

Worcester Telegram & Gazette
Monday, April 4, 2016

A bold vision for Bull Mansion: New restaurateurs envision farm-fresh food, craft beers - and lettuce on the roof



Entrepreneur Victoria Mariano, 29, of Spencer and her partner, Aditya Tibrewal (not shown), have acquired the Bull Mansion/GAR Hall and plan to open a farm-to-table restaurant and entertainment space in the summer. T&G Staff/Christine Hochkeppel



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Posted Apr. 3, 2016 at 6:00 AM

Updated at 9:18 PM

WORCESTER - The Civil War ghosts in one of the city's most beautiful - and endangered - historic buildings will not be smoking water pipes.

Victoria Mariano, founder of two hookah lounges in the city, has a different vision for the historic Grand Army of the Republic Hall, also known as Bull Mansion, at 55 Pearl St.: a farm-to-table restaurant with a steampunk theme to take advantage of the building's 19th-century aesthetic, craft beers brewed on site, and fresh vegetables grown on the roof. (Steampunk, for those not familiar with the term, is "a genre of science fiction that typically features steam-powered machinery rather than advanced technology," according to Wikipedia.

"It's going to be really unique," said Ms. Mariano, who also envisions outdoor festivals and winter ice sculptures in the adjacent parking lots. "We're going to make Pearl Street a destination."

The 29-year-old entrepreneur from Spencer and partner Aditya "Adi" Tibrewal, 37, of Worcester are principals in Bull Mansion LLC, recently purchasing the 140-year-old High Victorian Gothic landmark from the New England Dream Center Inc., an offshoot of Liberty Assembly of God in Shrewsbury.

The sale price for the three-story, 14,600-square foot building, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was \$480,000, significantly less than the \$850,000 originally sought by the sellers. The structure, along with the neighboring landmark Union Church, had been part of an urban mission which the Pentecostal church had tried to establish downtown, but did not take flight.

The Union Church building, at 5 Chestnut St., was sold recently by the Liberty Assembly of God to the local congregation of the Presbyterian Church of Ghana for \$1.75 million.

The 55 Pearl St. building, site of a succession of failed restaurants and equipped with one of the city's largest institutional kitchens, had been envisioned by its previous church owners as a culinary-training center for the needy.

When its sale was finalized in late March, the new owners acquired a cache of thousands of dollars' worth of plates, glassware and menus, a legacy of the hopes for restaurant success that have proven as ephemeral as any of the spirits that might linger in the former Union veterans' lodge hall.

Where previous eateries have failed, however, Ms. Mariano and Mr. Tibrewal say they are confident their new venture will succeed.

"We want to do a farm-to-table restaurant drawing from as many local organic farms as possible," said Ms. Mariano, whose previous business enterprises in the city are two hookah

lounges, Spiritual Haze at 482 Park Ave. and Electric Haze at 26 Millbury St. in the Canal District. “Eventually we’d like to do our own rooftop garden (and) grow some of our own stuff,” she continued. “We’re hoping to partner with a brewery as well and do small-batch (brewing) in there.”

Plans also call for renting out the GAR Hall for private functions and renting the third floor as office space - potential revenue sources she said previous owners may not have tapped: “It’s such a big building, we’re trying to utilize all of the space.”

The farm-to-table approach, with a focus on food brought to the restaurant directly from where it’s grown or caught, will be able to draw on a wealth of farm goods in Central Massachusetts, while filling a dining niche in the area, said Ms. Mariano.

“I think we’ll get people from all over, within 45 minutes to an hour (drive) away,” she said. “The farm-to-table restaurant and doing craft beers, potentially (with) a brewery in here, is enough of a niche right now that sets us apart. It’s kind of in demand in this area.

“I never want to do a business that isn’t needed in an area,” she said. “I will drive an hour away to go to a nice farm-to-table restaurant. A lot of times, going an hour away is quicker than the wait at Armsby Abbey” at 144 Main St.

Ms. Mariano said she and her partner aim for a soft opening with light menu in July, and a grand opening by the end of August. She said they already have struck a partnership with The Hanover Theatre for the Performing Arts at 2 Southbridge St. on a package deal to combine a ticket to a show with dinner at the restaurant.

Mr. Tibrewal, an assistant vice president at Blue Hills Bank, brings his finance background to the operation. He said he hopes the restaurant will attract a diverse crowd that will help give downtown a boost.

“People are inclined to try fresh foods and be healthy these days,” he said. “At the same time, downtown is being revived. New restaurants are part of it as city starts to rebuild itself.

"We are young entrepreneurs trying to do something incredible in downtown Worcester," he said. "The city has been very helpful to us (as has) the (Worcester Regional) Chamber of Commerce. We are very thankful to everyone involved so far."

The partners met as students at Clark University, where Ms. Mariano began her first business, Spiritual Haze, as a project in the entrepreneurship program. Now the two former Clarkies aim to play a part in Worcester’s downtown revival by bringing new life to one of the city center’s most striking historic properties.

“Bull Mansion was built in an age of opulence and craftsmanship,” said Deborah Packard, executive director of Preservation Worcester, which holds preservation restrictions on the exterior and interior of the building meant to safeguard its features for future generations.

The mansion at 55 Pearl St. was built in 1876 by Daniel B. Wesson, co-founder of the Smith & Wesson firearms company, as a wedding present for his daughter, Sarah, on her marriage to Dr. George Bull. The home, which cost \$125,000 to build - the equivalent of \$2.5 million in today's dollars - was designed by Calvert Vaux, the architect and landscape designer who, with his partner, Frederick Law Olmsted, designed New York City's Central Park.

The Bull Mansion was sold in 1912 to the Civil War veterans' association, the Grand Army of the Republic, and became the GAR Memorial Hall. The building eventually was turned over to the city for use as a veterans' hall, then entered private hands. By 2003 it had been listed by Preservation Worcester among the city's most endangered properties. Three restaurants failed in the building between 2005 and 2010, when it was put up for sale at a foreclosure auction.

"In my mind, Bull Mansion is a true downtown gem," Ms. Packard said. "Cities like Savannah, Portsmouth, San Antonio and Salem have used historic preservation as a catalyst for downtown development. Worcester can, and is, doing the same."

Ms. Mariano, showing visitors last week the castle-like rooftop where she plans to grow lettuce, the handcrafted sliding French doors separating the dining rooms, and the 10 fireplaces she hopes to relight, said the asking price for a building like this in Boston would be very high - "at least four or five times the amount we paid for it, easily."

She said, "The attention to detail is huge in this place. Every single doorway has its own unique flair. Every single fireplace is different. There's a fireplace in every single room. It's all original, it's all in perfect shape: From 1876 to now, to still be in perfect shape! It's so rare. The craftsmanship was incredible. They put so much effort into it."

She and her partner expect to put at least \$150,000 more into renovations to give the restaurant portion of the building "our kind of vibe," Ms. Mariano said. She said the steampunk theme being considered for the lounge on the lower level could resonate in the GAR setting. "If we get artists to do a steampunk type of thing, Civil War-esque things could go really well with that," she said.

"We're not changing any of the historical or architectural aspects," she said. "We'll be highlighting them, in a modern way. We've been working with Preservation Worcester, making sure they're happy. They've been really helpful through the process."