

GETTING AWAY WITH MURDER – FOR 20 YEARS

THE  
BOSTON

# Globe

06.26.05 /// MAGAZINE

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## Recipe for a Hot Spot

Opening a restaurant isn't all truffle tastings and shopping for chandeliers. A look inside the making of a trattoria reveals how friendships get tested and a blueprint becomes a business.

A couple gets cozy  
at new Back Bay  
restaurant Domani.

BY ETHAN GILSDORF

# The Opening

Follow Brian Lesser as he launches a Back Bay trattoria, going from blueprints to braised rab

**DURING CONSTRUCTION** of Domani Bar & Trattoria, carpenter supervisor Norman LaLonde, left, confers with architect Stephen Sousa. Facing page: Weeks later, diners fill the space.



just over a year. He dreams of packing the place and turning a buck. Can he and his team pull it of

**By Ethan Gilsdorf**  
**Photographs by Pam Berry**



**THE PAINTERS JUST TOUCHED UP THE TRIM.** The menus, printed this morning, are slipped into their covers. The rich Plugra butter slowly softens in the dining room air.

"Remember, forks are face up, knives are face in," Mark Spence, the director of operations, says in his kindly, you-ought-to-know-better way. "And bread plates always go to the left," adds the general manager, Tom Keefe.

Dressed in their black and whites, the waitstaff scribble notes. Mostly twenty-somethings, they are exhausted from a week of training and exams.

"I'm a little nervous," admits Lisa Hornak, one of the bartenders.

After 14 months of preparation, this is no time for stage fright. In three days, Boston's latest anticipated restaurant will open in the Back Bay, and this Friday night is the first full dress rehearsal. Forgotten are the not-yet-installed awnings and the wobbly tables. Worries about the custom-designed banquettes, once deemed too uncomfortable for a three-hour meal, are put away. Ignored are the plate covers that haven't arrived; if dishes are less than piping hot after their journey from the basement kitchen, so be it.

Downstairs, it's a plate of garganelli here, a bistecca Fiorentina there. The evening moves crisply, but in control. And then the rush hits. From a printer, a flurry of orders pops up on paper tickets. A blur of hands shakes sizzling pans, steam roils from pots, and heat pours from the mouth of chef de cuisine David Robinson. "Hereherehere!" Robinson barks to one of his subordinates. "I'm waiting on two chickens! One cod!" He wheels to correct a flustered line cook. "Stopstopstop! Putitdown! Putitdown!" Robinson catches himself: This is just practice. He puts his hand on the cook's shoulder, slowing down. "Don't worry, brother," he says. "Make it look nice."

Ordinarily serene, tonight, executive chef Rene Michelena looks fretful as he inspects each entree coming off the line. He drizzles juice on a roasted chicken with lemon grass, nutmeg, rapini, and lemon-thyme risotto cake, his blessing before Keefe whisks it upstairs.

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CARPENTERS' DUST settles on a row of glasses left by a previous occupant of the space, the Original Sports Saloon.

From his bar stool, restaurateur Brian Lesser watches as Keefe presents the food to a young couple before running back toward the kitchen.

"What do you think?" Lesser, 40, asks in his low voice, half to a guest and half to himself. With his casual clothes, stocky build, and 6-foot frame, he'd pass for a bouncer at Saint, the lounge he owns downstairs.

Lesser surveys his restaurant's bold interior — the wallpaper in mocha and sienna, the bar stools patterned with typography, the wall panels of wavy gypsum. Recently, he wondered whether the design was too over the top or whether "Joe Diner" would be turned off by the association with trendy Saint. He also has investors to think about and the fresh burden of a \$200,000 loan. But Lesser's face gives nothing away. Nodding in the direction of his 17 tables, his staff, his new world, he asks, "Do you like it?"

No matter. It's too late to change the food or decor at Domani Bar & Trattoria, the new culinary venture from Lesser and Michelena, two of the city's more adventuresome and prolific entrepreneurs.

Friday night flies by: 9, 10, 11 o'clock. By midnight, it's over. The verdict is clear: "We got slammed," says a sweaty but smiling Robinson. "But I knew it was going to be that way. It's a matter of organization. It's not about manpower. It's about streamlining the details."

They have one more try before Monday. The evening may have been only a drill, with servers posing as patrons, but its lessons will shape opening night and beyond. Because how Domani handles its big splash and first few months will determine just how long the restaurant will thrive — and survive.

GONE ARE THE DAYS when to be a restaurateur, you needed only a secret recipe, a few checkered tablecloths, and a friendly face at the door. Forget meat, potatoes, and chowdah. Think gargantuan plates, microscopic portions, and \$30 entrees. Boston is now a foodie town.

