

CALORIE COUNTING

IS THE TREND-SETTING NEW YORK CITY LAW FLAWED?

by Kevin Fallon / CAS '09

It was apocalyptic news for restaurants: Spurred by reports that Americans consume one-third of their calories while eating out, New York City was pioneering a law that would require chain restaurants to post calorie counts next to menu items in a font and format as prominent as the price. The New York State Restaurant Association was taking it personally. "The industry is being unfairly targeted," complained the association's New York City Chapters executive vice president Chuck Hunt. And other groups rallied in their support:

"Americans should still have a right to guilt-free eat-

ing," cried the Center for Consumer Freedom. But after a two-and-a-half-year war and three lawsuits, New York's "nutrition police" won and the nation's first calorie-labeling law was enacted in July 2008.

Little more than a year later, the law is yielding some unappetizing results: The groundbreaking policy may have actually had no effect, at least in the low-income areas

food patrons in low-income areas of New York City and Newark, New Jersey (where there is no labeling policy), both before the law took effect and again a month after. Stationed outside four major food chains, the team collected customers' receipts and questioned them about their dining choices. Barely 10 percent of those polled noticed any calorie labels in the restaurants before the law, but af-

"It's taken 20 years for us to get this fat....Maybe it will take another 20 to reverse."

surveyed so far. A recent study by NYU researchers suggests that the new labels barely influence food choice, while another study found that they might even encourage some diners to purchase *more* calories. This is troubling news, notes Brian Elbel, assistant professor at the NYU School of Medicine, as numerous cities around the country roll out their own copycat laws and Congress weighs the LEAN (Labeling Education and Nutrition) Act, a federal bill that would apply menu labeling nationally. "[The legislation] is sweeping across the nation," Elbel warns. "We really need to understand the extent to which it's working before we know if it's a good thing for other cities to do."

Elbel and a team of researchers polled fast

ter July's enactment that number surged to just over half, which means the labels did raise awareness. What's concerning, however, is that of the 54 percent of respondents who said they saw the calorie labels, only about a quarter said it mattered to them. Worse, a study conducted by the University of Minnesota revealed that some men actually purchase more calories when menus are labeled. *The Big Money*, an economic off-shoot of *Slate*, recently ran "The Big Max," a chart that broke down fast food favorites by calories per dollar, heralding Pizza Hut's Meat Lover's Personal Pan Pizza as the best poverty payoff.

Of course, fighting obesity—not poverty—was the motivation for the law. In 2007, the New York State Public Health Association reported that almost 60 percent of New Yorkers, as well as



nearly half of the city's elementary school children, are overweight or obese, which costs the state and businesses \$6 billion a year. "Behind the policy was the assumption that if you had more information, you would make better choices," says Beth C. Weitzman, associate dean for academic affairs and professor of health and public policy at the Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. "But there are very smart, aware people who know tons about food who are obese."

So if information is not the cure, what is? Tod Mijanovich, a research assistant professor at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, wonders whether taxing fat or sugar would work, while Weitzman suggests the "traffic light" system that Britain uses—where a red light warns that food is high in sodium—to blatantly signal unhealthy as opposed to high-calorie foods. But there is also evidence that who you eat with influences what you consume. In a recent study, Weitzman and Mijanovich found that, at least among adolescent girls, peer groups affect eating habits. Others are testing incentive-based approaches. In 2005, for example, Freedom One Financial Group offered a free four-day cruise to Jamaica for employees who met certain weight-loss goals.

Historically, public health policy has helped curb harmful behaviors, such as smoking and drunk driving. "Nobody would've believed that you wouldn't be able to smoke in your office 30 years ago," Weitzman says. "That would've been absolutely fascistic." Calorie labeling may be a first step then: Elbel's survey did show that it helps people better estimate the calories they consume. "This may slowly raise awareness," Mijanovich agrees. "It's taken 20 years for us to get this fat from supersize-me meals. Maybe it will take another 20 to reverse." ■

performance

All the City's a Stage

AN ALUMNI THEATER TROUPE CASTS A NEW BRAND OF SHAKESPEARE—JUST FOR NEW YORK

by Jackie Risser / CAS '09



ROCK 'N' ROLL IN PENTAMETER? MEMBERS OF THE THEATER IN A BOX COMPANY REHEARSE *TEMPEST* TOSSED—A MUSICAL VERSION OF SHAKESPEARE'S CLASSIC.

