at the far end of the patio and watch Houston's beautiful people come and go.

It's interesting that people seem to either love or hate the food here. I've had nothing but positive experiences. While there's nothing overly exciting



TINY BOXWOODS' PATIO

about the food, it's simple, well-prepared and consistently good. Of particular note is a wood-fired oven that produces crackery-crust pizzas and beautifully roasted fish.

I have a small group of friends who swear by the food at Tiny Boxwoods, and we actually welcome the bad reviews it sometimes gets. This is purely selfish on our part — we figure the more bad reviews it gets, the less people will go and the faster we'll get a table. It's like the Fight Club of upscale Houston restaurants — the first and second rules of Tiny Boxwoods is you do not talk about Tiny Boxwoods. Absent any buzz,

the theory goes, maybe — just maybe — the crowds will die down.

Unfortunately, this never seems to work. During lunch, dinner and Sunday brunch, the crowds are still crushing, and the wait is still long. So it's no sur-

prise that a second location has opened — quietly and without fanfare — in the West University neighborhood. It's called Tiny's No. 5, a reference to the renovated building it occupies, which was a long-standing neighborhood grocery store called JMH No. 5.

The space here is much larger than the original and during a recent lunch visit the minimalist, monochromatic interiors were offset by the bright attire of an overwhelming female West U crowd. Ordering is speedier and a table was corralled without much effort. The menu here is different from the original location but with a few holdovers — the well-loved turkey burger for lunch and the decadent braised short ribs with goat cheese grits for dinner. A menu item

for the new location, the towering "BLT No. 5," was filling, fresh and perfect for a leisurely lunch.

As frustrating as the madding crowds at lunch, brunch, and dinner is the way both locations clear out between services. Show up at 3 p.m. on a weekday afternoon and you will often be alone at the bar or a patio table. Food isn't served between lunch and dinner (check with the restaurant for exact service times), but Kuch's pastries are available, as is coffee service. Sit down at the bar with a croissant, double espresso and a crossword puzzle, and there's no better way to while away a day off in Houston.

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