

NYC STOREFRONTS



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ILLUSTRATIONS OF THE BIG APPLE'S
BEST-LOVED SPOTS

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AKA NEW YORK NiCO

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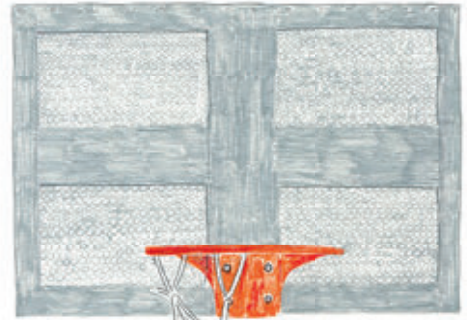
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FOREWORD

NiCOLAS HELLER AKA NEW YORK NiCO

New York is the greatest city on earth. Hands down, no contest. What sets it apart from any other city? Simple. It's the people and the small businesses. Where else will you find specialty shops like Chess Forum, Casey Rubber Stamps, or Punjabi Deli? Sure, there might be a few places in other cities that sell similar things, but they don't have the same types of individuals running them that we have here.

As a filmmaker, I travel around the city every day meeting exciting New Yorkers and highlighting small, local businesses on Instagram. The most fascinating people I have ever met are shop owners—like Big Mike, who runs Astor Place Hairstylists, or Jamal, who runs Village Music World. These are so much more than just stores to me. They are spots where I can go and hang out with good people.

Joel Holland's illustrations capture these storefronts beautifully. His style is so unique, and I always look forward to seeing new pieces from him. More importantly, the owners of the places he draws take pride in these depictions. Many of my favorite businesses have his illustrations front and center when you walk in. In fact, Joel and I first met when I recommended that he draw Artful Posters on Bleecker Street to help its owners promote the store. They were thrilled with the result (see page 120 of this book).

There are lots of amazing places included here, and it feels impossible to choose a personal favorite. But pro tip: order the New York Nico Special at La Bonbonniere.

With NYC rents soaring, it is so important to keep supporting these establishments. If New York loses its local butchers, bakeries, record stores, barber shops, etcetera, then it might as well be any other city.

Nicolas Heller is a filmmaker who was born and raised in NYC. Known as the "unofficial talent scout of New York City," he uses his popular Instagram account (@newyorknico) to highlight charismatic citizens, including local business owners. He also spearheads fund-raising campaigns to help keep them in operation.

INTRODUCTION



My family moved into a new apartment on March 13, 2020—during the same week that New York City shut down due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The move had excited me for many reasons, despite it being only two blocks (long blocks!) west of our old place. We'd now be closer to my daughter's school, some friends, Ralph's Ices, Mohammed's fruit stand, convenient bus stops, the Epiphany Library, and family too. But with quarantines and closures, all that turned moot.

This is when I decided to start drawing storefronts. It began mostly as a way for me to visit, in some small way, my favorite places and businesses—like a visual love letter. It was my method of grabbing tight to New York and squeezing. Hard.

Economy Candy on Rivington Street (open since 1937!) was the first of these illustrations. I drew it for my two daughters as a rain check for not being able to go there. It proved sufficient . . . though my personal stash of Swedish Fish did seem to disappear rather quickly, until they started shipping again.

The project took on new meaning for me after news broke that an East Village staple, Gem Spa—maker of the best egg creams and the only place around to buy Hav-a-Hank bandannas—was closing. After surviving a yearslong battle with their landlord, they simply couldn't win the war against the coronavirus. I drew the store and posted it to Instagram along with my rendering of Economy Candy, and the immediate enthusiastic response compelled me to continue. It was gratifying and, more importantly, gave me a way to send good vibes to the businesses themselves. Maybe it would even help drive customers to them.

During this process, George Floyd was murdered at the hands of the police, and people took to the

streets. Meanwhile, Asian Americans were being targeted and senselessly attacked, and New Yorkers rallied in support. A new, sane president was finally inaugurated in 2021. Restaurants reopened, closed again, then opened outdoor seating, then closed portions of indoor seating—and on and on. Some places closed for good. Some merged with other establishments. Some relocated.

