

## The last of the family-run diners: Inside NYC's oldest family-owned mom and pop luncheonette where the old fashioned way is the only way (and wi-fi definitely isn't on the menu)

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- Lexington Candy Shop at 83rd Street and Lexington Avenue opened in 1925
- It's run by John Philis, the 61-year-old grandson of the original owner Soterios Philis who came from Epirus, Greece, to New York City in search of a better life
- Philis doesn't plan on retiring anytime soon, but when he does his 31-year-old son Peter may take over the business before its lease expires
- The diner, which hasn't been remodeled since 1948, has 11 years left on its lease
- When the lease expires, Philis said he doesn't know what will happen to the diner

By [JORDAN GASS-POORE FOR DAILYMAIL.COM](#)

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It's a classic New York diner frozen in the 1940s, with a long counter lined with vinyl seats and an L-shaped row of cozy booths. There's a generous use of diner decor staples like vinyl seats and chrome-lined Formica tables that are separated by wooden partitions.

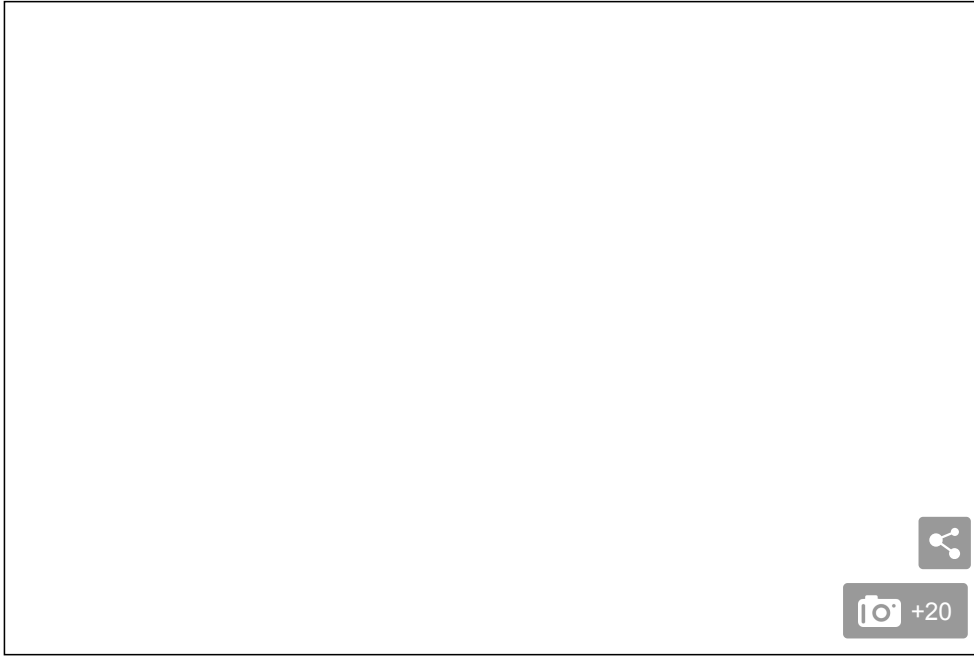


The smell of grease hangs in the air from the hundreds of burgers that are flipped on its grill weekly, and the noise level rarely rises above the clatter of forks and the chatter of old-timers.

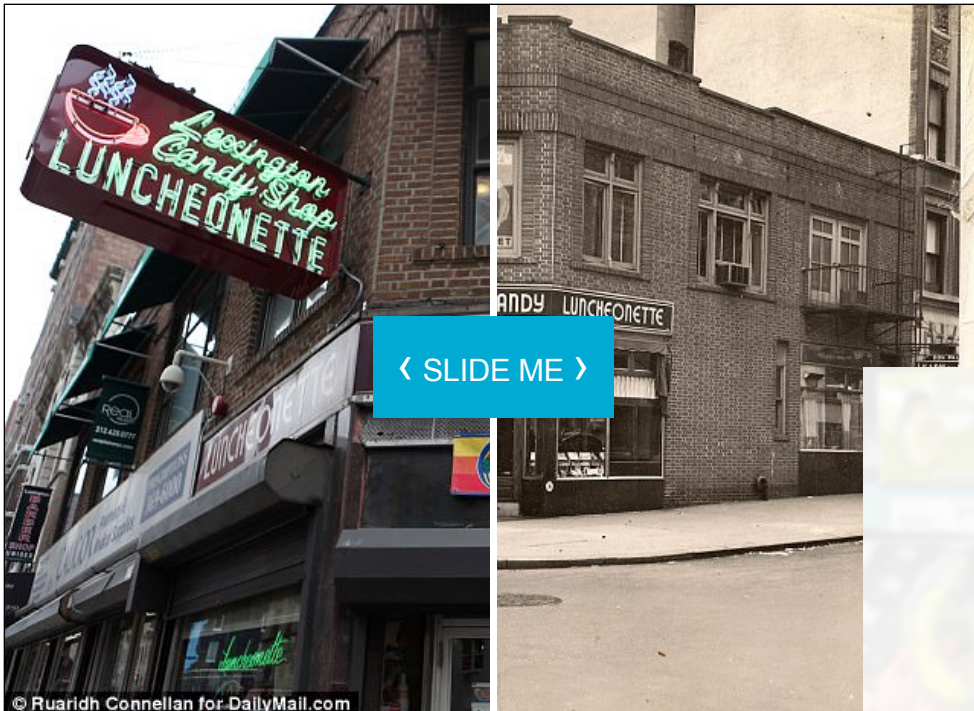
There are no computers and there's certainly no wi-fi.

