

NEW YORK

Haitian businesses caught between serving and surviving as inflation persists



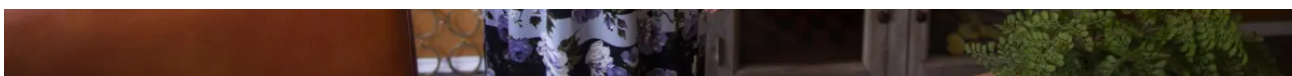
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Francesca Cassandra Denis, owner of Cocoa Bean Juice and Salad Bar in Flatbush, Brooklyn, said to save on production costs, she started doing tasks herself that she would typically hire a company to do, such as delivery services.. Photo by Leonardo March

BROOKLYN — Entrepreneur Francesca Denis had a hectic year in the middle of the pandemic, being a new mother and opening a business, Cocoa Bean Juice and Salad Bar on Nostrand Ave.

One year later, her store is among the **80% of businesses** in New York state that survive their first year. Now, she's busy navigating the highest inflation in the United States in 40 years.

“The [price] increases on goods to purchase for the store definitely made things more expensive,” said Denis. “We had to cut back on [local transport companies] because it's getting more pricey for them to be able to get gas.”

As product prices continue to increase, scores of Haitian businesses are caught between staying afloat and maintaining their customer base. For many Haitian entrepreneurs, who often see their businesses as a service to their community, the past year has been an exercise in how much more expenses can be trimmed to survive in the historic inflation rate.

Doris Etheart, owner of Stori Caribbean Food store on Nostrand Ave., describes the conflict some business owners like her face.

“In order for me to actually make money I have to increase the price,” Etheart said. “Sometimes it kind of hurts me because it's like: ‘I don't want to push my own people away because I'm from Haiti.’ But at the same time, the bills gotta get paid, the store gotta be open.”

Dr. Merih Uctum, a professor of economics at Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, both at CUNY, explains that inflation is “the increase in the cost of living,” as measured by the **Consumer Price Index**, or CPI. The index, which measures the change in prices paid by consumers for goods and services, estimates the cost of living in the U.S. has risen 9.1% between June 2021 and 2022.

“If you were earning, let's say \$40,000 a year this year, that means that you will be able to buy 9% less than last year on average,” Uctum said.

Average is a keyword, as not all the products' prices increase at the same rate. Between June 2021 and

2022, food items rose 10.4% but energy prices, including gasoline and fuel oil, increased 41.6%.

The energy prices increase reflects even more in higher prices for products sold by local businesses that rely on imported material.

“Transportation then becomes more expensive, because petrol and transportation become more expensive,” said Dr. Uctum. “Not only this is going to affect driving around, but also transportation of goods. Anything that companies will bring from abroad will be more expensive.”

This impacts Haitian community businesses, many of which depend on products imported to the U.S. like Haiti, Guatemala, or Ecuador. A 50-pound carton of plantains imported from Guatemala and consumed in New York, for example, rose by about 35% in one year, according to the USDA Agricultural [Marketing Service](#).

For Etheart, the products that increased the most are those brought from Haiti such as herbs, *lwil maskriti*, or castor oil, and cinnamon.

“It used to be \$2 for a bag,” Etheart said. “Now, we’re [going] from \$2 to \$5.”



Haitian Cinnamon, one of the most popular items sold at Stori Caribbean Food on Nostrand Ave., Flatbush, Brooklyn. The store specializing in products for the Haitian community has been impacted by inflation. Photo by Leonardo March

To survive and serve, many Haitian business owners have turned to various money saving strategies that minimize passing on price increases to their customers.

“We have about 21 smoothies,” Denis said, “and we are looking to cut down [to] as low as nine or 10.”

Denis has also cut down on branded products for the juice bar and transportation services they hire, opting to do some of the tasks herself or with help from relatives.

“As far as Haitian items, it’s possible that I’m biased and I don’t want to let them go,” Denis added. “So I haven’t really looked into it as much. But so far, we’ve been holding on to our drink called *Ayiti Cheri*. It is a top seller for us.”

Jacques Laguerre, owner of the Little Haiti restaurant in Flatbush, said he tries to keep prices consistent for customers by finding other solutions.

“Customers are always complaining, ‘the price is too high,’” he said. “And what can you do? I mean, we try to work somewhere around it. Maybe put a little bit less on the plate, but keep the same price.”

Ultimately, however, passing on increases to consumers is inevitable for many businesses.

Yves’ Garden Café, a new coffee house and bakery on Rogers Ave. in Flatbush, raised the price of some pastries as flour costs rose.

“You absorb it to a certain extent,” Owner Yves René said. “But you have to pass it on to the consumer.”