

LIFESTYLE / RESTAURANTS

feedme Oyster Bay restaurants are booming in 2022

The Hangover burger served with fries at Teddy's Bully Bar in Oyster Bay. Credit: Raychel Brightman

By Scott Vogel

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If you want the truth, so goes the adage, follow the money. But if you want the truth about Oyster Bay — along with clues to its resurgence — it's Johnny Verrelli's chicken cutlets you need to follow, which is interesting, not least because there is no such person. Johnny Verrelli is the *nom de consume* of Simeon Cruz, a short, bald man from Honduras, whose nickname comes courtesy Verrelli's Market, where Cruz worked the deli counter for 30 years, during which time Oyster Bay lost its collective heart to his cutlet sandwiches. Eventually, Johnny, or Yanny as Cruz spells it, became a hero to those with hero cravings, and a local legend by the time the market met its pandemic-hastened demise in 2020.

"I've made chicken cutlets for the whole city," said Cruz with a smile when finally tracked down. "The people are crazy for them." Though chicken cutlets were all he knew — on a busy day he made 1,500 of them — Cruz quickly pivoted, opening a demolition business, Yanny Demolitions, with a Verrelli's co-worker. Eventually, Oyster Bay missed him too much, and he was conscripted for sandwich-making at La Favorita, a nearby Italian specialty market. Until November, that is, when that closed too.



Simeon Cruz (aka Johnny) with his chicken cutlet sandwich at Cardinali Bakery in Oyster Bay. Credit: Linda Rosier

"Johnny was Verrelli's big draw," said Meredith Maus, executive director of the Oyster Bay Main Street Association.

Maus estimated that more than 10% of the downtown area's retail businesses shuttered during COVID. Besides Verrelli's, there was the toy store, a nail salon, takeout pizza place, consignment shop, restaurants like Nikkei of Peru, Osteria Leana and Canterbury's, which for over 40 years had been a local hangout, and more. Oyster Bay nights had always been on the quiet side — this was a town whose only real boom was in 1901, after all — but in 2020 they became deathly so.

For Oyster Bay, Covid took away the places but left all the people. And therein lay the seeds of the town's rebirth.

"For a while there I just felt completely lost," recalled Maus. "The assistance that I provided businesses wasn't useful." The only thing that wasn't changing, Maus noticed, was residents' engagement. "There is a community feeling here and it's not like anything I've seen elsewhere. They come together and clean up, they come together and beautify. It's a whole base that we get a lot of strength from."

While unquantifiable, the people's enthusiasm to, well, build back better, was palpable, and soon attracted attention beyond the town. "I think in the next few years this place is going to blow up, honestly," Carla Loeven told me when she and her family opened the 12th location of **Umberto's** downtown last March. It reminded her of Farmingdale's transformation a few years back, and while nervous about taking over the former home of Nino's pizza, a beloved Main St. institution for 47 years, Loeven found herself swayed.

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"The history of this downtown is interesting because it's also the story of Long Island in some respects," Maus said. A brief synopsis: Oyster Bay started life as a mansion-dotted summer colony, was home to few year-round residents until the LIRR arrived in 1891, then achieved notoriety and a certain measure of commerce during Theodore Roosevelt's rise in politics. "There were four or five different inns and hotels, places for foreign dignitaries to stay, places for the press to hole up."

A small-town self-sufficiency clung to the place in the years afterward, but that ended in 1980, when the Food Town closed downtown, ushering in decades of stagnation. By the time the pandemic arrived, Maus said the downtown was enjoying its lowest retail vacancy in 20 years. Now the town is bouncing back from that setback as well.

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✿ A Flourish data visualization

Now open

Katya Witthuhn, who with the aid of a sign grant from the association, transformed an Audrey Ave. nail salon into a storefront for **Bluebird Chocolates**. Since Sept., she's produced upward of 2,000 candies a week on the premises, many for special events and catered affairs, but two days a week Bluebird is open to the public. And while Witthuhn's shop regularly sells out of her retail inventory of inventive chocolates — in flavors from pear-and-gorgonzola to PB&J — the street presence has been a boon to her custom business. "As soon as I took the paper off the window, so many people reached out to me for bridal showers, for weddings, for gifts."



Katya Witthuhn at Bluebird Chocolates in Oyster Bay. Credit: Linda Rosier

Moving to Oyster Bay had long been a goal of Adriana and Thomas Milana, which they finally accomplished — in Feb. 2020. "It just really affected them, seeing all these businesses and the town kind of die down," remembered their daughter Sabrina, who is the operations manager of three new food and drink establishments open or on the way. "They made it their personal mission to see what they could do to help." In late September, the family opened an OB outpost of Syosset's **Cardinali Bakery**, bringing fresh baked goods, a selection of Italian specialty items, and a few powder blue sidewalk tables to South Street downtown.