There was a time when diners were a staple of most New York neighborhoods. Today Lexington Candy Shop at 83rd Street and Lexington Avenue is one of the city's last. The shop, which opened 92 years ago, started as an ice cream parlor and candy store, with chocolate made in the basement. But that proved to be difficult in warm weather, so in 1948, the owners dropped the candy and expanded the menu to include sandwiches, said owner, John Philis, 61, whose grandfather, Soterios Philis, founded the business.

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John Philis (above), 61, is the third generation owner of Lexington Candy Shop in New York City



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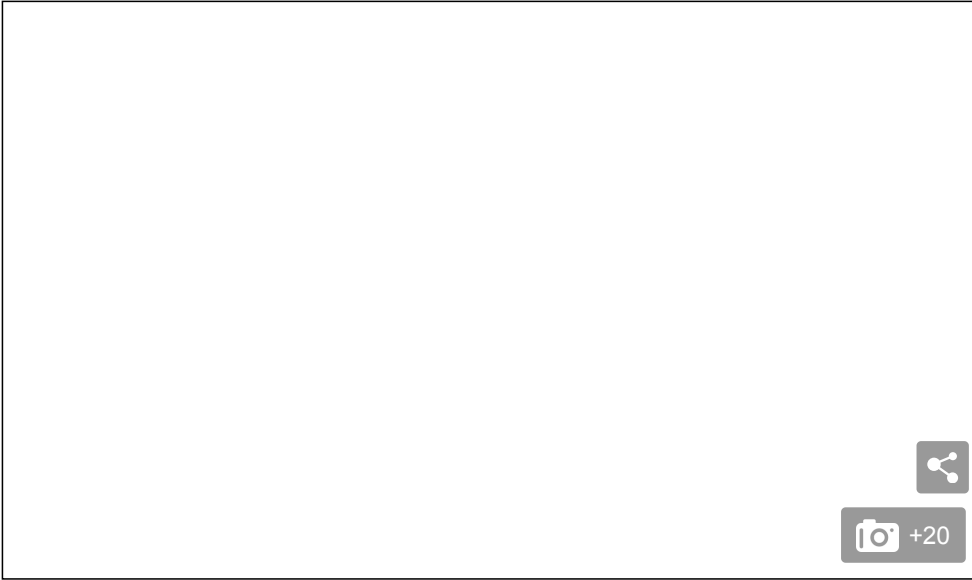
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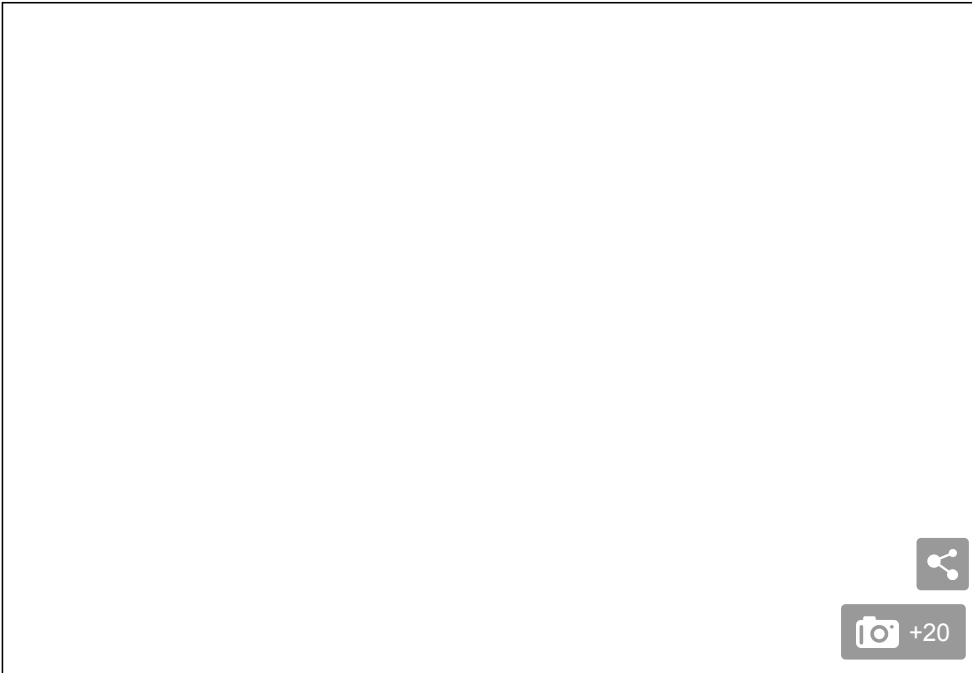
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**Lexington Candy Shop (pictured) at 83rd Street and Lexington Avenue opened in 1925 and is one of New York City's last diners**



**The shop was last remodeled in 1948 when it was expanded to the size it is today**



**It started as an ice cream parlor and candy store, with chocolate made in the basement. But that proved to be difficult in warm weather, so in 1948, the owners dropped the candy**

The menu, which hasn't changed much since the shop opened in 1925, is spelled out in white plastic letters behind glass at the top of the wall behind the counter. The walls are covered with shots from films like the 2007 romantic dramedy *The Nanny Diaries* that had used the candy shop as a backdrop to New York City. Actre Scarlett Johansson, who starred in the movie, and filmmaker Woody Allen were spotted in the booths.

This silver screen favorite and tourist landmark is a treasure trove of history by Philis and his staff. With a head full of grey hair and dressed humbly in a jacket spotted with grease stains, Philis looks like a soda fountain owner from a bygone era. But he's determined to avoid running a retro restaurant selling nostalgia without content.