To take a restaurant like Domani from a doodle on a cocktail napkin to a celeb-studded opening night, you'll need backers, a business plan, and expertise. Even then, the odds are stacked against you: According to a survey by researchers at Cornell University and Michigan State University, after one year, 27 percent of new US restaurants flop; after three years, half are gone; after a decade, 70 percent have disappeared.

But for the winners, the spoils include cookbooks, reality shows, and everything short of Le Creuset- and Wusthof-wielding action figures.

"If you're going to open a restaurant in Boston, you better have a celebrity chef or killer concept," says Charlie Perkins, owner of the property brokerage firm Boston Restaurant Group of Boxford who helped Lesser find a home for Saint. Without those, Perkins says, you had better have "people to kick you in the pants and say, 'It ain't gonna work.'"

The concept *del giorno* is contemporary Italian; recent entries include Mare in the North End, Sorriso Trattoria in the Leather District, and Stella in the South End. Whether Domani will ride this wave or be crushed by it is anybody's guess. In an environment where diners are fickle and restaurants disappear overnight, a final ingredient is needed for success: chutzpah. Lesser and Michelena have a seemingly endless supply.

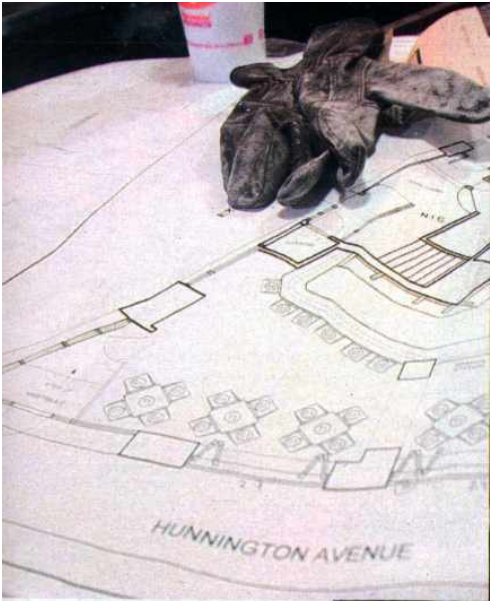
Lesser got hooked on the food business in 1985, straight out of the University of Denver. The New York native rose to director of room service at the Helmsley Palace Hotel. In 1991, he took on Boston, first opening Cafe Gianni and Cafe Briacco, then Wrap Culture in 1993.

With Joe Quattrocchi, he founded Commonwealth Fish & Beer Company near Haymarket, Metro in the South End, and Vox Populi and Barcode in the Back Bay. The partners split four years ago, but Lesser won't discuss why.

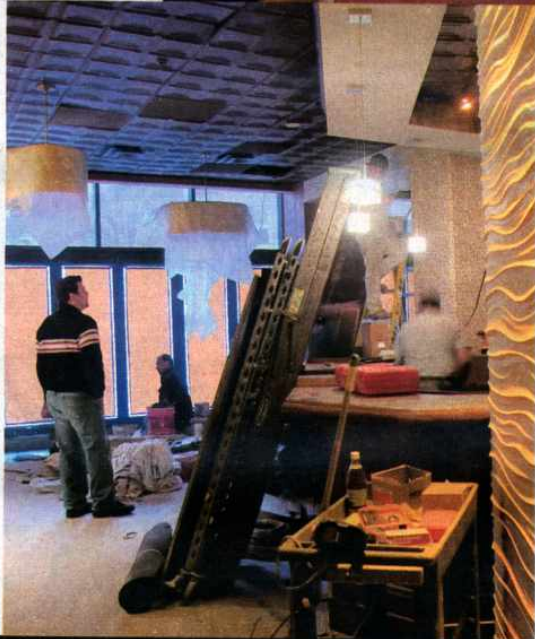
He reentered the business in 2002 with Saint. To head the kitchen, he recruited Michelena, whose resume included La Bettola in the South End, where *Food & Wine* named him one of the top 10 new US chefs in 1998. The two hit it off, and Saint flourished.

In 2003, Lesser saw a chance to expand into the upstairs space formerly occupied by the Original Sports Saloon. Sushi in mind, he began negotiations with his landlord, but delays led his chosen chef to take another gig. By February 2004, the concept was Oggi ("today" in Italian), to "showcase Rene's culinary talents." At Saint, Michelena's cuisine takes a back seat to the ambience, but food would be first at Oggi — which Lesser, worried about pronunciation, rechristened Domani. It means "tomorrow."