The determination of what to illustrate started as mine, but over time family, friends, and people online began suggesting places to draw too. I haven't intentionally focused on locations that are off the beaten path, but sort of (it's Manhattan; there is no unbeaten path here). They are drawings of storefronts that I treasure: the shops I see while riding the southbound M9 bus to play basketball on Mondays. Or the infinite stores seen during Chinatown walks, often with a cup from Oliver Coffee in hand.

This book isn't meant to capture every storefront that keeps New York moving. These are just a few of the places that act like glue, holding a seemingly endless number of different communities together as one great city. Some of these establishments have recently closed, but I wanted to draw them anyhow. Others may have shuttered or moved since *NYC Storefronts* was published, so make sure you double-check before heading out somewhere.

Whether your favorite spot is included here or not, hopefully you will be inspired to visit the places that make New York such a great place to live or visit. And if you're too busy, you can always order takeout.

Go for a walk. Ride the bus. Look up. And over. And keep going.

Peace,
Joel Holland



NOTE TO THE READER

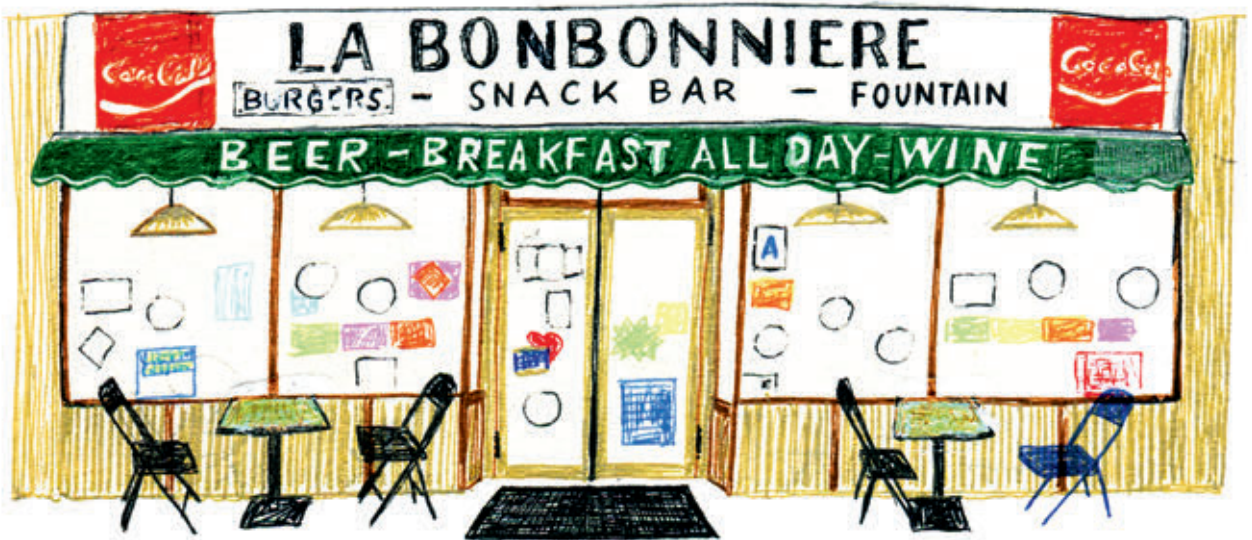
New York is known for many things—among them, constant change. Care has been taken to provide current addresses for the storefronts in this book, but some may have since moved or closed. Certain illustrations depict places that have permanently closed. In these cases, the old address is provided, and the text notes that the business has shuttered. Other shops changed locations after the illustration was made, during the process of creating this book. For these, the old storefront is depicted, but the new address is provided to direct readers to the current location (to help keep it open there).



28 8th Ave.
between W. 12th and Jane Sts.

La Bonbonniere

Open since the 1930s, this West Village eatery has developed an incredibly loyal following, including famous folks like Molly Shannon and Ethan Hawke. But despite its name, La Bonbonniere is not a fancy French restaurant requiring a coat and tie (quite the opposite, in fact). So if you're searching for a truffle omelet with pule donkey cheese, best look elsewhere. But it is precisely for this reason that the greasy spoon, which offers nothing but the basics—coffee, pancakes, and eggs—is a breath of fresh air in a neighborhood drowning in bottomless brunches.



