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# Say Goodbye To The Old Essex Street Market

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Mary Ann Siwek has been coming to the Lower East Side's Essex Street Market for 30 years. "It's cheap and the vendors are very friendly," she explained recently in front of her favorite fishmonger. Plus, the 68-year-old cracked, "It's not inundated by young people."

But soon neither the young nor old will pass through the doors of the roughly 80-year-old building. On May 5th, Essex Street Market will close at its current location on the corner of Essex and Delancey Street. As part of a [long-planned move](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/nyregion/a-move-for-the-essex-street-market.html) (<https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/29/nyregion/a-move-for-the-essex-street-market.html>), the city will relocate the market's current 21 vendors across the street to a glassy, newly built ground floor space at Essex Crossing, the 1.65 million-square-foot megaproject built by a consortium of developers known as Delancey Street Associates.

Essex Crossing calls for more than 1,000 apartments (roughly half of which will be below market rate), office, retail and community uses. In that respect, Essex Street Market is a piece of a much larger puzzle and experiment: the integration of an authentic affordable Lower East Side experience with an expensively curated one.

The new building will house not only Essex Street Market, but also a developer-run market called Market Line and, in the future, a food hall. On the opposite corner, there is a [14-screen Regal Cinemas, which opened earlier this month](https://www.boweryboogie.com/2019/04/14-screen-regal-cinemas-now-open-at-essex-crossing/) (<https://www.boweryboogie.com/2019/04/14-screen-regal-cinemas-now-open-at-essex-crossing/>), with promises of a soon-to-be-added restaurant. Above are rental apartments, some of which have been [projected to achieve the highest](#)

rents in the neighborhood (<https://www.wsj.com/articles/crossing-delancey-a-refuge-for-pushcart-vendors-gets-a-prime-new-home-1535374800>). Office space will follow. It makes sense that Essex Crossing, like Hudson Yards, has touted itself as “a city within a city.”

The old Essex Street Market—whose 15,000-square-foot plain brick building was constructed under Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia in 1940 as one of four markets to house Lower East Side pushcart peddlers—seems to lie squarely outside that city. The graffiti-lined block contains a pizzeria, a smoke store, and a cellular provider, a familiar retail trifecta in New York City. All will eventually be razed by Essex Crossing developers for high-rise housing.

Essex Street Market is the city's oldest public market, and city officials have hailed the relocation as a new era in its storied history. Its new home will be generously outfitted with 39 stalls and two restaurants, according to Megha Chopra, an assistant vice president of public markets who works at the city's Department of Economic Development Corporation. A peek into the building showed gleaming marble countertops and wrought-iron finishings. A 40-foot-tall glass exterior will open the stall owners to the light for the first time and make them visible from the street. Essex Crossing's developers have agreed to cover the cost of the move. The city will own and manage the new location, where the vendors will pay the same rate per square foot.

Unlike their private counterparts like Chelsea Market and food halls, public markets are mission-driven enterprises that cater to mom and pop businesses, many of them immigrant-run, Chopra said, by offering affordable rents and startup-friendly one-year leases. They are also a dying breed, she added, given the way most people shop these days. New York City has a total of six public markets, including La Marqueta in East Harlem, and Moore Street in East Williamsburg. Pike Place Market in Seattle is probably the oldest and most famous



public market in the country, but it too has had to weather economic declines and the threat of redevelopment (<https://www.nytimes.com/1984/09/08/style/pike-place-market-a-seattle-treasure.html>).



➡ Eric Suh runs New Star Fish Market. (Elizabeth Kim/Gothamist)

Essex Street Market is a brimming blend of the idiosyncratic and incongruous. New York Times columnist Ginia Bellafante once described (<https://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/06/dining/06esse.html>) it as "making available both the world of the bodega and the universe of the gourmand." The maze of stalls transitions from a fruit and vegetable stand to a rack of dried dark red peppers to a shelf of haphazardly displayed condiments to a tiny nook specializing in Japanese vegetarian dishes. To that mix, add two fish markets, a butcher shop, a bakery, and a coffee bean seller. Shopsyin's, the restaurant known

for its late foul-mouthed owner Kenny Shopsin ([http://gothamist.com/2018/09/04/kenny\\_shopsin\\_rip.php](http://gothamist.com/2018/09/04/kenny_shopsin_rip.php)) and his unusually long and disorienting menu, relocated here in 2007.

Many of the vendors at Essex Street Market have expressed excitement about the move, which to some has been too prolonged and confusing for customers (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/nyregion/essex-street-market-on-the-lower-east-side-is-forgotten-but-not-gone.html>). But the approaching deadline has evoked nostalgia and sadness as well.

On a recent Wednesday afternoon, the market was beginning to hum with the after-work crowd. There was a steady drip of Hispanic and Asian shoppers, old men standing around nursing cups of coffee, and the occasional tourist. At one point, a crew of FDNY firefighters, dressed in full gear, trudged in and began looking over the fish selection.

"It's definitely bittersweet," said Eric Suh, whose family runs New Star Fish Market. "I grew up in the market. There's a big sense of community. You get that vibe where everyone knows each other."

The 30-year-old, who graduated from culinary school in 2011, said he was looking to expand the business slightly. The new space will include a kitchen that will allow him to experiment with some pre-made food options like fish and chips and crab cakes.

Saad Bourkadi, who runs Essex Olive & Spice House and has been a vendor at Essex Market for two years, had similar feelings. "Put it this way, it's a mixed feeling," he said. "We are attached to this building. It's been here for such a long time, 80 years old. At the same time, we are looking forward to the new place which is much more open, has much more light and is a much more attractive place."

Christine Juritsch, the owner of Peasant Stock, which specializes in soups, said she was looking forward to having "more storage, more elbow room."

One shopper, who only gave her name as Zaida, said that the market's "rustic" quality will "be lost because of the shiny new lights." However, she said she believed "the soul of the place will be the same".

Back at the fish counter, Siwek was skeptical, even after she was assured that all the vendors would simply be moving across the street. "This works. Why would you like to change it?" she said plaintively.

"Nobody likes change," she added.

The new Essex Street Market will open on May 13th.

*Additional reporting provided by Brahmjot Kaur.*

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