



Owners maintain sense of community on Cortelyou Rd.

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In November, Brooklyn Industries announced the planned opening of its 16th location nationwide-eighth in the borough-on Cortelyou Rd. in Ditmas Park. For local residents and business owners, the arrival of the trendy design company signals the start of a new era.

Along the stretch of Cortelyou Rd. between Coney Island Ave. and East 17th St., the retail reformation is underway.

The arrival of Ditmas Park on the retail map, and Cortelyou Rd. in particular, diverges from the typical path of an emerging area like Prospect Heights and Vanderbilt Ave.: adjacent to an established neighborhood, widely accessible transportation, and a high concentration of attractions to draw visitors.

While Ditmas Park certainly benefits from the B and Q subway lines that run the length of the neighborhood-including a stop at Cortelyou Rd.-its residents have truly upheld the very definition of the word "neighborhood." A suburban haven in an urban setting, the neighborhood's idyllic, freestanding homes (driveways, garages, and pools, oh my!) provide the perfect locale for New Yorkers and Brooklynites alike to settle down.

So perfect, in fact, Ditmas Park locals found every excuse not to leave. With every amenity already at hand, including the wide green expanse of Prospect Park, a number of locals needed one last luxury to complete their self-contained paradise: locally owned and operated businesses just a few steps away.

Benjamin Heemskerk is one such owner. He lives within walking distance of his wine and tapas bar, The Castello Plan, and his new home furnishings and gift shop, Collyer's Mansion, which held its grand opening in early December.

"Like many other Cortelyou Rd. merchants, Ditmas Park is firstly my home, where I met my wife, plan to have a family, and look to invest in as a resident," said Heemskerk. "The business choices I have made on Cortelyou reflect how I envision my community's development."

In addition to The Castello Plan, Cortelyou Rd. features The Farm on Adderley (run by local resident Gary Jonas, who also owns the nearby hybrid bar and flower shop, Sycamore) and The Purple Yam (founded by Romy Dorotan and Amy Besa, who relocated their SoHo restaurant Cendrillon to their backyard), as well as Qathra Caf , Mimi's Hummus, and Caf  Madeline. Concentrated in an eight block stretch, these storefronts form Brooklyn's latest "Restaurant Row."

However, the influx of restaurants and other retail hasn't altered the decidedly neighborhood feel, thanks to local owners like Heemskerk looking to maintain that sense of community.

"There have been many changes to Cortelyou Rd., but what I find more interesting are the things that haven't changed with the development," Heemskerk said. "It is still small-town USA: people say 'hello' on the street, competing merchants are close friends, your regulars are literally your neighbors, and a nice day is a walk around the neighborhood picking your dream house."

Nonetheless, it isn't purely the Ditmas Park populace frequenting the establishments on Cortelyou. "Those first-timers to Ditmas Park are always blown away that this little hamlet of Victorian homes and Mom and Pop shops even exists!" Heemskerk said. "Sometimes there are crowds looking at the postings in the window of the real estate office, and then you know that Ditmas Park is no longer our little secret."

Indeed, the secret seems to be out (no thanks to me, admittedly). Ironically, the flourishing success of Cortelyou Rd.'s local business owners-in what Heemskerk refers to as the "neighborhood quality and feel"-has heralded its arrival as a viable retail corridor. With Brooklyn Industries coming to Cortelyou, the five year countdown to more major retailers arriving in Ditmas Park has begun.

I've spent six years working in commercial real estate, five at CPEX Real Estate as part of the New York retail leasing team. I've negotiated over 50 retail leases, bringing in national, regional and local tenants such as Retro Fitness, Key Food, Premier Care, and M.O.B. I work exclusively with landlords to lease their space, ideally to fit their vision of what tenant would best benefit the community. With conscientious landlords and a little luck, Cortelyou Rd. should be able to stay true to its character moving forward.

For the final part of "The Next Smith St." series, I plan to use my real estate crystal ball to look a little farther into the future. Which Brooklyn corridor is primed for a retail reformation ten years down the road - and what honorable mentions are close behind? Check back next month to see if your street makes the cut.

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