



SAG HARBOR UNDER SIEGE

A RISING TIDE LIFTS ALL BOATS.
BUT CAN IT ALSO SINK THEM?

by Kelly Laffey

Scenes from Le
Bilboquet, Sag Harbor



There are at least three places to get three different styles of burgers in Sag Harbor: the Corner Bar, Bay Burger and LT Burger. One was established in 1978. The second in 2007. And LT came along in 2010. One serves pub fare. One has counter service. LT's menu has 10 different styles.

But as of now, you can't get a slice of pizza in Sag Harbor.

"Each year on Halloween, the Sag Harbor Elementary School hosts a parade down Main Street," says Joe Tremblay, who owns Bay Burger with his wife, Liza. They have two young kids. This past year, the parade coincided with the final business day for Conca D'Oro, the family-run red sauce Italian restaurant that had been at 103 Main Street for 41 years. "The teachers rode on a float with a huge sign that said, 'Thank you, Conca D'Oro.' The kids stopped [in front of the restaurant] and sang 'When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie,'" continues Tremblay. "The parents were crying."

Similar stories have long been told in all of the East End villages and hamlets: The fabric of a community inevitably changes. Smaller businesses close as the cost of living and working in the area rises. As more upscale tastes prevail. As the potential financial incentives of selling a property become too good to pass up. Or as people simply grow disenchanted with the shifting attitudes of the area.

There's no doubt that the influx of wealth into Sag Harbor has made it a different village, one that is increasingly posh. But it's also still raw and salty and betrothed to its history.

With its colonial-style homes, old whaling captains' mansions and white picket fences, Sag Harbor acts the part of an old New England village, but has not gone the way of so many other waterfront towns, with every other shop selling T-shirts and seasonal seaside treats like taffy and ice cream. It has also not yet crossed the border into full-blown Hamptonization, a word that seems to have an increasingly negative connotation every year, implying pop-up shops, loud nightclubs, pushy patrons and unfriendly vibes.

New York State Assemblyman Fred Thiele, a Sag Harbor native who now represents the community as part of New York's 1st assembly district summarizes: "The one thing about Sag Harbor—whether you've been here all your life or moved here 10 years ago—is that there is a love of the community and a psychic investment in the area that few towns boast."

If Sag Harbor were a brand, its values would rest heavily on authenticity. Parts of the village may have a shiny new veneer, but because of the spirit of its residents, it has not been Disneyfied, nor become a seasonal satellite of Manhattan.

"Sag Harbor is still a real and functioning village," continues Thiele. There's an IGA, two hardware stores, coffee shops, two independent bookstores, a local paper, a pharmacy, a K-12 school district, volunteer fire and ambulance departments, a five-and-ten and a toy store.

Even the Sag Harbor slice sabbatical won't last for long. The space will soon be home to Sag Pizza, brainchild of LT's Laurent Tourondel and Michael Cinque of Amagansett. It'll open mid-June or July, confirms Tourondel. The style will be Neapolitan brick oven similar to the chef's L'Amico in New York. He plans to serve slices at least until the early evening hours, "to accommodate the schoolkids," he says. He'll also be open year-round. A slice will cost between \$2.75 and \$3.75.

The village wasn't always so wholesome. It started out a working-class town far removed from peoples' perceptions of the high-class Hamptons, yet with a history full of firsts. In 1777, it was the site of the colonists' first victory in New York. It was the first official port of entry in the newly formed United States, and the site of the nation's first customs house. It was home to the first volunteer ambulance in New York State and the first newspaper on Long Island.



RICHARD LEWIN

IF SAG HARBOR WERE A BRAND, ITS VALUES WOULD REST HEAVILY ON AUTHENTICITY.

“Sag Harbor started as a port,” begins Jayne Young, president of Save Sag Harbor, a community group formed in 2007 to keep the village from being taken over by big chain stores. In contrast, East Hampton and Southampton were farming communities; their cultures developed from large swathes of land and the accompanying physical distance between neighbors. “Ports are frenetic and lively, with a cross-section of people constantly coming and going.”