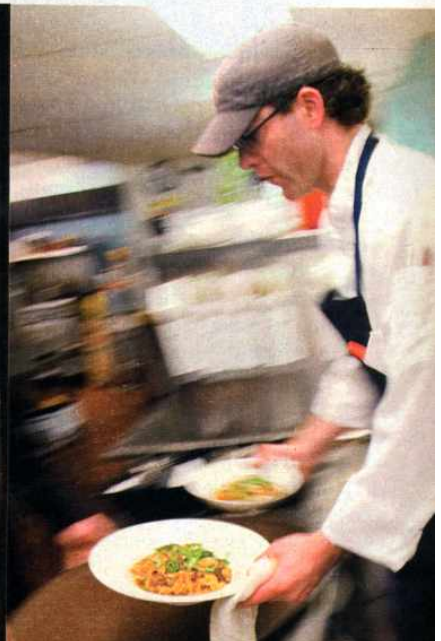
TWENTY YEARS IN THE BUSINESS has left Lesser scornful of restaurateurs who put the plan for importing truffles ahead of the lease



FROM TOP LEFT: Plans call for dining and bar areas, but before drinks can be poured, painters and carpenters work for weeks. Right: Owner Brian Lesser checks the progress. From bottom left: The waitstaff is critiqued after a dress rehearsal, and chef de cuisine David Robinson feels the heat.

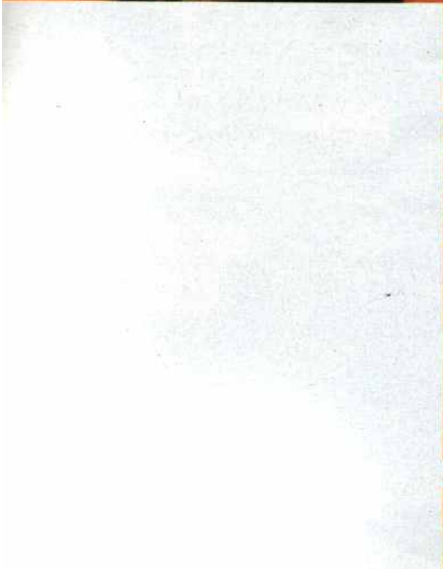
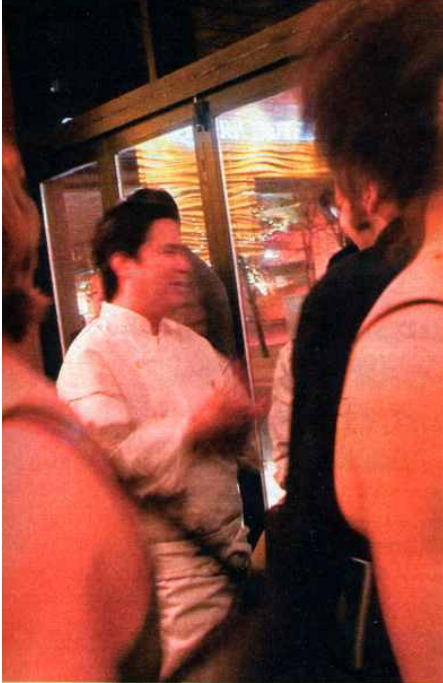


**“Most chef-run restaurants fail because they don’t serve what the public likes but what [the chefs] like,” says Domani owner Brian Lesser. “You have to grow, adapt, change.”**





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** The dress rehearsal lets the kitchen staff work out kinks; guests at an opening party will be able to nibble on appetizers prepared by executive chef Rene Michelena; throughout the party, Lesser checks his phone messages, a doorman waits, and Michelena mingles.





DOMANI'S ARCHITECT says the more trendy the space, "the less shelf life there is."

and securing funding. So before Lesser worries about a logo, he lines up permits, insurance, and neighborhood support. He figures his location, just off Copley Square near some 6,000 hotel rooms, is propitious. But Boston poses its own set of problems for restaurants. High taxes, snowstorms, parking, traffic, and skyrocketing rents increase the risk.

In September 2004, Lesser estimates a start-up budget of "a little north of \$300,000." Construction is two-thirds of that figure; the rest is marketing, administrative, payroll, and miscellaneous costs. He figures on five bartenders and 12 waitstaff and bus people. Two establishments under one roof mean economies of scale: Saint and Domani will share a liquor license, management, kitchen personnel, a pastry chef, and Michelena. Lesser doesn't ask his Saint investors for additional capital. To finance the new venture, Lesser uses some money from Saint and signs a hefty personal loan.

The Sports Saloon's beer signs, pennants, and bust of Bobby Orr won't fly with Domani's pheasant consommé. To transform the 2,800-square-foot space in the Copley Square Hotel building, Lesser hires architect Stephen Sousa, whose portfolio includes Gypsy Bar in the Theater District and Allston's Tonic, as well as previous Lesser projects. By early January of this year, Lesser and Sousa start making decisions about what they call "FF&E": furniture, fixtures, and equipment.

