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Beyond Popcorn and Nachos

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Bryan Derballa for The Wall Street Journal

Cinema director John Woods updates the marquee at the upstairs bar of Nitehawk Cinema in Williamsburg, which has a full menu and bar.

At the new Nitehawk Cinema in Williamsburg, movie trailers aren't the only pre-feature offerings. There are appetizers, too: deviled eggs with bacon bits, chicken wings dusted with sesame or croquettes stuffed with Serrano ham.

All are created by a Michelin-starred chef, and brought to you table-side by a server who makes sure your Gruyère-topped burger arrives just as "Midnight in Paris" enters its second act onscreen.

Nitehawk is New York's first movie theater with full table service, and it is one of several boutique theaters offering plush seating, waiter service and ambitious programming not typically found at the local multiplex.

Four new micro-theaters, as well as a revamped one, have opened in the city in the last year.

Dumbo's reRun Gastropub, which celebrated its first anniversary last month, boasts a 60-seat screening room and bar with snacks like duck-confit sausages.

Over at Lincoln Center, the Elinor Bunin Munroe Film Center will make its debut as a cafe next month.

Since opening in June, the center has been showcasing specialty titles such as John Turturro's documentary about the music tradition of Naples, "Passione."

In Williamsburg, the year-old indieScreen is co-owned by the founder of the Brooklyn Film Festival, Marco Ursino, and will feature an in-house tapas restaurant and bar slated to open next month.

Even older theaters are seeking amenity-rich makeovers.

In June, the slightly down-at-the-heels Brooklyn Heights Cinema was sold to musician Kenn Lowy, whose ambitious plans include a regular silent-film series set to live music.

"There are so many options now with how you can consume a movie—on your laptop, on your iPhone, through Netflix," says Nitehawk owner Matthew Viragh. "There needs to be a response from movie theaters on how to bring the audience back. We make it more of an event, that old glamour of going to see a movie 50 years ago."

Aaron Hillis, reRun's film curator, says his theater is focused on the experience of movie-going, and that more than 90% of its films have been New York theatrical premieres and festival-circuit favorites, such as "True Adolescents," starring Melissa Leo.

"Between the space, the food, the drink specials, all of these cater to those who want more than sticky floors and overpriced Coke," he says.

There's a strong demand for such niche theaters: New Yorkers are among the most voracious moviegoers in the country. According to the National Association of Theatre Owners, New York ranks second among all U.S. cities when it comes to grosses, with a current market share of 7.4%. (Los Angeles, with 7.7%, holds the top spot.)

A representative of AMC Theatres confirms that its AMC Empire 25 multiplex in Times Square is its busiest nationwide.

These smaller-scale theaters are opening amid a backdrop of trouble in the industry, which saw movie-going attendance fall to a 13-year low last year.

According to Paul Dergarabedian, box-office president of Hollywood.com, current ticket sales are significantly off last year's pace.

BTIG media analyst Richard Greenfield notes that "when you can subscribe to Netflix and have a virtual video store for \$7.99 a month, buying a movie ticket that costs north of \$10—and if you're in 3D, \$15-plus—I just think the price-value equation is under pressure."

Throw in steady grumbling about concession pricing and quality—a study by the Center for Science in the Public Interest found that a medium popcorn-soda combo will run you up \$12 and 1,600 calories—and you've got an opportunity that New York's new crop of boutique theaters can exploit.

"If some care and thought is put into the presentation and the experience, then people are going to go," says Nitehawk's cinema director, John Woods. "You're looking at what somebody does and what somebody doesn't do. And if you can do it better, then you're ahead of the game already."

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