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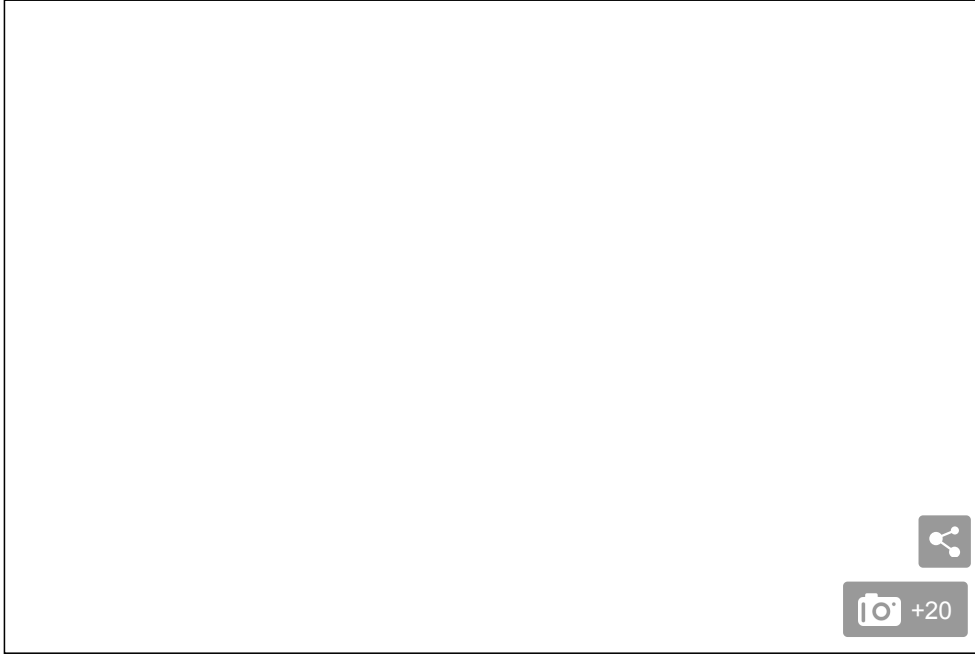
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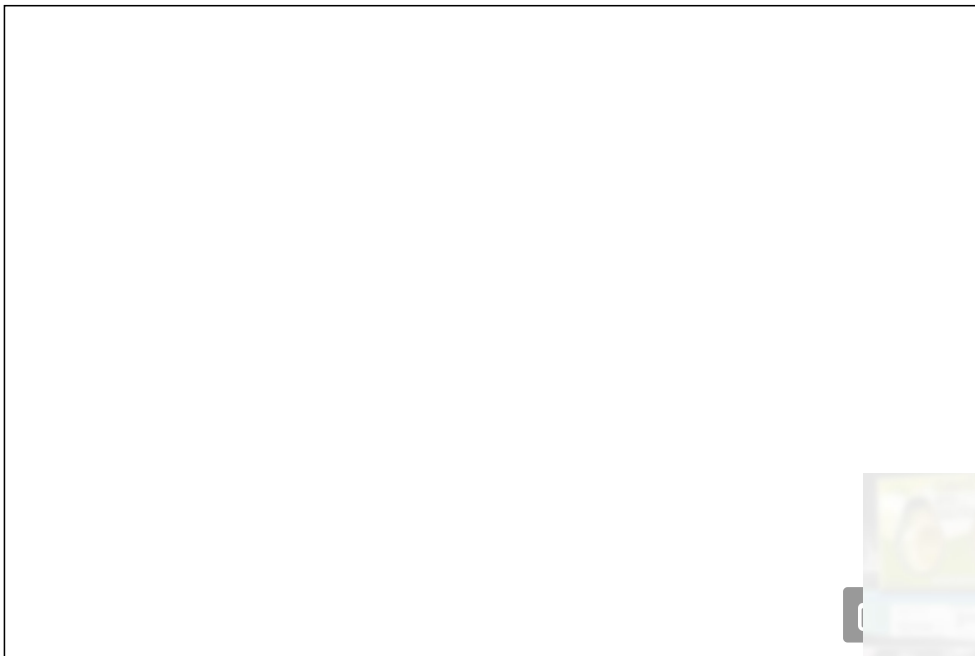
'We try to do things the way they were done originally, the "old fashioned way", so to speak,' Philis said.

And that includes the way Lexington Candy Shop makes its beverages. One sip of an old-fashioned soda with its lively bubbles has the power to evoke memories of childhood.

As an only child, Philis remembered watching his grandfather make soda by first pouring handmade chestnut-brown syrup in a wide-mouth glass rich with ice. He would then position the glass under the fountain's nozzle, curved like a swan's neck, and push its handle to release the seltzer inside.



The menu, which hasn't changed much since the shop opened in 1925, is spelled out in white plastic letters behind glass at the top of the wall behind the counter



In keeping with tradition, the juices are freshly squeezed daily. The chicken and egg salads are homemade every morning

