

# The Boston Globe

**New to Boston? Bless yah hahts ... The Southerner's guide to fitting in here.**

We drink our tea. You toss yours in the harbor. But we have more in common than you think.

By Cameron Sperance Globe Correspondent, January 31, 2024



*.Ally Rzesu/Globe staff; Adobe Stock*

Y'all never got rid of me.

This is the last year when I can say I lived more of my life in the South. A proud Memphis native, I moved here for college in 2007.

What I'm about to say runs counter to what has been written in this very section, which has reported that Northerners are decamping for the South in pursuit of more space, lower taxes, and a relaxed pace of life.

I also recognize that Boston isn't exactly known for rolling out the welcome mat.

“Massachusetts consistently ranks amongst the top 10 states for out-migration. You think about U-Hauls leaving Massachusetts, not entering Massachusetts,” said John Boyd Jr., the principal of corporate site selection firm The Boyd Co. “The big challenges that many of our relocating clients face leaving the South for New England and for Massachusetts has to do with taxes. The cost-of-living/affordability is a major challenge for relocating Southerners into Boston.”

If you are a Southerner considering a move to Boston, fret not about fitting in. (The cost of living is not something I can help you with. Sorry.)

While outsiders moving to Boston tend to work in high-salaried fields like the life sciences and tech, there are still plenty of reasons why people of all backgrounds want to live here — and have done so successfully.

What’s the secret to going from “outsider” to belonging here?

**Don’t be someone you’re not.**

I spent my first few years up here wandering the campus of Boston College mindful of never, *ever* saying a certain four-letter word: “y’all.”

Big mistake.

Fast-forward 17 years, and “y’all” emerges in every third sentence I utter.

“I always love being a little different. When I moved here, there was practically no one else from the South,” said Elizabeth Erdreich-White, an art consultant who grew up in Alabama and moved to Boston in the late 1980s after stints in New Orleans, New York City, and Paris.

Moving here from down South must have been a culture shock. Some advice:

- Fashion-smashion. Buy a puffy winter jacket.
- Keep an eye out for aggressive tow truck drivers on street cleaning days.
- When giving directions, keep the chatter to a minimum.

“A person here will say, ‘Go north on I-93 and take Exit 24.’ I would say, ‘You go past the baker’s house, and you turn left, and then there’s that white fence that’s no longer there,’” Erdreich-White said with a laugh. “When I give directions, it’s a story, and people up here give directions like a proper person.”

But don’t be afraid to continue the Southern tradition of small talk in other social venues, whether it’s with a waiter or a bank teller or a group of strangers at a party. It can pay off in new friends and work connections.

“I’m interested in other people, genuinely,” Erdreich-White said. “That’s been a cool thing for me personally and in my business.”

Embracing one’s Southern-ness can be quite the party trick, too.

The late, great Vogue and Newsweek writer Julia Reed of Greenville, Miss., famously scored a gig at The New York Times by serving Southern food at a dinner party.

Pimento cheese, ham biscuits, smoked pulled pork, fried okra — you’d be surprised at how even the most uptight Yankee will break into a smile after a few courses of Southern fare.

Don’t like what’s served? Like Bostonians, Southerners don’t refrain from expressing their displeasure.

For “The Devil Wears Prada” fans: Southern culinary critique follows the same “pursed lips = catastrophe” formula as Miranda Priestley fashion reviews. In the South, a relative may bite into a biscuit, purse her lips, and deliver a faux compliment like “The added cheddar was a bold choice, dear.”

Here in Boston, sarcasm reigns supreme.

“Boston is famous for its sarcasm, and then you have Southern versions of that like ‘bless your heart’ and clutching the pearls,” said Jonathan Soroff, a longtime Boston social columnist who lived in the South while attending Duke University in Durham, N.C. “There’s a similarity in terms of humor.”

It’s true.

A born-and-bred Beacon Hill resident regaled a dinner party I attended with a story about running into a former neighbor.

“I’m sorry, but I thought you had died!” the former neighbor said.

“I just moved to the Back Bay.”

“Well, isn’t that worse?”

Boston Brahmins like that former neighbor no longer run the show, however. Today, it’s a city fueled by a variety of industries and points of power, from health care to higher education to finance and technology.

“When I was young, Boston was the city of tribes,” Soroff added. “All of that has completely changed.”

According to Erdreich-White, “Boston has evolved.”

“What has kept me here is that I love how it’s now a way more diverse mix of people,” she said, “but there’s still the fact you can live in a city that’s got the assets of a city but that still feels small.”

For some, Boston is just a four-year waiting room; it’s the place you go to college and then move on. But for others, yours truly included, the city strikes the right balance of small town (or even European) charm with cosmopolitan features like the Boston Symphony Orchestra, art museums, great restaurants, and a major airport.

The high cost of living drives people away, but “Boston continues to kind of reinvent itself,” Boyd said. “It’s an attractive city for young professionals given the cultural amenities, the diverse nightlife, professional sports, the beach and coastal living opportunities, and access to high-paying jobs.”

Southerners can even rejoice in the tailgate culture, whether it’s college football at Boston College or the New England Patriots. Of course, it was a lot more fun to watch when Matt Ryan and Tom Brady played for those teams.

Nobody interviewed for this story is wearing rose-colored glasses while they sip their sweet tea. They recognize Boston still has a way to go in terms of fully embracing inclusivity, but there are plenty of signs the city is shedding its cold reputation.

Maybe the influx of Southerners has something to do with that?

But at the end of the day: Neither Southerners nor Bostonians pronounce their R’s.

There’s just a lot of difference in the delivery, y’all.