

MODERN VINTAGE

Mike Croce and Jeff Sorg will keep unique Corner Room features, like its revolving door, while updating the space and menu.

Turning a Corner!

The new alumni owners of **Hotel State College and Co.** knew they'd have their hands full balancing respect for tradition and long-overdue updates to the iconic downtown business. They didn't know they'd have to cope with a pandemic, too.

For almost 100 years,

people have been cramming into booths at The Corner Room to catch up on local news, trade gossip, or debate the promise of this year's O-line. It's such a common sight, in fact, that when four colleagues in matching masks gather in the restaurant's side room one January afternoon, no one seems to notice. But the content of their conversation, if overheard, would definitely raise

a few eyebrows: These guys are talking pendant lighting, vinyl swatches, logo designs, and avocado toast.

They are reimagining every aspect of this iconic spot, from its flooring to its food.

Though most alumni probably think of The Corner Room as unaltered by time since it opened in 1926, "it's been many iterations," says Mike Croce, president of Pat Croce & Company, which purchased the restaurant's



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business group Hotel State College & Co. in December 2019. “So we can continue to change it, but we’re never gonna get rid of certain things—the wood stain, these crazy-high booths that everybody loves. You’ll know it’s The Corner Room.”

Croce’s business partner and brother-in-law, CEO Jeff Sorg, holds up a photo of the restaurant’s main dining room (below) from somewhere around the middle of last century; the same wood-paneled walls and high-backed booths are there, but so is an unfamiliar soda fountain counter and stools. “Jonny, do we have a lot of these postcards?” he asks Corner Room GM Jon Street, who assures his boss that there are hundreds of them laying around, relics from another time that is somehow all-but-forgotten and yet still beloved.

“Cool,” Sorg says, new menu options and a proposed seating plan also in hand. “We’re gonna put the counter back in the space.” His voice is muffled behind a mask that states “Do Good.” But you can tell he’s smiling.

Alumni themselves, **Croce ’04 Bus** and **Sorg ’99 Bus** understand how important it is to honor the brand’s history while shepherding the business into the future. It’s exactly what they signed up for when they bought the business, which includes The Corner Room, Zeno’s Pub, Bill Pickle’s Tap Room, Allen Street Grill, Chumley’s, The Basement Nightspot, and the 13-room Hotel State College.

What they did not sign up for was a global pandemic. Less than three months after meeting with their new team of managers and staff, all of their State College businesses had to close—and half remained so for almost all of 2020. “We lost a lot of money last year,” Sorg says. “This has been our toughest market.”

Pat Croce & Company’s other markets, in Key West and St. Augustine, Fla., fared better, though Sorg says they sold one restaurant in Key West during the pandemic, and permanently closed another. They now have eight businesses in Florida, where pandemic-related mandates and norms have been vastly different than here in Pennsylvania.

But here is where the guys have mostly been, carpooling back and forth each week from their homes and families in the Philadelphia area to the heart of their alma mater’s hometown. Or, as Mike Croce calls it, “where my favorite four years of my life were spent.”

The business partners first

met when Croce came to University Park to visit his older sister, **Kelly Croce ’01 Com**, who was dating Sorg (they later married). Sorg played varsity soccer his sophomore year, then switched to club soccer, where he made the friends who would, years later, alert him to the Hotel State College listing. He spent his first post-college years working for accounting firms Arthur Andersen and KPMG. Then, at a crossroads in his career in 2005, he moved down to Key West to help Kelly and her father open a pirate museum. (Pat Croce, the colorful entrepreneur and former president of the Philadelphia 76ers, is something of a fanatic about pirates and has written a number of books on the subject.) Mike, who also met his wife, **Julia Miller Croce ’04 Com**, in college, was following his dream of making it in the auto industry—and quickly learning that selling cars wasn’t for him.

In 2006, Sorg had a brainstorm to buy the building beside the pirate museum and open a restaurant and bar. “We very much stumbled into hospitality in that way,” says Sorg, whose industry experience to that point had been working the door at Café 210 West and summer bartending at Russell’s in Bloomsburg. “We made all the mistakes and learned all the hard lessons with our first project there. And I loved it. I really, really enjoyed the restaurant industry.”

Mike Croce joined his father’s company in 2007, and by 2014 when Pat retired, Mike and Jeff were at the helm of company operations that included nine restaurants, bars, and museums in Florida. But both also had growing families based in Pennsylvania: Mike and

RESTORING A TREASURE
The Corner Room’s old soda fountain counter, seen in this postcard from the mid-20th century, is being rebuilt as part of renovations.



MENU MAKEOVER
Croce and Sorg aim to attract younger generations of diners to The Corner Room with a revamped menu that updates classic dishes with more modern flavors.