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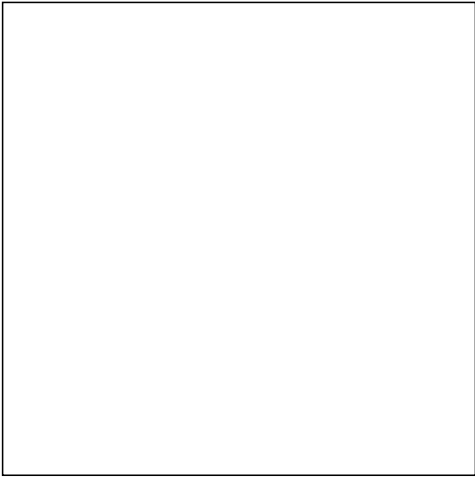
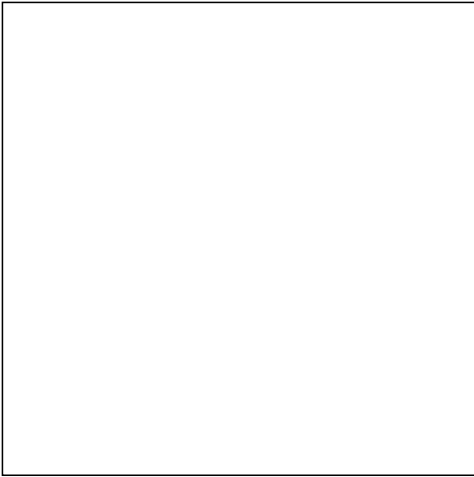
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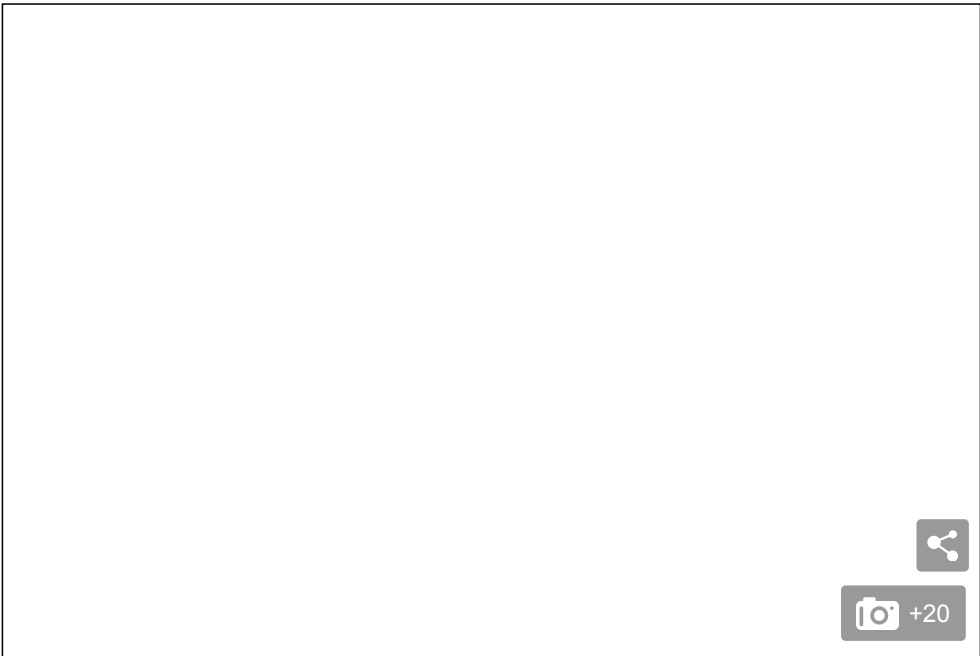
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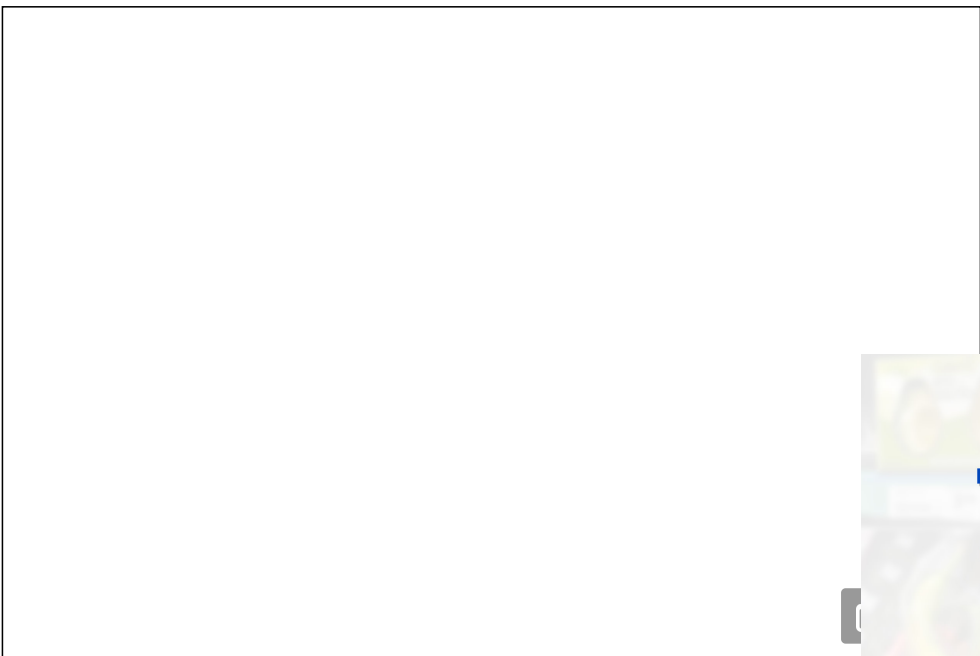




