

The Boston Globe
DOT!

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The cold breath of winter whips across the boulevard. Under a halo of bright white streetlights, four girlfriends meet up at a bar where the line outside is five deep and it's not even midnight. One friend lives a stroll away. Two live in South Boston. The other drove up from Brockton. It's another Friday night on the town, with drinks and dancing.

They're in a Lansdowne Street state of mind, but they're not near Fenway, not downtown, and definitely not in the South End. They're in a spot that seems to be getting hot, especially at night: Dorchester.

Dorchester?

Tonight, this foursome is making a night of it at the Blarney Stone in Fields Corner, along with other crushes of young night crawlers and professionals. Up the street, other partyers are meeting at dbar, the newest restaurant/lounge helping to make Dot, the neighborhood's nickname, more of a destination on the night life scene.

The two spots, which feature DJs four nights a week, along with the new Ashmont Grill and veterans such as the Emerald Isle Bar and Lounge and 224, are giving them reasons to visit Dorchester after dark as they look to diversify their dining, drinking, and dancing cards. As dbar's website declares: "Finally! Nightlife begins in Dorchester."

While some nighthawks might have hesitated in the past about heading to Dorchester because of its longtime reputation as a gritty, watch-your-back section of the city, some say they're braving Dot Avenue because of a burgeoning night life scene that goes beyond the traditional Irish pub. Nocturnal hot spots no longer seem limited to certain areas of the city. As new residents are moving to Dorchester for its more affordable housing, the night life scene is following them.

"It's more people looking for night life, looking for fun and having a good time in Dorchester instead of running away from it," said Peter Sasso, a Fields Corner Main Street board member who introduced the "Dotini," a martini named after the neighborhood, last winter at the Blarney Stone. "It's kind of incredible to hear people say, 'We went out in Dorchester.' "

Rocking the house

"Don't cha wish your girlfriend was fun like me?, don't cha," the Pussycat Dolls purr from the speakers at dbar just shy of midnight on a recent Friday. Savin Hill resident Marlon Major is here, nursing his Rusty Nail (scotch and Drambuie) inside the dark, one-story, wood-paneled bar. Depending on what time people stop by, the place is either a restaurant or a lounge/club that attracts a mostly gay clientele. From 5 to 10 p.m., waiters serve pork loin, fried squid, and lobster ravioli under dim lights. After 10, a swift makeover occurs, as staffers put away the tables to make way for a small dance floor, a DJ, and a computer-controlled lighting system.

Owner Brian Piccini, who lives in nearby Adams Village, opened the bar in October to give residents a place to sway and swirl without having to leave the 02124 district. (The "d" in dbar stands for Dorchester, of course.)

"I've never gone out here, because there was nowhere to go besides the Irish pubs. For me, it was always going out in the city," said Piccini, 24, a former bartender who knows something about where people like to go out at night. "People say the night life scene in Boston is so lame and it's always the same. People get bored easily. We just turn up the music and make the lights flash, move the furniture around, pump the music through the floor, and rock the house."

So far, it's working. On Fridays and Saturdays, the place is packed, mostly with gay men causing human gridlock at the barstools and on the dance floor.

Major, 44, is among them, chugging his golden drink while fellow dancers sashay, booty shake, and crunk on the dance floor. A moving pink logo that reads "dbar" is projected onto the bar's hardwood floors. Wall lights fade from lime green and pink to sea blue and yellow, adding to the nightclub feel.

"It's almost like a gay Cheers in an upscale way. It doesn't have the attitude that most other places in the city have. It's warmer, and people embrace people here a lot better than in the city," said Major, who walked here from his condo.

"Time goes by, so slowly," Madonna coos. The song summons dbar patrons to get into the groove. Major, a corporate trainer, hears the call and wades through the crowd to hit the dance floor.

Making the scene

The folks showing up at Dorchester's hot spots are as diverse as the neighborhood itself: gay and straight, young and old, black, Hispanic, and Asian, residents and visitors. Some have migrated to Dorchester from other parts of the city for cheaper condos and rentals. As they make themselves at home, they are finding more reasons to stick around at night.

Clubgoers say their reasons for coming here are simple: The drinks are cheap, there's no cover, and you can snatch a parking space on Dot Ave. whether you have good parking karma or not. The change is part of a shift that has the night life scene spreading beyond downtown and into neighborhoods such as Dorchester.