Julia have five children, Jeff and Kelly have three. For years they commuted to their Florida properties while searching for the right opportunity in the Philadelphia area to expand the business closer to home. Nothing ever felt right. And then:

“I remember exactly where we were. We were on a plane, we landed in Key West and Jeff said, ‘I just emailed you something. Look at the deal at Penn State,’” Croce says. “Man, I remember I was like, ‘Whoa. Really? Penn State?’”

It took months of due-diligence meetings with former Hotel State College & Co. CEO **Joe Shulman ’81 H&HD** before the partners gave the deal a thumbs-up, but Shulman says he knew early on these were the right guys for the job.

“We wanted to cater to a group with pockets that were deeper than ours and were smarter than us. People who knew what they were getting into,” Shulman says. “And I wanted to make sure that the brands did not change, that they carried on. And most importantly, that my staff would be maintained.”

That staff includes his son Curtis Shulman, Hotel State College’s director of operations, who got to know his new employers quite well those first few months under strange, stressful circumstances.

“It was a roller coaster of

emotions,” says Sorg of the first state-mandated shutdown of restaurants and bars in mid-March 2020, less than three months after they officially took control of the business. “It was complete loss of certainty, in our businesses and our lives. We all experienced that in various ways. It was devastating when we laid off our teams initially because we were very scared. We didn’t know how people were going to fare, and the impact this was going to have.”

For much of their staff, the impact has been longer-lasting than anyone had anticipated. Zeno’s GM and bartender David Staab, with the company since 1984, was furloughed in March of 2020, came back briefly in mid-June, then was furloughed again when the bar closed a month later. The Basement Nightspot and Chumley’s didn’t reopen at all after closing last March.

Chumley’s GM **Ellen Braun ’84 Lib** has relied on unemployment benefits and some part-time work at local restaurant Pine Grove Hall when it was open. “I think the most stressful part for everybody is the unknown,” she says. There are people like herself who are sitting idle, and others, like The Corner Room chefs making to-go orders and hotel staff

COURTESY THE CORNER ROOM

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sanitizing every inch of the place, working twice as hard as usual while worrying about their own health. “Everybody feels for everybody else. There’s no ‘I wish I was on the other side,’ because all of it’s hard.”

With an inventory going to waste and a community to help, Croce, Sorg, and Shulman gave away 150 meals to service workers during the first weeks of the pandemic. On April 1, they packed 50 bags of groceries and set them outside The Corner Room for State College families in need to pick up, an endeavor they continued weekly for three months. But as time passed and seats remained empty, the new owners turned inward, scrapping their original five-year plan for a new one that made more sense given the situation.

In 2018, the Allen Street Grill was renamed Spats at the Grill, marking the beginning of a partnership with the owners of the former downtown spot Spats Café. But it never found its footing, and the second-floor space needed attention. Sorg and Croce knew the restaurant needed to be recognizably familiar but also feel—and taste—entirely new. They brought in chef Karen Nicolas, a State College native who’d been working in Philadelphia and whose previous experience included Gramercy Tavern in New York City, with a big pitch: to be Hotel State College and Co.’s culinary direc-

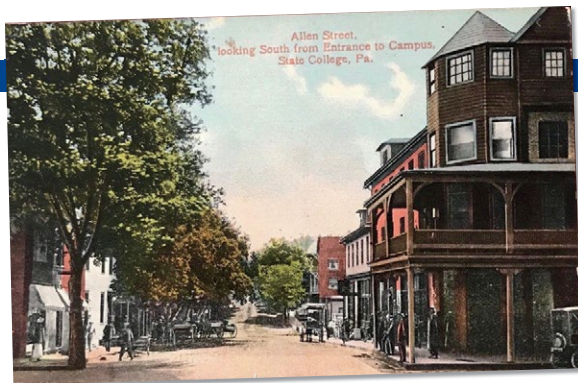
tor. First and foremost, she’d serve as executive chef at the Allen Street Grill, working to create and implement a whole new menu. Then Nicolas would revamp The Corner Room menu and create a small plates menu for Chumley’s.

Nicolas moved back to her hometown and began creating in the kitchen, serving six to 10 menu choices for Croce and Sorg to sample and score each week. Over time, the grill’s new culinary identity—modern American fare with seasonal ingredients and Eastern European influences—took shape, complemented by a new bar program created by beverage director Chris Peters that features biodynamic wines and inventive twists on traditional cocktails.

The Grill reopened in September after a two-week training with kitchen staff, many of whom hadn’t worked since early spring. Despite the lowered capacity and masking requirements, Nicolas, who had opened three restaurants in her 20-plus-year career, called this one “the least stressful restaurant opening I’ve ever done.” She credits the smooth sailing to the openness, talent, and team spirit in both the front and back of the house, an environment cultivated by longtime GM Becky Burger, and reinforced by Sorg and Croce. “This whole restaurant, they’re just amazing people,” Nicolas says.