Whaling, which peaked in the 1840s, became the most prominent of the seafaring industries. “The village was full of bars and sailors and prostitutes,” continues Young, and it attracted residents from all economic levels. The reckless, seafaring culture was so pronounced that some whaling captains opted to have a second residence in more decorous Southampton. They didn’t want their families exposed to Sag Harbor’s raucous

streets. They wanted to give their children a more refined education.

Now, Sag Harbor may be the most desirable place to be on the East End, both for locals and visitors. And its school district is arguably the best east of the Shinnecock Canal. “I have a lot of peers that, given the choice, work hard to get into the Sag Harbor district,” says Tremblay. “It’s a community that’s voted over and over again to support the school, and it shows. That’s a big part of the year-round attraction.”

Sag Harbor has always been densely populated, and its culture is rooted in its strong sense of community. Save Sag Harbor is one of two formal organizations in the 2.3-square-mile village that is fighting to preserve its integrity. The other, the Sag Harbor Partnership, has spearheaded the effort to rebuild the Sag Harbor Cinema after it was lost in a December 2016 fire, and turn it into the Sag Harbor Cinema Arts Center.

“The effort is not so much to bring movies back to Main Street as to inoculate the space against becoming another brand-name commercial property,” says Steve Hamilton, who cofounded the nearby Bay Street Theater in 1991. “People are so passionate about it. It’s about community.”

That passion has allowed Sag Harbor’s spirit to not only survive, but thrive despite the inevitable challenges that arise when ever more people buy into Sag Harbor’s brand, particularly if they don’t acknowledge the authenticity, values, history, businesses, landscape and architecture that made it what it is.

“The architecture of a place defines the personality,” says Bob Weinstein, a Sag Harbor resident and member of the board of directors of Save Sag Harbor, as well as vice president of the Sag Harbor Whaling & Historical Museum. “To quote Winston Churchill, ‘We shape our buildings, thereafter, our buildings shape us.’”

In 1973, the Sag Harbor Village District

was added to the National Register of Historic Places. The area was expanded in 1994. It contains 870 buildings. Individual landmarks have also been singled out: the First Presbyterian Church, also known as Old Whalers' Church, is one. Another is the Whaling Museum. Housed in the former residence of whaling titan Benjamin Hunting II, the building was restored as an official project of the Save America's Treasures program under President Bill Clinton.

The National Register designation makes it difficult, but not impossible, to alter a building's appearance. One of Save Sag Harbor's key

in 2014. Calendrille recalls that there were five booksellers when she and Kathryn Szoka took over the shop from its namesake in 1999. "People want to see bookshops in town. They come here with that expectation," she says.

Though beloved, Canio's has had its share of threats. Three years ago, the building was listed for sale, and people worried about what would happen to its tenants. At the time, Szoka told the *Southampton Press* that Canio's would stay in Sag Harbor, "no matter what the building's new owner decides to do with it." It's no longer on the market. Calendrille and Szoka still rent the space.

The duo acquired the shop after founder Canio Pavone made the decision to close it after 19 years. Many lamented the community's pending loss, including Sag Harbor poet Kathryn Levy, who told the *East Hampton Star*, "The distinctiveness of the Sag Harbor community, it seems to me, is bound up with places like Canio's that are disappearing all too rapidly. I hope we all don't wait until it disappears before we realize how important it was to us."

Aptly, a village that seems constantly to be stuck in the crossfire of change has a Division Street running down its center, so named because it is the dividing line between the towns of East Hampton and Southampton, which share sovereignty over Sag Harbor. But division also captures the attitudes of its residents. Requesting anonymity, one surmised that "people who have lived here their whole lives, who are real locals, think that Sag Harbor is already ruined."