**They mix ice cream and malted milk powder in a 1940 Hamilton Beach mixer for fresh malts**



**Burgers are the shop's top menu item. They could sell four or 500 a week, John Philis said**



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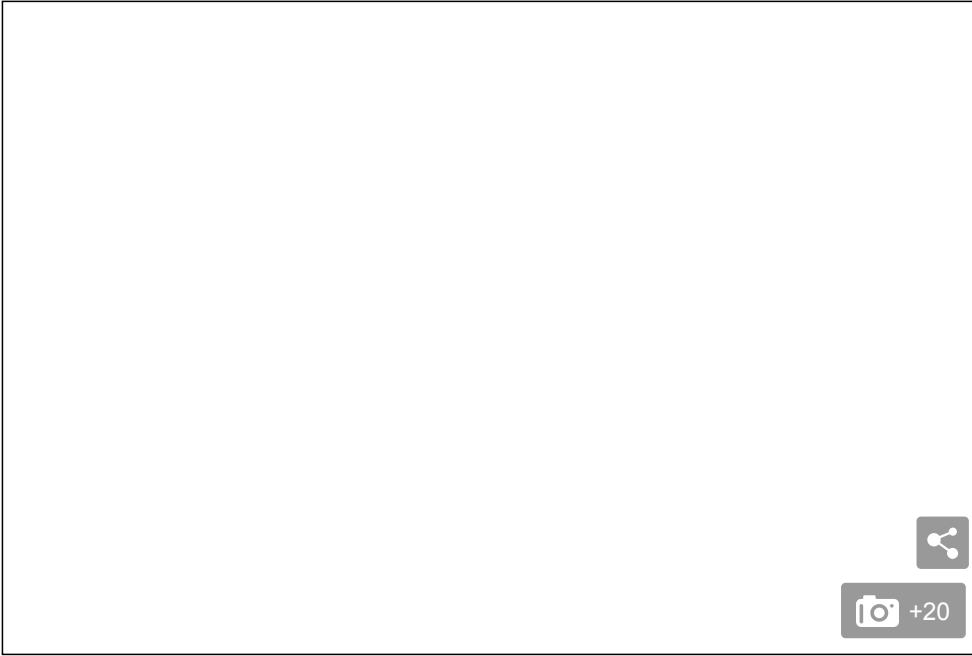
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Alongside traditional burgers, they serve a version of the Butter Burger: a conventional bun, a flat patty with a caramelized crust and a tablespoon of butter that arrives intact but melting



**What Philis likes most about working at Lexington Candy Shop is the camaraderie with his mix of customers. He said there are people who have regularly come to the diner for decades**

This tried-and-true method, labored over since the shop opened during what some consider to be the soda fountain's golden age, has stood the test of time. When Philis's father, Peter Philis, came over from Epirus, Greece, in 1930 in search of a better life he worked alongside his father making soda and slinging burgers for 17 years before taking over the business.

John Philis had started working at Lexington Candy Shop on school breaks when he was 12 years old doing 'whatever my father told me to do.' This meant cleaning the basement, taking care of the customers behind the counter and 'he always let me do the money. He trusted me with the money as a kid.'

'I couldn't make sandwiches or cook; I wasn't allowed to, but I started waiting on tables when I was 17,' Philis said.

During summer vacations in high school, Philis would take the 40-minute subway ride from his home in Jackson Heights, Queens, to the Upper East Side to work at Lexington Candy Shop.

'I would make sodas and milkshakes and serve people behind the counter, work the register, that sort of thing. It kept me off the streets,' he said.

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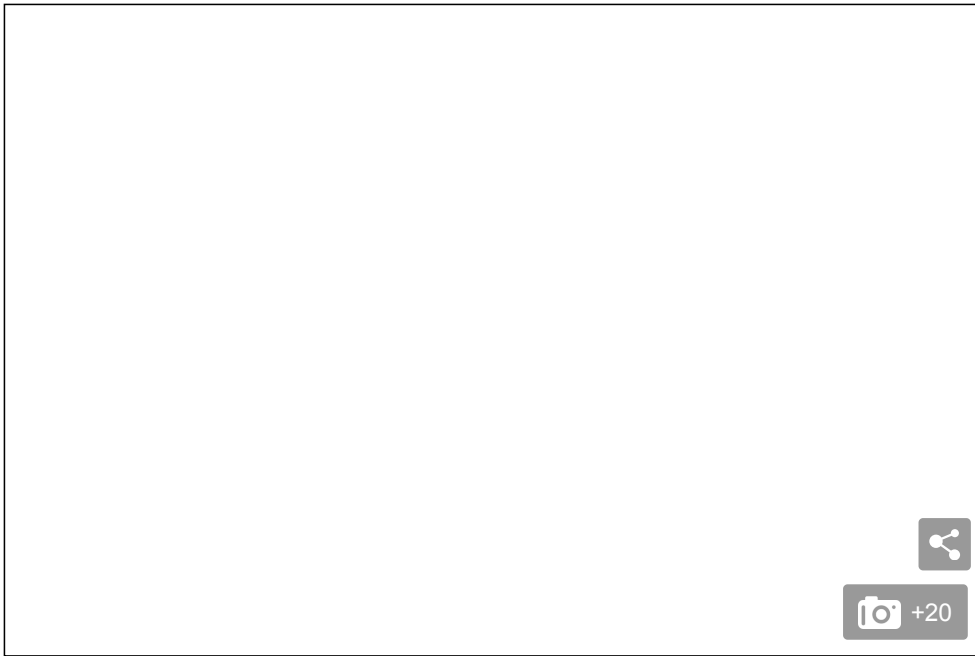
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**John Philis's grandfather, Soterios Philis (center in this undated photo), founded the business when he immigrated to New York City from Greece. Soterios's son Peter (left) took over in 1947**



