

Defy Landlord by Dining At Lima

📅 May 1, 2015 📌 *Featured*

By Arthur Z. Schwartz

Something is smelly on the corner of Bedford and Christopher, and it's not the food from the corner restaurant, Taste of Lima. Taste of Lima was an East Village mainstay until ten years ago when its landlord, Steven Croman, asked them to move to the West Village so he could renovate their old space.

He gave them a ten-year lease at \$11,000 per month with a five year option to renew. Things went well. The restaurant, at 129 Christopher Street, and across from the Lucille Lortel Theatre, got a good review in the *Times* (see excerpt below), full of words like "sweetly fiery taste," "superb," and "perfectly cooked." And the crowds came, both on theatre nights and otherwise.

But late last year, as the owner, Nelida Mori, was about to exercise her option for a five year renewal, her landlord, Croman, began to attack. Seems the owner of over one hundred residential buildings has a reputation as one of New York's worst landlords, and is under investigation by State Attorney General Eric Schneiderman for using strong arm tactics to push rent controlled and rent stabilized tenants out of apartments.

Schneiderman actually won a cease and desist order against one of Croman's operatives, an ex-cop named Anthony Falconite, who forces his way into apartments, rifles through drawers, takes photos and then deliver's Notices to Cure conditions which the landlord says warrant eviction.

Seems that Croman could rent her restaurant space for \$28,000 per month, and wants her out. So he served her with a Notice to Cure, alleging that she has created conditions which violate the Landmarks Law, including a window the landlord bricked up before she moved in. And he wants her bar removed.

She acted to correct the Landmark's issue but the property owner needs to sign all applications; Croman has refused. Nelida hired a lawyer and got what is known as a "Yellowstone Injunction," which keeps her in the restaurant while she fights with the landlord. But she fears that if one thing goes wrong in court (the next scheduled court date is 5/26) she will lose her business. And her legal bills are mounting; she says she has spent close to \$100,000 over the last 6 months fighting multi-millionaire Croman.

On April 28th however, a new battle began. Taste of Lima passed its last Health Department inspection in early March 2015 with no violations. But after March she started to receive repeated visits from the Health Department, based on "anonymous complaints."

At around 6 p.m. on Tuesday, April 28, four large uniformed officers, who identified themselves as Health Department Police, arrived at her door and told her that there was a report of raw sewage leaking into her restaurant. Several stationed themselves at the door, and for the next three hours refused to let patrons in. The others combed through the restaurant with a fine tooth comb, looking for violations. Those patrons who were already there left.

At the end she got a notice that the allegation of raw sewage leakage was "Not Found/False." But they served her with five other violations, including one which reflected running several cycles of the dishwasher and then asserting that the dishwasher was out of chlorine sanitizer. If found guilty of the five violations, the restaurant could be closed by the Health Department. Then, the next day, when Nelida looked on the web, numerous web listings (Yelp, Google) incorrectly stated that Taste of Lima was CLOSED. For the rest of the week the restaurant was largely empty.

On May 1, on behalf of the restaurant, your correspondent, Arthur Schwartz, wearing his lawyer hat, shot off a letter to NYC Inspector General Mark Peters, asking him to launch an immediate investigation of why the Health Department cops did what they did, saying "The actions of the Health Department Officers appear to be a deliberately planned witch hunts, whose sole purpose was to cause problems for the restaurant and assist the landlord in his efforts to terminate the lease." Hopefully Peters will investigate quickly.

Meanwhile our community needs to rally to save one of our few remaining, reasonably priced, local restaurants.

Think about going to the Taste of Lima for dinner, Call (646) 854-6770 for a reservation, or use seamless.com or delivery.com to order takeout. We as a community need to give Nelida and Taste of Lima our support. Big bad Steve Croman, and his thugs, and his possibly paid off Health Department cops can't be allowed to win this one. It's our community. Let's keep this a community restaurant!

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