One of the most polarizing examples of change came when Le Bilboquet set up shop on Long Wharf last year. Ronald O. Perelman's restaurant was as exclusive a place as the village had ever seen. Reservations were only for those in the know, though there was a loophole: Last year, you could book a seaplane ride with Blade, which uses Bilboquet's dock, for roughly \$800 per seat and upon arrival, you were allowed a taste of exclusivity.

"It really did rub people the wrong way," says literary agent Janis Donnaud, a 30-year Sag Harbor resident. She splits her time between New York City and the village year-round. "I'm curious to see what will happen to it," she says, sounding hopeful for Sag Harbor, if not the bistro.

Most of Sag Harbor's shops have remained mom-and-pops, whereas the restaurants have become East End outposts of New York City hot spots. But unlike Bilboquet, which closed for the winter, most other upscale eateries tend to stay open year-round, becoming a part of the community and frequented by locals and visitors alike. Bilboquet represents the outer



BARBARA LASSEN



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Opposite: Sag Harbor's granite Civil War monument, honoring the men who served

Above: Scenes from Sag Harbor's waterfront

goals is to work with the village to uphold building codes. Until a significant code change and building moratorium in 2015, which Save Sag Harbor rallied for, "there were loopholes where people applied to the zoning boards and planning boards with a vision that wasn't in line with the character and history of the community," says Young. New structures would push against lot lines and overwhelm surrounding homes.

The character of the residential and business districts go hand in hand. If the architectural integrity of the village is threatened, it impacts what's needed on Main Street to support the community.

"Any coastal village is experiencing the same kind of real estate and development pressure," reflects Maryann Calendrille, part owner of Canio's Books. The shop, at 290 Main Street, is one of two independent bookstores in the village. The other is Harbor Books, which opened

Below: Canio's Books, one of two independent bookstores in Sag Harbor

Right: Bulova Watchcase factory, now a condominium complex

Opposite Page: Sag Harbor's Mashashimuet Park; The former Conca D'Oro space, which will soon be home to Sag Pizza



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limit of what residents fear for the future of Sag Harbor: seasonal, exclusionary and with blinders that only point north, to the yachts that long ago replaced the whaling vessels.

Even the village has taken notice. This spring, the *Sag Harbor Express* reported that Bilboquet applied for a change in its license with the State Liquor Authority that would allow it to have music, both live and recorded, and via disc jockeys. The trustees were not in favor, and the village said that it would write to the SLA opposing the concept. While the feeling about town is that Bilboquet exists in its own world, this decision does not—making it difficult for Bilboquet to bring in music to the village impacts other businesses' ability to do so. Notes one resident off the record, “[The village] can't pick and choose and just say ‘yes’ to the businesses it likes.”

But no one place causes an irreversible change, and Bilboquet's arrival didn't represent a total shift in Sag Harbor's downtown. Up at Canio's, Calendrille has never even heard of it. “I'm in a whole different time zone here. Upper Main Street is a bit outside of the intense fray.”

And it's clear the locals won't surrender their village to development without a fight.

When Young started Save Sag Harbor, it was in response to the threat of a CVS coming into the village. The international conglomerate didn't belong, she says. “We cherish that we have a mom-and-pop feel with independent stores.”

Save Sag Harbor is an advocacy, preservation and education organization separate from the Sag Harbor Partnership, a 501(c)(3) that was established so that the infrastructure would be in place if Sag Harbor ever needed to raise funds for a project. Though the two organizations are friendly—Young is on the board of the Partnership, too—they don't directly work together. “[The Partnership] was formed because we wanted a nonprofit with a broad-based mission,” says Nick Gazzolo, its president. The first initiative was fundraising for the volunteer ambulance.

Its biggest project to date is the nascent Sag Harbor Cinema Arts Center. Because the Partnership had a historic building fund in place, its leaders were able to quickly mobilize after the 1919 cinema burned down, raising the money to purchase the cinema. The project's plans were approved by Sag Harbor's Board of Historic Preservation and Architectural review on April 12. Construction can begin if the Partnership raises \$3 million by July.