22 8th Ave.
at W. 12th St.

Casa Magazines

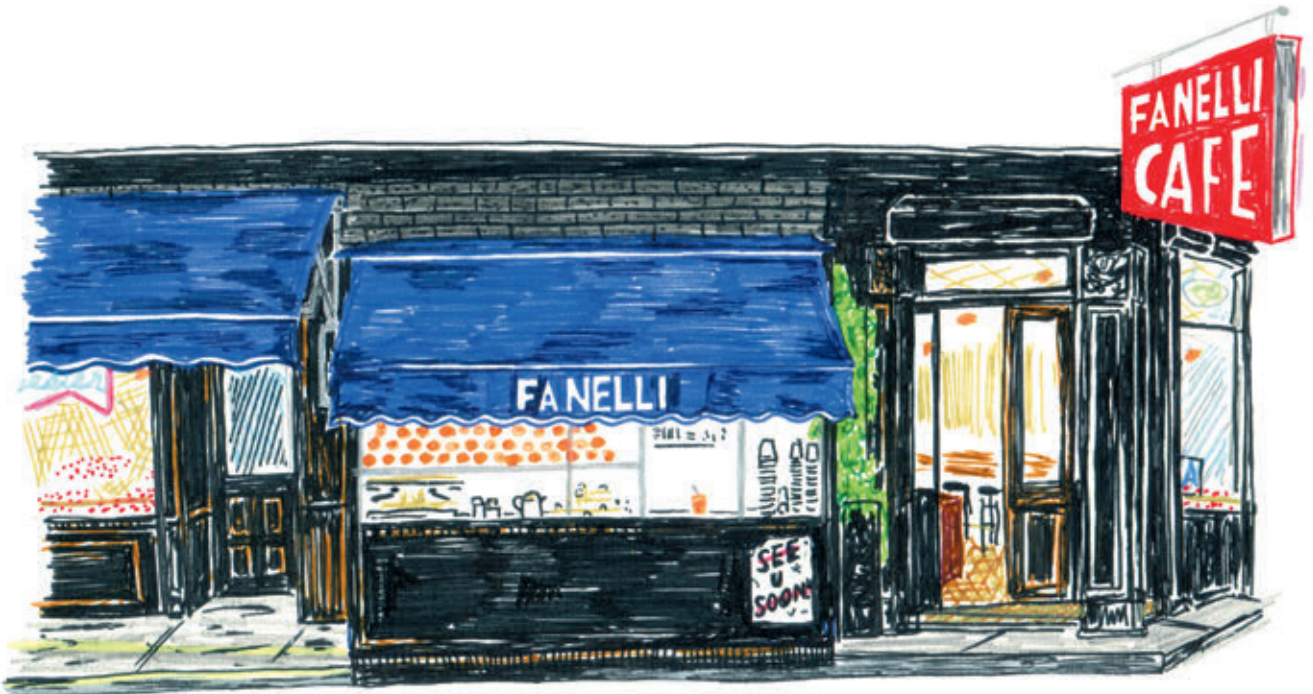
In 2012 the *New York Times* deemed this shop's owner, Mohammed Ahmed, the "last king of print"—and it's not hard to see why. His store, Casa Magazines (which sits next to West Village diner La Bonbonniere), sells every mag on the market you can think of, tallying to around two thousand titles. For this reason, on any given day it's not a surprise to see some of the city's top editors and writers casually perusing the offerings or chatting it up with Mohammed, who originally hails from Hyderabad, India. In fact, Casa is often the first and final stop for those with a passion for print. Certain international periodicals, such as the men's magazine *Made in Brazil*, or *Da Man*, a fashion publication from Indonesia, can only be found in New York on Casa's shelves.



