

Simply Grand -- A Clinton Hill Block Reinvents Itself

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From left: Nu Yu Day Spa, Grand 275, and Karrot.

Don't be ashamed if you've never noticed the unassuming pocket of Clinton Hill on Grand Avenue between Lafayette Avenue and Clifton Place. For more than 40 years, Louise Boone has lived less than a football field away from the area, in the Pierson Towers co-op, and she had almost never walked down the formerly blighted strip. "I guess I never had a reason to," Boone said one Saturday afternoon while perusing the offerings at Karrot, the street's new health food store, for the first time. "I'll tell you, I think it's very nice."

The long-neglected eastern side of Grand Avenue used to be a rather menacing place, with drug dealers stationed on the corners and businesses boarded up and abandoned. Until 2001, when Sandra Simons opened the thimble-sized Caribbean restaurant Juleions, few had the courage or the assets to set up shop on the street. "When I say it was nothing, I mean it was nothing," said Simons of her humble storefront. "Everything was run-down, beat down to the ground."

Now Juleions is wedged between two other up-and-coming businesses, and Grand Avenue has become the centerpiece of a vibrant, welcoming community. When early-morning customers ask for bagels instead of grits, Simons sends them next door to the new cafe Grand 275, which at night becomes a soulful DJ lounge. She barter plates of oxtail, peas, and rice for fresh fruit smoothies from neighboring Karrot, and during lulls in business, she'll get a manicure from Nu Yu Day Spa, just around the corner on Clifton. "Their manicures are so relaxing," Simons said. "And that's just my hands. Can you imagine what their massages are like?"

The restaurant features a full service espresso/breakfast bar open weekdays at 7 a.m. and a cafe that serves afternoon and evening meals. The cafe will soon be complemented by a catering component and a meat, fish and produce market with limited dry goods, bread, wine and dairy selections opening this summer.

The block's renaissance is due in large part to the Pratt Area Community Council (PACC), a non-profit development group based in Fort Greene. In 2001, PACC bought a dilapidated, city-owned building (now home to Karrot, Nu Yu, the African bistro Dakar, and six apartments) for a dollar. "The building was horrible, a complete disaster," said project manager Mark Morgan-Perez. "Now it's a completely different environment."

On a block that used to see minimal foot traffic and zero commercial activity (at least of the legal sort), you can now join packs of Pratt Institute students for \$10 mimosa brunches at Grand 275. At Karrot, you can pick up an all-natural Indian simmer sauce made by Fort Greene cookbook author Maya Kaimal. Next door at Senegalese chef Pierre Thiam's Dakar, you can buy a bissop martini.

"Overnight, all these amenities that are of quality and that are diverse have appeared," said

PACC economic program manager Melissa Lee. "People are reprogramming themselves to shop in the area."

People like Clinton Hill resident Venetia Cantey, who says she "didn't come here a lot before." These days, the chatty health-care rep gets massages at Nu Yu, grabs sandwiches at Grand 275, and stops in a Karrot, if only to mess with the owner Radhamus Vitalona. "All these new stores are so beautiful. And sometimes," Cantey said, putting her arm around Vitalona, "the owner is even pleasant!"

Photography by Randy Duchane.