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Dining divas have sights set on a place in Harlem

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The group behind some of New York's toniest restaurants is looking for a seat at the table in Harlem.

Fourth Wall Restaurants, which runs upscale joints like Smith & Wollensky and Maloney and Procelli, has been searching for space in the neighborhood, according to several retail sources.

With the popularity of the neighborhood's food scene, a move to fine dining has been on the horizon.



Faith Consolo, chairman of the retail sales and leasing division at Douglas Elliman and a member of Harlem's Chamber of Commerce, insists that an invasion has begun, and that more are coming.

"They're there, and more are coming. You have some very respected restaurateurs looking in Harlem. Big groups that have been downtown seeing if there's an opportunity uptown," she said.

It would have been unthinkable more than a decade ago, but for some of the best food in New York City, it is now necessary to go uptown. Harlem, which has long been known for live music and nightlife, now houses one of the most exciting culinary scenes in the city.

This goes way beyond an obligatory visit to Sylvia's, the Harlem institution that has been dispensing delicious soul food since it opened in 1962. The neighborhood, which now has its own Restaurant Row on Frederick Douglass Boulevard, has embraced more dining options in line with a shift in the profile of its residents.

This change can be largely attributed to a 2003 south central Harlem rezoning plan that covered a 44-block area bordered by West 110th Street, West 124th Street, Morningside Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard. The plan, which allowed for the construction of more housing units along Frederick Douglass Boulevard, brought in defectors from other parts of the city, thereby creating a need for more dining options beyond authentic soul food.

"I think that the demographic of Harlem... you have a lot of people move in from the Upper East, Upper West Side. You have a lot of yuppies, a lot of millennials," said Faith Consolo, Douglas Elliman's retail leasing and sales division chairman.

The first restaurant to cater to Harlem's newfound fascination with food culture is Red Rooster, which opened in Lenox Avenue in 2011. Since then, Harlem has experienced a cultural revival of sorts, with food being the driving force.

The recent additions range from relaxed to upscale. Celebrity chef Marcus Samuelsson, one of the creators of Red Rooster, recently branched out with Streetbird Rotisserie, a rotisserie chicken joint on Frederick Douglass.

Vinateria, which opened two years ago, can be found on 118th Street, serving Italian fare paired with extensive wine options. Park 112, another restaurant on Frederick Douglass, is decidedly upscale, making it an anomaly in Restaurant Row's many easy-going options.

In terms of drinking options, Harlem has also gone beyond the dive bar.

Harlem Corner Social, which is across the street from Red Rooster, is one of the institutions from the early days of the neighborhood's so-called revival.

Meanwhile, Harlem Tavern, which is near 116th Street, has been serving burgers and fried chicken on the site of an old gas station since it opened in 2011.