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& SMALL BUSINESS

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TRICKS OF THE TRADE

Banking on their bakery

Restaurateurs make a downtown-style cafe in East Harlem their main course

With its sprawling outdoor seating and decadent menu of gelato and cream filled pastries, Settepani is an eatery familiar to the downtown scene but a rare find in Harlem.

It's nice, you can just sit down and relax, said Evelyn Hasty, a local customer who likes to stop in for fresh loaves of sourdough bread.

But it hasn't always been good life here. Owners Leah Abraham and her husband Nino Settepani, restaurant experts, opened the bakery in the winter of 2001 with an investment of \$1 million. At the time the two were successfully running two other Settepani cafes up in Westchester. They were convinced that a third location in Harlem would be a no-brainer, but the first couple of years were really difficult for us, said Abraham.

Sales in the first two years were around \$250,000 a year - a far cry from their initial investment. The couple said the problem was that the cafe was by its lonesome on its stretch of Lenox Avenue and starving for foot traffic.

Settepani's struggle are similar to a number of small businesses in various pockets of Harlem that suffer from isolation and a lack of neighboring merchants who could provide added traffic.

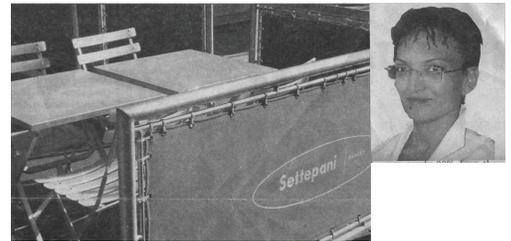
Local leaders say excluding the 125th street area, there is a general reluctance from entrepreneurs to take a commercial stake in Harlem partly due to misperceptions about the community.

Nevertheless, Abraham was convinced that given time residents would embrace this foreign concept of a cafe, providing to other entrepreneurs that the area was ripe for business.

But it wasn't just time that proved the trick. The couple realized that if they were going to keep a profitable business running in Harlem, they'd need to go full stream ahead. So they closed their two other cafes in Westchester and poured that money into the Harlem location.

They added menu items, expanded the store, extended their closing hour to 10 p.m. and added sidewalk seating to gain more visibility.

Those efforts have started to pay off. Revenues last year rose nearly 30% from the previous year to \$320,000. Now we get people from everywhere, Abraham said. Things are finally starting to turn around,



Settepani

These days, Leah Abraham's Italian bakery cafe on Lenox Avenue adds a bit of la dolce vita to the area



Settepani BAKERY