

Cursed Restaurants

Are some locations just jinxed?

By Jane Marion

The first time Neill Howell stopped by Banksy's Cafe to get a bite to eat was also the last time. "It took 25 minutes to get a simple sandwich," he recalls. In a twist of fate, though, when he and his wife, Emily, moved away from her hometown of Baltimore then returned in 2011, Howell again found himself standing in the space — not to eat at Banksy's, which had closed, but to consider renting the location for a cafe concept of his own. Although the spot at the corner of Falls Road and Lake Avenue had changed hands a few times through the years, Neill and Emily weren't daunted.

So why do some restaurants succeed while others flop?

Restaurant and hospitality consultant Arlene Spiegel of Arlene Spiegel & Associates works with restaurants across the country, including Grillfire at The Hotel at Arundel Preserve in Hanover. She says what's critical to opening a successful eatery is to try to "understand the demographics and the psychographics of the population you're trying to attract.

"Whether there's a failed restaurant in the space or a from-scratch, brand new build-out, it's important to figure out the people you are serving," she says. "What has worked and what hasn't worked, and why? If you're a doughnut and coffee shop, for example, are you on the right side of the highway? Is there a burning void for great bagels and pastrami that no one else is doing that will have people going out of their way because you're the only one doing it in an authentic way? In cities, in particular, where there's competition and occupancy costs are high, there are always some that will do well even on the same block where others are going to fail."

Bottom line, says Spiegel: "There really aren't any bad locations, there are just bad fits."