UPGRADING THE GRILL
Allen Street Grill renovations include a new bar, flooring, lighting, kitchen upgrades, and commissioned artwork.



The Historic Heart of Downtown

The roots of this iconic business run as deep as the university itself.

1855 James Jack opens Jack’s Road House, a stage stop, on the corner of College Ave. and S. Allen St., to accommodate travelers to the newly opened Farmers’ High School of Pennsylvania.

1864 Under a new owner, the stage stop is dubbed The Agricultural College Hotel.

1885 State College’s first telephone and first telegraph are installed in the hotel.

1904 Nittany Real Estate Co. buys the building and renovates it, adding bowling lanes and a barber shop in the basement. The post office and Co-operative Book Store operate on the first floor, inspiring the intersection of College and Allen’s nickname, “Co-op Corner.”

1906 The hotel is renamed The Nittany Inn; two stories are added. At its peak, has 70 rooms.

1907 The Nittany Printing & Publishing Co. moves its *State College Times* into a new brick building beside The Nittany Inn, at 108 W. College Ave. A typographical error on the building’s façade is still there.

1926 New owners take over the hotel and open a restaurant—The Corner Room—on the first floor.



1926 *State College Times* moves to Fraser Street. The Nittany Printing & Publishing Co. building is connected to Hotel State College; the former press room becomes The Corner Room’s prep kitchen. Upstairs is a banquet hall where the Allen Street Grill kitchen is today. The Chamber of Commerce is on the first floor.

1950s The Chamber of Commerce moves out, and Catherine Bell opens Nittany News Book Shop on the first floor.

1971 Sidney Friedman, who had proposed to his wife Helen in a Corner Room booth, buys the restaurant, Hotel State College, and the buildings on either side.

1971 Brothers Zeno and Christ Papadopoulos ‘67 H&H (a.k.a. Chris Pappas) take over ownership of the Hotel State College businesses. (Friedman and family retain ownership of the buildings.) In an old safe, the brothers find an unused liquor license, and begin selling alcohol from a bar in The Corner Room.

1971 Renovations begin to turn the space below The Corner Room, once used for a shoe repair business and a dry cleaners, into a bar. They leave parts of a tin ceiling from when the space had small bowling lanes.

1972 The Papadopoulos (Pappas) brothers open Zeno’s Pub, known for its wide selection of beers, in the basement below The Corner Room. An 80 Beers Around the World passport program is offered.

1970s Chris Pappas coins the Zeno’s tagline, “Located directly above the center of the Earth.”



Early 1970s The Corner Lounge at the Allen Room opens above The Corner Room.

1976 Disco club Mr. C’s, named for owner Chris Pappas, opens in the basement of the building next to Nittany Printing & Publishing Co. There’s a strict dress code: no blue jeans allowed.

1978 After the last exclusively gay bar downtown closes in 1977, some LGBT patrons begin gathering at Mr. C’s on Monday nights.

1983 Liz Pierce and Joe Schrantz become principal owners of Nittany News Book Shop. Pierce is manager of Take Six Bottle Shop and Mr. C’s.



1984 The bookstore closes, and the space becomes Chumley’s, State College’s only gay bar.

1986 Mike Desmond and John Cocolin buy the businesses and retain ownership for 29+ years.

1990 Mr. C’s is given a makeover and reopens as Players, a more casual dance club.

1991 The Allen Room becomes the Allen Street Grill, an American bistro directly above the downtown diner.

2005 Bill Pickle’s Tap Room opens at 106 S. Allen St., formerly the Bostonian Ltd. clothing store. It’s named after a bootlegger-turned-Christian who supplied alcohol—and then salvation—to students in the early 1900s.



2008 Players is renamed Indigo Nightclub.

2018 Allen Street Grill merges its menu with the recently closed Cajun and Creole restaurant Spats Café to become Spats at the Grill.

2018 *Thrillist* names Zeno’s Pub the best college bar in Pennsylvania.



2018 Indigo closes briefly for renovations, and reopens as The Basement Nightspot.

2019 Pat Croce & Company purchase Hotel State College & Co., which includes The Corner Room, Spats at the Grill, Zeno’s, Chumley’s, The Basement Nightspot, Pickle’s, and the hotel.

