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Don't Mention the 'Curse'

By ANNE KADET



Since Peter Sibilis and Damien Vizuite launched Sadie's Kitchen in Cobble Hill a few weeks ago, they've been getting an earful from the neighbors. The restaurant is on a residential side street, so everyone seems to be taking a personal interest in the start-up's well being. Folks stop in to compliment the tiny eatery's cutie-pootie, retro-1940s décor, and to rave about the gourmet mac 'n' cheese and Southern-style baked goods. Others barge in to offer advice: Sadie's should offer green salads; Sadie's should open for breakfast.



Rob Shepperson

The pair take it in stride. But there's one comment they're really tired of hearing: The suggestion that their charming location, at 243 Degraw St., is cursed. Folks haven't let up about how the address defeated five previous restaurant start-ups in 10 years. Then there are the bloggers and online food reviewers, who toss around words like "doomed" and refer to Sadie's as "the next victim."

"It's ridiculous," says Mr. Vizuite. "It's a thorn in my side."

Every neighborhood has its share of commercial addresses that routinely defy even the cleverest restaurant schemes. In the Village, it's 504 Sixth Ave., which reportedly regurgitated everything from a French brasserie to a Cusi sandwich shop. In Park Slope, it's 230 Fifth Ave., which, according to urban legend, was cursed by a creepy clock stuck at 3:40 p.m., the hour of a previous landlord's death.

Perhaps the most famous example is 206 E. 63rd St., which annihilated a string of 13 restaurants before its planned conversion to a Buddhist temple.

The food blog Eater maintains a list of the city's "Most Cursed" spaces, highlighting locales where start-ups last as little as two

months. Last December, entrepreneurs opening the third location of New York Burger Co. realized that their newly leased space at 470 W. 23rd St. was in Eater's hall of fame. They invited in a priest, a Buddhist monk and a rabbi to bless the joint.

The publicity stunt seems to have worked: At this month's one-year anniversary, neighbors were stopping by to offer their congratulations. "They said, 'You made it longer than anyone else so far,'" says co-owner Elisabeth Dufeu.

It may take more than heavenly favor to make a success of 243 DeGraw.

Its 10-year history includes the failure of Copper, a bistro, followed by the 2004 shuttering of Whim, a seafood spot that reportedly featured a raw oyster bar fashioned from a shower curtain and an ice-filled keg. The owner of Cielo Café, according to a Time Out New York review, simultaneously served as cook, bartender and waitress; the venture lasted less than a year.

Perhaps the location's most successful endeavor to date was Chicory, a high-end takeout joint that closed in 2008 following a three-year run. Co-owner Gavin McAleer, who now heads a hoagie and salad shop down in Savannah, Ga., said the 400-square-foot space was just too small. He tried to encourage faster turnover by installing bench seating at a communal table, but the place never made a profit. "It's a tough little space," he says. "I still haven't figured it out."

Commercial real-estate brokers say there's no such thing as a cursed location.

"To say a space is doomed is just ridiculous," says Jeffrey Angel of RES Commercial Corp. There's usually a logical explanation, such as high rent or poor maintenance. The most common mistake, says Mr. Angel, is the new operator's failure to perform a radical renovation. When one Thai restaurant replaces another, the aura of failure lingers. "You have to do a complete overhaul and make sure everyone forgets the last place," he says.

The elaborately designed Sadie's Kitchen, with its formica counters, period wallpaper and carefully curated music (Etta James, Billie Holiday), couldn't be more of a contrast from its immediate predecessor, the hyper-casual Ultimate Burgers and Dogs, which, with its choose-your-own-toppings tater tots menu, felt like the brainchild of your 14-year-old nephew.

Mr. Sibilia, who says he first noticed the \$3,000-a-month location after riding by on his bicycle, says his business model is carefully tailored to respect the venue's limitations. The ultra-simple menu (10 kinds of mac 'n' cheese, sides, desserts) is built on ingredients with long shelf lives. A bakery set up in the building's cavernous basement could eventually supply Sadie's satellites all over the city.

And the side-street location might not hurt. New Yorkers will happily venture off the beaten path in search of favorite specialty items, notes Mr. Angel. Just look at the success of the Meatball Shop on Stanton Street: "You can't get in at lunchtime," he says. "They had the right concept and the word got out."

But some say it takes more than a great concept to overcome the aura of failure. Ira Davidson, director of the Manhattan Small Business Development Center at Pace University, says he's long been fascinated by several "cursed" locations near his office. Nothing seems to succeed in these spaces, a phenomenon he chalks up to "guilt by association." Folks familiar with the location's history form a subconscious judgment and dismiss the next venture offhand.

I know what he means. While I pass Sadie's every day on my way to the F train, I never bothered to stop in. Something about the appearance of yet another hopeful at 243 Degraw just made me roll my eyes.

Once I finally got around to ordering some takeout (for research purposes, of course), I was delighted. The mac with bacon and gruyere was a stroke of genius. The mac with lobster and fontina was a higher-priced stroke of genius. And the pecan brownies! Those dense, tender chocolate bombs won't stop calling me on the telephone.

You might even say I've become a promoter. I recently showed the menu to a friend who had yet to check out the joint. He lingered admiringly over the menu selections and gave a deep nod of appreciation. "Boy," he said. "I hope this place makes it."

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