



KEELIN DALY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Raz Msaad, manager at Bobby V's Sports Gallery Cafe, dons a Red Sox shirt Wednesday at the Stamford restaurant. The restaurant is beefing up its Red Sox merchandise as Bobby Valentine takes the helm of the team at Fenway, though all baseball fans are welcome at the restaurant. Mets and Yankees memorabilia are also prevalent.

Red Sox fever hits Bobby V's

By Elizabeth Kim

STAMFORD — It is a far cry from Red Sox Nation, but one of the city's oldest and most venerable bars has created a more welcoming vibe for fans of Beantown's baseball team.

At Bobby V's Sports Gallery Café, patrons can now buy Red Sox T-shirts, miniature souvenir batting helmets and autographed baseballs. A wooden menu holder has been freshly painted with the Red Sox logo, and Boston pennants hang plentifully alongside those of the New York teams.

The shift was expected — the restaurant and bar is dedicated not only to all things sports, but all things Bobby Valentine, who is starting his first season as Red Sox manager.

Major League Baseball's regular season begins this week. The Red Sox — and Valentine — make their debut Thursday against the Tigers in Detroit. Their home opener is April 13 against the Rays.

Bobby V's manager, Raz Msaad, said he expected extra interest in the Yankees' and sometime Mets' rival.

"It's going to be amped up a little bit," said Msaad, who was donning a Fenway Park polo. "Just the fact that Bobby is the manager, that alone would bring more Red Sox fans."

Aside from memorabilia, the restaurant has found other ways to play up



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A Boston Red Sox sign hangs at Bobby Valentine's restaurant in Stamford. Valentine was Stamford's director of public health and safety when he was named manager of the team in November.

its new Boston connection.

A "Red Sox" burger has been added to the menu, following a custom of naming a burger after every team Valentine has either played for or managed. Counting Chiba Lotte, the Japanese team Valentine managed there

are seven special burgers in total.

The restaurant is also organizing five bus trips to Fenway Park. The \$175 package includes a game ticket, a tour of the stadium and food and beverages on the bus.

By Elizabeth Kim

Red Sox fever takes hold at Bobby V's

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Msaad, however, stressed that Bobby V's is by no means going to "become a Red Sox bar."

A Quinnipiac University poll last year indicated

Fairfield County is solid Yankee territory. A total of 57 percent of baseball fans root for the Bronx Bombers compared with 16 percent for the Red Sox and 15 percent for the Mets.

Yet while they may be outnumbered, Red Sox fans in the region do not find themselves lacking a fraternity.

Every year, members of the Benevolent and Loyal Order of Honorable Ancient Red Sox Die Hard

Sufferers — otherwise

known as the BLOHARDS

— travel by bus from Westport to the team's opening day. The group has been arranging the trips since 1968.

Jack Condilin, president of the Stamford Chamber of Commerce, has made the ride before and said he plans to do so again this year. A native of Natick, Mass., he moved to Stamford in 1981. Wherever he has lived, his team loyalty has never wavered.

"There's one thing about a true baseball fan," Condilin said. "No matter where you move, if you're a Red Sox fan, you will always be a Red Sox fan. You don't change your team."

At his restaurant, he is known for being hands-on, shaking hands with customers as well as buying them drinks.

At the bar Tuesday night, there was no shortage of well-wishers for Valentine.

But most drew the line

when it came to rooting for their team.

"We still respect him as a person," said Will Davis, a 23-year-old Stamford native. "But if I'm here watching a Yankees-Red

Sox game, I'm not rooting

for the Red Sox."

Another Yankees fan, Jamie Johnson, 42, tried to make a case that, in certain cases, Mets fans would cheer on the Red Sox.

"The Mets fan's second favorite team is any team playing against the Yankees," he said.

Msaad, a Norwalk resident who has worked for Valentine for 15 years, knows where his allegiance lies.

Asked what team he would root for, he responded with a broad smile.

"The Red Sox, of course."

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