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Real Estate Guide

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Life in Williamsburg
isn't such a grind

Having a BALL

By MICKI SIEGEL

MICHAEL Chernow didn't know it at the time, but when he bought his Williamsburg condo in 2008, he was opening the door to starting a business of his own.

Chernow and his business partner, Daniel Holzman, formed a plan for a restaurant focusing on meatballs. They knew they'd have to lure potential investors to try their product, and needed a space that was big enough — and attractive enough — to accommodate the tastings. Chernow had just what they required. What better place than the spacious private roof deck that came with his condo?

Though it meant that would-be backers had to trudge up four flights to get to Chernow's apartment, then another flight to reach the roof — where they sampled what Chernow and Holzman called a "new concept" in restaurants — they came, in droves.

For three months, from August through October 2009, "Daniel and I spent the whole day preparing meatballs," Chernow

says. "We would grind pounds and pounds of meat in this tiny household meat grinder. We set up big trays of meatballs, sides, and mix-and-match sauces on the roof. That's how we were able to woo investors. And that's what created the whole business."

The Meatball Shop opened in February at 84 Stanton St. The Lower East Side joint became a success so quickly that Chernow and Holzman are now planning to open a second branch in Williamsburg next spring.

Meatball Shop partner Michael Chernow and his wife, Donna, live in a Brooklyn condo with a spiral staircase that leads to an 800-square-foot roof deck.

That spot on Bedford Avenue will make the commute even easier for Chernow, 30, who lives with his Wilhelmina-model wife, Donna Hemmingsen Chernow, in a loft-like, 900-square-foot, one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment with 12-foot ceilings, an open kitchen with granite counters and a Juliet balcony. A spiral staircase goes up to their

roof deck, which measures a whopping 800 square feet.

The couple had been renting in downtown Manhattan when they decided they were ready to buy a home of their own.

"I was apprehensive about climbing over the bridge and moving to Williamsburg," Chernow admits, "but Donna was adamant about getting

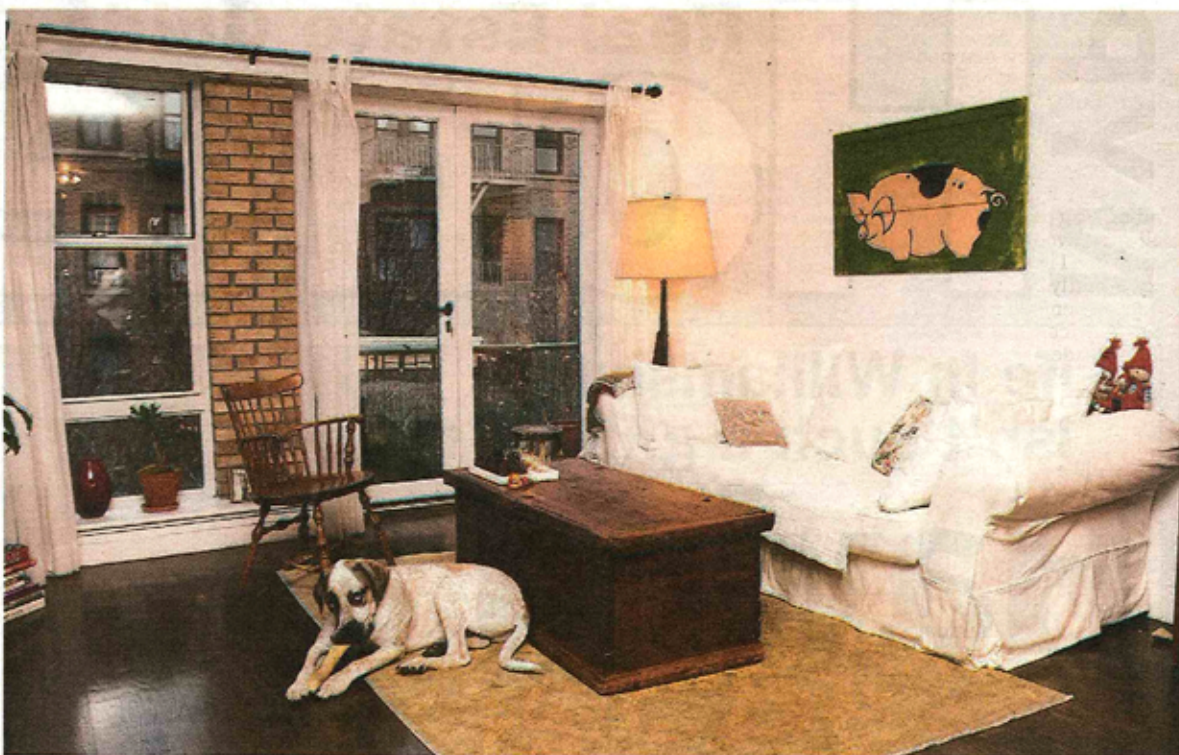
outdoor space. We knew we couldn't find a place in the city with space like we have now.