94 Prince St.
at Mercer St.

Fanelli Cafe

It's hard to miss Fanelli Cafe thanks to the old-school neon sign hanging on the corner of Prince and Mercer proclaiming its name. But regulars of this space, which has been around since 1847, need no reminder: some have visited daily for decades. In recent years it has become equally as popular with tourists, who swarm the surrounding streets of SoHo during the day and pop into the restaurant for a quick reprieve between bouts of shopping. As a result, mornings tend to be the "sweetest, most local time," as proprietor Sasha Noe told the *New York Times* in a 2019 profile.

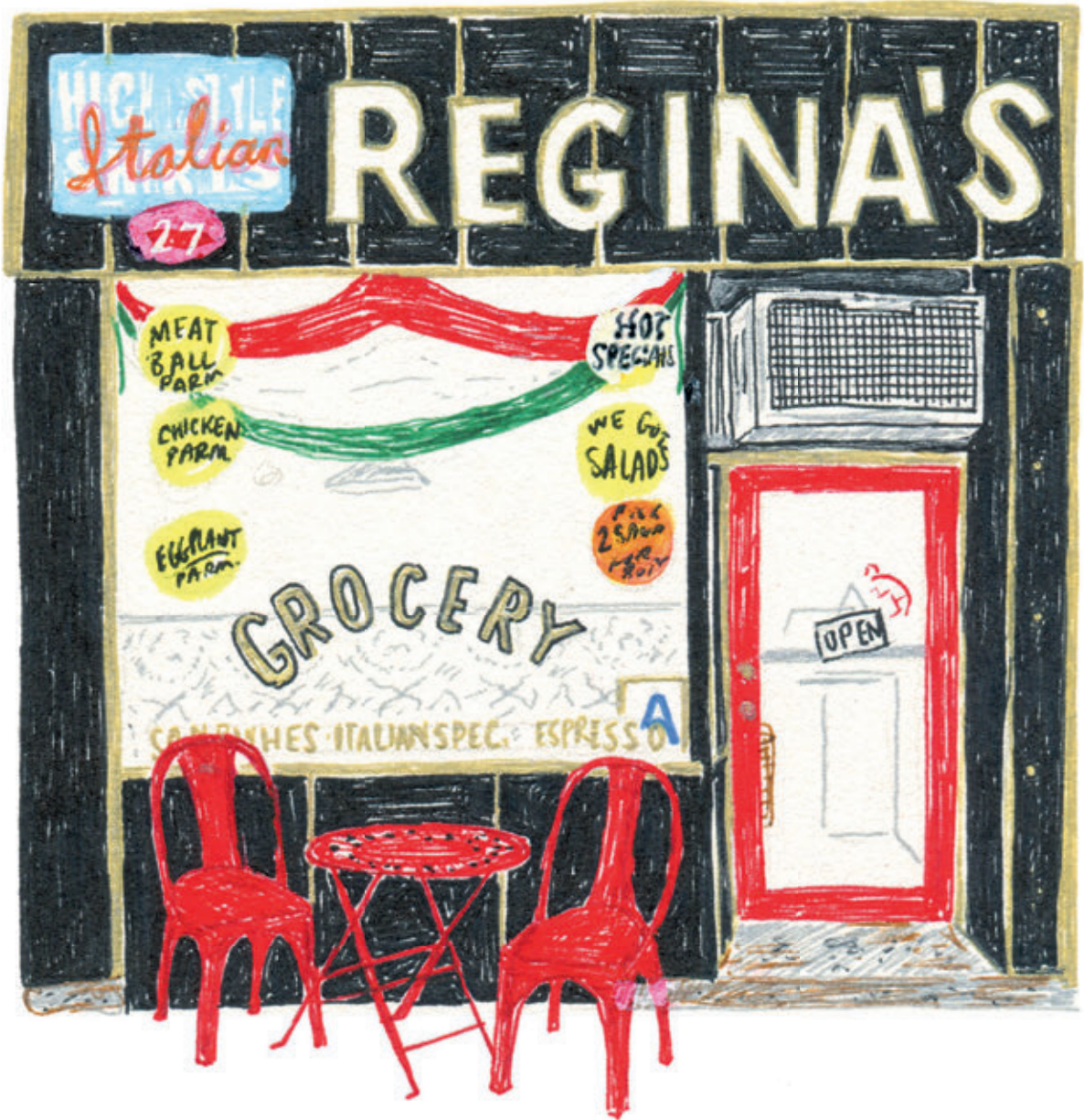


13 Doyers St.
between Chatham Sq. and Pell St.

Nom Wah Tea Parlor

The doors of this tea parlor opened on Doyers Street in 1920, making it the oldest dim sum spot in Chinatown. It has been run by the same family since 1974, when Wally Tang, who worked in the restaurant from the age of sixteen, bought the space. In 2011 Wilson Tang, Wally's nephew, abandoned his career as an investment banker for the chance to take over when his uncle decided to retire. Wilson has opened new locations, but he's left the original almost entirely untouched, from the classic red booths to the checkered tablecloths. Thanks to this preserved old-world feel (and, of course, the incredible dumplings), regulars and tourists alike line up for hours for a table.





27 Orchard St.
between Canal and Hester Sts.

Regina's Grocery

Located on the border of Chinatown and the Lower East Side, Regina's Grocery sells sandwiches made with "none of the processed shit," as the owners say on their website. Roman Grandinetti, founder of the downtown creative agency CNNCTD (whose clients include Bob Dylan and A\$AP Ferg), opened the shop in 2017.

While Roman may have friends in high places in the advertising world, he freely admits the store's popularity is thanks almost entirely to the traditional Italian sandwiches—each based on a recipe from his mother, Regina, and named after a member of their family.

The most popular of these, he says, is the Uncle Jimmy, made with prosciutto, fresh mozzarella, and hot sopressata. But plenty of people pop into the tiny establishment (it can fit ten to twelve customers at one time, maximum) just to buy some of Regina's signature Calabrian pepper spread, which the family bottles and sells separately. Too long of a wait to snag your favorite sandwich? Check out the store's second location, opened in 2021, several blocks away on Mulberry Street.

