

How We Got the Restaurant Open for July 4

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Tokyo turnips. French radishes. The light and the land of Bridgehampton can grow anything. Lemon balm. Thai basil. When Paul Hamilton is the gardener, throw in sugar snaps and heirloom eggplants. When his makeshift staff includes four chefs with green thumbs and a closed-down kitchen, you can depend on lovely sorrel and Vietnamese coriander.

The garden blossoms. The owner wilts. Last week, I found myself singing the [permit perdition blues](#) to Paul Hamilton as he planted red chili peppers. After his ear was unduly bent, he asked one quiet question:

“Do you know Laurie Wiltshire?”

“No. Should I?”

“She might be able to help. She’s a good friend.”

“I’ll talk to anybody any time.”

“I’ll call Laurie. Fifty people are out of work because you can’t get a permit. That’s crazy.”

“I have to be open by July 4th, Paul.”

Paul called Laurie. Laurie called me. Ten minutes later, I was on the phone with Mr. Big in the building department of Southampton. He cracked a few jokes I didn’t get and said I would have permission to plug the hole in the wall within 24 hours.

Sure enough, the next day, I had the permit that was supposed to take four weeks. A verbal permit, nothing in writing, but printed posters take time and have to go through channels beyond Mr. Big’s reach. Gratitude nearly choked me, as did befuddlement. In equal parts, I was elated and vexed by a system that can move so swiftly when it wants to and so slowly the rest of the time. Just because I know Paul who knows Laurie who knows Mr. Big, my luck made a sudden U-turn. Guilt is riding shotgun, of course, as too many fellow citizens are still standing in line at town hall with furrowed brows and unanswered prayers.

Laurie Wiltshire is tall and blonde and had a modeling career in Hollywood before she discovered a talent for getting all the unions on the same movie set at the same time — gaffers, gofers, carpenters, drivers, designers, talent, the whole end credit scroll. When she got married and moved to the Hamptons, Laurie worked for a local land expediter. She has now had her own shop, [Land Planning Services](#), for 13 years, and knows everyone with any authority or expertise in the permit game. Unlike Lucy van Pelt, Laurie Wiltshire is worth every nickel. Under her spell, my fortunes have turned on a dime.

Thus is the yin and yang of a small-town sangha. Thus is the politics of the boonies, even the toniest of boonies. You can cut the municipal molasses with a hot Korin knife if you know the right people. Or pay the right people. I know what you are thinking: why didn’t I have an expediter all along? Good question. I thought our case was so open-and-shut, so obvious in its urgency that the town elders would sidestep the hurdles and an expediter would be overkill. Like sending Hillary Clinton to a school board to negotiate for whole wheat bread. What I never realized was how welcomed expeditors are because they are efficient, ask the right questions, provide smart answers and never show up without the proper documentation. It seems rather simple in hindsight: expeditors expedite.

(Lest we assume all conflicts are resolved in a day, it should be noted that Laurie Wiltshire has cases that have lasted five, eight and 10 years. Even an all-star expediter has trouble moving certain mountains, or dunes, in the Hamptons.)

On Monday, June 20, 2011, a new skin of stainless steel went on the old kitchen wall and cement wall board was installed behind it, double thick, and wood studs were wrapped in metal. For good measure, we replaced the X-rated insulation with fireproof Roxul. There will be no fire or brimstone in this cavity.

But before we can close the wall and get back to the business of food, it has to be approved by three departments, building, health and fire. Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of red tape, I will fear no inspection. The firewall is beyond reproach. I call health. No problem. I call the fire marshal. No problem. I call building. They say the inspector will be there on Wednesday.

“By the way,” I ask, “who is the building inspector on duty?”

“Hold on, please,” says the voice. “Bridgehampton? That would be ...”

I drop the cellphone. Thud. Dud. My body goes numb. I hear a faint voice from the ground, “Hello? Hello?” I cannot move. I know this inspector. He was visited upon me once before. I barely recovered.

Everyone who knows this inspector fears him. My general contractor refuses to be on site when he arrives. They have had “serious issues.” The mere mention of his name elicits the same kind of response as did Keyser Söze in “The Usual Suspects.” Jaws drop. Eyes pop. Good people and bad run screaming for cover; he eats children for breakfast and spits out their bones at lunch. (Note to legal department: That last sentence is hyperbole.)

To say Inspector Söze will fail you for the slightest hint of an infraction is understatement. If Inspector Söze learns I do not have a written permit, I realize, he will laugh and leave without a word. I drive to town hall. I climb the steps and reach for the front door. An alarm goes off. Can they read my thoughts? Am I persona non grata? I look for cameras. Dozens of people stride toward me briskly.

“What is happening?” I ask.

“Fire,” says a woman.

“A fire?” I echo. “Another fire?”

