

the sale of two cities:

and restaurants revitalization



WHEN YOU DRIVE DOWN Broadway in Newburgh, you move through a typical urban hodgepodge, remnants of a once-thriving river city. Broadway, still a grand, wide swath sweeping down to the Hudson River, is lined with storefront churches and old clapboard houses that over the decades have morphed into hair salons and auto supply stores. Without changing much, the same might be said about Yonkers, Poughkeepsie and even Kingston on the Rondout.

Just a few decades ago, the Hudson River seemed like a large catch basin of chemicals; the desolate piers and craggy marinas that stabbed the water were the last places you'd expect to get a gourmet meal. More recently, spurred by environmental groups like Clearwater and Scenic Hudson, initiatives to clean up the river were begun, and waterfront property began to look attractive to businesses again. The shores of the Hudson River have always lured restaurateurs; the river vistas with gliding boats and barges are one magic ingredient that can make for a perfect dining experience.

The order for restaurateurs is light on the risk and heavy on reassurances; they want to know that people will come back, especially to a previously blighted area.

Nick Citera, owner/manager of Torches on the Hudson, a cavernous eatery built in 2000 that is part of the Cosimo's Brick Oven Pizza

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photos by
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restaurant group, says the opportunity to build a new restaurant on a six-acre riverfront parcel was too good to pass up. The opening of Torches in 2001 spearheaded new businesses development on the Newburgh waterfront. The large brick-and-glass building, with its 25-foot ceilings and 6,000-gallon aquarium, became a showplace, with dedicated docks and wait service to yachts and cruisers—its success grew from pulling in business from both land and water.

Sheryl Ranke is co-owner with Robert Kroner of The Big Easy Bistro, near the southern edge of Newburgh's revamped waterfront at the end of a block of restaurants that includes The Blue Martini, The River Grill and Havana 59. The Big Easy opened in August 2004 with a menu that has a Creole bent with generally more surf than turf. Ranke says they knew the risks of waterfront investment but they were confident in Newburgh's redevelopment plan.

"We saw the big picture of revitalization, not just the

the 1906 Gazette Building just one block from the waterfront. Two years later, he opened Zuppa Restaurant and Lounge, a white tablecloth restaurant serving Italian cuisine.

"We were the pioneers," Leggio recalls. "No one else was here prior to us. We didn't want to just build a *place*, we wanted to build a *destination*." Leggio spent over two years refurbishing the historic building. Prospects looked slim, but he held out and eventually partnered with his father. "Business is now growing rapidly—it's more than doubled since we first opened our doors," Leggio claims. "Now it's finally starting to pay off, but we still have a long way to go."

Other eateries opening on the Yonkers waterfront battled different odds. Some visitors wanted to venture down and check out the riverfront scene but dreaded driving through seedy, dangerous neighborhoods to get there. Leggio says some places just came and went. "Lejends Restaurant opened and closed, and Arthur Avenue Pizza changed hands," he says.

waterfront redevelopment was part of Yonkers' \$400 million downtown revitalization plan

waterfront," she says. "We knew that the Port Authority was putting more money into Stewart Airport and we saw the new ramp going off I-84. We think this area is going to explode in about eight years." Ranke says that since The Big Easy opened they've been lucky. "We have a stable core of customers and a lot of locals who keep our bar busy, even in the winter months."

But the synergy among the restaurants along the Newburgh waterfront didn't exactly happen overnight. Ranke has just begun to try to organize the eateries into a group association. "We just came together collectively to advertise and do events to spin off the season," she says. "On our own, we normally do Mardi Gras, with a parade and floats, in February. I thought, if everyone works together in festivals like the Winter Fest and the Italian Fest, we could come up with themes that we could all do together."

Just about the time the first wave of restaurants were opening on the Newburgh waterfront, on the east side of the river a couple of dozen miles south, a young entrepreneur decided to open a new restaurant in a preservation building in Yonkers. A revitalization project was on the drawing table, and 25-year-old Robert Leggio took a chance: He purchased

Last year, Leggio rejoiced when Hudson Valley's *uber* chef, Peter Kelly (Xaviar's, Restaurant X, Freelance Café) opened up a new restaurant on Yonkers' waterfront on an historic Victorian steel pier. "Having Peter Kelly here really helped," says Leggio. "When he came here it was a draw and it brought people down here. The more people the better."