Cookies at Cardinali Bakery in Oyster Bay. Credit: Linda Rosier

Meanwhile, 2 Spring's Schenker was restoring a cottage adjacent to his restaurant, a few weeks later opening **4 Spring**, featuring



a tasting menu of a dozen or more courses for 10 diners at a time, all of them huddled around a handsome open kitchen. And a few weeks after that, **Teddy's Bully Bar** opened around the corner, breathing new life into the former Canterbury's space.

"I already have regulars here, it's

like we've been around forever," said Angelo Monniello, who manages the place, a second bar-restaurant by the owners of the Clubhouse in Bellmore. Originally slated for Sept., Teddy's was forced to postpone its debut till Nov. 1 owing to difficulties finding staff, by which time locals were chomping at the bit for a cozy, family-friendly bistro. Monniello and his team went further, bringing all that *and* live music to Oyster Bay most nights.



The Hangover burger served with fries at Teddy's Bully Bar in Oyster Bay. Credit: Raychel Brightman

Residents who had long clamored for a bookstore finally got their wish later that month when **Theodore's Books**, run by ex-congressman Steve Israel, opened a few doors down from Teddy's on Audrey Avenue with a multitude of author events and signings.

Coming soon

This month, **Stellina Ristorante**, a second effort by the Milana family, will bring pasta, a gold-plated pizza oven, and the cooking of noted chef Fabrizio Facchini — who also co-owns Cardinali — to the old 40-seat Osteria Leana space. "It's my mom's passion project and an homage to Stella," said Milana of the Floral Park eatery her mother's family has owned and operated since 1960.

Speaking of Cardinali, next door to that is another eatery on the way. "I would describe it as a Manhattan restaurant on Long Island," noted David Antin, who visited Japan for business upward of 20 times during his past life in accounting, falling in love with the country's thriving street food culture. Together with his brother Dan and Randy Klein — the trio behind growing local chain Danny's Chinese Kitchen — Antin is set to open yet another new eatery, **Danny's Izakaya**, although the difficulty of finding quality restaurant staff and contractors, both in high demand these days, pushed back its debut to January. A recent visit confirmed that an overhaul of the Nikkei space on South St. is nearly finished, its walls replete with striking Asia-themed murals by local artist Arlene McLoughlin. Also a work in progress: the Danny's menu, which promises an authentic selection of shareable plates — think yakitori skewers, bao buns, karaage, takowasa and okonomiyaki — and several varieties of ramen.



Co-owners, Randy Klein, left, David Antin and Danny Antin at Danny's Izakaya in Oyster Bay. Credit: Linda Rosier

. They and the chamber of commerce remain supportive, he added, a sentiment echoed by Sabrina Milana, whose family's third business — a wine shop in a former Audrey Ave. toy store — hit a snag in the fall when the State Liquor Authority declined to issue them a license. Still, the MSA has been helpful with the appeals process, she said. If all goes well, Milana hopes to finally open her store, **The Wine Line**, in early or mid-2022.

Despite evident success in revitalizing Oyster Bay, Maus and the MSA are not taking a victory lap. "We've explored bringing a market to the downtown," she said. "That's something we believe strongly in." Maus also hopes to lure an entertainment venue to a community without a movie theater, performing arts center, bowling alley "or any other place for kids to go and hang out." That need is glaring most afternoons, when the streets come alive with tweens and teens, hundreds of whom pass through the downtown area after school.

Still, she is thankful for all that Oyster Bay has gained, especially after a year in which the little hamlet lost so much. One thing it hasn't lost, incidentally? Johnny Verrelli. "Now he's working with us at Cardinali," said Milana, "and people are absolutely loving it."

Verrelli — eh, Cruz — hopes to keep turning out chicken cutlets for years to come. "My customers are a big family," he said. "So these sandwiches are made with love."

Restaurant information

BLUEBIRD CHOCOLATES: 8 Audrey Ave.; 516-253-0585, bluebirdchocolatesny.com

CARDINALI ITALIAN BAKERY & MARKET: 96 South St.; 516-551-2863, cardinali.net

DANNY'S IZAKAYA: 94 South St.; 631-804-5887

4 SPRING: 4 Spring St.; 516-624-6877, 4springstreet.com

STELLINA RISTORANTE: 76 South St.

TEDDY'S BULLY BAR: 46 Audrey Ave.; 516-408-5339, teddysbullybar.com

THEODORE'S BOOKS: 17 Audrey Ave.; 516-636-5550, theodoresbooks.com

UMBERTO'S OF OYSTER BAY: 25 E. Main St.; 516-922-0434, umbertosoysterbay.com

THE WINE LINE: 30 Audrey Ave.

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