

FRESH START Bart Potenza is an owner of Candle 79, which is opening next month on East 79th Street.



Christopher Smith for The New York Times

Feng Shui and Vegan Fare Battle a Neighborhood Curse

By ALEX WITCHEL

IF you noticed them at all, you would think they were part of the restaurant's new design: two small octagons outside, each with a mirror at its center. The point? To protect the restaurant from the building across the street, whose sharp edges, according to Judith Wendell, a feng shui consultant, "create a knifelike effect on the restaurant's energy, cutting into it — so we're reflecting it back."

Yes, it's come to this. Opening a restaurant in New York has always required a certain combination of savvy and insanity, especially at problematic addresses. Everyone can think of a space that has had a run of bad luck, no matter how many menus were tried. So when Joy Pierson and Bart Potenza, the owners of Candle Cafe, a successful vegan restaurant at 1307 Third Avenue at 75th Street, decided to expand into the property recently vacated by the failed Dining Room, they took its karma into their own hands. They hired Ms. Wendell to go where no contractor had gone before and fix what seemed to be

A new restaurant where
four others have died.

ailing the two-story town house at 154 East 79th Street at Lexington Avenue.

Candle 79, as it is called, is the building's fifth tenant in 20 years; others were Trois Jean, the Living Room and Jams, which started out white hot with Jonathan Waxman at the stove, was shaken by the stock market crash of 1987 and finally closed in 1988 after being renamed Jonathan Waxman and lowering its prices. So rather than rely on the purity and healing powers of the food alone to conquer unseen demons (vegans omit not only meat and poultry but all animal products, including fish, eggs, dairy, even honey) Ms. Pierson and Mr. Potenza have taken out

supernatural insurance instead. Although they will devote this month to private parties and not open full time until September, they claim to feel the benefits already.

"We used feng shui in the Third Avenue location," Mr. Potenza said, "and after being in business there for nine years and going strong, we think it's an element that has added to its overall success."

The front door to Candle 79 was built on a diagonal, which means it is slanted in Ms. Wendell's parlance, and she says that is no laughing matter.

"Slanted energy can cause accidents, bad business and lawsuits, and we want to cut that off immediately," she said. She hung a bamboo flute above it on the inside. "Usually you hang a sword, but it didn't match the décor," she said. "The flute symbolizes the sword."

An identical bamboo flute hangs over the doorway to one of the bathrooms near the kitchen; according to a feng shui map that Ms. Wendell consulted, that particular bathroom is located in a zone symbolizing wealth. "Because there is a toilet and sink there, you don't want the wealth going down the drain," she explained. (When Mr. Potenza added a mirror to a bathroom at his first restaurant, the Healthy Candle, to counteract a similar problem, he said he received a tax rebate of \$1,700 the next day.)

At the 79th Street space, Ms. Wendell said, she will also perform a number of "blessing and clearing" ceremonies that will "cleanse the negative energy and augment the positive," including one that will have Ms. Pierson and Mr. Potenza mix a concoction of cinnabar (a component of mercury known, Ms. Wendell said, for its protective qualities) with alcohol (Ms. Wendell prefers Bacardi 151 proof).

"They will then literally anoint the space," she said, "sealing the doors, putting it down drains and toilets and touching the center part of each burner on the stove."

In still another ceremony, she will use rice to "feed the negative spirits so they are sated and no longer need to occupy the space," Ms. Wendell said. "One of the things that prevented me from coming in at first was the yin, or what I call predecessor chi." (Chi is the Chinese word for energy.)

Which means the place had ghosts. "And they could be here from long before there was even a 79th Street," she said.