"I've been working for weeks to get the right chair," Sousa says from behind thick-rimmed glasses, running his fingers through his black hair. "Clients get nervous about making a splash. But the more trendy you are, the less shelf life there is." The chair decision is tabled for weeks.

On January 12, six weeks of construction begin. "Everyone will tell you we're out of our minds," Lesser says of the timetable. At the same time, Lesser gathers Michelena, Robinson, and managers Keefe, Spence, and Beth Scher to hash through hundreds of details.

Take the 125-item FF&E list. In January, questions include: Uniform color? Ties? Bread baskets? Television? A debate on the merits of different wineglasses drags on for 45 minutes. Lesser rubs his temples. Maybe his plan to shed 20 pounds by opening night wasn't so brilliant. He tries to focus. "Stereo system?"

"I don't want to eat pasta to the Doobie Brothers," says Scher, the lunch manager. Done. No classic rock.

In February, with a month until opening night, Lesser still must choose a logo. At least the chair issue is settled. He and Sousa go with Robi, a sleek, espresso-colored model of bent plywood with a perforated back. They order 40 at about \$200 apiece. As Keefe and Spence recruit staff, Lesser repeats an axiom to the growing team: "Great service can make up for a mediocre meal, but a great meal can be ruined by poor service."

Lesser often asks for input, but some decisions are made by the benevolent dictator. Michelena wanted a bar menu. Lesser said no. But otherwise, Lesser leaves food to Michelena. "I might say we really need a steak on the menu," Lesser says. "But I would never tell him 'I don't like the way you do tuna.'"

Diners might be skeptical knowing that a chef from Manila, not Milan, dreamed up their lamb ragu fettuccini and braised rabbit. But the 35-year-old Michelena sees similarities between Asian and Italian cuisine. "The ideology is the same: Preserve the natural state and flavor of the product." He says his kitchen has put together what he hopes is an appealing combination of "comfort foods for the Joe who doesn't know much" and dishes for "the food critics and the foodies."

"He's a very talented chef," says Rita D'Angelo, Michelena's former boss at La Bettola and the Theater District's Galleria Italiana. D'Angelo takes credit for opening Michelena's eyes to "real Italian food." "When he came to us, his pasta wasn't 100 percent," she says. "We taught him."

Michelena has worked at 13 restaurants, including Sign of the Dove in New York, Charlie Trotter's in Chicago, Centro in Cambridge, and Vault in Boston. Yet the chef's attention span doesn't concern Lesser. "Rene has a vested interest," he says. Michelena's piece of Domani's action should keep his energies focused, at least until the next big concept — say, neo-Filipino — hits Boston.

SATURDAY, MARCH 5. The tray covers have arrived. The awnings and window decals are installed, just in time for the final rehearsal: an event for investors and VIPs. It's the team's last chance to sharpen its game before Monday's opening. "We are looking for some serious feedback on service, the menu, the food, ambience," Lesser says. "There's a lot of things we could have overlooked."

## The Opening

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Two nights later, Domani opens to the public. The servers know their wines better, and the kitchen is faster. The evening passes smoothly. A week later, the press event is mobbed. By early April, Domani is averaging 60 meals, 100 on a busy night. No longer dependent on the extra help he brought in for the launch, Michelena has downsized his kitchen crew from eight to five. "We're streamlining it," he says. "We can go faster now."

As the weeks pass, Lesser's initial doubts fade. "Hopefully in a month we will be full every night and running smoothly," he says. Asked for the financial picture, Lesser is circumspect: "The whole thing is a long-term investment."

By May, reviews are in: two in the *Globe*, one in the *Herald*. Alison Arnett's three-star assessment in the *Globe* begins "Another week, another Italian" but praises Michelena's subtle departures from tradition. "I thought it was a good review," Lesser says. "But I was disheartened that our service wasn't mentioned at all." (A month later, the *Boston Phoenix* would note the "unusually good" service.)

"You can't create a restaurant to please the critics," Lesser says. Still, he preaches flexibility. "Most chef-run restaurants fail because they don't serve what the public likes but what [the chefs] like. You have to grow, adapt, change." Lesser says he will heed word of mouth. "If people keep saying the same things over and over, then we have to listen."

So far, most words are good, even from the competition. Lesser is "doing everything right," says Frank DiPasquale, owner of Bricco, Umbria, and Trattoria Il Panino. "He knows what he's doing. He's a real good businessman."

Lesser says he doesn't feel threatened by other establishments riding the Italian wave. "I truly believe Domani has its niche," he says. "Rene's food is unique enough."

Though Lesser has the most at stake, ideally, restaurants please their owners, the critics, and the public. "You invest your future in certain things, and you really hope people understand it, that people appreciate it," he says. "It also has to be a viable financial venture. Hopefully, the two things meet. It's all I can hope for."

And if not? "I'll be in Belize." **BG**