

# Worn down by Croman, Caffe Vivaldi, bohemian gem, is calling it quits

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By The Villager



Caffe Vivaldi has preserved a unique Village vibe on Jones St. for three-and-a-half decades. Photo by Gabe Herman

**BY GABE HERMAN |** Caffe Vivaldi, a beloved Village institution for 35 years, will be closing its doors for good on June 23 due to ongoing difficulties with notorious landlord Steven Croman.

"Our legal and financial difficulties with our landlord came to a head this spring," said a message recently posted on the cafe's Web site, referring to a new lawsuit filed against it by Croman. "To continue to fight would be self-destructive in many, many ways for the business and for all of us."

Since it was opened in 1983 at 32 Jones St., near Bleecker St., by Ishrat Ansari, Caffe Vivaldi has provided an intimate space and bohemian atmosphere, in the tradition of bygone days of Greenwich Village, that attracted many artists over the years.

Vivaldi is a cafe, bar and restaurant, serving freshly made food and using local neighborhood sources, such as Raffetto's pasta shop, on W. Houston St. and Murray's Cheese and butcher Ottomanelli & Sons, both on Bleecker St.

"Ishrat's purpose with the opening of the cafe," said the message, "was to bring people together and that it did."



A jazz singer and musicians performing at Cafe Vivaldi. Photo by Jackson Notier

Dozens of fans, including patrons and staff members, have written messages on the site in support of Caffè Vivaldi, expressing sadness at the news and sharing memories of what the place means to them.

“I think it really does represent a great loss to the community,” said Zehra Ansari, Ishrat’s daughter, speaking in the cafe a week before its closing. “So many artists, musicians, creative people have called Vivaldi their home for three and a half decades, and so many amazing minds met here.”

Zehra, 24, who took over running Caffè Vivaldi two years ago when her father suffered a stroke, added, “It’s becoming more and more rare to have a true artistic salon-type community. You don’t find that in a lot of places in New York anymore, and all the credit is due to my dad for trying to cultivate that environment here.”



Listening to music in the intimate Caffè Vivaldi was always a treat. Usually a basket was passed for donations for the performers, rather than a cover fee being charged at the door. Photo by Jackson Notier

Ishrat Ansari, 72, came to New York City from Pakistan in the 1970s and opened a magazine shop at Barrow St. and Seventh Ave. South before going on to open Caffè Vivaldi 13 years later.

“It became a place for a lot of people in the neighborhood to gather,” said Zehra of the magazine shop. “It became a little intellectual center for people to exchange ideas. And so that was kind of the kernel in his mind that convinced him that he needed a bigger space to house all these people and to have all these conversations and just to create this microcosm.”

Ishrat’s love of classical music led him to name the cafe after his favorite composer, Antonio Vivaldi. Music was not featured there, however, until after 9/11, when the cafe and many local businesses were struggling, and it was a way to change the business model, according to Zehra. Nightly live music at Vivaldi has ranged from jazz and folk to open-mic nights. There is a piano in one corner, and a fireplace still warms up the small room on cold nights.



For roughly the past 17 years, there was always live music going on at Caffè Vivaldi. After local establishments saw a slump following the 9/11 attack, music was added to the Jones St. cafe as a way to boost its business. Photo by Jackson Notier

For the final night on Sat., June 23, Zehra said that some special Vivaldi community members would be performing, including some coming in from California and Canada, and some who have been in residence at Vivaldi for more than 10 years.

“It really speaks to how powerful of an impact this space has had on so many musicians,” said Zehra. “My dad gave a lot of musicians in New York their first gig here, and I think it’s just representative of this atmosphere of cultivating and nurturing artistic talent, as opposed to trying to make a quick buck.”

The cafe’s charms have attracted many artists and celebrities over the years, including Andy Warhol, Al Pacino and Woody Allen, who has filmed scenes at it for three different movies.

A wall at Vivaldi filled with photos of classical composers is left over from when Allen shot the 1994 film "Bullets Over Broadway" there.

For seven years, Caffè Vivaldi has been battling landlord Steven Croman, who owns more than 140 buildings in the city and has been the subject of many complaints and protests from tenants and city officials. Croman just got out of prison earlier this month after eight months for grand larceny, tax fraud and mortgage fraud. He also paid \$5 million in fines related to the case.

In recent years, the cafe survived an attempt to quadruple its rent, Ishrat said, and had to deal with legal disputes over use of the basement space that the cafe has seen as a form of harassment to wear them down into closing.

"In 2011, my tormentor, Steven Croman, became the new owner of the building," Ishrat Ansari wrote this April 5 in a message on the cafe's Web site addressed to its friends. "From the beginning, his conduct has been belligerent and illegal, unilaterally breaking the renewed lease, which commenced on January 1, 2012, that I signed with him for the Caffè Vivaldi space, and treating me with dismissive contempt."

In the April message, Ishrat thanked the thousands who had signed various petitions over the years in support of Vivaldi, adding, "I want to let you all know that Mr. Croman, a convicted felon, is taking us to court again, and we might be forced to close our doors."

After Ishrat's stroke in 2016, the cafe's closing seemed somewhat inevitable, according to Zehra.

"When my dad got sick, we all knew that it would be a race against the clock, although it doesn't make it any less heartbreaking," she said. "I think this time period of the last few months has really renewed my perspective toward our community, and toward how strongly connected people have felt to this place."

Zehra noted many locals have wanted to help Vivaldi stay open but didn't want to deal with the landlord.

"Unfortunately, in spite of so many individuals who would want to back us financially, none of them want to get in business with this guy," she said.

She and Ishrat would love to keep the cafe's legacy alive in some form.

"We would be open to a partnership of some kind to make that happen," Zehra said. "We have such an incredible community, I think that a lot of them feel we have a responsibility to try to keep that alive somehow."

Zehra was proud that a few years back, when the Coen Brothers film "Inside Llewyn Davis," about a Village folk singer in the 1960s, was being shot in the neighborhood, actor Oscar Isaac and musician Marcus Mumford came to an open-mic night at Vivaldi.

"That was a really special moment," said Zehra, "because even though they didn't film here, I think that what drove them to come here was to experience what the Village used to be like, and I think for a lot of people, that's what Caffè Vivaldi has been representative of."