ELLIE SEYMOUR DISCOVERS HOW TRADITION AND INNOVATION SIT COMPANIONABLY IN MASSACHUSETT'S ELEGANT CAPITAL.
I was at the Charles River Speedway, a complex of historic buildings dating to 1899, five miles from downtown Boston and just a mile from Harvard University. Fewer than three years ago, the buildings here were derelict with peeling paint. Today’s youthful shopfronts leave little reminder of its past, in what’s become a vibrant new marketplace that represents Boston’s community of independent businesses in miniature.

Under the same roof the Belleweather Salon, where hairdresser-owner Melinda is booked up ten to 12 weeks ahead; Super Bien, a Latin-American ‘grocery bar’ glowing iridescent pink, with South American treats like natural wines, beer and homemade empanadas on offer; Birds of Paradise cocktail bar with a travel-themed twist; and Notch Brewery for local beers, to name but a few.

‘The Koji Club is basically a cozy wine bar specialising in sake,’ said Alyssa, ‘and our menu follows suit, too. We have sake, Castellana olives in sesame oil with togarashi from a local spice shop, quality Japanese table rice with

my mom’s quick pickles, and a Japanese curry empanada in collaboration with our Speedway neighbours, Super Bien. ’I took my sake and empanada to enjoy in the suntrap European-style beer garden, lined with wooden tables set on white gravel and hung with string lights.

Boston’s revolutionary history will always be its biggest draw, with the well-trodden Freedom Trail and Harvard University walking tours attracting record visitor numbers. But beyond its big-hitting historical sites, there’s an edgier side to the city. One where shiny glass towers mingle with 1800s Beaux-Arts buildings, hotels are getting designer makeovers, sleek galleries and food halls are finding new homes in old spaces, and once-abandoned green spaces are being revitalised with colourful murals.

The Koji Club was Boston’s first sake bar when it flung its doors open in 2022. ‘It was tempting to set up shop in New York City. We had plenty of attractive offers, but I’ve lived in Boston my whole life, so I wanted to contribute to the city’s community of small businesses,’ Alyssa said.
Boston is a city where it’s easy to bring new ideas to life and where people like to innovate,’ self-taught French artist Cécile Ganne told me as she pottedtered around her studio in the SoWa Art and Design district, just a mile south of downtown Boston. Here, 19th-century warehouse buildings that once housed clothing and piano factories are now home to cool galleries, design shops and artists’ studios.

I work as a professor most of the time,’ she told me. ‘Boston is packed with colleges, universities and tech start-ups, which lends a feeling of youthful optimism and energy to the city. People aren’t scared to turn old ideas upside down and start over. It’s a mood that inspires me every day, and nourishes my brain and my paintings. Clearly, the city’s slobos nickname, the ‘Hub of the Universe,’ remains relevant.

Cécile has been working at her SoWa studio for just over two years, during which time she’s turned it into a tiny art gallery. ‘I didn’t want it just to be a place to store my materials. I tried to imagine a person’s journey through my studio, what they would see first and then next, so their visit would be an immersive experience.’ The result is a compact, free-flowing space that feels calm and allows viewers to focus on her paintings without distraction.

During SoWa First Fridays, creators invite the public into their studios to see them at work. This behind-the-scenes glimpse is part of SoWa’s appeal. ‘Having long conversations with people interested in my work is what I love most about being part of the SoWa community,’ Cécile said. ‘Their questions give me insights and a greater perspective I wouldn’t otherwise have.’

Lunch was calling so I headed north to High Street Place for another taste of Boston’s food hall scene. It opened in 2022, in an atrium between two historic buildings, one of which is an Art Deco National Historic Landmark that was home to the United Shoe Machinery Corporation, which sat at the heart of the region’s economic life in the 1930s.

Now it’s packed with cool food outlets, like Wheelhouse, where an ‘Old Timer’ burger – American cheese, pickles, onion, shredded lettuce, ketchup and mustard – hit the mark.

After, a slow stroll over to nearby Rose Kennedy Greenway helped walk my lunch off. This 1½-mile ribbon of park doubles as an open-air art gallery of installations and sculptures. Welcoming me was a giant mural of artist Robb Gibbs’s daughter, Bobbi Lauren, wearing a tracksuit and standing next to an old-school boom box. She was looking out into
NEED TO KNOW

GETTING THERE
Boston Logan International Airport is around three miles from downtown Boston, and easily reached by subway, airport bus or taxi.

BEST TIME TO GO
Spring (May and June) and autumn (September and October) are ideal times to visit Boston, for the best weather and fewer crowds.

CURRENCY
US dollars

TIME ZONE
GMT -4

FOOD
Boston’s intoxicating food scene has it all. Seafood restaurants are its mainstay, like the buzzy Union Oyster House, the city’s oldest, where you can shuck oysters in an upstairs booth John F Kennedy once sat in.

WHERE TO STAY
The Omni Hotel in the shiny Seaport District is within walking distance of the city’s main sights. The compact, stylishly decorated rooms have floor-to-ceiling glass windows with great views across the city.

HOW TO DO IT
The Meet Boston website (meetboston.com) is packed with ideas for things to do organised by theme, as well as restaurant and hotel recommendations.

MUST-PACK ITEM
Comfy walking shoes – Boston has a compact, easily navigable centre that has earned it the nickname ‘America’s Walking City’.

WHY GO
To discover Boston is neither staid nor stuffy and that there’s more to the city than time-worn cobblestone streets and red-brick heritage.

The writer travelled as a guest of Meet Boston

† FROM LEFT: The recent Guadalupe Maravilla Exhibition at Boston’s ICA; The exterior of the ICA in Boston.

Rewey Square, directly at me, it seemed – or maybe at my dessert: a melty yet moreish ice-cream taco from Sugar Skulls, experts in frozen treats with a Mexican twist.

My final spot for soaking up the city’s contemporary spirit was the ever-expanding Seaport District, a mile east. As well as shops, bars, breweries and restaurants, this buzzy waterside district is home to the Institute of Contemporary Art, a modernist building at the heart of Boston’s modern art scene and a pioneer in the transformation of the area. In its boxy first-floor gallery, I was taken in by the sight of American artist Simone Leigh’s monumental, curvaceous bronze figures of African female forms. Larger-than-life and dressed in traditional materials, they cut thought-provoking forms against the starkness of the space.

Another striking element of the ICA: the building’s glass design. One side perfectly framing the view north across Boston Harbour. From here I spotted the museum’s second outpost, the ICA Watershed, a brisk ten-minute boat ride away on the museum’s tiny shuttle. It’s set in a giant once-abandoned copper-pipe factory at the Boston Harbour Shipyard and Marina – in the city’s oldest neighbourhood. As I stepped off the boat, away from the city-centre hubbub, the peaceful atmosphere seemed to bring with it a sense of nostalgia. Though many of the low brick buildings and warehouses here have also been modernised, they are markedly different from the gleaming skyline across the water. Looking back, it seemed clear to me that Boston is a city that manages to stay true to its roots while embracing innovation. At once both unswervingly traditional and energetically forward-thinking – one part buttoned-up grandmother and the other a youthful, hip auntie who likes to spoil you rotten.