One recent afternoon inside the Tisch School of the Arts acting studios, five actors huddled around a piano, chanting "Lost, lost, let's get lost," before singing a cappella, "Sun is going down/Better put your pack down/And stay here for the night." The bit may sound like a run-through for some hip new off-Broadway musical, but it's actually rehearsal for a streamlined, stomping adaptation of William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The avant-garde show, titled *Dream a Little Dream*, is the debut work of Theater in a Box, a new project by the Continuum Company, comprised entirely of alumni from the Tisch graduate acting

program, dedicated to bringing a fresh perspective to Shakespeare's iconic plays to the greater public. Directed by Tisch faculty member Jim Calder, the plays are more portable because there are only five actors—including, this year, Edi Gathegi (TSOA '05) of the *Twilight* film franchise—and more accessible because the verse is mixed with original contemporary music. Plus, they're free. For the first time the troupe traveled to three New York City parks—the Marcus Garvey and East River parks in Manhattan, and Herbert Von King Park in Brooklyn—to present what producer Michael Wiggins (TSOA '98) calls "essential Shakespeare."

Instrumental in launching the program was Academy Award-winner Whoopi Goldberg, who

was inspired by Joseph Papp's traveling theater truck, which used to come to her childhood neighborhood of Chelsea. Goldberg pitched a similar idea to Tisch Dean Mary Schmidt Campbell, who then recruited former grad acting chair Zelda Fichandler for artistic leadership. Soon, Theater in a Box—named for an actor's ability to create a dynamic theatrical experience out of a given "box" of a character—was born with the mission to bring first-rate free theater to New Yorkers throughout the boroughs.

One of the ways that they accomplished this was to adapt the work for a smaller cast. Michael Sexton, artistic director of the Shakespeare Society, trimmed the text to 70 minutes, and while the pentameter remains, some scenes were shortened, leaving time for those that more directly rely on an outdoor setting. The production, which was developed during a summer residency for Continuum at NYU's La Pietra in Florence, also features musical numbers written by the cast and accompanied by a live band, in what director Calder calls a "gospel back-up" style. "It's sort of like, 'We're gonna stop and sing a song now,'" he explains. The company's hope is that the dance and music—from South African movement and ballads to contemporary hip-hop—help to translate Shakespeare's prose into a more vibrant and personal experience for all audiences.

Back at the rehearsal, Sexton explains: "Look, we're out here creating rock 'n' roll—except it's in pentameter." ■

ENNYC

the insider

BEST OF NEW YORK

NYU FACULTY, STAFF, AND ALUMNI
OFFER UP THEIR FAVORITES

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

AS COLD WEATHER APPROACHES, GET THE BLOOD FLOWING WITH
A FRIENDLY GAME OF FOOTBALL OR SOME INTENSE RETAIL THERAPY

HOME FIELD ADVANTAGE

Autumn and football go hand in hand, but finding space to throw around the pigskin can be tough in a concrete jungle. Not even the green haven of Central Park can accommodate flag and touch football players. "It's gorgeous, but if you try to play a pickup football game you're going to get a citation because they don't want you chewing up the grass," says Christopher Bledsoe, director of athletics, intramurals, and recreation at NYU. Instead he recommends **RANDALL'S ISLAND**, which sits in the East River just off Manhattan, offers 18 fields for football and soccer, and is the easiest place in the city to find regular playing space. While his own football days may be behind him, Bledsoe still visits Randall's to play softball and Frisbee or to watch the track-and-field events at the \$42 million Icahn Stadium, which

opened in 2005 and is the premier outdoor track facility in North America. Randall's also boasts new tennis and golf centers, 26 softball and baseball fields, picnic areas, a playground, and waterfront pathways for walking and biking. "You can always get a good game," Bledsoe says, "and it's a great place to enjoy views of the city in the fall." **RANDALL'S ISLAND SPORTS FOUNDATION, 212-830-7722; WWW.RISF.ORG**

