

At new casino, a rare Boston sight: diversity

Written by Administrator
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Since opening June 23, Encore Boston Harbor in Everett has drawn a clientele that cuts across demographic lines — race, class, and age — to an extent rarely seen in the Boston area.

From Fenway Park to TD Garden, from the Museum of Fine Arts to the Prudential Center and Faneuil Hall, patrons at major entertainment venues often don't reflect how the Boston area looks.

But the Wynn Resorts casino appears to offer something starkly different: racial diversity.

To those accustomed to seeing area restaurants and bars dominated by white faces, the contrast is stark, and casino visitors seem to have embraced the melting pot mix.

"This is a real depiction of what America looks like, and I love it, because I'm a person of color," said Felicia Kornegay, a 55-year-old black woman who visited the casino with her mother in its opening week.

"You know, a lot of places you go to, especially in Boston, you go and you feel excluded," said Kornegay, who lives in Medford. "You don't feel that here."

With its 143 table games, 88 poker tables, 3,158 slot machines, and 15 restaurants and bars, Encore is, of course, in the business of separating people from their money. As at all casinos, making visitors of all backgrounds feel comfortable is good for the bottom line. And that comfort could entice people to gamble away money they can't afford to lose, specialists said.

It's a concern felt acutely in some Asian communities, especially those that have long had an affinity for games of chance.

"It's a difficult place for us," said Giles Li, who directs the Boston Chinatown Neighborhood

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Center. “In general, our community of working-class Chinese immigrants, they don’t feel welcome a lot of places. At casinos, they actually feel welcome there. They’re treated well. They’re treated like VIPs.”

But, he added, “our community may be at particular risk for gambling addiction.”

Li worries that outreach aimed at wealthy Asians might also bring in “our neighbors who come from a similar culture” but have less financial flexibility.

“So when they are being enticed to play in the casino, there is a lot more risk for them,” he said.

One evening during opening week at the high-limit baccarat tables, all the players were Asian, a common occurrence at all hours, according to reporters’ observations over eight days. Last week, Cantonese, Mandarin, and Taiwanese speakers filled the baccarat and pai go tables. The dealers were mostly Chinese speakers, too.

Winnie Tan, who lives near Chinatown, said people visit the casino because it’s fun.

“Chinese people enjoy trying their luck,” Tan said in Cantonese as she wandered the art-filled casino lobby with her husband. She shared photos of the art in the marble-floored entryway on WeChat, the Chinese social, texting, and payment network that’s an equivalent of Facebook and more.

Michael Weaver, a spokesman for Wynn Resorts, which owns Encore Boston Harbor, said the company’s casinos — in Las Vegas, Macau, and Everett — work to ensure all guests feel welcome. Those efforts include having a diverse workforce with multilingual employees.

Wynn Resorts has teams that “focus on hosting Asian guests in our resorts, most especially guests traveling to Las Vegas and Boston from Asia,” he said.

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Everyone ought to set a gambling budget for their visit to the casino, he added.

Specialists said high-end casinos like those run by Wynn Resorts are adept at catering to a broad clientele that crosses lines of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and nationality. There's no charge to get in, and the luxury — from the red Venetian crystal chandeliers to the \$28 million Popeye statue near the lobby entrance — is accessible.

“At a property like this, you're going to get everybody from the premium player who is being flown into Logan to the fanny packer from Framingham,” said Joseph Weinert, a specialist in the casino business at Spectrum Gaming Group, an independent consultancy.

“Nobody is going to go to a Four Seasons just to look around; in a casino you can do that,” Weinert said. “They have an open door policy and they try very hard to offer something for everybody, whether it's a buffet or art in public places or the types of slot machines they have. Many are branded after cultural products and entertainment.”

Weinert noted that among the most popular slot machines in history are those branded with “Wheel of Fortune” — and Encore has several.

“You don't get more mass market than people who watch ‘Wheel of Fortune’ on television,” he said.

The Rev. Richard McGowan, a Boston College professor who closely follows the gambling industry, said Wynn casinos are designed to appeal to a diverse swath of people.

It's a “high scale experience for many different price points,” he said. The design of the Everett casino, like other Wynn Resorts properties, “puts the dream in somebody that, ‘One day I could go to the high-end part of the casino,’ but in the meantime they have a luxurious experience,” he said.

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Wynn, unlike some other casino companies, has done a good job of attracting younger people with entertainment and restaurants, McGowan said.

That was on clear display in recent days as young people flocked to the casino and celebrated the spectacle on social media.

Jeff Durrigan, 29, was making his second visit on June 27 to see O'Neal DJ at Mémoire, a nightclub filled with thumping music and bright rays of blue light shooting through special effect fog.

Durrigan, who lives in Revere, posted a photo with Shaq on Instagram, and had previously come to the club to see DJ Steve Aoki.

But to many patrons, even more striking than the diversity of age was the diversity of race.

"Me, I'm from the Dominican Republic, and I'm seeing people from literally all over the world — it makes me feel comfortable," said German Antigua, a 22-year-old Dorchester resident and college student who works at the airport.

Kornegay, the Medford native who was touring the casino with her mother, found an inclusive feeling at the venue that's different from all the rest.

"In Massachusetts, in Boston, there's nowhere you can go where you see a lot of people that look like you in one place," she said. "So I think this is awesome."

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