

‘Inside story’ on push for White Horse landmarking

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BY MICAELA MACAGNONE | Efforts to landmark the interior of the White Horse Tavern continue, as concern over the famed Greenwich Village pub’s future is unabated.

The building, at Hudson and W. 11th Sts., that has housed the White Horse since 1880 was recently sold to notorious landlord Steven Croman. The building’s sale included the bar. Croman selected Eytan Sugarman, who owns the Hunt and Fish Club in Midtown, as the pub’s new proprietor.

Sugarman’s and Croman’s names are linked quite often in discussions of the sale. Andrew Berman, the executive director of Village Preservation, acknowledged there have not yet been many changes to the White Horse’s interior under Sugarman. But he added that one can never know what the future holds — particularly, because the relationship between Sugarman and Croman is not clear. Plus, he said, Croman has a track record of maximizing profit on old buildings, rather than preserving the space or making an effort to respect the community.



A recent photo of an interior room at the White Horse Tavern, featuring a painting of poet Dylan Thomas. The bar’s new proprietor says they haven’t made any significant changes to the interior. (Courtesy Dylan Leazier for White

Horse Tavern)

One troubling past example is Cafe Vivaldi. A West Village restaurant and live-music venue that had been open since 1983, Cafe Vivaldi closed last June after a lengthy legal battle over landlord Croman's tripling of its rent. Ishrat Ansari, the cafe's owner, referred to Croman as his "tormentor."

This paper recently spoke with Sugarman in a phone interview. When asked about his relationship with Croman, Sugarman claimed that he and the landlord had no relationship prior to the latter's purchase of the White Horse.

Sugarman consistently goes out of his way to emphasize his commitment to preserving the White Horse's legacy, something perhaps best expressed in an Instagram post he made back in April. He also mentioned that Croman must have at least a basic respect for the bar because the building's sale agreement stated that the place had to be maintained as the White Horse. Sugarman said of Croman that he "doesn't know the guy." But he said Croman selected him because he is "New York born and bred," and thus would run the White Horse authentically, and that Croman has not been unsupportive of his efforts to maintain the pub's legacy. While Sugarman would not disclose how much rent he is paying, he did say that the lease is for 15 years.



A recent photo of the bar at the White Horse. The place's new owner says he is committed to the historic pub's legacy. (Courtesy Dylan Leazier for White Horse Tavern)

Sugarman said that regulars will be pleasantly surprised to see that the White Horse Tavern is "the same, just with a slightly better product offering." "Care and reverence" are central to his efforts at the White Horse, he added. He mentioned that prices have increased slightly because quality has increased.

When asked about interior design changes, Sugarman said that he knows that the interior is "sacred" to the history of the White Horse, and thus anything that is historically relevant will remain the same. In addition, the bar's manager is the same one who has been working there the past 13 years.

While Sugarman said Croman has no say in the White Horse's operations, Cynthia Chaffee, co-founder of the Stop Croman Coalition, explained that it is impossible for the the place to be divorced from Croman.



In addition to burgers, under its new ownership, the White Horse now offers some fancier fare, such as beef tartare and bottarga (cured fish roe), for \$18. (Courtesy Dylan Leazier for White Horse Ta

“If they think they are safe with Croman...they are not,” she said. “Everyone who moves into his buildings winds up getting screwed. When the lease is up, Croman will double or triple the rent and start harassing you to get out... . The White Horse is just another neighborhood restaurant lost forever to upscale developers.”

Similarly, Berman said, even if Sugarman and the White Horse’s operators have good intentions, the power may not be in their hands in the long run.

City Council Speaker Corey Johnson has also expressed concern for the famed tavern’s future.

“White Horse Tavern holds a special place in the hearts and minds of Greenwich Village residents and the city’s literary community,” Johnson said in a statement to this paper. “Like many of my neighbors, colleagues in government and fellow New Yorkers, I have concerns about the interior of this cultural and literary treasure being compromised due to recent ownership changes. I hope the Landmarks Preservation Commission will protect the White Horse Tavern both inside and out and landmark its interior.”



Also new on the menu at the White Horse is Scotch egg (a soft-boiled egg wrapped in sausage and deep fried), for \$9. (Courtesy Dylan Leazier for White Horse Tavern)

In the views of Berman, Chaffee and Johnson, it is thus crucial then the tavern's interior be landmarked. Optimistically, one could think that the White Horse is safe for at least 14 more years because Sugarman constantly emphasizes his commitment to protecting it. On the other hand, one could say trust alone is insufficient to safeguard a historical treasure. If so, what could Sugarman do to prove his dedication to the community? As expressed in his Instagram posts, he is more than willing to take suggestions.

Asked if he was hopeful the interior landmarking request would be approved, Berman said he was "guardedly optimistic." The preservationist said this case for landmarking is a strong one and that they have received tremendous support from "thousands of New Yorkers to the Landmarks Preservation Commission itself." Yet it's far more common for a building's exterior to be landmarked than its interior. While the city boasts roughly 30,000 exterior-landmarked buildings, there are only around 120 interior landmarks citywide. Indeed, this is first time the Village Preservation has pushed for an interior designation.

Berman encouraged people not to wait until it is too late, and "to make sure a slice of New York City history is preserved and that we do not regret not acting when we could have." He said, if people want to contribute, they can go to Village Preservation's Web site and send a letter, so the group will have a record of people's support, plus can then keep people abreast of the campaign to preserve the historic space.

In short, while some solace can be taken from Sugarman's avowed commitment to preserve the tavern, the consensus is that it would be wise to keep up the pressure for landmarking the place's interior due to the inherent risks of being a tenant — particularly of Croman's.

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