

A Piece of Belgium Uptown

By: Stacey Szewczyk

Pascal Petit quit her public relations job at the

United Nations three years ago on a bet with her brother that she could successfully market the family sugar waffle recipe.

"My grandfather and great uncle manufactured household appliances like waffle irons," explains the petite, cammo-clad, blonde in an accent acquired in the Belgian city of Liege where she is from. "My grandmother and her sister came up with recipes to test on them."

One of these recipes resulted in waffles of a delectable flavor and consistency that Petit was able to recreate in her apartment kitchen and sell to specialty food stores like Dean & DeLuca and Gourmet Garage.

Brisk sales eventually turned to profits which, combined with personal savings and an SBA loan, enabled Petit to finance **La Liegeoise** (Woman from Liege), a bakery and cafe at 1325 5th Avenue, just off the northwestern tip of Central Park at 111th Street. The shop opened for business in June 2002.

The largely Hispanic East Harlem neighborhood would seem an odd choice of locations for a bakery specializing in waffles, crepes and croissants but Petit is one of a growing number of small business owners gambling on unconventional loca-

tions in a tough real estate market.

"We looked all over downtown and we also looked on the Upper West Side between the 70's and 90's but we gave up because it was too expensive," says Petit of the hunt for affordable space that also led her on fruitless searches through the Park Slope and Williamsburg sections of Brooklyn.



Then Petit and her husband, a graphic designer and 10-year resident of Harlem, came across the 111th Street space. "I thought this was a perfect spot," says Petit who recognized Fifth Avenue as a direct line to her clients downtown and 111th Street as a single cross street from the increasingly courtly northern tip of Central Park. Beyond the convenient location, the jazz heritage and cultural diversity of the area currently shared by Hispanics, Africans, Asians and even a small French community helped to cinch the deal for the jazz fan and former U.N. liaison.

Petit estimates the cost of launching a small business in the neighborhood to be about \$300,000. The space currently occupied by La Liegeoise had been a Chinese take out restaurant when she and her husband found it and under-

went a year of renovations before baking could be done on the premises.

Today, it has an airy, newly minted feeling. In the coming months Petit, who plans to sell Belgian chocolates soft drinks and waters in addition to waffles and pastries, intends to decorate the walls with images from both her homeland and Harlem.

"Belgium is definitely the main theme but also we wanted to dedicate some of our space to pictures of jazz musicians," explains Petit with a sense of the importance of binding her native culture to that

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of the surrounding community. Sensitive to the stigma of contributing to the gentrification of yet another New York working class community, she is determined to prove that a successful business can be run without compromising egalitarian ideals. "We make it a point to keep our prices under control. We want to change the conception that you can't have a wonderful store with downtown prices. Our goal is to keep the menu affordable so that everybody can come."

Petit asserts that her neighbors are proving to be very supportive. Despite a slight lag following 9/11, retail sales have tripled since June. In the seven months since she opened her doors, Petit has catered to customers ranging wealthy Upper East Siders, to children from the nearby projects who come to spend their pocket money on waffles.

"I believe the neighborhood is undergoing a transformation and I deeply believe we'll do well here," says Petit who is currently preparing to launch a new kind of waffle that is common in Belgium but still relatively unknown in The U.S. Like the recipe that launched La Liegeoise, it is a personal spin on a traditional formula that may just find its niche in New York.

La Liegeoise's Hours: M-F: 7:30 a.m.- 6 p.m.; Sat. & Sun. 8:30 a.m.- 6 p.m.