

Dirty Habit opens Saturday with global small plates – and an insane-asylum theme

By [Becky Krystal](#)

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If you thought creepy insane asylums were only for Halloween, here's something to ponder: A new restaurant is donning the ambiance year-round.

We couldn't make this stuff up even if we tried.

Dirty Habit, opening Saturday in the Hotel Monaco in Penn Quarter, is the eatery embracing this, ahem, unique approach. The theme isn't terribly overt -- nothing like a haunted house -- but there are "small hints" that allude to the types of places that have long since been shut down, such as Bedlam in London, said general manager William Smith.

One example: a padded room that seats up to 10 (how's that for your next holiday party?). Another: a statue built from spare equipment parts called "The Crouching Man," in which the figure is kneeling in an almost fetal position. The whole idea is to make people "a little uncomfortable," Smith said (there's even a Pleasantly Uncomfortable cocktail).

"Each person is going to read the space a little different," Smith said. He described the overall design as a mix of industrial (lots of exposed steel -- reminiscent of cell bars, perhaps?), edgy, Gotham (yes, as in Batman) and Gothic.

But what exactly does Dirty Habit mean? "Everybody has their version of a dirty habit, and it's something that's always been treated as taboo," such as during Prohibition when having a good cocktail was off-limits (at least officially), Smith said. "This is kind of a twist on that type of mentality."

Dirty Habit is the restaurant replacing Poste, which closed earlier this year after a 14-year run. It is a complete departure from the late French brasserie.

"Poste is dead. The book is closed," said Smith, who spent a little more than a year working at Poste before it shut down. "Other than the physical address . . . the entire space has been gutted and redone."

But not everything is different: Poste chef Kyoo Eom has stayed on to lead the kitchen at Dirty Habit and has crafted a menu of mostly shareable plates that draw inspiration from around the world. His Korean heritage is an influence as well: Eom's large-format braised short ribs, for example, will be served with kimchi, pickled radishes and rice. He's also serving a tuna tartare that he said is kind of like Korean sashimi, in addition to double-fried, Korean-style chicken wings.

Other dishes include shrimp curry, grilled marinated skirt steak and a burger with a fried egg and Kewpie mayo. Eom is holding onto a few items from the Poste menu; diners told him he had to keep the truffle fries, and the crispy duck ravioli are returning, too.

Dirty Habit will have three bars: a patio bar (most likely opening in the next few weeks), the Glasshouse Bar in the atrium and the Footed Bar inside the restaurant. If you're looking for a slower pace and slightly more complex drinks, hang around at the Footed Bar, where head bartender Sarah Ruiz said she can really geek out with the drinks and play with more elaborate garnishes, some of which she'll make in a cotton-candy machine.

In keeping with Eom's wide-ranging menu, "as far as spirits, we're kind of all over the place," Ruiz said. She spent some time in Mexico, which has provided her with additional inspiration. The Prickly Position is made with sotol, a spirit made from an agave relative, and includes serrano-infused ice cubes that melt and change the drink as you sip it. Other drinks include a roasted banana daiquiri and the Smoke Signals, made with High West Double Rye, lapsang souchong tea, maple and walnut bitters.

Dirty Habit will also offer a few large-format drinks, including a gin and tonic served in a porrón (a large glass pitcher from Spain). The bar will build on the French wine list it inherited from Poste with some lesser-known varietals and regions. Expect a rotating selection of beers on tap, local and otherwise, plus Basque cider.

Dirty Habit, 555 Eighth St. NW in the Hotel Monaco. 202-783-6060. Opens Saturday for dinner daily; breakfast begins Sunday, lunch Oct. 17 and brunch Oct. 22.

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