"We'd been looking at apartments for nearly a year when we first walked up here. We weren't 100 percent sold on it at the time. Then we looked at the apartment across the hall.

See **CHERNOW** on Page 40



Edin Paz (2)



BROOKLYN BASED: Chernow's living room (above) showcases his pig painting. The bedroom (below) has vintage furnishings.

BE LIKE MIKE

CHERNOW from Page 39

It was the same footprint as this one, but flipped over. So we put in a bid, and that was the start of a bidding war. Just before we were to go to the signing, the owner suddenly stopped everything and sold it, instead, to a friend of his."

So, the couple went back to the first apartment for a second look, and realized there were possibilities they hadn't seen before. Plus, they were able to purchase the condo, which is a short walk from the Bedford Avenue L-train stop, for less than they had been going to spend on the other unit.

"It didn't need much work," Chernow says. "We had the floors sanded and redone. We put in a big closet in the bedroom. And we built French doors to separate the bedroom from the rest of the apartment."

As for the decor, it's rather minimalist — a white couch, a wooden captain's chair, a bookcase, an antique dowry chest that serves as a coffee table, a huge TV and a dining-room table with benches. Flourishes include an 1800s-era chandelier Chernow bought on a trip to California after finding nothing



in the city that suited him, and an antique movie-studio set light.

In fact, Chernow learned to appreciate vintage objects thanks to his father, an antiques buff who often dragged him along while shopping. Chernow "hated" it then, but has since grown to enjoy antique hunting. He and Donna have traveled upstate and found pieces both for the restaurant (wooden tables on old iron bases, farmhouse chairs, old light fixtures and ceiling fans) and for their home.

On one of the apartment's walls, Donna creatively arranged photos of both their families. On another,

for the holidays, she'd hung 24 small Christmas gifts for Chernow, a reflection of her Danish background.

"It's a tradition to receive gifts for each day from Dec. 1 to Christmas Eve," she explains.

When Chernow isn't spending time at home with Donna, he's working with Holzman, whom he's known for most of his life. They were Upper East Side neighbors, from families that "weren't wealthy," so they both started working at the Candle Café on Third Avenue (which — ironically, given the boys' future endeavor together — is a vegan restaurant). Holzman,

The Chernows' FAVORITE THINGS

- ★ Their dog, Riley, a rescue
- ★ An 1800s chandelier
- ★ The pot rack; it is Chernow's invention — he attached an old sled to the ceiling and hung pots from it
- ★ Chernow's painting of a pig; he took old doors from two kitchen cabinets and used them for a canvas
- ★ An antique movie-studio set light
- ★ The household meat grinder they used to make meatballs for potential investors
- ★ A tiny statue of the three wise monkeys — see no evil, hear no evil and speak no evil — that belonged to Chernow's dad

then 14, started in the kitchen while Chernow, 13, was a delivery boy. They've been inseparable ever since.

"We were best friends then, and we're best friends now," Chernow says.

In 2007, after years as a bartender, Chernow enrolled at the French Culinary Institute. He graduated with honors and then teamed up with Holzman, who had gone on to cook at Le Bernardin.

Originally, they planned on having what Chernow calls a "fancy" place, with meatballs as just an item for outgoing orders.

"But that was a lot of pressure," Chernow says, "and making meatballs was really fun. Everybody wants meatballs. They're homey, cozy. Finally, we decided to make them with sauces, sides and ice-cream sandwiches for dessert."

Donna helped out, too. She went to pastry school and developed the dessert sandwiches, made with freshly baked cookies and homemade ice cream.

Running the Meatball Shop, which serves from lunchtime to the wee hours, is indeed a grind. It's open Monday to Wednesday until 2 a.m., and Thursday to Saturday until 4 a.m.

Fortunately, "it's just a hop, skip and a jump from Stanton Street to the apartment," Chernow says. "Still, I'm excited about opening another Meatball Shop even closer to my home in Williamsburg.

"It's funny that I was nervous about moving to Brooklyn," adds the heavily tattooed Chernow, whose hobbies include Muay Thai



TURN ON THE BRIGHT LIGHTS: The cozy dining area adjacent to the kitchen features an antique chandelier and a mirror.

fighting and jiu-jitsu.

"Now that we're here, it's most certainly where I want to be. The only way I would move back to Manhattan would be if we

could fulfill our dream and have a townhouse in the West Village.

"That's our next step. We just have to sell enough meatballs to do it."