



MY TURN
Beating his
marathon time
30 years later
E31



NEWSDAY / J. CONRAD WILLIAMS JR.

Nick and John DeVito renovated the Prohibition-era speakeasy area in the same building as Charlotte's Desserts, the Farmingdale establishment they named after their mother.

The boys in the **back room**

BY JOHN HANC
Special to Newsday

Brothers reopen **speakeasy** in coffee-and-dessert joint

Nick and John DeVito could see the handwriting on the wall — and it was digital text.

The DeVito brothers, who grew up in Syosset, had spent most of their working lives in commercial printing. But as mass mailings were replaced by emails, invites by Evites and four-color brochures by PDFs and web links, the brothers found their Manhattan-based

company in a downward cycle. “I saw other guys in printing whose business was evaporating, but they didn’t want to take a risk doing something else,” recalled Nick, 55. “We didn’t want to just sit there and watch it dwindle away to nothing.”

He and his brother decided to go in a different, nostalgia-driven direction. In 2013, they bought a building in Farmingdale, out of which they contin-

ued to operate a trimmed-down version of their business, Manhattan Business Forms, in the back. The 1907 building had originally been a department and ladies dress store, and faced out to the village’s burgeoning Main Street, currently in the midst of revitalization, with new restaurants and pubs opening left and right.

The brothers did their research and realized that something was missing among all

the rounds and meals: coffee and dessert.

They decided to fill the void, and in January 2014 they opened Charlotte’s, named after their mother. In the nearly four years since, its menu of gourmet coffee, self-serve, soft frozen yogurt and hand-packed ice cream, desserts and sweets has made it a hit for children, parents and grandparents, many of whom find a familiarity in the

warm atmosphere — complete with an old-fashioned soda-fountain-like counter and rocking chairs — that harks back to youths spent in candy stores and ice-cream parlors.

“We wanted to have the feel of an old-fashioned ice-cream parlor, while capturing some of the best part of a modern coffee or frozen yogurt shop,” said Nick, of Rockville Centre.

Still, going from commercial printing to a business neither brother had experience with

See **SPEAKEASY** on E26

Coffee, sweets and gin



SPEAKEASY from E25

was a leap of faith. “It was a risk, but a calculated risk,” said George Andriopoulos, managing director of Launchpad Five One Six, a business consulting firm that worked with the brothers to make the transition. “They’re good business people, and it shows.”

The success of their midlife pivot also speaks to the bond between the siblings. (They had one other sibling, older brother Vinnie, who died in 2012.)

“We’re brothers and best friends,” said John, 51, of Syosset. But they complement each other in a Felix-and-Oscar-like way. “John is much more organized,” Nick said. “If I was paying the bills, there’d be a problem.”

The two share another important quality. “They have the same work ethic,” said Nick’s wife, Rachel.

And the brothers’ hard work at Charlotte’s has paid off, said Carol Menscher, one of their first and most loyal customers. “My husband and I went in the week they opened,” she said. “It was just such a cozy, friendly atmosphere, and Nick and John were so eager to please.”

Menscher, a Plainview resident who allows to be older than 60, said that Charlotte’s brought back warm childhood memories, right down to the Del Shannon, Beach Boys and Aretha Franklin hits playing over the loudspeakers.

Along with classic rock, you get classic candies: While he doesn’t want Charlotte’s to be pegged as a “nostalgia” or “theme” establishment, Nick DeVito has a sense what his fellow baby boomers like. When they were initially picking out selections for candies to sell at the checkout counter, he opened his supplier’s catalog and saw a section that said “Nostalgia Candies.”

“I saw my childhood flashing before my eyes,” he said. Now, patrons to Charlotte’s can buy such vintage treats as Whoppers, Chuckles, Clark Bars, Sugar Daddy pops and Bonomo Turkish Taffy.

“This was stuff I never thought I’d see again,” Menscher said with a laugh.

Soon, she and other Charlotte’s patrons are going to see something that few people alive today have ever seen.

Not long after they moved into 294 Main St., the brothers were told an interesting story about their new building by several local residents and business owners:

It seems that an approximately 1,000-square-foot section of their basement had been a speakeasy during Prohibition.

Closer inspection revealed an ornate, 12-foot-high tin ceiling and the remnants of a tin wall covering. There was also an arched cinder block entranceway to the backyard (“Why something so elaborate if it was just a storage cellar?” Nick asks) and an “escape” exit that led through the basement of an adjoining building and into the backyard next to Charlotte’s.