“A fire drill,” says a passing man. “It only lasts 10 or 15 minutes.”

I mill about on the front lawn with the civil servants. This is a break for them, an eternity for me. If I sneak into this empty building, I could be first in line when the fire drill is over. Better yet, I could rifle through desk drawers until I find my permit. I am casing the rear entrance to town hall when the exercise thankfully ends.

The dark-haired woman behind the counter says Inspector Söze will resolve the issue when he arrives on site come Wednesday. I am sorry, I say, but that won't fly. No more Mr. Milquetoast. I will not leave this office until I have a permit in hand. No sane person would let Inspector Söze make a decision tomorrow that could be made by someone else today. The specter of the inspector has emboldened me; like any hero, I am propelled by a fear that looks like courage.

“I was approved,” I say.

“But we do not have any copies in this office,” says the dark-haired lady.

“Where can I get one?” I ask.

“You will receive it in the mail,” she says.

“When?”

“Maybe tomorrow. Maybe the next day.”

“That's not good enough. I need the permit now.”

"We sent it to your general contractor."

"I need it now. One approved plan, please."

"I don't know what to say. We don't have it here."

"Let me speak to Mr. Big."

Mr. Big hands over the plans that did not exist. Stamped on the approved permit are these words:

"No oversight, error or omission on the part of the Building Inspector or his Representative shall legalize the erecting, construction, alteration, removal, use or occupancy of a building or structure that does not conform to the provision of the N.Y. State Fire Prevention and Building Code and Code of the Town of Southampton Zoning Regulations."

At 9:15 a.m. on Wednesday, June 22, 2011, Inspector Söze drives onto the property. He exits his white S.U.V. with the Southampton seal on the door and before any greetings, he says, "That wall is illegal." He is pointing not to the fire-damaged wall in question but an entirely different wall along the entrance to the restaurant. "And the shingles next to the front door are new and this whole section of the restaurant is illegal and was erected after your permits and expands your footprint."

"I beg to differ," I say. "We have not changed a thing."

"Yes you did. The wood is a different color."

"It's a different wood."

"And the shingles next to the front door are new and this whole section of the restaurant is illegal and was erected after your permits and expands your footprint."

"The shingles have been protected by an overhang. There is nothing new on this property except the inside of that other wall."

"Do you have your site plan?"

"No, sir. I have the plans for the wall that was burned."

"Do you have your survey?"

"No, sir. I have the electrical approval and the permit to rebuild the wall that had the fire."

He looks at the firewall.

"Why steel studs?"

"The fire marshal suggested them," I say.

"The fire marshal doesn't know anything about construction," says Inspector Söze. "Do you want the building to catch fire or fall down?"

"Neither," I say.

"I can't see the header above that exposed beam."

"It's exactly the way it always was."

"Expose it. And where is the insulation?"

"Right here, sir." The insulation is in a box, on the ground, ready to be put into the wall.

"Why isn't in the wall?" he asks.

"Then you couldn't see the work, the steel studs, the sheets of Durock."

"Without the insulation, I cannot approve this project."

"It'll take 10 minutes to put the insulation into the wall."

"Call the town for an inspection when you are really ready, when the insulation is up and you reveal what's on top of that header and you have a site plan and a survey for that illegal wall."

I hold my tongue. With my teeth. He drives away. I am left alone in the vacant parking lot. Very alone. And nauseated. Inspector Söze was dead wrong about the wall. About both walls. The old one is old, and the new one is sound. The purpose of his visit, it seems to me, was neither to inspect nor assist. The sordid dramas that play out inside his head, I suspect, have nothing to do with me or this restaurant or the public's safety.

Standing there, I call the town to arrange another inspection for the following day. Everything Inspector Söze needs can be produced within an hour. The woman on the phone says there is a

problem — an open demolition permit. It is back. The fallible computer has struck again. This is the same open permit that was flagged by Town Hall's front-room computer and then overruled by a back-room computer the week before. I head back to town hall to straighten out this mess in person. "Tenth Avenue Freeze-Out" is on the radio. Clarence Clemons is dead.

The next morning at 11:15, Thursday, June 23, 2011, the inspector drives onto the property, takes a long walk around the perimeter of the building and then stares at the open wall. And approves it. Just like that. Doesn't want to read the site plan or survey or the Holy Bible I brought along. He signs a piece of paper and climbs into his white S.U.V. with the Southampton seal and drives away.

I walk through the garden and smell the anise hyssop. The red beets share a bed with the golden beets. We will be back in business for the Fourth of July weekend, the holiday that celebrates our independence from an oppressive government. I will invite Laurie Wiltshire for a good stiff drink, maybe a gin and tonic. I owe her.

Bruce Buschel owns [Southfork Kitchen](#), a restaurant in Bridgehampton, N.Y.