

Outdoor tables add life to Salem's downtown

By Chris Cassidy
Staff writer

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SALEM — One morning last week, a couple walked into Gulu-Gulu Café and snagged an outdoor table overlooking Lappin Park and the weekday clamor of downtown Salem.

It began with coffee. Coffee turned into lunch. Lunch turned into a few beers.

They finally asked for the check — 3 1/2 hours later.

Salem's downtown diners love an outdoor seat with a view, and they suddenly have a lot more options.

Gulu-Gulu, which opened last July, has nine outdoor tables. Upper Crust, a trendy pizzeria next door that opened last fall, has 20 outdoor seats.

Edgewater Café, Rockafellas and Fresh Taste of Asia all offer patrons an outside view of bustling Washington Street. Front Street Coffeehouse and the Lobster Shanty have tables with views of a quieter part of the downtown.

"Anytime the season rolls around, and it's warm enough to put tables out there, we'll take the first opportunity because that's how beneficial it is," said Dave McKillop, the co-owner of Rockafellas, which can seat 50 out front.

Many patrons prefer to be put on a waiting list for an outdoor table than take a readily available seat inside, McKillop said.

"People love to be outside," he said. "They love to people-watch. They love to see what the action is. ... It's a much more urban type of feel, like in Boston."

At Gulu-Gulu, patrons will trickle into the outdoor patio in the morning. On a Friday or Saturday night, though, it'll be full until closing time at 1 a.m.

"It's kind of a nice little nook for people to relax and spend time outside," said Laura Potter Walton, the café's general manager.

"We're trying to make this a little hot spot for the city," said Michael Buchhalter, owner of the Upper Crust, which is also considering buying heat lamps to keep outdoor diners warm through October and November.

Six years ago, Edgewater Café was one of the first downtown restaurants to place seats outside.

"In New England, we're stuck inside so much that when you have a chance to be outside, you have about three months to do it," owner Dennis Moustakis said.

It's a booming trend the city seems to be supporting.

During a meeting last week, Mayor Kim Driscoll was receptive to the idea of closing off all traffic – including delivery trucks and vans – on the pedestrian mall from Central to Washington streets, McKillop said. That would allow Rockafellas to add more tables and chairs along the pedestrian mall side of the restaurant and encourage other businesses to do the same, he said.

"If we did get a commitment from the mayor and other retailers ... it would change the whole ambience of the Essex Street mall overnight," McKillop said.

Driscoll sees other possibilities, as well, including adding tables and chairs near Old Town Hall, where office workers or customers from other establishments can eat or relax.

"It creates a great ambience for our downtown," Driscoll said. "We want to encourage it. We think it's great in terms of creating a vibrant and active environment."

"We need more," said Rinus Oosthoek, executive director of the Salem Chamber of Commerce.

Outdoor seating dominates European city squares, where six or seven businesses at a time will put out rows of tables and chairs, Oosthoek said.

"It makes people feel like they're a little more cosmopolitan," Oosthoek said. "People just want to be where the other people are."

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Photos



Petronella and Frits Beran from Montreal, Canada, and their son, Laurens, right, who lives in Vancouver, opt to enjoy their lunch on the patio outside Rockafellas in Salem on a sunny Sunday afternoon. Laurens is attending a conference in Boston and met his parents in Salem for the afternoon. Staff photo