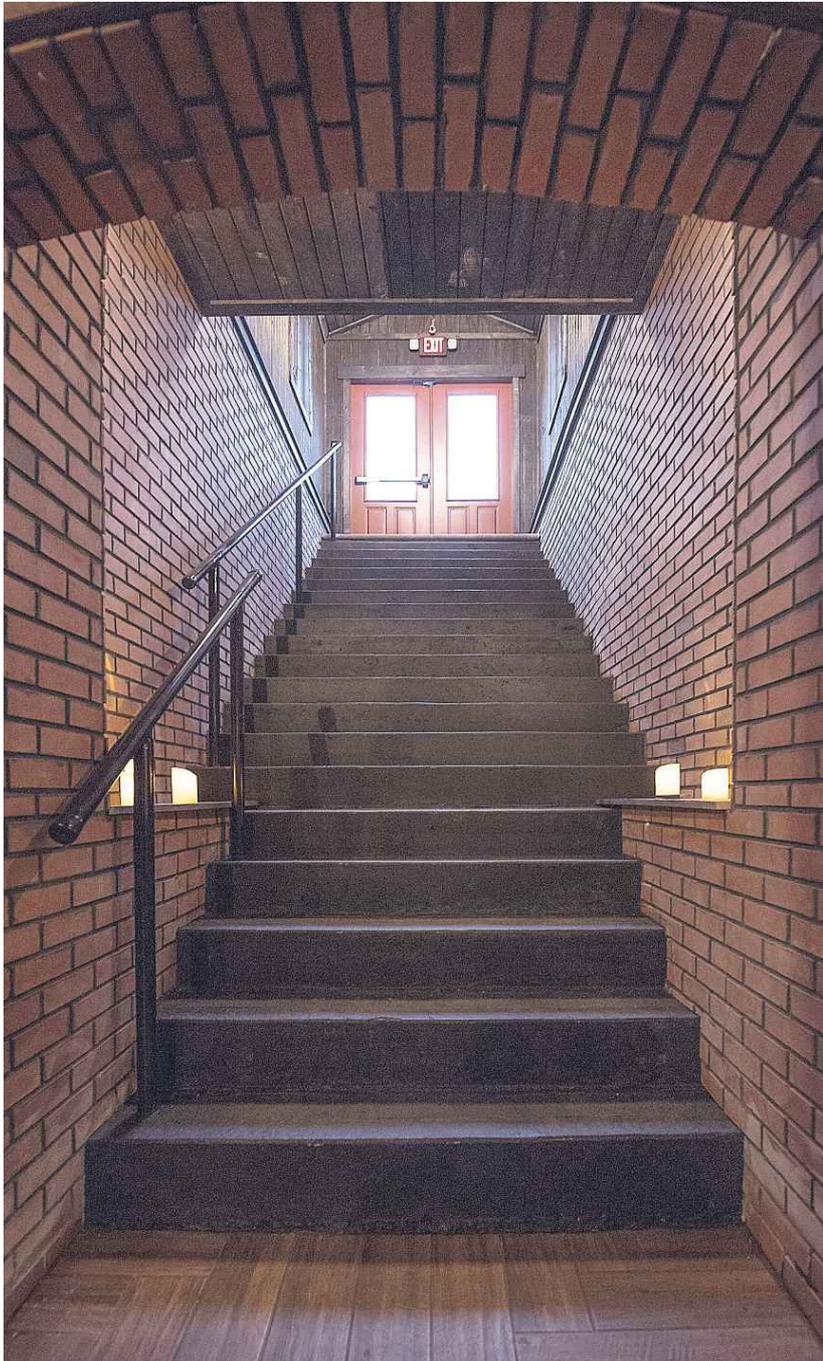
John was flabbergasted. “I said, ‘We’re literally sitting on history! We need to act on it.’ Nick was right there with me. We decided we had to bring the speakeasy back.”

This month, they will: The new Charlotte’s Speakeasy, which will open Nov. 24, is a 1920s-themed bar, complete with a disguised entrance: It’s a door that looks like a bookshelf and can only be opened by pulling down on a candlestick mounted on the wall. Patrons will then descend a staircase suffused in a golden light, reflected off an antique ceiling mirror. Once in the speakeasy, they can see some of the original tin ceiling and wall covering, and belly up to a bar constructed from the original support beams the DeVitos found when they moved in.

The menu will not include bathtub gin, an illegal concoction popular during Prohibition, but there will be 1920s-themed cocktails as well as drinks for a modern palette.

One wall will include photos from that era of the building and the Village of Farmingdale. The DeVitos stress that they want to pay homage to the history of the original establishment. But what exactly is that history? Since illegal businesses don’t usually leave detailed records, it’s hard to

Business is looking up for Nick and John DeVito, printers who opened Charlotte’s in 2014.



The way to get to the speakeasy is via a stairway to nostalgia.

say. What is true is that Long Islanders didn't allow a little thing like the Volstead Act — the legislation enacted by Congress that prohibited the production, sale and transport of "intoxicating liquors" — to interfere with their cocktail hours. "Probably nowhere in the nation was illicit alcohol so available as in Nassau County," declared former county historian Edward J. Smits in his 1974 book, "Nassau, USA." The "speaks," as they were called, were omnipresent. "Clandestine bars were everywhere, and it was easy to make a nightly circuit of them and rub shoulders with the most substantial citizens," he wrote. A ladies dress shop would have

been the perfect cover for such an operation, although Nick DeVito thinks there is another reason a speakeasy in their building makes sense. "It was right near the intersection of two major roads, today's Route 109 and 110, both of which ended at the water," he said. Village of Farmingdale historian Serena Brochu said that would have been an advantageous location for a speakeasy. She added another point about Long Island during that era: "Liquor used to be hidden in hollow grave markers in cemeteries during Prohibition." As of now, the DeVitos, however, have no plan to add a cemetery to their soft-serve yogurt offerings.

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