The venture took Kelly six years of slogging through zoning regulations and building codes—all bureaucratic byproducts of preservation architects and state and city planners. Kelly stuck it out, pursuing a vision he knew could work. "I wanted it to be the gateway to the Hudson Valley," he says about the prominent pier that now houses his newest restaurant, X₂O: Xaviars on the Hudson.

The long-abandoned iron pier jutting out on the river afforded spectacular views of the New York skyline and the Palisades. It beckoned to the Yonkers-born Kelly, who admits he didn't need another restaurant, but was swept away with the idea of a pier as a beacon restaurant.

"You stand at this location and look at the breathtaking views—the challenge was to build a restaurant to showcase that," says Kelly, who promotes the panoramic scene from the glass-wrapped restaurant. He shopped his idea to the



New York State Parks and Historic Preservation Departments in Albany, as well as to the city of Yonkers. Vowing to keep the historic integrity and design of the pier, Kelly finally got the thumbs up from former New York Governor George Pataki, a move applauded by Yonkers Deputy Mayor (now mayor) Phil Amicone, and Ed Sheeran, at that time the Executive Director of Yonkers Industrial Development Agency.

Along the way there were plenty of naysayers, Kelly recalls. "Why Yonkers?" was a frequent question—implying the move into the depressed city was risky. Protestors at times raised the issue that a public space was being used for private enterprise. "You have to come to the realization that you can't just stay status quo forever," Kelly countered.

Complying with architectural standards and keeping with the 1902 design of the pier entailed years of extensive review processes, worked and re-worked designs. "There was no short-term win here, and the risks were huge," Kelly stresses. "Enclosing the top floor in glass changed the weight loads, and the underwater pilings had to be reinforced—we had to bring in divers from the Army Corps of Engineers to deal with that."

But Kelly was riding the wave of waterfront redevelopment that was part of Yonkers' \$400 million downtown revitalization plan, already well underway. Across the street from X₂O are new apartment buildings; lining the riverfront nearby is the new Yonkers Riverfront Library, Esplanade Park and Sculpture Meadow.

Newly appointed Commissioner of Planning and Development of Yonkers, Lou Kirven, says Kelly's restaurant captures the imagination of the surrounding area. "We are bringing people to Yonkers who haven't been here in years.

They stop in X₂O, see the vitality and energy of the development on the pier. Peter Kelly and X₂O is an important piece of that."

Kirven explains that a state tax credit program for businesses within a defined "Empire Zone" sweetens the deal for restaurateurs and businesses taking on new or refurbished property, either on the waterfront or in downtown Yonkers. "It helps bring investments to historically distressed areas and lets employers pay less taxes," Kirven says. "Businesses get sales tax exemptions for items needed for their business." Utilities are also discounted, which correspondingly lowers operating costs.

Kelly holds what he calls "a very long lease" for the pier with the city of Yonkers. "The city is capitalizing by generating income from a piece of property that was just sitting there," he says. "There has been a great synergy here between the public and private sectors."

While many people marvel at the rebirth of the Yonkers waterfront into what Robert Leggio calls a "destination," they also grumble about the lack of parking (an issue also along the Newburgh waterfront). X₂O offers valet parking—after cruising the small waterfront streets hawking for a spot, drivers generally are glad the restaurant offers it.

"The parking problem is a good problem to have—we laugh about it," Leggio contends. "We knew the lot across the street from us, which was used for parking, would be the site of a 10-story building that would bring us 170 new families, which is much better than having a parking lot."

Parking aside, while cities like Yonkers fine-tune their waterfront development, upland neighborhoods are struggling to get a piece of the action. It's a tough issue:

How do you spread the energy from the marinas up to inner-city neighborhoods and retailers? And how do you get folks who are dining waterside to venture up the hill to see what's going on, perhaps do some shopping and generally "spread the wealth"?

