



Boardwalk on

BY REBECCA PATTON



The first thing you'll notice about Madam Marie's is a glowing, neon Tillie Face in the window that, to the uninitiated, could easily be mistaken for a clown. And for good reason: The Tillie Face is Asbury Park's unofficial logo and features a grinning carnival worker (likely George C. Tilyou, who founded both Coney Island and Asbury Park), his hair parted down the middle and curling up at the ends. Madam Marie's, a new bar on Broadway, is a dizzying homage to Asbury Park, although owner Mike Higgins says the theme was inspired by the Bruce Springsteen song, "4th of July, Asbury Park (Sandy)." The lyrics describe the characters who frequented the boardwalk, including the famous fortune teller Madam Marie, whose booth was an Asbury Park staple.



Broadway



"I'm a Jersey boy myself," Higgins said. "Grew up on the boardwalk, worked on the boardwalk, was under the boardwalk a few times." He wanted to bring that feel and energy to Astoria.

Higgins and his business partner, Barry Spellman, also run the similarly quirky Judy & Punch bar on 30th Avenue, which they opened about four years ago. They saw that there was room to expand in Astoria and began renovating the space – previously a Croatian soccer bar – for Madam Marie's last year. Paul Rafferty, a bartender at Judy & Punch, is also a co-owner of Marie's, and they have another partner named Ted Gaylor, who also owns a sports bar in Brooklyn.

Higgins and Spellman did all of the renovating themselves, with help from Spellman's brother, Mark.

"We probably made a thousand trips to Home Depot," Higgins said. Their soft opening was on Dec. 15, 2017, and they've been spreading the good word of Marie's through social media and word-of-mouth. Although he said finding the bar's decorations was "a nightmare," their work paid off: Eclectic, slightly deranged objects line the walls, like a mounted stag head draped in Mardi Gras beads. And





then there's the vintage arcade game, Tic Tac Strike, which Higgins and Spellman found on eBay. Ironically, the only one they found was located in Asbury Park.

The bar's main attractions, however, are three spray-painted murals, which were done by Brooklyn muralist Danielle Mastrion. Higgins met her through a mutual friend, who knew that Higgins was looking for a muralist and that Mastrion excelled at carnival-themed artwork. Mastrion lives in Sheepshead Bay and grew up in Coney

Island, so she was perfect for the gig. The biggest of her three murals is located along the bar's back wall and depicts a Madam Marie-like figure holding a crystal ball up to her eye, which is magnified through the glass.

For inspiration, Mastrion was given a folder of reference images – “a mood folder!” she laughed – filled with photographs like Springsteen playing at the Stone Pony, vintage carnival signs and people on the boardwalk. She described

herself as a kid in a candy shop looking through the lookbook.

“I never had a client do my homework for me,” Mastrion said. “I really feel like we all really collaborated and worked together to make the vision they had come to life.”

Higgins is happy with the results, too. “I'm glad we got her because she did a fantastic job,” he said of Mastrion.

In addition to painting the walls, Mastrion also helped Higgins and Spellman find the soon-to-be-famous Tillie Face light, which



hangs in the front window. When she found out they were looking for some vintage signage as decoration, she recommended her friend Tommy Holiday, Coney Island's sign painter. Holiday had previously made the neon light and was trying to find the right home for it.

"That kind of sign either would go to a collector or museum or something very, very specific, like this kind of a place," Mastrion said of Madam Marie's.

"[The sign] found us," Higgins said. "We didn't find it, so that's even better."

Madam Marie's debuted their cocktail list in early January, which the bartenders curated "through many nights of drinking," according to Higgins. The results are both fun and flavorful, and their names have classic rock references. The Southside Johnny, for instance, has muddled mint and cucumber, lime juice, simple syrup and gin. It's Higgins' favorite, and he hopes it takes off once the weather gets warmer. Spirit in the Night is a mix of bourbon, maple syrup and bitters, while Bad Medicine contains vodka, pickle juice and lime juice – "Not that I'm a Bon Jovi fan," said Higgins of the latter, "but I thought it was a great name for a drink. Because either you're a Bruce Springsteen fan or a Bon Jovi fan. You can't be both, in my book."

He's a Springsteen fan, but that should be obvious by the name of the bar. "When you get pulled over in Jersey," he added, "the cop asked you for, like, license, registration and favorite Bruce Springsteen album."

In addition to their signature drinks, they have a rotating draft list, with craft beers like Allagash, Lagunitas and Dancing Gnome, along with the more classic Pabst Blue Rib-

bon and Guinness. The bartenders at Marie's are very personable and attentive, which is very intentional.

"One of our biggest things is making sure that you get a smile," Higgins said. "You get a hello, goodbye – maybe a dirty joke in between."

His hope is that Madam Marie's will become a neighborhood fixture, and already, the atmosphere is lively, irreverent and boozy. They have big plans to open up the back deck this summer and put some arcade games outdoors. They also host trivia – Immortan Joe's Trivia Thunderdome, more specifically – every Wednesday at 8 p.m., which is punctuated by the "Mad Max" soundtrack. They also just started playing bingo every

Tuesday at 8 p.m., hosted by the charismatic drag queen Glace Chace.

"She's hysterical," Higgins said. "She just had me and my partner laughing the minute we met her."

Higgins described Madam Marie's as off-beat – like a platypus. "Just a little different, but it works."



Photos: Marie Tomoi/9090