

## What happens to local food establishments when tourists are the only thing keeping them alive?

For two immigrant food-business owners on the Lower East Side, the growing number of tourist patrons has helped them stay in business, but indicates their community is disappearing.

By Ronni Husmann

Mike Roscishewsky, owner of the Ukrainian bar Blue and Gold on East 7th Street, hates tourists.

“Well I guess I shouldn’t say that,” chuckles Mike, his brows furrowed. “I don’t hate anyone, and I’m glad people like coming to the bar. But these out-of-towners don’t appreciate what this place means.”

After a brief pause, he added with a sigh: “But, they’re the reason we’re still open.”

The Lower East Side of Manhattan is one of many neighborhoods in the throes of gentrification. As housing rates rise, the existing residents are being priced out by younger, wealthier people [who entice new businesses and excitable tourists](#). For many immigrant-owned food establishments, this shift in neighborhood dynamics is inciting two important questions for owners: how do I keep my business running when the community I was serving is disappearing? And why should I?

The answer to the former, and the instigator for the latter, is tourists. Tourists have become an essential customer base for many of these long-standing establishments, like Blue and Gold, sometimes at the dismay of the owners who dislike the outside attention. These businesses are “discovered” by [Yelp](#) and [Tripadvisor](#) reviewers or [Tik Tokers](#) who afflict them with those tourist-luring catchphrases like “authentic” and “off-the-beaten-path,” propagating their reputations as tourist spots.

While tourists may see these places as adventurous and cheap experiences to spice up their Friday nights, these establishments hold the legacies of Lower East Side history, which for centuries has been a neighborhood known for its amalgam of immigrant enclaves. These businesses are survivors who have dug their feet into the concrete of an otherwise rapidly changing city. They are also anomalies, the exception to the endangered species that is family-owned businesses in gentrifying areas.

For many immigrants, owning a restaurant or bar was a way to gain economic independence while also serving as community hubs for cultural preservation. Mike reminisced that his earliest memories are sitting behind the bar in the 1970s watching his grandfather pour shots of Horilka, a Ukrainian honey vodka, through the smoky haze as cigar-filled mouths shouted Ukrainian

curses over card games and traditional Ukrainian folk songs hummed through the jukebox. Today, that same jukebox pulses with the classic dive bar rock of The Doors' "Roadhouse Blues" and Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Free Bird."

"It's the music everyone expected a place like this to have," said Mike, with pursed lips and a shrug. "It's not like the Ukrainian stuff was being played anyway, but it hit me harder than I thought it would when I took it out."

Mike's grandfather (Mike Sr.) came to New York City in the late 1940s after working in a labor camp during the Second World War. Believing his wife and sons had perished in Ukraine, he started his new life in New York's [Ukrainian Village](#). He opened Blue and Gold (a tribute to his country's flag) in 1958, and about ten years later while on a smoke break outside the bar, ran into someone from his village who informed him his family was still alive in Ukraine.

Mike and his parents joined his grandfather in 1978 when he was six-years-old, and Mike was raised engrossed in the culture of the neighborhood. He learned about the importance of the bar where the neighboring Ukrainian families socialized from 9am until close at 4am — that is until the 1990s when Mike took over the bar at the same time his grandfather's locals began passing and the neighborhood was gentrifying, making [East Village dive bars](#) the new "it" spots for young people, artists, and tourists.

"This place went from a Ukrainian social club to an 'authentic,' gritty, New York dive [bar] almost overnight," said Mike, employing air quotes and an eye roll when uttering "authentic," spitting out the word like it left a bad taste in his mouth. "I never wanted this to be a touristy spot, but they are definitely a huge reason we haven't closed like all the other bars that were here when my grandfather opened."

For Mike, however, Blue and Gold's open doors isn't an unequivocal positive.

"When I look through the crowd on a weekend night and it's all faces I don't know — you know lots of new kids and tourists passing through — I just feel like it's not right. I know that my grandfather wouldn't have liked it like that."

A similar struggle is happening just a few blocks west at Casa Adela, a Puerto Rican restaurant owned by Luis Rivera whose mother, Adela, opened the establishment in 1976 to serve the [thousands of Puerto Ricans](#), such as herself, migrating to New York City.

"Community is a big part of Puerto Rican food and culture," said Luis, proudly donning a Puerto Rican bandana around his neck. "People didn't just eat here, it was their opportunity to see old friends and be themselves, cause they were not able to do that in a lot of other places."

The area around Avenue C and 6th street, where the restaurant still stands today, was once a hub of Puerto Rican culture in New York. Today, families that have been living in the area for generations are [moving to Queens and the Bronx](#) where housing is more affordable. Luis, holding out as best he can in his childhood apartment around the corner, spends each morning in the restaurant meticulously preparing the plantains and other vegetables for dishes like their famed mofongo and tostones. He says having to relocate, however, will be the end of the restaurant, as the commute will be too tough on the 73-year-old to continue his contributions to daily operations. He says, however, he soon may not have a choice.

“I hope there will always be a Puerto Rican restaurant in this neighborhood, but it’s changing every single day to be for the young people and for the tourists,” said Luis. “We are old news, we look out of place — which I sometimes think is what the tourists like.”

Luis says that while the inception of the restaurant solely had the Puerto Rican people of their community in mind, the changing neighborhood has meant that there are decreasing numbers of regulars. He says about 50% of their business is now reliant upon tourists, who are attracted to its [“authentic”](#) feel (according to dozens of Tripadvisor reviews), so in the last 10 years they’ve pushed to have more of a social media presence, actively trying to extend their reach to tourists through [Yelp](#), [Tripadvisor](#), [Google reviews](#), and [Instagram](#).

“It’s great we are still here, and I hope there is always a Puerto Rican restaurant in this neighborhood, but this restaurant, the energy and community, is just not what it used to be,” said Luis. “I always thought my kids would continue [it] after me. But now there’s not really as much of a community to continue.”

Mike shared a similar sentiment: “I don’t think my grandfather had generations or legacy in mind when he opened. He wanted to serve his community and he did. Now that the community isn’t there, maybe it’s okay that the bar changes.”

The effects of gentrification and tourists on local businesses is not a new phenomenon. One of the city’s most famous examples of a local, immigrant-owned spot turned tourist-seducing eatery is just a few blocks south at Katz’s Deli. Originally serving its loyal Jewish and Irish neighbors in the early 20th century, it has become one of New York’s “must visit” tourist landmarks, according to hundreds of [Tripadvisor](#) and dozens of [Tik Tok reviews](#).

The changing dynamics of their neighborhoods and establishments were not a huge shock for Mike or Luis. But reconciling their family’s intentions and legacies with the realities of the transforming city has been a relentless conundrum. For Mike, he’d be happy if one of his kids took over the bar, but ultimately hopes they don’t.

“I don’t want my kids spending all their lives in a grimy bar,” said Mike. “It can be fun, but they’re smarter and they can do better — that’s the American dream, right?”