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The Closer: Flips and splits of New York's real-estate community

By Jason Sheftell



Old East New York, meet the new East Village. Italian newcomer **Zi Pep** is a little of both. On Ninth St. between First Ave. and Ave. A, the restaurant has walls decorated with photographs from owner Gerard Renny's great grandparents' restaurant on Stone Ave. and Dean St. in the historic Brooklyn neighborhood. Renny, a former doorman at **Studio 54**, used to eat with his family at Pep's almost nightly.

"The place had no menu," says Renny, who remembers the breaded veal cutlet with a salad on top as his favorite dish. "People would walk in and order what they wanted to eat. My great-grandmother cooked, and my great-grandfather ran the front of the restaurant. They lived upstairs. The whole neighborhood was there."

At Renny's new spot, the 'Zi' in Zi Pep pays respect to the restaurateur's uncle, **Meade Esposito**, who ran Brooklyn's powerful Democratic Party for decades. Esposito, credited with

helping Ed Koch get elected mayor, was a master of backroom politics. The restaurant at 424 E. Ninth St. has distressed walls and a relaxed dim-lit feel. On-the-bone roasted chicken Marsala and duck lasagna are specialties.

“It’s a step up from your typical chicken Parmigiano,” says Renny, who also owns the **Stuzzicheria**, soon to be renamed Pane Pannelle for its fried chickpea-based sandwich, voted a top city eat.



Maria Velazquez-Sanclemente (BILL MORRIS)

Twenty-eight million closed and in contract in three months — that’s a good quarter. No wonder **Prudential Douglas Elliman** agent **Maria Velazquez-Sanclemente** is smiling. The positive Colombian native who lives in the Financial District has worked her tail off forming relationships with Latin- American buyers. She takes trips to Mexico, Colombia and Venezuela, spending time with prospective buyers at their house to match their needs with the right area and property. In the last six months, working with Elliman’s **Sroka Worldwide Group**, she’s had three closings, seven contracts and five accepted offers.

Most of the \$28 million in sales comes on Riverside Blvd., split between two buildings, the **Rushmore** and the **Aldyn**. Both are owned by Extell Development Company. (Yankee [Alex Rodriguez just sold his Rushmore apartment](#) for around \$8 million after buying it eight months ago for \$5.5 million.) The buildings have some of the best amenities: rock-climbing walls, indoor pools, a bowling alley, sun decks and fitness programs run by **La Palestra**.

“Latin-Americans love amenities,” says Velazquez, whose mother is a major Miami broker, also with Elliman. “We have big families, so when we visit, it’s nice to have so many things to do. Riverside Boulevard and those buildings are very desirable because it’s like a city in a city over there.”



World-class furniture designer [Dakota Jackson](#) racked up another award. The native New Yorker who runs his studio and factory out of a warehouse in Long Island City was given the first **Icon Award** from San Francisco’s **Academy of Art University’s School of Interior Architecture and Design**.

Jackson is one of a kind. He’s a former magician who once built a chair for a poker-playing gangster with a hidden compartment for a gun. **Yoko Ono** commissioned Jackson to build the Chinese desk for John Lennon’s 30th birthday. Jackson, a concert pianist who builds pianos for **Steinway**, is perhaps best known for designing the “**Library Chair**,” which is in university and city libraries all over.

“I’m a guy who gets up every day and just goes to work,” says Jackson. “I don’t see it as passion, I see it as having to create. It’s an honor to be recognized for your work. I hope this is motivation for students who will be driven to express themselves.”