Just about every river town in New York has major hills or geographical expanse dividing the river, railroad, and ferry crossing from the heart of the city. It's called "the gap," explains Louis Marquet, of Leyland Alliance, the developers partnering with Newburgh in a full-scale revitalization project that includes rebuilding 30 acres in and around lower Broadway.

"We are planning to fill the gap over time," Marquet says. "In fact, we are putting back an old street that ran diagonally

Getting around a city easily, either by walking or mass transit, is what Marquet defines as the "new urbanism," basically a throwback to old American- and European-style towns with parks and squares every couple of blocks—a requirement for the quintessential "neighborhood." Marquet explains that the park periphery is perfect for restaurants and shops and adds "hours of stay" for those dining out in the neighborhood.

This, in theory at least, is the nuts and bolts of how restaurants are viewed as key elements for rebuilding depressed areas. "After you eat, most of the time you want to come out of the restaurant and walk down the street," Marquet says. "That's when you spend more time shopping indirectly—by just looking at what's available.



Broadway, Newburgh

from the river up to the city that was originally for freight wagons hauling goods up from the river." Marquet says that the street will be in a slightly different place than it was originally, with only a 7° slope. Conceived as a walkway up from the river, it would pass shops, living and working spaces.

Until the paved walkway is a reality, however, a car is still the primary means of getting around—that translates into a battle for a parking space, especially on the weekends in the warmer months. Leyland has proposed area parking garages for about 2,000 cars, as well as a rapid transit bus system similar to an above-ground subway with wheels. Marquet forecasts that "bus stops would be from the river to the airport and out to the western edge of town to the larger shopping areas and the hotels." The plan coincides with Ranke's sense of how the downtown would be connected to the commercial areas around it.

The idea is to get people to spend another 20 minutes to one hour in the area. If that evolves into two or three hours, you can consider building inns or B&Bs for people wanting to visit the riverfront and town, then stay over."

One of those neighborhood squares has existed on a hill overlooking the Newburgh waterfront two blocks south of Broadway for several hundred years: the historic Washington's Headquarters. Just across Liberty Street from the landmark property is Caffè Macchiato, a small eatery opened about three years ago by owners Barbara Ballarini and her pastry-chef husband, Edwine Seymour.

The cozy restaurant is open mainly for brunch and lunch with nouveau Italian fare of fresh soups, salads and a variety of panini. Ballarini says her clientele is mostly from out of the area. "They come here because we make everything fresh and use organic food. We do

all the cooking on the premises." A typical lunch has the place packed with office workers and friends sitting at some 13 tables. "Whenever I have business up in this area I always eat here," says Tom Carchietta, a businessman from Long Island, recently lunching at Caffè Macchiato.

Places like Caffè Macchiato may start attracting more people after Broadway's resurgence. It's the hope of people like Ian MacDougall, Newburgh's city planner, who believes that business centers will draw people out and into nearby restaurants.

"These centers employ many people and are where many people congregate on a daily basis," says MacDougall. "There's St. Luke's Hospital—a major employer of this community—and Mount St. Mary's College. They all affect their surrounding communities. They are the bigger players; the smaller businesses in those neighborhoods depend on them for economic growth."

Part of Newburgh's revitalization plan targets \$80 million to a new campus for SUNY Orange Community College in two office buildings overlooking the river, according to Newburgh City Manager Jean McGrane. McGrane wants to see a stronger connection between the waterfront and lower Broadway.

"One of our greatest assets is the river—we can take that success and move it throughout the rest of the city," McGrane says. "We are starting to see this with high-quality, diverse restaurants in town. They are real gems, both as an attraction in their neighborhoods and in the region." McGrane hopes this trend continues. "As you move up Broadway, part of the challenge is linking the revitalized waterfront with the rest of the city. We need to support businesses in different locations," she says.

Waiting for revitalization projects to kick in may seem like an eternity for restaurants whose doors are already open. Some restaurateurs have moved ahead by connecting to nearby businesses; it's a version of "one hand washing the other." Orange County Planning Commissioner Dave Church says this is a synergy that drives much of the future plans for downtowns slated to be rebuilt.

"That synergy is created by businesses being near each other. Think of your car dealerships—they are usually in the same area. Restaurants are starting to figure that out," Church says. "It makes good business sense if they have a marketing strategy that works well for them all."

