

ENTERTAINMENT

Caffe Vivaldi has closed, but its contents are for sale as souvenirs

Owners of the small live music venue on Jones Street are selling off furnishings to its most devoted patrons.



Caffe Vivaldi, a 35-year-old cafe and performance space in the West Village, closed its doors for good on Saturday. Photo Credit: Yeong-Ung Yang

By Nicole Levy

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After one final evening of live music and Italian fare, a West Village institution leaves its patrons 35 years of memories — and the physical souvenirs left inside.

The owners of Caffe Vivaldi, which officially closed its doors for good Saturday, are selling most of the furnishings inside the performance space at 32 Jones St., including a vintage cash register, marble tables, silverware and even the mahogany bar.

“A lot of our patrons who’ve been coming here for a very, very long time, they want a souvenir of Vivaldi,” said Zehra Ansari, 24, daughter of the cafe’s founder and Vivaldi’s acting manager at the time of its closing. “That’s why a lot of them are interested in taking a chair, or one of our marble tables, or some of our glasses, to have a memento of the space.”

Pakistani-born Ishrat Ansari modeled the establishment after old-world European coffeehouses, envisioning a salon that would bring neighbors together for artistic and intellectual dialogue over the strains of his favorite Western Classical recordings, espresso and dessert, his daughter said.

ADVERTISING



The bohemian hangout reinvented itself as a space for live performances daily in the wake of 9/11.

The attacks “affected a lot of businesses downtown, and we had to completely reconfigure our business model ... into a dedicated live music venue, with full dining service,” said Zehra Ansari, who took over the family enterprise when her father suffered a stroke two years ago.

“It took a long time to bounce back from that particular financial hardship, but we were reinvigorated by our ability to bounce back in the past,” she recalled.

The business’ historic resilience made it all that much more challenging to say goodbye this time, after seven years of financial and legal battles with its widely loathed landlord, Steven Croman.

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Some patrons and performers bid the cafe farewell in person, others in an online forum on its website.

Musicians described it as a home away from home, where they could hone their craft, connect with like-minded collaborators and find an attentive audience.

“It was not a big place, but it created such a huge vortex that amplified and multiplied the deeper connections in life,” wrote blues

musician Brian Kramer. “So many have had that experience there.”

Comparable in size to the Lower East Side’s Rockwood Music Hall, Caffe Vivaldi never enjoyed the same visibility. Singer/songwriter Avi Wisnia counted that low profile among the cultural center’s strengths: “This ensured that Caffe Vivaldi remained one of the rarest of places in the city — a place you could reliably go any night of the week and hear live acoustic music in an intimate setting for no cover, no matter how old you were,” he wrote.

Others described its warmth and sense of community as not only rare, but “magical.” Some traced their friendships and romances back to the cafe.

It was with these supporters in mind that the Ansari family chose to sell the venue’s remaining furnishings directly, rather than liquidating their assets through an auctioneer, Zehra said. The Ansaris are accepting offers via email, at caffevivaldi@gmail.com, and via [Facebook](#) all this week; they have estimates in mind, but are willing to negotiate, Zehra said.

Many have expressed an interest in the black-and-white portraits of 19th- and 20th-century writers and composers lining the back wall, but those aren’t on the market.

They served as part of the set for Woody Allen’s 1993 film “Bullets Over Broadway,” scenes from which were shot in the space, and the Ansaris’ plan, Zehra explained, “is to work with the director, and his people to figure out what we want to do, because we just really want to preserve that history.” According to Caffe Vivaldi, Allen featured the spot in his 2008 film “Whatever Works” and returned again in 2016 while shooting an untitled project.

Allen’s film cameos weren’t the only time Vivaldi served celebrities; Al Pacino, Bette Midler, Ethan Hawke, and John Cusack, among others made appearances, according to the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation.

But the cafe’s legacy has not just artistic, but political resonances in light of the country’s shifting immigration policy.

“What makes New York a really special place is that an immigrant like my dad could live out his dream and create something that truly lived beyond him,” Ansari said. “My only hope is that other people who come here and want to make a difference in other people’s lives will always have avenues to do so.”



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