520 E. 6th St.
between Aves. A and B

Joe's Bar

This East Village dive bar closed in 2012 when its owner, Joe Vajda, passed away. That same year, Kirk Marcoe and Rich Corton, the owners of two other beloved drinkeries nearby (Mona's [see page 50] and Sophie's), took over the business and renamed it Josie's. By saving the bar, the new proprietors helped continue the space's legacy as a watering hole, which it had been since the 1910s.

Kirk and Rich decided to give the bar a bit of a facelift but were cautious to stay true to Joe's divey roots. They needed to replace its cigarette smoke-stained wallpaper, for instance, but decided to use the exact same print. "You have to do it within the context of what the East Village was, is, and represents," Kirk told a local paper at the time. "We love this neighborhood. We're not here to make a quick buck, we're here because Joe died and we liked to drink in this bar."



14 1st Ave.
between E. 1st and 2nd Sts.

Lucien

Everyone from Lady Gaga to Tilda Swinton has walked through this French bistro's doors, and many of these encounters with the world's entertainment class are documented in pictures that adorn its walls. The owner, Moroccan-born Lucien Bahaj, who died in 2019, was known as a demanding boss with a colorful vocabulary—but also as someone who cared deeply for the neighborhood that kept his restaurant afloat since 1998. He provided free meals to cash-strapped artists in the area.



394 Broome St.
between Mulberry St. and Cleveland Pl.

Happy Bones Coffee

Founded by a trio of New Zealanders, this tiny Little Italy coffee shop is known as much for its coffee as for its rotating displays of art from around the globe. Some stop in just to purchase the shop's trademark tortoise shell-patterned spoons, sold in a pack of four (but call ahead if this is your goal, because they're often sold out).



380 Amsterdam Ave.
at 78th St.

Jing Fong

Dim sum restaurant Jing Fong first opened on Elizabeth Street in Chinatown in 1978 with just one hundred fifty seats. Fifteen years later, it moved to a giant new twenty-thousand-square-foot space on the same street (which is the location depicted in this illustration). There, it became one of the city's best-known banquet halls, serving ten thousand customers a week.