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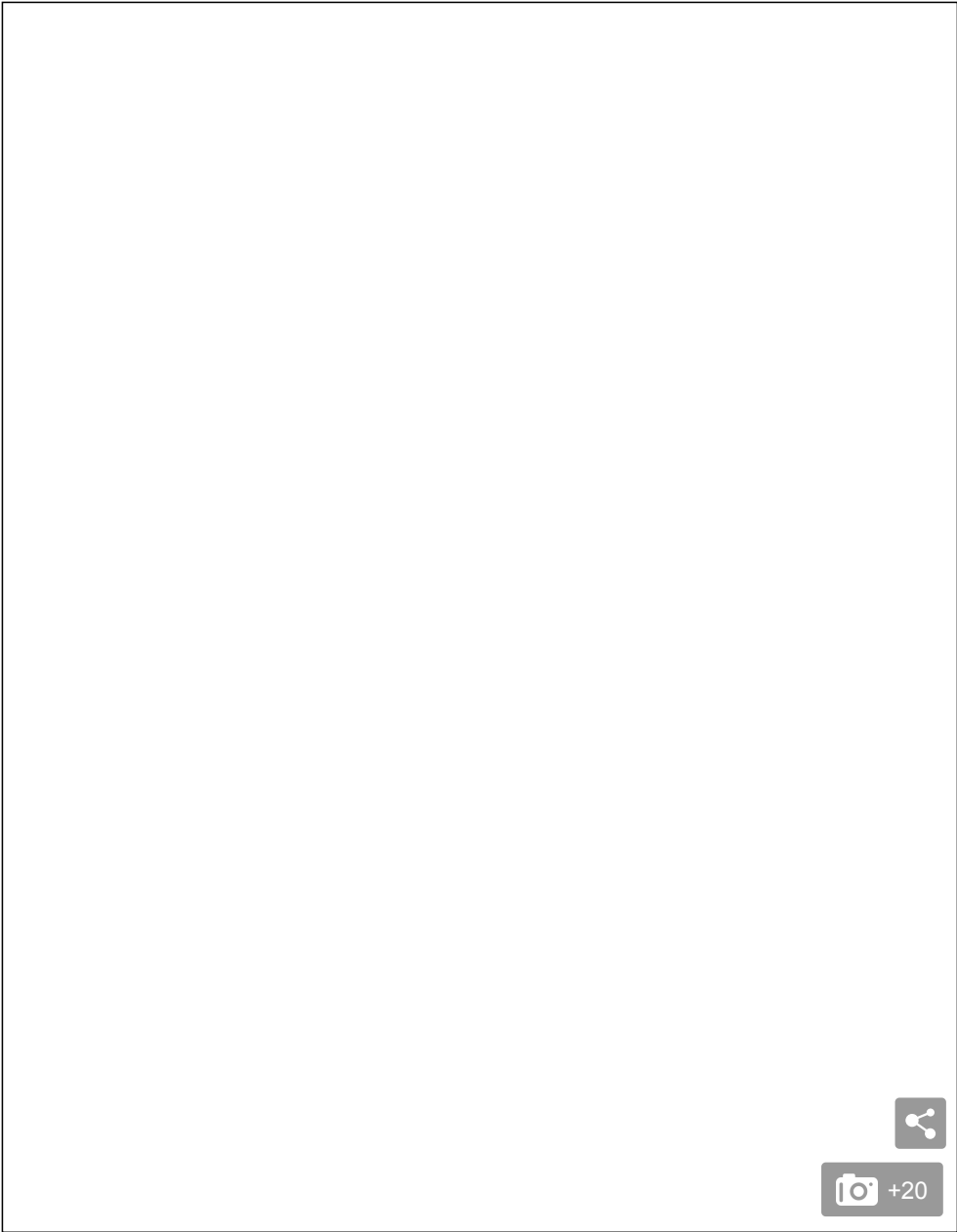
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**John Philis (above in the 1980s) worked in the diner as a child before becoming its owner in 1980 at the request of his father**

