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New York City Hot-Dog Sellers Scramble for New Spots

Dislocated Street Vendors Discover There's No Place Like Their Old Homes

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Konstantinos "Gus" Katehis finally reclaimed his small patch of New York real estate early this month.

After the destruction of the World Trade Center displaced him from his spot in lower Manhattan, the 52-year-old Greek immigrant spent three weeks at home and another four weeks hawking his food from a new location. But business was poor.

Now, he is back at his old spot. His silver cart sits on a chunk of concrete next to the Woolworth building on Broadway, as he dishes out $1 hot dogs and greets old customers with a handshake and a smile.

Still, it isn't the same. Before Sept. 11, his lunch-time crowd stretched around the corner. Now, sales are down 60% as police barricades and recovery efforts a block away deter pedestrians from what had been a prime spot for more than 20 years.

The destruction of the World Trade Center hurt businesses around the city, and as the woes trickle down, one group has been hit especially hard: the hot-dog vendors.

Coveted Patch of Sidewalk

In some sense, Mr. Katehis had it better than other vendors, who completely lost the keystone of their businesses: their parking spots, and with them, their base of loyal customers. New York City's 3,000 licensed food-cart vendors learned long ago of the need to find a patch of sidewalk, and to hang on to it at all costs. Savvy New Yorkers won't eat from a cart they haven't seen before, while a vendor they see day after day is worthy of their trust.

But Sept. 11 upset the hot-dog cart. Nobody has an official count, but suppliers and vendors estimate dozens of hot-dog sellers may have been displaced in the trade-center area. Those who were able to return are finding their spots aren't as good as they once were. The vendors who can't yet come back because they were too close to the destroyed Twin Towers have sought out new spots, creating more competition with established vendors. Some have tried to make a go of it with other sidewalk fare.



Gus Katehis is back at his spot near World Trade Center site.

"Everybody's trying to jump on the bandwagon and going where the business is," says Larry Friedman, co-owner of Gabila & Sons Inc., a Brooklyn supplier of knishes to food-cart owners. "Unfortunately there's not that much around."

A drop in tourism has made competition even more fierce, slicing into business for street vendors across the city. New York research concern HotelRevMax Inc. says hotel occupancy in the city fell to 74% in October, from 87% a year ago. Attendance at the Bronx Zoo, the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art is down 34% as of Oct. 15, says NYC & Co., the city's tourism bureau.

"This has just been hammering" vendors, says Tony "Oz" Owczarek, a distributor of Sabrett-brand hot dogs and meat products. As owner of G-O Top Grade Distributors Inc. in Queens, he has seen demand for his products fall to 3,000 to 4,000 pounds a week from the typical 10,000.

Some are scouting new opportunities. Longtime vendor Jeff Cicio, whose eight Trade Center-area carts are in a garage, spent an afternoon monitoring a new venture: mangoes on a stick. Sitting in a truck in a Latin American neighborhood a few blocks from the Bronx's Yankee Stadium, he watches his vendor peddle orange fruit looking like oversized lollipops.

"I struggled every day to sell hot dogs and pretzels," Mr. Cicio says. "Who the hell is going to buy a mango?" He is skeptical that mango sales can reach the $100 a day in sales needed to break even.

A few vendors who had worked near the trade center have yet to return to the business. Billy Katehis, Mr. Katehis's 31-year-old nephew, sold hot dogs in front of the fire station on Liberty Street, across from the towers, for seven years. These days, he helps friends with home-construction projects and, he admits, "I watch a lot of TV." He refuses to take his cart to new areas. "I don't want to be out there like a scavenger," he says. "I want to be where I used to be. If I can't do that, I might as well go do something else."

Sitting at Home

The elder Mr. Katehis understands. "If you go to another corner, you go into business against somebody else," he says. Four of the vendors who share his Tribeca garage apparently feel the same way. Their carts have gone unused since Sept. 11.

Mr. Katehis spent the first 23 days after the attack sitting at home himself. He returned, after throwing out 90 pounds of spoiled franks. Through October, he occupied a spot on the other side of Broadway. Business was stagnant.

Mr. Katehis, who arrived from Greece in the early 1970s without knowing a word of English, plans to stick it out. A cousin gave him his spot in 1976. For immigrants, food vending is perfect, he says. "All you need to know is 'hot dog,' 'ketchup,' 'mustard.'"

Over the years, his earnings put his two grown children through private school at a combined cost of $6,000 a year. He has about eight months left on his 15-year mortgage on his Floral Park, N.Y., home. Business was tough before Sept. 11, with rent and other expenses rising. He expects his slowdown to linger. "I give it three years', maybe two years' time. Then it's going to come back better than before. I truly believe it."

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