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NEW YORK

# Latest Spin on Laundromats Includes Pastries, Movie Nights and Maybe Even Karaoke

The number of self-service laundry spots in New York City has dropped 25% since 2015, so owners are doing what they can to stay in business

*By Anne Kadet / Photographs by Lauren Crothers for The Wall Street Journal*

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Passing by Celsious, a storefront in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, one might feel a bit puzzled. The sidewalk signs advertise organic pastry, cold brew and “Save 20% on bulk soap.” What’s inside?

A fancy laundromat, of course. At Celsious, customers doing the wash snack on rhubarb rose tarts at the cafe, sip organic kombucha on tap, attend free meditation classes and fold their jeans in a spacious backyard patio festooned with pink Azaleas.

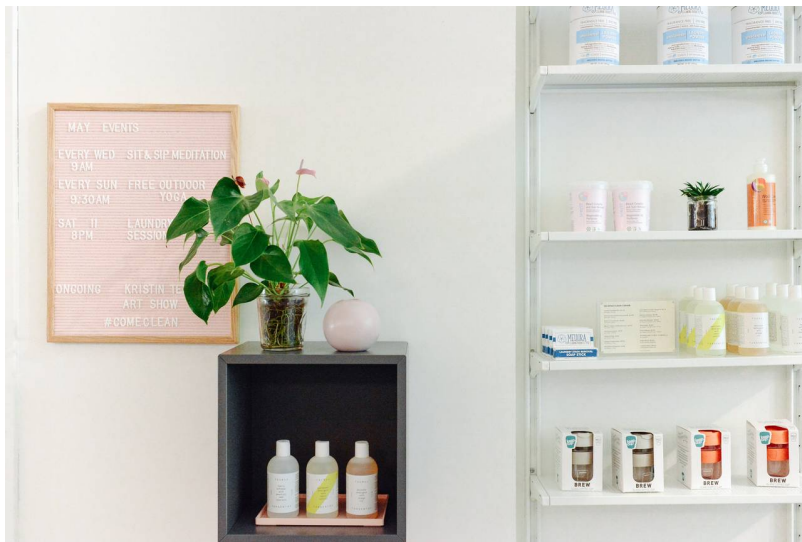
The catch: A wash here starts at \$7. While the price includes detergent and an extraction cycle that gets clothes extra dry, that is more than twice the \$3 charge typical at New York City laundromats.

“If you want to be able to pay the rent, the model has to change,” says co-owner Corinna Williams, who opened the business in 2017 with her sister. “Your pricing has to reflect your costs, and then you need to see if you can offer accessory services.”

The city is losing its laundromats. Since 2015, the number of self-service laundry spots fell 25%, from 2,800 to 2,100, according to the city’s Department of Consumer Affairs.

“It’s a business in decline, to tell you the truth,” says Gary Ruff, a Melville, N.Y., laundromat consultant and lawyer who specializes in laundromat transfers. “Gentrification is killing it.”

Some local laundromats are trying to boost sales with attractions ranging from arcade games and beer to movie nights.



Celsious in Williamsburg is an 'eco-conscious' laundromat founded by sisters Corinna and Theresa Williams.

At Celsious, customers can also buy oil paintings from the current exhibit hanging over the washing machines or purchase \$35 ceramic Celsious coffee mugs.

Ms. Williams says she doesn't think of her laundromat as "upscale" so much as a "dignified experience" in contrast to the cramped, grimy conditions found elsewhere.

"Every laundromat should be like this," she says. "Everyone deserves it."

While Ms. Williams says her business is doing well, don't expect many copycats. It costs a lot to break into the laundry business, and it is hard to make a profit.



Patrons use a second-floor lounge at Celsious in Brooklyn.

Opening an average-size laundromat—about 2,500 square feet—might cost about \$500,000, estimates Brian Wallace, president and CEO of the Coin Laundry Association. That is roughly \$150,000 for the build-out, including utility hookups, and \$350,000 for equipment, including washers and dryers.

For every four quarters a customer pops into a machine, one roughly covers the rent, another covers the utilities and a third covers labor, insurance and repairs, Mr. Wallace estimates. Ideally, the owner pockets the remaining 25 cents.

This typical laundromat might generate \$250,000 a year in sales and a \$65,000 profit, says Mr. Wallace.

This sounds doable, but in recent years, rents have been rising fast, and there isn't much price elasticity in laundry service. "There's a limit to what the local business feels they can pass along to their low-income family customers," says Mr. Wallace.



A customer uses Apple Pay at V&T's Laundry Box in Harlem.

In New York City, there is added pressure from the growing number of new apartment buildings with spacious shared laundry rooms or in-unit hookups, he says.

Mr. Ruff, the consultant, says he has seen laundromats try to earn additional revenue by installing everything from tanning beds to pool tables. But the owners who survive are typically those who own the property and can repair

their own machines—service can cost \$300 to \$400 an hour.

Many laundromat owners monetize excess capacity by offering wash and fold services. Usage can range from 90% on weekends to just 10% on a Tuesday morning. That is a great time to wash towels for the local gym.

One of the city's top-rated laundromats, according to Yelp, is also one of the newest. The attraction at V&T's Laundry Box: a nonstop party. Sort of.

While things can be slow on weekdays, the Harlem laundromat, launched in 2017 by husband-and-wife team Vincent and Tanya Brown, features movie nights, talent shows, plays, candlelight networking mixers and a rockin' sound system blasting playlists curated by Mr. Brown.

"I try to get a feel for the crowd," he said on a recent afternoon, turning up the volume on "Sucker," a current hit by the Jonas Brothers.

Customers also enjoy free snacks, videogames on the Xbox and plenty of conversation.

"We talk a lot," says Ms. Brown.

"She talks a lot, seriously," agrees Mr. Brown.

They are equally proud of their machines, which take coins, credit cards, Apple Pay and Google Pay, "and spin twice as fast as any other laundromat in the neighborhood," says Mr. Brown.



Vincent and Tanya Brown co-own V&T's Laundry Box in Harlem, which offers free coffee, popcorn, wifi, sweets, TV and machines that accept Apple Pay. The couple also puts on movie and music nights for customers.

“When you take your clothes out, they’re practically dry.”

Alas, there is a lot more competition in Harlem than in Williamsburg. A dozen rival laundromats operate within a four-block radius of V&T's. The Browns charge \$3 for a wash, the going rate in the neighborhood, and that makes for a tight budget.

“We’re working really hard to break even,” says Mr. Brown.

Still, they are optimistic. The customer base is growing, an automatic folding machine is on order and Mr. Brown just bought a new tool set in hopes of doing his own repairs.

And if that doesn’t do the trick?

“We’re planning karaoke for summer Fridays,” says Ms. Brown.

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