

Bleach & Bagels

Throw In A Few Loads, Then Relax At The Spin Cycle Cafe In Newington

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Anyone who ever hauled a sack of dirty clothes and a roll of quarters knows about lulls at the laundromat between loading, unloading and folding.

Leaving for other errands risks loss or abuse of sundries and delicates, so students, military service members and others without home machines have had to endure long waits in often spartan settings.

Two Connecticut cousins have set out to invigorate the wash-and-dry routine with food, art, music and Internet access. Laury Rosario and Jesus Ortiz opened the Spin Cycle Cafe Laundromat two weeks ago at 190 Fenn Road in Newington. It has 25 washers and 24 dryers, all commercial-grade units with big, circular windows.

The gleaming machines occupy one side of the high-ceilinged, brightly lighted building. On the other is a café with warm, orange walls offering doughnuts, bagels, muffins, sandwiches and salads, along with coffee, soda, juice and water. The café side also features a lounge area with leather seating and a flat-screen TV.

Ortiz, 28, says he was inspired by a similar business near Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. The former U.S. Marine and East Hartford native said he hung out at the laundry/beer joint, which also featured a snack bar and arcade games. The place attracted Marines and students from a nearby college and was always busy, Ortiz said. When he returned to Connecticut in 2003, he told his first cousin, Rosario, about the potential for such a place in Yankeeeland.

Rosario, 35, was inspired and ready to launch, but Ortiz, a former Connecticut corrections officer, said he was reluctant. He had two kids to feed. Could he commit to a strong hunch?

His cousin finally convinced him, Ortiz said. "She kicked me in the (rear) and said, 'Let's go through with this.'"

Ortiz says Rosario is driven in everything she does. The Hartford native holds degrees in

biochemistry and naturopathic medicine from Trinity College and the University of Bridgeport. She is a U.S. Navy veteran and a former science teacher in Windsor schools.

Rosario's interest in hybrid business comes naturally. Her father, Evaristo Rosario, has run a grocery store/bar - a colmado - for the past 21 years in Aguas Buenas, Puerto Rico.

Rosario and Ortiz had to cross a few hurdles before opening their laundromat/cafe. Government inspectors, who had never dealt with such an operation, required a well-defined separation between laundry and restaurant operations. The two sides are divided by a partition, with separate water heaters for each side. The partners also had to expand the diameter of sewer and water lines.

In poker terms, Rosario and Ortiz say they're all in. Both have refinanced their homes and other property. They spent about \$175,000 on laundry machines alone, Rosario said. In all, she and Ortiz said they have invested well over \$250,000.

Business has been a bit slow, and the partners said they're looking forward to the start of the fall semester at nearby Central Connecticut State University. For now, Ortiz said, he's keeping his job with a tree removal outfit to pay his bills, but he and Rosario say they're committed.

Plans include WiFi access, additional seating in the lounge area and appearances by area musicians, poets and artists. Rosario and Ortiz said they are seeking a license to serve beer and wine, but both said they don't want a bar atmosphere. The café, they said, should be a place to relax, have a bite, listen to music or browse the Internet while the laundry spins.

As the only employees, they have to maintain the laundry and serve café customers. The hours are long - 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. on weekdays and 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on weekends - but Rosario said they're set for the long haul.

"We made it so far; I'm not giving up," she said.

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