The New York Times Reprints

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.

May 20, 2011

In an Unlovely, Old Market, Bonds Run Deep

By CARA BUCKLEY

Several things to note about the Essex Street Market on the Lower East Side. Unlike its glamorous uptown peers, the factory-chic Chelsea Market and the glossy food palace that is Eataly, it is more Plain Jane than beauty, with utilitarian flooring and generic signs that announce each vendor while screaming municipal ownership.

It is a place where one can visit a botanica, buy a hot-tub-themed cake or order a breakfast platter called “Pig Newton” off a 500-item menu. It opened in 1940, many years before the word “artisanal” was used adjectivally to describe that staple of all self-respecting city markets: handmade cheese.

What is shared by the market’s 20-odd merchants — who include an Uzbek barber, Korean and Dominican grocers, a young Greek ex-lawyer-turned-baker and the irascible Kenny Shopsin, creator of the aforementioned platter — is a deep connection to their airy, if unlovely, space. The red brick building, at the northeast corner of Essex and Delancey Streets, has been a home to vendors since the day it opened.

There is a sizable chance, however, that the Essex Street Market will be moved in the coming years, as part of a long-discussed plan to build shops and mixed-income apartment buildings on the property and the city-owned parking lots across the street, a project called the Seward Park Urban Renewal Area.

The city’s Economic Development Corporation, which manages the market, has promised to ease the transition for vendors should the market move. Options will be explored at a community board meeting on Wednesday.

For the merchants, the prospect elicits an array of reactions, from dismay to denial to ambivalence. Dismay, as felt by Anne Saxelby, of the much-feted Saxelby Che you have a vibrant, community-oriented marketplace that fell on hard times a great, it just doesn’t seem like something you want to mess with.”

MORE IN N.Y
Bill Wo
Cigaret
Read More
OPEN

Denial, as expressed by Zack Shopsin, son of Kenny: “I don’t think it’s moving anyway.”

Ambivalence, as exhibited by Ira Stolzenberg, 62, proprietor of the Tra La La juice bar and Rainbo Fish, and a baker of theme cakes, who has been at the market for 38 years: “The buzz is it’s not supposed to happen for at least five years, and by that time I’ll hopefully be retired.”

What is certain is that a move would disrupt the delicate ecology of the place, where relationships among vendors have been forged, and forced, by close proximity and the simple fact that nearly every shop is essentially an open-air indoor stall.

To wit: the friendship that has blossomed between the market’s newest vendor, Rona Economou, 33, and Luis Batista, the 53-year-old Dominican who opened Batista Grocery there 18 years ago. Ms. Economou opened her wee 7-foot-by-7-foot Greek food stall, Boubouki, last July, after losing her job at a Midtown law firm. Mr. Batista’s grocery and produce shops share a corner with Ms. Economou’s space. When her refrigerator started to break down, Mr. Batista and his son, Luis Jr., quickly offered her space in theirs. After Mr. Batista noticed that Ms. Economou rarely had time for a break, he began sharing his lunch, which his wife prepares, with Ms. Economou every day.

On Wednesday, lunch was yucca, avocado and cod. “You ate?” Mr. Batista asked Ms. Economou as he walked by, a smile creasing his face. “I did. It was great,” Ms. Economou replied. She beckoned him over, and threaded a yellow freesia, presented to her by a customer, through his lapel.

Around them the market bustled, with regulars slipping easily into their well-worn routines.

Nearby, Jesus Dumois, 78, a retired ambulette driver from Cuba, was perched on the seat of his rolling walker, just outside Formaggio Essex. Six days a week for 10 years, Mr. Dumois has traveled, by bus and in a pained shuffle, to this spot from his home in the Jacob Riis houses on Avenue D. He sits all day long, happy amid the market’s buzz.

At the southern end of the market, Kenny Shopsin rested his large frame on a small padded bench outside his restaurant, Shopsin’s General Store. If the Essex Street Market is, as Ms. Saxelby says, “oddly like Sesame Street,” Mr. Shopsin is its resident Grouch.

The market’s property manager, George Otero, describes him as the “Essex Street Nazi,” and Mr. Shopsin certainly competes with Jerry Seinfeld’s Soup Nazi for causticity. As unsuspecting customers have learned, a request for a different table leads to no table, or service, at all. (The New Yorker’s Calvin Trillin penned an ode to Mr. Shopsin in 2002, before he moved his

restaurant to the market from Greenwich Village.)

Nevertheless, his shop does just fine, and he and his son are not exactly publicity hounds anyway.

“I’d like to chat with Kenny about the market possibly moving?” this reporter asked Zack Shopsin last week.

“No,” the younger Mr. Shopsin replied.

“Can I just…”

“NO!”

Ms. Economou is among the many vendors who have benefited from Mr. Shopsin’s unpredictable wrath, as his exiled customers, still hungry, have been known to drift over to her stall. She has yet to sample Mr. Shopsin’s wares but hopes to soon, when she is feeling brave, and her business slows a bit.