

There is a five-story brick building at 206 East Sixty-third Street, between Second and Third Avenues, that has long been identified as the most unpromising address in New York City for aspiring restaurant owners and chefs. Since 1977, a dozen restaurants have rented the lower two floors and basement of this building, and, without exception, the various investors failed to fulfill the expectations that existed the day they signed the lease.

The first restaurant at 206 East Sixty-third was an elegant French establishment overseen by a Grenoble-born chef who named his place *Le Premier*. After the chef and his partners agreed to an annual rent of forty thousand dollars and spent lavishly on an Art Deco interior, and after the *Times*' food critic Mimi Sheraton found the fish pâté "rubbery and bland" and the murals "whimsically pornographic," *Le Premier* closed, fifteen months after it had opened, costing its investors \$1.5 million.

The second restaurant, *Bistro Pascal*, opened in 1979, financed by a specialist in tax shelters, and though it lowered the prices, it continued to lose money. In 1984 came *Gnolo*, headed by an ex-waiter from Elaine's named Nicola Spagnolo, who, after quitting Elaine's, in 1974, to open Nicola's, on East Eighty-fourth (which is still thriving), unwisely sold his share to his partners in order to gamble on 206 East Sixty-third Street. His wife begged him not to do it, claiming that the building exuded "bad karma." He did it anyway, and went bankrupt in 1985.

In 1986, the fourth restaurant, *Moon's*, was opened by the son of a wealthy bathrobe manufacturer who had an office in the Empire State Building. He lost two million dollars in two years. The fifth restaurant, which opened in 1988, was called *John Clancy's East*. Although it was a spinoff of a successful seafood place on West Tenth Street, it, too, failed.

In 1992, after the space had been empty for several months, a young woman of Jamaican ancestry named Yvonne Bell opened *Lolabelle*. She featured Caribbean cuisine and hired jazz combos and reggae musicians to perform, and on weekends she brought in a choir for a Gospel Brunch. None of this worked, and *Lolabelle* served its last meal in July of 1994.

None of the six restaurants that followed *Lolabelle*—not the Napa Valley Grill (1995); not *Tucci* (1996); not *Tucci No. 2* (1997); not *Peaches* (1998-99), part-owned by Donald Trump's Georgia-born second wife, Marla Maples; not *Il Patrizio* (2000-04), a kosher Italian restaurant; not *Haikara Grill* (2005-07), a kosher Japanese steak house; not *Smokin' Q* (2008-09), a nonkosher barbecue place—could reverse the site's ill fortune.

While some of the twelve restaurants at 206 East Sixty-third Street earned positive reviews and were efficiently managed, none could achieve the enduring success of *Bravo Gianni*, a trattoria a few doors away, at 230 East Sixty-third, which closed late last month after doing a brisk business since 1983. What was so good about *Bravo Gianni* that was never quite good enough about all the restaurants that rented space at 206 East Sixty-third?

It no longer matters. This spring, a seventy-year-old Zen Buddhist monk named Samu Sunim spent \$5.6 million to purchase the building, with the intention of converting it into a monastery: the Buddhist Society for Compassionate Wisdom. The building's upper three floors, which had been rented out over the years to a travel agency, a two-partner law firm, a shoe designer, and, briefly, a family of Gypsy fortune-tellers, who were evicted after their bathtub overflowed into *Gnolo's* dining room, will soon be quarters for monks. The lower two floors and the basement are being redesigned to accommodate spiritual gatherings presided over by Sunim, a soft-spoken individual with a shaved head and a copper-colored complexion.

Born in Korea in 1941, orphaned at eleven, and often a homeless beggar until finding refuge, at sixteen, in a Buddhist monastery, Sunim left his country in 1965, when, having failed to obtain a deferment from the Korean Army, he served for a year and then fled to Japan as a deserter. Two years later, he was in New York, often associating with groups of anti-Vietnam War protesters while supporting himself by panhandling. In 1968, he moved to Montreal and established his first Buddhist Center. He now oversees centers in Toronto, Chicago, Ann Arbor, and Mexico City. Along the way, he worked at such odd jobs as sorting packages at a post office and washing dishes (and later making garlic bread) in a steak house.

In February, Sunim bought the East Sixty-third Street property from the estate of Frank Catalano, a warehouse operator who had used the building for that purpose when he bought it, in 1952, for \$64,250 from another warehouseman, named Frederick J. Schillinger, Jr., whose father had constructed the building, for twenty thousand dollars, in 1907. Schillinger, Sr., kept half a dozen dray horses in the basement, from which they were raised by freight elevator whenever they were needed to pull wagons laden with furniture, pianos, safes, or other cargo.

For most of the past three decades, the basement was used as a prep kitchen and wine cellar. Now that the Zen Buddhists have moved in, all remnants of restaurant life have been sold or thrown out: tables and chairs, barstools, plates, wineglasses, swizzlesticks, Martini shakers, half-full jars of moldy olives, Bloody Mary mix, and Sambuca. Sunim has placed a gilded Buddha statue in a prominent place on the first floor, and in the big window along the sidewalk, where a dozen different menus were once on display, there is now a new sign:

Zen Buddhist Temple
Sunday Public Service
7-8:30 meditation
10-11:30 open to public
4 pm dharma service

As one of Sunim's disciples put it, "We are in the process of exchanging one form of intoxication for another."

—Gay Talese