Funds came from both year-round residents and second-home owners, and the cinema project would not have been as successful without both cohorts being involved. But those seasonal visitors are not the people that Sag Harbor purists are fighting against. Speaking off the record, one born-and-bred Sag Harborite said, “In the 1980s and '90s, people came to Sag Harbor and bought a house as their



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second home, but they were invested in the village. What concerns me now is that there's more of a trend of people buying homes solely because they want it to be a monetary investment. They're not participating in the community.”

“The bottom line is, the answers are already here,” says Save Sag Harbor’s Weinstein. “If people take the time to understand the history of Sag Harbor and approach it sensitively, I think you can live here in a way that shows an appreciation of everything that the village has to offer, without changing it for the worse.” To that end, one of the Partnership’s first projects was to launch a Sag Harbor Walking Tours app, now with 17 different narrated options that highlight everything from its whaling days to arts and cultural destinations.

“What’s nice here is that people want Sag Harbor to be their local hometown,” says David Bragna, who has owned In Home at 132 Main Street for 16 years. “Every customer who comes in wants us to know where they were over the winter, where their kids go to school,” he continues, reflecting on the small-town atmosphere.

“I find that people are very interested in the history of Sag Harbor,” confirms Calendrille. Many of Canio’s clients found the shop through its focus on Sag Harbor’s literary history.

Artists and writers, among them John Steinbeck, moved into the area in the 1960s, after Sag Harbor had sustained years of economic decline that came with the collapse of the whaling industry in the mid-1800s. Sag Harbor’s robust and still thriving cultural significance can trace its history back over a century. Herman Melville’s *Moby-Dick* makes

reference to the village. And Main Street has been the set for many movies, including Paramount Studios’ *No Man of Her Own* (1932), which starred Clark Gable and Carole Lombard.

Manufacturing companies also moved in after the village’s whaling days were over, but once plants like Bulova and Grumman left, Sag Harbor’s viability was threatened.

“When people talk about the good ol’ days in the ’70s and ’80s, [they forget] that every third storefront was closed,” says Thiele. It was around that time, in 1975, when Tony and Lena Venesina brought Conca D’Oro to Main Street. “We did our best,” Tony told the *Sag Harbor Express* on closing day. “We turned the lights on and brought some life to the village.” His only regret, he continued, was that he didn’t buy the building.

Because rising rents and the other costs of doing business are a constant concern, another initiative of Save Sag Harbor is to meet with landlords. “I believe that if a landlord has a sense of what the heart and soul of the village is, they’ll be willing to sit down and have a productive discussion,” says Young.

Thiele, too, is working to help improve quality of life in both the village and the greater East End, addressing such issues as affordable housing, better public transportation, continued land preservation and water quality. As of this year, the *Sag Harbor Express* has begun holding monthly Express Sessions, where community members and business leaders talk about concerns facing the village, as well as potential solutions. Among the topics have been parking, renewable energy and the rental market.



Bay Street Theater is one of the village’s most famous rental tenants, and its sustainability in the village was challenged in 2013, when its 20-year lease was set to expire. Though the theater explored other options, it eventually came to an agreement with its landlord, extending its lease for another 10 years. “It’s a difficult situation to not own a property,” reflects Hamilton. “But kicking Bay Street out would be a sin.”

The theater opened in 1992 with *Men’s Lives*, a play by Sagaponack’s Peter Matthiessen about the disappearing way of life of Long Island fishermen, who lament that the area has become a playground for wealthy tourists. Bay Street staged a revival in 2012. Matthiessen passed away in 2014. His widow, Maria, now lives in Sag Harbor.

“People come out here with the expectation that it’s a lovely rural community, but it isn’t anymore,” she says. “It’s the ’burbs and I never thought I’d live in the ’burbs.”

There’s no solution, she continues, lamenting the prospect that Sag Harbor might be loved to death. “But what are you going to do?” she asks plaintively, “Close the Shinnecock Canal and not let anyone through?” ♦