

One Year In: The Smith

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The Smith, Jeff Lefcourt and Glenn Harris' follow up to their West Village spot Jane and their [currently closed](#) UWS eatery The Neptune Room, opened just over a year ago in a massive old Pizzeria Uno's space on 3rd Avenue and 11th Street. Due to the space, their location in a busy strip of NYU zone, and certain aspects of the menu, the restaurant had its fair share of [doubters](#). But a year later, the place is consistently packed, and, as the owners will go at length to reassure you, it's not with an undergrad crowd. The model was so successful, in fact, that Lefcourt and Harris are planning a citywide expansion, with at least one new Smith [already in the works](#). But let's take a quick look at how they got here:

Let's start with the opening. Any delays, any problems? Glenn Harris: No, all of our projects have opened up pretty much on time, which is a pretty unique situation. We had signed the lease several months prior to taking over the space, so it gave us some amount of planning time. **Jeff Lefcourt:** We were looking for awhile and we heard about this space and that day we walked over here and were pretty much like, "We'll take it." Without meeting the landlord or knowing too much about it. We signed the lease that day and met the landlord about a week later.

Were you concerned about having to renovate it from what it was before, a Pizzeria Uno's, to make your own identity? JL: It has a great infrastructure which is so hard to find with restaurant spaces in New York. We were able to use a lot. There's a back door where we can take deliveries. We can keep garbage in the back alley. We saw how the restaurant could operate and then started from scratch. For example we put in a whole new kitchen.

What did you do to differentiate it from the look of Uno's? JF: We took everything down. The only thing we kept was the floor. It's like an old New York floor and we liked that. We kind of patched it up but didn't want it to look perfect. The whole idea is to kind of have it be a **restaurant version of an old pair of jeans**, that kind of lived in comfortable feel.

How did the fact that there are two NYU dorms a block away on both sides play into your plan for the restaurant? JL: We knew where it was, we knew where NYU was, but we never thought of it as NYU. We got a lot of press from Eater and from other places saying, "NYU, NYU, NYU," but we really saw it as a central spot where people could come from Gramercy or from the East Village and downtown and a little west on 5th Avenue. We saw it as a real opportunity to be in the center of all these different neighborhoods.

You didn't think to take advantage of the student population? JL: We wanted to be accessible to whoever came in. We do a lot of faculty events. And for undergrads, they usually just bring their parents here. It's not at all an NYU crowd. NYMag wrote a thing on us when we first opened, and Gael Greene said NYU people were around. And I'm looking around thinking "where?" I think to some people anyone under 30 looks like NYU, but really we're in the heart of young downtown New York.

Any major changes in terms of the decor or menu since you opened last year? JL: The decor no. The menu has been a fun process for us because we started with food we loved to eat and food we crave. **GH:** But we've made some seasonal changes. And there are a few specials that people loved that we decided to put on the menu. **JL:** When we opened up, every dish we were in love with, but it was easy for us to drop one thing that wasn't working and put something else on. And that was the fun part, tweaking the dishes that people were buying and adding more.

Is that how you tweak the menu, you see what sells? Do professional or online reviews come into play? GH: I'll be informed that there are certain comments on certain blogs, and I'll definitely look at all of those things. I want to know what the public thinks, what they like, what they dislike. But you take it with a grain of salt. **JL:** What our servers in the restaurant are hearing is huge. So, we'll definitely look in the mirror. If someone says I don't like this salad we'll look at it and think what can we possibly do? But it's not like someone online will say they don't like the salad and we'll take the salad off the menu.

Have you had to change prices at all over the year? GH: Some things adjusted. We were able to change certain items that brought some prices down and some items we had to increase. **And now that we're in a recession, any specials?** GH: We do a Sunday night burger and a beer which is hugely popular. It's almost like a free beer. **JL:** I wish I could say that we opened this restaurant because we knew there was going to be a recession, but really it's just being accessible with great food and reasonable prices was our idea two years ago and now more than ever it just works.

And have you had much turnover in the last year? JL: Of all the restaurants I've opened over the years, this was the one restaurant where we still have over 70% of all the bartenders and front of the house. I think part of it is that we got busy so quickly that everyone was making money from the beginning. **GH:** Also because it was our third restaurant, I think it was the easiest one to open. Systems were in place. We knew exactly what we wanted. We had enough planning time. We were well funded.

Any lessons from your other openings that informed this one? JL: When we opened Jane, we opened right before September 11. It took us years...**GH:** And we were a couple of kids...**JL:** Yeah and it took us years to build the business one person at a time. Literally, our first Sunday brunch at Jane, we did 20 covers and now we do 600 covers. Here it just happened from our reputation at the Neptune Room, people were more interested in seeing what we were doing and came for brunch.

Any tweaks you want to make in the next year? GH: I want to break less glasses. It's up and running. I'd like to see breakfast grow. **What about new places on the horizon?** GH: We'd like to do more Smiths. **You were signing on to that Sheridan Square space, no?** G: Nothing's in stone yet, but it's certainly a possibility. **JL:** We're looking for great neighborhood restaurants. And there are plenty of neighborhoods in Manhattan and Brooklyn...**GH:** That deserve us. **JL:** That I think would be excited to have a good place to go to.

If you did end up with that space, would you build it out to look like this one? GH: Similar. The physical layout is a little different. **But the same kind of menu, same feel.** JL: It will be a little bit different just to make it feel different. Some people will say oh I like the one on the East side or I like the one on the West side.

So potentially in 20 years we could have a lot of Smiths. GH: All over. **JL:** Right now we're happy with one and we want to keep improving it. One step at a time.