GHOSTLY GOTHAM

"People are either very curious about ghosts or have great disdain for the idea," observes Joyce Gold (GAL '88), an adjunct assistant professor who teaches *Walking and Talking New York* in the School of Continuing and Professional Studies. Those in the former group have plenty of options for visiting haunted spots in NYC, says Gold, who has been giving

historic walking tours of the city for over 30 years. One of her most popular is the **MACABRE GREENWICH VILLAGE TOUR**, inspired by a photo she once took in a Manhattan cemetery that revealed what appears to be a ghost. Highlights include St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, where Peter Stuyvesant, who was buried there in 1672, is said to roam the chapel, and the White Horse Tavern, where Dylan Thomas downed 18 shots of whiskey just before his death in 1953 and now allegedly haunts his favorite table. Gold also suggests that curious mortals check out the **MORRIS-JUMEL MANSION** in Washington Heights. Built in 1765 and used as headquarters by George Washington during the Revolutionary War, the house is a historic landmark and public museum. Over the years, there have been numerous ghost sightings of Hessian soldiers, former servants, and a previous owner. In 1964, schoolchildren waiting outside for a tour spotted a woman on the mansion's

balcony who scolded them to "Shut up!" They assumed it was an angry guide in period costume, until the curator explained that the building was locked—and empty. Eliza Jumel, the woman they likely saw, had been dead for nearly a century.

65 JUMEL TERRACE (BTW. WEST 160TH AND 162ND STREETS), 212-923-8008; MORRISJUMEL.ORG

SOUP'S ON

When *NYU Alumni Magazine* deputy editor Nicole Pezold (GSAS '04) heard we were looking for the city's top soup shop, she was eager to share her favorite: **CAFÉ MEDINA**. This unassuming eatery is tucked below street level near Union Square. And while many delis load their soups with oil and salt, the cooks at Café Medina, whose owners hail from Casablanca, rely on spices and creativity. Ten different varieties are made in-house daily, including staples such as Tuscan tomato bread and the wildly popular pumpkin corn

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bisque, alongside specials. “My order really just depends on my mood and the weather that day,” Pezold says. With so many options, it can be difficult to decide between, say, the African chicken peanut and the French bouillabaisse, but diners may sample them all. The soups are so well liked that they sell year-round, with lighter selections such as gazpacho available in summer and heartier fare in the winter—when a good bowl of soup is crucial. “Walking around New York on a cold, dreary day can be one of the most depressing things, so anything that’s warm and tasty is soothing to the soul,” Pezold says.

9 EAST 17TH STREET (BTW. BROADWAY AND FIFTH AVENUE), 212-242-2777; WWW.CAFEMEDINA.COM

'TIS THE SEASON

Holiday shopping is terrifying for many people, but shopaholic Ashlea Palladino (CAS '06) has a remedy for the long lines and depleted department store shelves. Each year she goes to the **HOLIDAY SHOPS**

AT BRYANT PARK, where from November to January the space is transformed into a winter wonderland. And though holiday markets spring up throughout the city, only Bryant Park features free ice-skating, a rinkside lounge with heated outdoor dining, and a holiday tree covered in more than 30,000 lights. There’s even a kiosk that offers a tree setup and decorating service. “It really takes the stress out of shopping and creates a fun experience,” Palladino says. The park features more than 100 booths of wares from all over the world—including handcrafted jewelry, Italian wool knit hats, luxurious lotions, and custom ornaments—and most of the booths are manned by the designers and artisans themselves. “You can find great deals and then get a little something for yourself, which is a nice reward for getting all of your shopping done,” Palladino says.

SIXTH AVENUE BTW. 40TH AND 42ND STREETS, 866-221-5157; SHOP.BRYANTPARK.ORG

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