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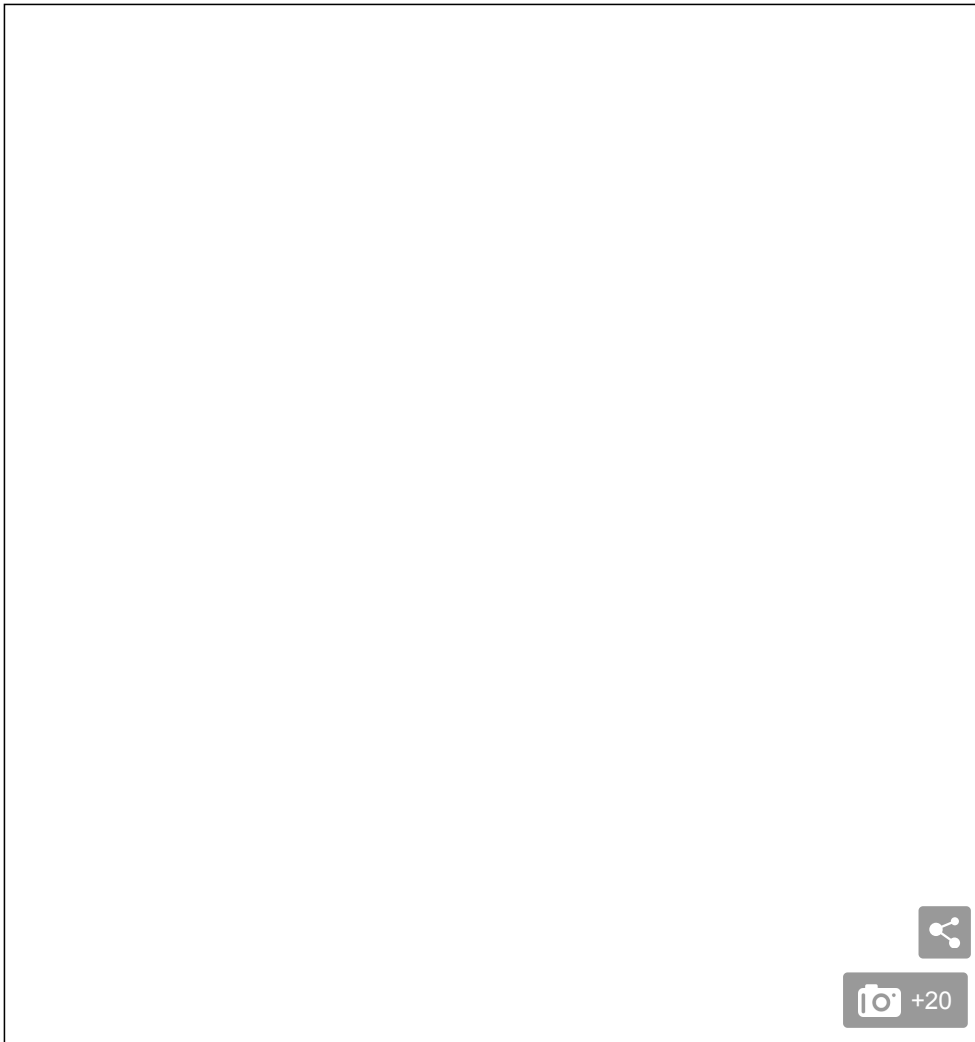
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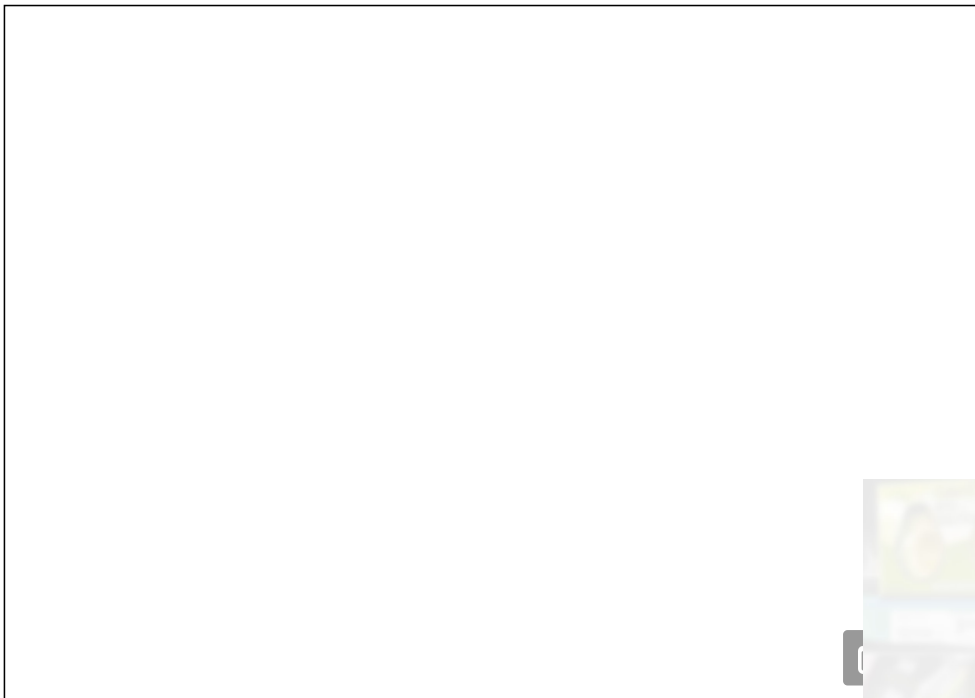
▶ **Bernie Ecclestone, 89, goes shopping with wife Fabiana Flosi, 43, as couple continue festive getaway in**







Philis's father (above in this undated photos) was in his early 70s when he asked him to manage the store after he retired



The shop has remained in the Philis family ever since, with John Philis's 31-year-old son (left in this undated photo), continuing to work there on Saturdays

▶ **in Bahamas**

Recently teased her fans on Instagram

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The 28-year-old supermodel kept her makeup minimal

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Philis, the third-generation owner of Lexington Candy Shop, took over the store in 1980 after receiving a master's degree in public administration from New York University. At the time, he said, he was working for the Federal Department of Health and Human Services.

His father was in his early 70s and wanted to cut back his hours at the store but didn't want to lose the business either. So, Philis agreed to manage the place for a couple of years to stem off the 'guilt that I let a business disappear'. To ease the responsibility, Philis brought on a partner, Robert Karcher, in 1990 and they run the diner together. Seasons changed, but Philis's attitude (and hairstyle, and work uniform) has remained relatively the same for 37 years.

'We're the last one's standing like this in the city of New York,' he said. 'You go outside to New Jersey, a few suburbs, all the way out in Long Island, then you'll find a couple of places like this. But in New York City proper, in the five boroughs, we're the last one.'

Sky-high rents, changing eating habits and the preponderance of coffee chains like the Starbucks a few blocks down from Lexington Candy Shop have all contributed to the demise of the New York City diner. There was once thousands of diners in the city; now roughly 215 are left, according to the city's public records.

Luckily for Lexington Candy Shop, they've leased the space from the same 'family organization' since the 1940s and have 11 years left on their lease, said Philis who has no plans to retire anytime soon. Once the lease expires, however, he's uncertain what will happen to the diner. They may have been 'very fortunate with our rent', but grooming the next generation to take over the 92-year-old business will be more of a challenge.