This type of synergy is evident in Newburgh: Caffè Macchiato, known for its pastries and chocolates, supplies baked goods to the Downing Film Center, a small, intimate cinema that showcases hard-to-find, first-run independent and foreign films. "We have this symbiotic relationship with Caffè Macchiato," says Sharon Burke, owner of the waterfront film center. "People coming to our films always ask where we get our baked goods from." Burke makes a conscious effort to spread the word about other places to visit in Newburgh by having a special table with local information.

The film center is located in the Yellow Bird Building, a 1925 furniture warehouse, restored in 2005 by owner Dick



Torches, Newburgh

Polich, of the Polich Art Works foundry between Newburgh and Montgomery. Also in the building is Vino 100, an eclectic and popular wine store run by Tom Settino. Opened in 2005, the same year the Newburgh-Beacon Ferry reinstated commuter service, Settino was trying hard not to locate in a shopping mall. "The building was still being renovated, but there was a high-end art gallery right next door," he recalls.

The Yellow Bird Art Gallery, adjacent to Settino's shop, opened in 2004 but closed last year. When the gallery was open, Settino benefited from the overflow of art aficionados. "The gallery had museum-quality work—there was a good synergy with my wine store. When the gallery closed I still got a lot of folks coming in. I developed a following."

Settino still wants to connect with the arts community and regularly features works of local artists or photographers. Recently, a tasting of Spanish wines and live flamenco guitar music coincided with the showing of a Spanish film next door. "I create these [events] not only for my own enjoyment, but to let people know that I am here," Settino explains. "It's a win-win for everyone."

McGrane cites block grants that encourage and support prospective businesses in downtown Newburgh. About 40 small businesses have applied for these grants for things like façade improvement. Because many of the small business owners are Latino, the bi-lingual staff at Newburgh's Planning and Development department is a



Dylan Lounge at X2O

major asset in helping prospective merchants negotiate the regulatory process (which McGrane calls “insurmountable”). “We walk them through the pre-planning, let them know what we need,” McGrane notes.

Included in the city’s overhaul is the rebuilding of the Newburgh Courthouse that will be housed in the classic, Ionic-columned Broadway School. Nearby, a new Peruvian restaurant, El Tumi, opened in July. MacDougall says the opening of El Tumi is a perfect example of what’s supposed to happen. “This is part of the plan,” he says. “The Courthouse will have municipal employees who will lunch at the local, ethnic restaurants, which will draw a different crowd in the day and local folks in the evening.”

El Tumi, situated on one of the few Broadway blocks graced with trees, features authentic Peruvian and international cuisine, including ceviche and ceviche mixto, and traditional dishes prepared with chicken, beef and pork.

Although a much more modest establishment than X₂O, El Tumi is also in an Empire Zone, which entitled them to similar tax credits. The corner restaurant is housed in a two-story, white brick building purchased by Carlos Mansilla for \$180,000 in 2002. Mansilla, 64, left Peru 34 years ago and has owned both an office-cleaning business and a restaurant in Walden. His wife, Isidora, is the chef at El Tumi.

The clean, square space with about 13 tables is warm and finished with new hard wood floors with sparsely decorated walls. Mansilla got help from Newburgh’s planning department as he labored through the myriad of inspections, health and building permits, tax forms and

the inevitable glitches. Mansilla’s son, Marlon, who manages the restaurant, recalls there were repeat inspections throughout the renovation. “But we got through it,” he says. The Mansillas noticed early on that some folks had ventured away from the waterfront and into their restaurant. Just five weeks after it opened, on Labor Day, a small crowd walked up from the riverfront for lunch. “We were buzzing,” Marsilla says. ❖

tasting Newburgh

Many of Newburgh’s top-flight eateries will be represented in one location in May and will offer the opportunity to sample their best dishes, to meet the chefs and to celebrate the city’s variety of cuisines. **A Taste of Greater Newburgh** is set for **Sunday, May 18** at **Mount Saint Mary College** in Newburgh.

Admission is \$30 and advance tickets are required. For more information or tickets call (845) 561-1706. The event is a fundraiser for the Newburgh Rotary Club’s scholarship fund.