

Harlem eatery plays with fire

Owner makes splashy but risky upscale move

BY JON KALISH

INSIDE a dining room of Betty Park's lavish new seafood eatery in Harlem, a rocky streambed snakes between high-backed chairs and tables clad with white linen. The vast space above is dominated by a 38-foot-long chandelier in the shape of a boat's hull.

Ms. Park says she has sunk "a few million dollars" into her restaurant, and it shows. "We need this kind of an upscale restaurant here now, because Harlem is changing," she says.

With entrées starting at \$20 and 175 seats to fill, Pier 2110 is taking a risky tack.

"The overhead is so high that if we don't have a certain volume of customers in five or six months, we're going to have to close," says Ms. Park, noting that this summer's results have run below expectations.

Welcome to the world of upscale eateries, where even a seasoned restaurateur like Ms. Park—operator of Manna's, a chain of five soul-food buffet restaurants in Harlem and Brooklyn—cannot be sure of success.

Aware that her new location marked a departure both for herself and for the neighborhood, she handled matters differently from the outset. Instead of promoting employees from one of her budget-priced restaurants to run the eatery, Ms. Park brought in two high-end veterans. She tapped Jason Wallace, who has taught restaurant management, as her general manager, and Jamie Blatt, formerly of Bar Six in the East Village, as executive chef.

Getting their licks in

MR. BLATT incorporates soul food staples such as grits, sweet potatoes and collard greens into his entrées of baked trout and pan-roasted catfish.

"Ms. Park was smart to bring in expert staff," says Arlene Spiegel, a restaurant industry consultant.

Working in a neighborhood where rents for retail space range as high as \$150 per square foot, Ms. Park also was careful to find a bargain. She pays only \$40 per square foot for her 10,000 square feet on the ground floor of the old Alhambra Theater at 2110 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd., at West 125th Street.

Ms. Park isn't so lucky when it comes to her power bills. She complains that her Consolidated Edison tab for one month amounted to \$15,000. Mr. Wallace voices another worry: labor. He interviewed close to 300 people before hiring 55 employees. Even worse, in the first five weeks of operation, half of the staff had come and gone.

For a top-drawer restaurant, such turnover can threaten the superb service that is a prerequisite for attracting patrons. Competition for talent in New York City is tough, and establishments in neighborhoods such as Harlem are at a disadvantage.

"They need to recruit a quality waitstaff when there are jobs down in SoHo and the Village where waiters will be busy, something that is not guaranteed in Harlem," says Sam Firer, a restaurant industry expert who is a partner at The Hall Co.

Filling her seats, and keeping her waiters occupied and well-tipped, is a continuing challenge for Ms. Park.

A BLOCK AWAY, A WORLD APART

PIER 2110

2110 Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd.

SIZE 10,000 square feet

EMPLOYEES 55

SEATS 175

MOST POPULAR DISH Seared Atlantic salmon, \$21

MANNA'S

2331 Frederick Douglass Blvd.

SIZE 2,000 square feet

EMPLOYEES 10

SEATS 80

MOST POPULAR DISH Oxtail, \$10

Alexander Smalls, a chef and restaurateur who lives in Harlem, says that an ability to draw people from beyond the neighborhood will be key for Pier 2110. That knack contributes to the success of famous area eateries such as Sylvia's.

Lloyd Williams, president of the Greater Harlem Chamber of Commerce, notes that Ms. Park has another important card to play: her status as an entrepreneur who has given back to Harlem for two decades.

"Betty Park has supported cultural and religious institutions in the community," says Mr. Williams. "The people in these institutions have significant disposable income, and they will want to reciprocate by supporting the restaurant."

Some organizations are already doing so. This month, the Chamber of Commerce and Rep. Charles Rangel's office will start holding monthly gatherings at Pier 2110.

COMMENTS? smallbiz@crain.com

Still waiting, insurers seek merger OK

GHI, HIP want decision from AG this year; plans say they are paralyzed

BY GALE SCOTT

GROUP HEALTH INC. and HIP Health Plan of New York are making last-ditch efforts to get State Attorney General Eliot Spitzer to approve their marriage before he

leaves office. Until he signs off on antitrust issues, the suitors can't get the state Department of Insurance to approve their proposed merger, announced nearly a year ago.

If Mr. Spitzer doesn't act soon, GHI and HIP may have to start

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