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**SMALL BUSINESS**

# Nitehawk Cinema Serves Dinner With A Movie In Independent Theater Revival

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BROOKLYN, N.Y. -- At the Nitehawk Cinema in New York's Williamsburg neighborhood, all the meals are served and eaten in the dark, lit only by the flickering images on the screen. Menu items like mussels, owner Matthew Viragh learned, don't go over so well in the dim lighting. But finger foods? A huge hit.

The Nitehawk has been open for less than two years, but already the dine-in theater is making profits. In the movie theater business, the typical revenue per customer from concessions is around \$5 per ticket holder. But at Nitehawk, that amount is triple that, said Viragh, who sold more than 150,000 tickets last year. At his theater, tickets cost \$11.

The success of the Nitehawk is a refreshing turnaround tale for the movie theater business. For years, small independent theaters -- think the lone single-screen in a small town -- have declined due to competition from mall multiplex theaters, home theater systems, cable TV and rising rents.

Even as the number of screens has increased over the last 18 years, the number of theaters has dropped. The number of United States movie theaters overall dropped to 5,331 in 2011 from more than 7,100 in 1995, [according to the National Association of Theater Owners](#).

But now a new kind theater is emerging: The dine-in theater, where patrons can catch the latest releases while noshing on things like fish tacos, marinated olives and craft beer.

Viragh, 34, who formerly worked as an advertising executive, modeled his business on the Commodore Theatre in Portsmouth, Va., one of first restaurant-movie independent theaters which opened in 1990. To learn the ropes of the business, he apprenticed with the Commodore's owner Fred Schoenfeld before coming back to New York to start the Nitehawk.

"The reason you have seen these dine-in theaters come about is that the little guys figured out that [in order to] survive we had to come up with new model," Schoenfeld, 68, said.

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At the Commodore, which plays new releases, tickets are \$7, but customers typically eat dinner too, which means his revenue comes to about \$18 per ticket holder, Schoenfeld said.

For Viragh, however, one thing stood between him and the opening of his new theater in 2011: a Prohibition-era law remained on the books in New York state making it illegal to serve alcohol in a motion-picture theater. [Viragh successfully lobbied to have the law overturned](#).

That has paved the way for other dine-in theaters in New York, including the franchise Alamo Draft House, [which has locations in Brooklyn and Manhattan opening later this year](#).

Of course, the dine-in theaters are not for all movies -- or all theater goers. Movies with graphic scenes, like the recent "Zero Dark Thirty," didn't necessarily go well with Tater Tots, which were poorly timed to be served during a torture scene. But on the other hand, some movies lend themselves naturally to culinary pairings, like "The Godfather," [which was screened with an orange-themed menu](#).

"With this model, people are basically looking for a good time," Viragh said.