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Friday, September 27, 2013

With a helping hand, healthy eatery opened faster

September 19, 2013 | Filed under: News | Posted by: adm in

BY HEATHER DUBIN | Opening a bar or restaurant in New York is a little easier these days with the city's New Business Acceleration Team.

A free service by the division of the city's Department of Small Business Services, the program offers new eating and drinking establishments an opportunity to set up shop at a much faster pace by helping streamline the process. Client managers for NBAT, as it's known for short, work with business owners to help navigate construction plan reviews and coordinate multiagency inspections to meet city requirements.

In a recent interview, Stephen Shallo, deputy director of operations for NBAT, discussed the team's origins and the services they provide. Three years ago restaurateurs who experienced delays with inspections and difficulties securing permits approached Mayor Bloomberg and City Council Speaker Christine Quinn's offices to ask for assistance. They wanted to make the process easier for new business owners to get started, and NBAT was created to meet this need.

As a result, since April 2010, new business owners can rely on a client manager at NBAT to facilitate inspections with the New York Fire Department, the Department of Environmental Protection, the Department of Buildings and the Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

"The client manager walks business owners through the entire process and holds their hand through all the different city agencies' inspections because it can be pretty overwhelming," Shallo said.

With a staff of about 30, NBAT has seven client managers, including Shallo, who work with an average of 80 new businesses at a time.

"We can help a business open in 60 days if they utilize all of our services," he explained. "It can speed up that process that significantly."

Veronica Velez, an NBAT client manager, worked with Marissa Lippert, owner of Nourish Kitchen + Table, at 95 Greenwich Ave. to expedite the restaurant's debut on July 15. Velez began working with Lippert in early May and was instrumental in coordinating F.D.N.Y. and D.O.B. inspections for her kitchen range hood plan review and system. She also made sure the Health Department site visit was compliant with city standards.

In addition, Velez worked with Lippert's plumber and D.O.B. to receive the gas authorization. According to Velez, it has taken up to three months for new businesses to get their gas turned on in the Village, but Lippert's was up and running on July 8.

"Being in constant contact is one of the big parts of client management," Velez said. "We try to see the glitches before they happen."

Lippert, who is also a certified nutritionist, has spent the past two years working to open her first restaurant, and was grateful for Velez's expertise. A friend directed Lippert to NBAT, and she ended up taking restaurant management classes at the New York City Business Solutions Center under the Department of Small Businesses Services.

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Lippert was in the final stretch of getting her restaurant off the ground when Velez, who received Lippert's nutrition newsletter, contacted her to say she worked at NBAT.

"Her e-mail was a godsend," Lippert said.

While Velez's arrival was late in the game, she was extremely helpful in answering questions about construction, D.O.B. and Health Department requirements for mechanical items. She also worked on securing permits and inspections, and coordinated timing.

"She did help move things along quickly and probably saved us two to four weeks," Lippert said. Without Velez's intervention, they could have been stuck in the system waiting for plumbing approval.

"I think I called her 'angel' in multiple e-mails," Lippert said. "She was so calm and cheerful, and really happy to help."

Velez's work helped put the finishing touches on Nourish Kitchen + Table, which is a restaurant designed to merge healthy eating and delicious food. "I wanted to take the conversations I have in my office, from doing private nutrition work, and build it out in a brick-and-mortar place to produce beautiful fresh food to be helpful," Lippert said.

Menu items range from kale salad to black quinoa with feta and a morning green juice that Lippert claims is the talk of the West Village.

"We have a lot of people coming in and asking for it," she said.

Chef Thomas Curi uses fresh, seasonal, local ingredients to create inspired dishes. Lippert chose not to list calorie counts on the menu so that people focus on satiety and food quality instead.

There are eight people on staff, and the restaurant seats 19, and also does takeout orders. Lippert is pleased with the stream of customers so far, and they already have some regulars.

Lippert spoke about a woman who visited the restaurant last week and insisted she hated kale.

"We gave her a small taste, she sat down and she loved it," Lippert said. She explained that if the surrounding ingredients are not great, then the dish fails. At the restaurant, they aim to highlight ingredients and bring out flavors in all their entrees.

After she finished her kale salad, the woman sat down to chat with a regular customer. This is exactly what Lippert wants in her restaurant.

"Bringing people together over great food and conversation, this exemplified it," she said. "It's our neighborhood's kitchen away from home."

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