2020 The businesses are forced to close in March due to the pandemic.

2020 Menu and décor changes are unveiled at the Allen Street Grill, ending its collaboration with Spats.

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The Grill was the first

visible sign of what the new owners were up to, but they actually completed two renovations in 2020. Since Chumley's had to remain closed due to capacity and distancing restrictions, it, too, was bumped up on the face-lift list. The old Take Six Bottle Shop space was incorporated into the bar, giving the front of the bar more breathing room and natural light. They added new flooring, lighting, furniture, a sound system, artwork, and bar equipment, and created a new bar top made of tens of thousands of Scrabble tiles. Family names, pop culture references, nods to Chumley's history and much more are hidden—and not-so-hidden—on the bar.

"They really kept the heart and soul of Chumley's, but made it 10 times better," Braun says. "There's more space, it's more welcoming. They really did a great job of honoring its history. It's one of the longest-running gay bars in Pennsylvania, and they were super respectful of that."

"It's a great little sanctuary off College Ave.," Sorg says. "I fell in love with it when we were doing due diligence."

They added a Little Free Library on a bookshelf beside the bar—similar to one at their Green Parrot bar in Key West—and hired an artist to create a mural on one wall that will incorporate tidbits from the bar's past, longtime patrons, and surroundings.

Eager to dive into what they considered a comprehensive but relatively small renovation, the guys did the bulk of the work themselves, with a lot of help from the Grill's beverage director Peters, an experienced contractor. "It was so fun, especially because I don't know much about construction," Croce says. "I'm not the handiest person in the world."

Once it reopens, menu items for Chumley's will be made by Allen Street Grill's kitchen staff, while The Corner Room kitchen crew will continue to serve the Pickle's crowd. In the meantime, shifts have been few and far between in both kitchens, which is a surreal contrast to Pat Croce & Company's Florida restaurants, where shutdowns were much shorter and business is booming. In December, two cooks from the Grill and two from The Corner volunteered to drive down to St. Augustine and help out in their new employers' Southern establishments during the holiday rush. **David "Zeb" Czebotar '05 H&HD**, an Allen Street Grill prep cook who's been with Hotel State College for 20 years, jumped at the chance to earn a paycheck, and in a much warmer climate.

He and the three other Hotel State College employees stayed for free at the condo Croce owns and stays in when

CHUMLEY'S REDO

Chumley's GM Ellen Braun says she's begun having vivid dreams of working at the bar again, and is eager to show off its renovations. "We're aiming to open when we're able to open with open arms."



ROOM WITH A VIEW

The renovated Allen Street Grill still showcases the space's best feature: its sweeping views of downtown State College and the Allen Street gates entrance to University Park.

Back at The Corner

Room, Sorg and Croce are finalizing their choices for the interior upgrades, and getting excited to start another round of weekly menu item scoring with Nicolas. Joe Shulman, the former owner who's been to the reopened Allen Street Grill several times, marvels from afar at how much his successors are investing in the property under circumstances in which the instinct is to save, not spend.

"I say to my friends, 'How can they do this?'" he says, recalling the stress of running seven businesses with triple-net leases, in which the tenant doesn't own the building but is responsible for all of its maintenance and repairs. It's a contract that's common in business but "becomes a really big toll on your finances, especially in a competitive marketplace. There's always something [needing to be fixed] in one of the oldest buildings in town." Shulman and his partners' largest recent investment was in The Basement Nightspot, which underwent a \$150,000 renovation in 2018. "That's where the bread and butter's made, downtown with the students."

Staab, Zeno's longtime bartender and GM, says the well-known dive bar will see its share of attention in the near future, as will Bill Pickle's Tap Room, though no plans are finalized or imminent. And renovations to the hotel, once first on

the new owners' to-do list, is now last: "Perhaps sometime next year," Sorg says, "depending."

"Depending" has become a necessary concession in an impossible-to-predict future, even one situated in the center of a college town that is typically very, very predictable.

"In the fall we're budgeting for a modest return, 75 percent of pre-COVID sales. We took football out of the mix, assuming there's still not those huge spikes," Sorg says. "But we are budgeting and planning for things to start to come back."

For now, that means making the 95-year-old Corner Room more relevant to younger generations than the historical marker it's always been. "We know we're going through a tough time collectively," Croce says, "but everybody has the belief that when we get to the other side of this, we have something special." ♡

visiting their properties. Czebotar says the philosophies and rules—regarding organization, expedience, and hospitality—at St. Augustine Seafood Co., where he was working the early shift, were similar to what was instilled during the two-week training led by Sorg and Nicolas at Allen Street Grill back in the fall.

He did, however, notice some stark differences between the company's restaurants there and other establishments in that historic Florida town. "Here we're at 50 percent occupancy for COVID, and they personally decided to space tables 6 feet apart and have no parties larger than eight at a table," he says. "Most places (down) here, if you want to you can run at 100 percent."

Sorg says their more conservative approach to safety measures makes good business sense to them. "We just think it's the right thing to do, and it makes the staff feel good."