

The New York Times

At Columbus Circle, a New Home for Underground Gourmets

Building Blocks

By DAVID W. DUNLAP MARCH 23, 2016



Sit-down restaurants are set to open in April at the 59th Street-Columbus Circle subway station, part of a new shopping arcade called TurnStyle. Credit Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Sit-down dining is coming to the subway.

Twenty small restaurants and other food establishments, along with 19 shops, kiosks and pop-up stores, are set to open under Columbus Circle on April 19 in the first significant privatization of a New York subway station.

At Casa Toscana, run by Luca Paci and Luca Meacci as an offshoot and upgrade of [Gelato Ti Amo](#) in Lower Manhattan (which itself will become a Casa Toscana), focaccia sandwiches and gelato will be the staples.

Nearby, the sisters [Carine Assouad and Christine Assouad Sfeir](#) will open the second [Semsom](#) in New York, serving bowls and wraps with a creamy hummus made of peeled chickpeas.

Cosa Toscana and Semsom are two tenants in a \$14.5 million mall and food court, called [TurnStyle](#), along both sides of a 325-foot-long mezzanine passageway from Eighth Avenue and 57th Street to the A, B, C, D and No. 1 train platforms at 59th Street-Columbus Circle.

“This is our first full-out experiment in transforming a section of an older station,” Jeffrey Rosen, the real estate director at the [Metropolitan Transportation Authority](#), said.

Transformation is the word. With matte white columns, matte black beams, illuminated vaults framed by [clerestory windows](#), mirrored enclosures to camouflage mechanical fixtures, glass storefronts and a central island of porcelain floor tiles that look and feel like real wood, TurnStyle is a far cry from [Nedick’s](#), an orange-drink-and-hot-dog chain that operated in the subway until the 1980s.



A 325-foot-long passageway will offer 20 restaurants, with an emphasis on smaller, independent businesses. Credit Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Of course, there is a Starbucks in the mix. But most of the lessees are relatively small and fairly new companies. “We’ve built a community of independent businesses,” said Susan E. Fine, a developer who leads the partnership behind TurnStyle. “It would have been very easy to do five large stores. The secret is the diversity of uses.”

This sounds like the kind of thing a developer is supposed to say in an era when malls are called “collections” and tenant selection is known as “curation.”

But a visit to TurnStyle last week left me almost convinced that Ms. Fine had achieved her stated goal — almost, because it will be impossible to judge fairly until it fills with as many as 90,000 pedestrians every weekday. (The passageway is outside the fare zone, so it costs nothing to enter.)

TurnStyle’s closest retail cousin is probably [Grand Central Market](#). And that is more than a coincidence, since Ms. Fine was the director of real estate at the transit authority during the [redevelopment of Grand Central Terminal](#).

What is appealing about TurnStyle is the density, variety and clarity of the space, designed by Thaddeus Briner and his colleagues at [Architecture Outfit](#). The central public corridor is 27 feet wide, tight enough that a passer-by is conscious of storefronts on both sides. It is a small-scale evocation of a busy shopping street.

But not too busy. An enclosed conveyor belt has been constructed along one of the stairways to deliver goods and remove garbage without convoys of hand trucks.



TurnStyle businesses will be required by their leases to remain open at least 12 hours a day. Credit Chang W. Lee/The New York Times

Some dining spots will open fully to the passageway, with security gates that fold inconspicuously into side pockets. Tenants whose stores have solid glass facades cannot cover the windows with signs, or fill them with products that obscure views, according to the terms of the lease.

Spaces range from 219 square feet ([Doughnuttery](#)) to 780 square feet (the [Gastronomie 491](#) market). Businesses are required by their leases to remain open at least 12 hours a day, Ms. Fine said. She said her goal was to keep TurnStyle open every day except Sunday.

TurnStyle is operating the 27,000-square-foot mezzanine space under a 20-year lease that can be extended by 10 years. The partnership led by Ms. Fine was chosen by the authority because it offered the highest guaranteed base rent (a present value of \$5.4 million over 20 years) and proposed at least \$5 million worth of improvements to the property.

The upgrade turned out to be far more ambitious, requiring a \$12 million investment by Goldman Sachs, which lent money to the partnership and took a stake in the project.

Perhaps the most striking feature of TurnStyle are the white steel columns. This is not something an architect would have proposed for the [graffiti-plagued subway system](#) of the 1980s.

TurnStyle will employ two full-time cleaners, Ms. Fine said. Shopkeepers will furnish “[eyes upon the street](#),” to use the famous phrase of the critic Jane Jacobs for neighborhood deterrence.

Nevertheless, Mr. Briner allowed, as he walked by the unblemished columns, “It will be an interesting social experiment.”