Jing Fong was also known as the last of Chinatown's unionized restaurants. Hundreds of people, including workers and neighbors, rallied to keep it open when it was struggling during the Covid-19 pandemic—but unfortunately, negotiations with the landlord failed, and it closed in March 2021. Back in 2017, however, its owners opened a second location on the Upper West Side, which is still going strong—thus the legacy of this beloved dim sum spot continues.



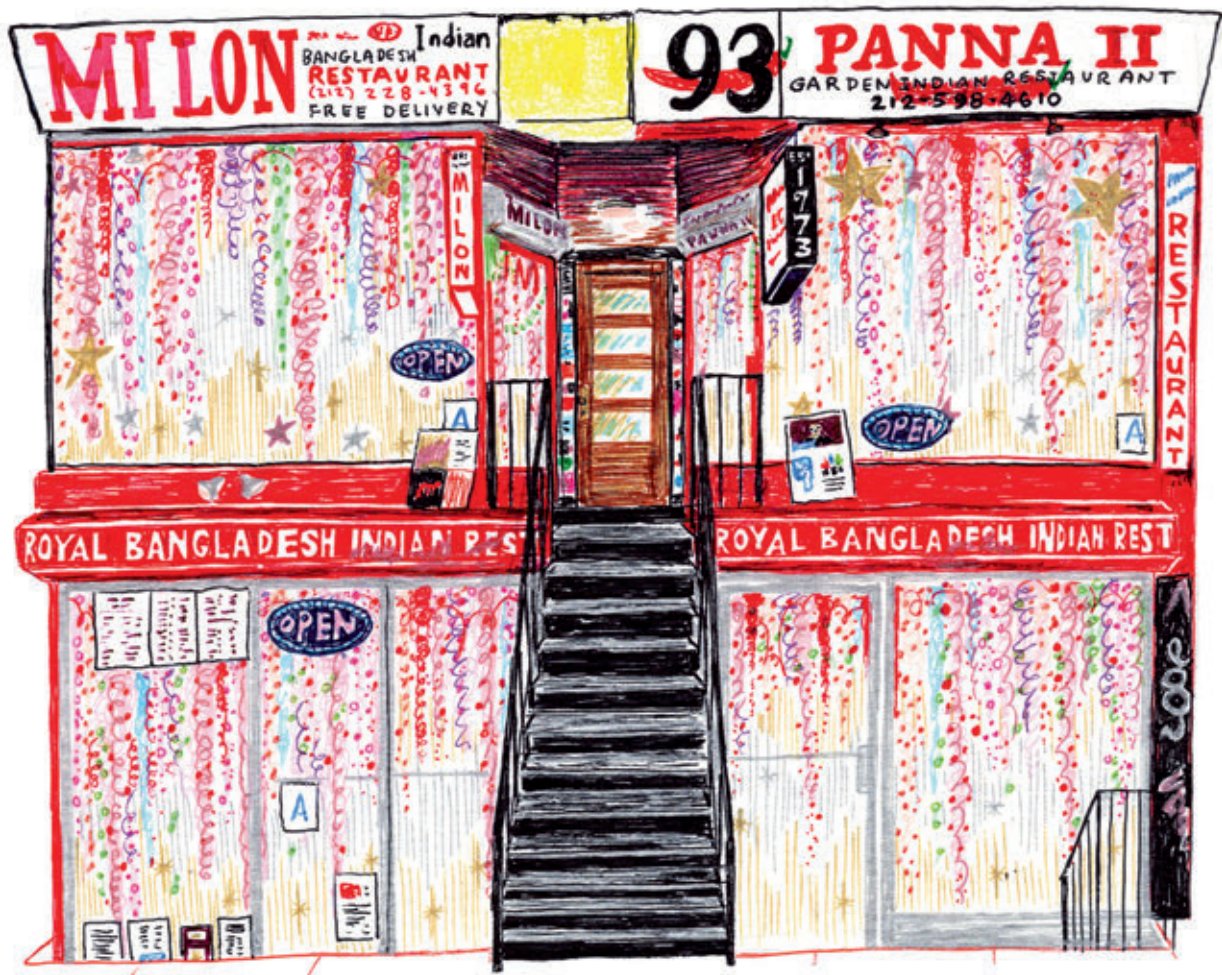
93 1st Ave. #2
between E. 5th and 6th Sts.