"It's cool to see a nightclub like this in Dorchester," said Patrick Momplaisir, 24, of Brighton, as he sipped his Kahlua mudslide at the Blarney Stone with his girlfriend, Nadege Hold, who lives in Fields Corner.

The pair would usually go out in Coolidge Corner or Harvard Square on a Friday night for drinks and music, but they discovered the Blarney Stone which four years ago underwent a remodeling that included a DJ area and a deck to make it more of a night life destination after attending a fund-raising party here. They had no idea this was a happening spot, because there was no such scene in Dorchester when they were both growing up here.

"It was not on our radar," said Hold, a medical assistant sipping a Cactus Pear margarita.

"Everything here would close at 6 p.m.," she said, trying to talk over Aerosmith's "Walk This Way."

Down the bar from her is Kelley Connolly, 28, one of the four girlfriends who met up at the Blarney Stone earlier. "People who come here are from Dorchester and don't want to be in the city at night, which can be a hassle with the Big Dig detours," said Connolly, drinking a Corona. Of her friends tonight, she's the only one who lives in Dorchester. "They're surprised because they didn't know this was here. People look at Dorchester as a place [where] they are going to be shot and robbed, but it depends on where you go."

The neighborhood hasn't totally shed its negative image. A recent rash of shootings from the quadruple homicide in December near Melville Park to the fatal stabbing of community activist John Beresford, which stunned the Ronan Park community last spring is a reminder that some pockets of Dorchester are among the most violent in the city. In October, the car window of city council president Michael F. Flaherty was shot out as he and an aide drove down Dorchester Avenue, the four-mile spine of the neighborhood.

But more and more, twilight visitors continue to drop by Dorchester's hipper spots. As this Friday night switches over to Saturday morning, the music of Mariah, Ciara, and Missy Elliott pounds the dance floor at dbar. Around 1:30 a.m., the crowd starts to thin out and the revelers seem ready to call it a night. Some walk home on the mostly desolate streets. Others, like Lenny Donnarumma, drive back to the South End.

"A few years ago, I would have never gone out in Dorchester, because it was so unsafe," he said, finishing up his vodka tonic. "Now I go out here more than in the South End. It lacks the attitude. It's my hangout."

SIDEBAR:

DOT SPOTS

Hip places to hang out in Dorchester

dbar

1236 Dorchester Ave.

617-265-4490

Dinner served from 5 p.m. to 10 p.m., then the eatery transforms into a lounge/club. A DJ plays music Wednesday through Saturday nights. Mixed crowd for dinner, but chances are you'll smell more cologne than perfume here at night.

The Blarney Stone

1509 Dorchester Ave.

617-436-8223

They serve American food, but the place, which feels like a loft, is also a good drinking hole weekend nights, with a DJ Thursdays through Saturdays. Twenty-something football buffs watch the latest game on a large-screen TV while yuppie partyers shoot pool or get down on the dance floor to hip-hop, pop, and '80s hits. Don't wear baggy jeans or the bouncer will turn you away, as was the case with a recent fellow one Friday night.

Ashmont Grill

555 Talbot Ave.

617-825-4300

The restaurant has added new energy to Ashmont's Peabody Square. The AG is a sleek, modern yet casual dinner outpost that is making the area more of a stop than just the one for the T across the street.

The Emerald Isle and Lounge

1501 Dorchester Ave.

617-288-0010

Dot rats call it "The Isle," and a lot of folks who grooved and drank up some Coronas at the Blarney Stone like to stroll a few feet north on Dot Ave. and cram in here for some late-night debauchery and dancing on the square dance floor. The place has also been a venue for comedians and live local bands. Last October, the bar premiered a documentary by Dorchester punk band Unnatural Axe and then had them perform for a benefit for Dorchester Open Studios.

224

224 Boston St.

617-265-1217

It has been touted as one of the first hip restaurant/bars to open in Dorchester and has been a pioneer in yuppie dining for more than 15 years just off Columbia Road near Uphams Corner.

Whether you want an appetizer, pizza, or salmon or duck as an entree, or just a drink at the bar, you can bet you'll bump into a lot of Dorchester neighbors here, as well as visitors.

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