

LIVING

Angry activists aim to buck new owners of White Horse Tavern

By [Kirsten Fleming](#)

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The Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation wants to save the White Horse Tavern's soul.

Brian Zak/NY Post

Tempers ran high Thursday when West Village residents gathered in the basement of St. Anthony church on Sullivan Street for a community board meeting. On the docket: transferring a liquor license for the legendary White Horse Tavern on Hudson Street to restaurateur Eytan Sugarman, whose past projects include celebrity hot spots Suede, Southern Hospitality and the Hunt & Fish Club.

West Villager Kat Georges noted she was “mortified” by the change and even finished her speech with a quote from Dylan Thomas, the bar’s patron saint.

“‘To surrender now is to pay the expensive ogre twice.’ I don’t want to surrender,” she said, to loud applause.

“I’ve been to a lot of community board meetings, but never one where someone quoted poetry,” Sugarman tells The Post.

Then again, the 44-year-old nightlife vet has never taken the reins of a city institution like the White Horse.

Since the 1880s, the literary haunt has nourished some of NYC’s most famous writers, including Thomas. The bar has been owned and operated by Eddie Brennan and James Munson for years, and it’s considered an integral part of the fabric of the West Village, which has been rapidly changing due to rising rents.

But after decades in business, Brennan and Munson are now retiring — and have sold the building to controversial landlord Steve Croman, who **served eight months in prison** for tax and mortgage fraud, for \$14 million.

Heading up operations is Sugarman, who co-owns Hunt & Fish Club with Anthony Scaramucci (who is not involved in the White Horse). He counts among his close friends Southern Hospitality partner Justin Timberlake, Darryl Strawberry, Derek Jeter and legendary Dodgers manager Tommy Lasorda — whom Sugarman credits with turning him from a chubby, rudderless kid into a motivated hospitality maven.

Sugarman also made headlines in January, when his pie joint, Made in New York Pizza, was accused of ripping off Prince Street Pizza’s spicy pepperoni slice.

Reports of Sugarman’s White Horse takeover sparked panic among community activists and downtown denizens, who worried that their beloved bar would turn into an upscale hangout for hedge funders and White House hangers-on.

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“The change in ownership obviously gave us great pause and concern,” Andrew Berman, the executive director of the Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation, tells The Post. After learning the news, his organization asked the Landmarks Preservation Commission to have the bar’s interior landmarked. “The prior owners who have been owners for decades have been loving caretakers of this incredibly important part of New York City history. We don’t know the new owner’s plan.”

During the community board meeting, Sugarman said he had been unfairly lumped together with Croman: “I understand your feelings. But I am the tenant, and he is the landlord. We don’t get to chose our parents. We don’t get to chose our landlords.”



Restaurateur Eytan Sugarman and Anthony Scaramucci co-own the Hunt & Fish Club.

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Christian Johnston

Sugarman, who grew up on the Upper West Side and tended bar at the iconic P&G Cafe, was blindsided by the backlash, according to sources. For weeks, he had been in secret discussions with Munson, who wanted to ensure his successor would carry on the tavern’s legacy. Out of respect for the bar employees, the pair kept the news quiet until there was a proper succession plan. But the changing of the guard leaked anyway, and instead of celebrating his newest venture, Sugarman found himself playing defense.

“My reasons for taking this is so pure. The changes will not be noticeable,” he says, pointing to structural changes such as the air conditioning system and leaky pipes. “My intention is to fix what needs to be fixed — and anything that Dylan Thomas might have breathed on will remain the same.”

Although Sugarman insists the White Horse will remain a pub, he concedes that there will be some changes. Unlike Munson, who owned the building, Sugarman is paying rent, and has to factor in those costs — so the bar’s current \$12 burgers will not be sustainable.

He says he also wants to make the food better. “We’re going to have the best pub food,” Sugarman says, adding that he’s been approached by two Michelin-starred chefs about the project. “I would hire them if they understood what we’re doing here. This isn’t going to be a place where you put flowers on a plate with tweezers.”

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White Horse patrons may be wary of this interloper. But entrepreneur Gary Vaynerchuk, who has known Sugarman for close to a decade and is an investor in Hunt & Fish Club, says his friend is an anachronism who is tailor-made for this project.

"He's from a New York that doesn't exist anymore," Vaynerchuk tells The Post. "He is friends with Tommy Lasorda as if he was as old as Tommy Lasorda. I think his current favorite music is Frank Sinatra."

Sugarman insists he intends to keep the saloon's spirit alive and will ensure it doesn't turn into a Starbucks or bank.

"I [took over] the White Horse Tavern. I didn't [lease] it to change it," he says. "Jimmy is retiring and he has the right to retire. It would be nice if Derek Jeter played for the Yankees for the rest of time. Like everything else, time marches on."

Foodie flips

The White Horse Tavern is just the latest classic West Village joint to get a new owner — for better or for worse.