Panna II

For decades, if you happened by this pair of Indian and Bangladeshi restaurants on First Avenue—Milon (to the left) and Panna II (to the right)—you’d be greeted by two menu-brandishing men, enthusiastically arguing with you, and one another, about which establishment you should choose for dinner. The cuisine of the two spots was nearly identical, as was the décor: a mess of chili-pepper and Christmas lights hanging from the ceiling. (Pros knew to tell the staff it was their birthday, even if it wasn’t, for a chance to see what those pepper lights can really do.)

According to urban legend,
the restaurants were owned
by the same people, who used
the performative arguments
outside to create a sort of tourist
attraction—a dinner-and-a-show
type of gimmick.

Those rumors came to an end in 2020, however, when Milon went out of business. Panna II got the last laugh, expanding into its former rival’s space a year later.





229 W. 43rd St.
between 7th and 8th Aves.

Los Tacos No.1

True to its name, this spot is top of the list for New York taco enthusiasts, especially those with an appetite for authentic Mexican food. Expect a line—especially at its Hell’s Kitchen or Chelsea Market locations—but the wait is worth it.



157 Ave. C
between E. 9th and 10th Sts.

Royale

You could easily miss this unassuming watering hole (and its backyard patio) amid all the fancy cocktail bars and restaurants that have sprung up on Avenue C in recent years—but the burgers here are the stuff of Alphabet City lore.

85 Ave. A
between E. 5th and 6th Sts.

Juicy Lucy’s

In a city where a blended fruit drink can cost you a cool dozen dollars, the offerings at this East Village hut—which include pressed juices and fresh smoothies for under seven dollars—are refreshing in more ways than one.



71½ Mulberry St.
between Bayard and Canal Sts.

Asia Market Corp.

This market, located in Chinatown, sources hard-to-find fruits and vegetables—and what one online reviewer referred to as a “dizzying assortment of soy sauces”—from across Southeast Asia. The options may be overwhelming, but searching for what you need is half the fun.





54W Henry St.
between Catherine and Market Sts.

Dreamers Coffee House

The co-owners of this Chinatown coffee shop are self-described *jook-sings*, meaning someone of Chinese descent born in the West. They opened this spot to counter the displacement of Chinese-owned businesses catering to the local community.



289 Grand St.
at Eldridge St.

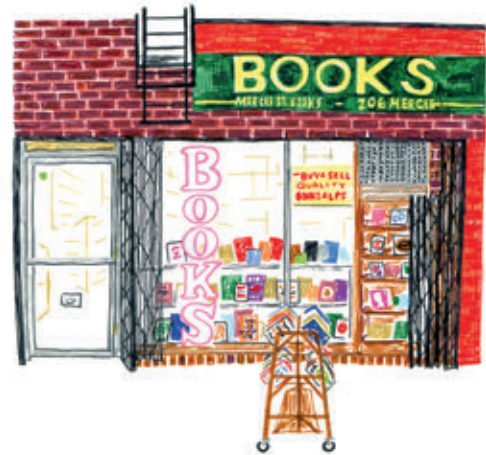
Da Hing Florist

This plant shop is known for its home delivery service within NYC's five boroughs (and parts of New Jersey). Its website even boasts a virtual-reality feature to help you visualize how that fiddle-leaf fig might blend with a cat palm.

206 Mercer St.
between W. Houston and Bleecker Sts.

Mercer St. Books

Since the 1990s, this literary institution in Greenwich Village has been a go-to spot for hard-to-find and out-of-print books—and the perfect place to kill time before the start of an indie flick at the Angelika Film Center, located just down the street.



356 E. 19th St. #2
between 2nd and 1st Aves.

Wu Cleaners

Regulars at this Gramercy-area laundromat focus their praise as much, if not more, on Mr. Wu himself—a chatty, affable man with a personality that warms his small, unassuming storefront—as on his impeccable alterations.