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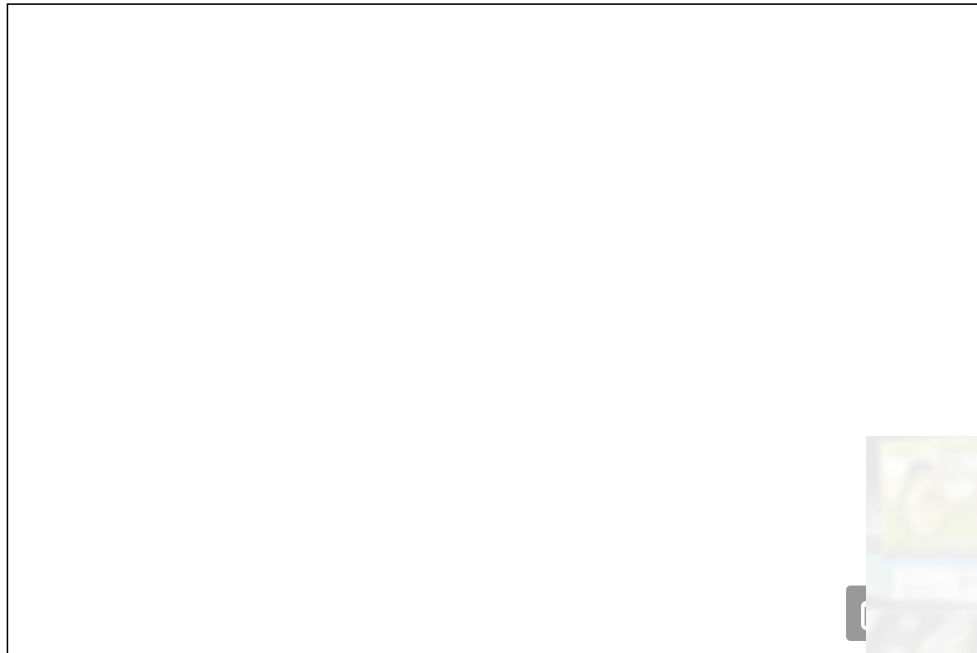
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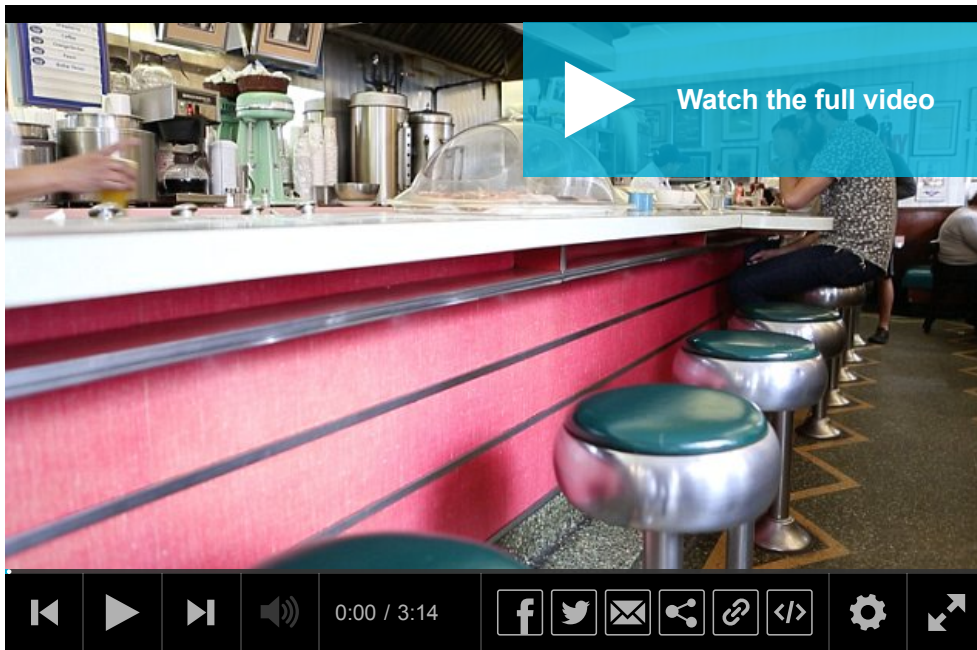
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Peter Philis (left) pops into the shop three or four times a week for some food and fat bonding but his decision to take over the business is uncertain





Phillis's 31-year-old son Peter, who's named after his grandfather, works at Lexington Candy Shop on Saturdays and the remainder of the week works as the manager of Bobby Vandt's Steakhouse on 45th Street. Peter pops into the shop three or four times a week for some food and father-son bonding but his decision to take over the business is about as firm as a foam-topped egg cream.

'As I've been getting older it has been a growing thought,' said Peter Phillis. 'I haven't thought about it too much. If you ask customers, "Oh, you have to do it, you have to do it" for the historical side of it. Basically, we're an unofficial landmark, so they want the tradition to keep going. I haven't made a 100 per cent decision, but I would say it's literally 50-50 right now just because of the family side of it and everything that comes along with it.'

There's more than the 840-square-feet of physical space for Phillis to consider in his decision to run Lexington Candy Shop. From the counter to the Terrazzo floor, every nook and cranny of Lexington Candy Shop provides a telling backdrop to his family's history. These are the stools where his legs once dangled, there are the foggy plastic cake covers he lifted to sneak desserts, and in his mind is where he may leave them – memories that, in many ways, mirror those of his father.

John and Peter Phillis both remembered being forced to do 'backbone work' at the shop by their fathers during school breaks. They stood on milk crates as children in order to see over the counter, trying hard to simultaneously balance and remember their father's advice: 'Don't screw up the money and use your head'. Now, putting that advice into practice was sometimes a different story.

'You gotta be able to do everything,' said Peter Phillis. 'So, you literally start at the bottom and work your way up, and you gotta literally know every single inch of the place. You start young, you figure it out, then you don't forget.'

▶ [as he heads out to lunch with his three kids](#)  
Was spotted out and about

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Lexington Candy Shop is a favorite of location scouts. The diner was featured in the television series Louie. Here John Philis (right) poses with the show's star Louis C K inside the shop

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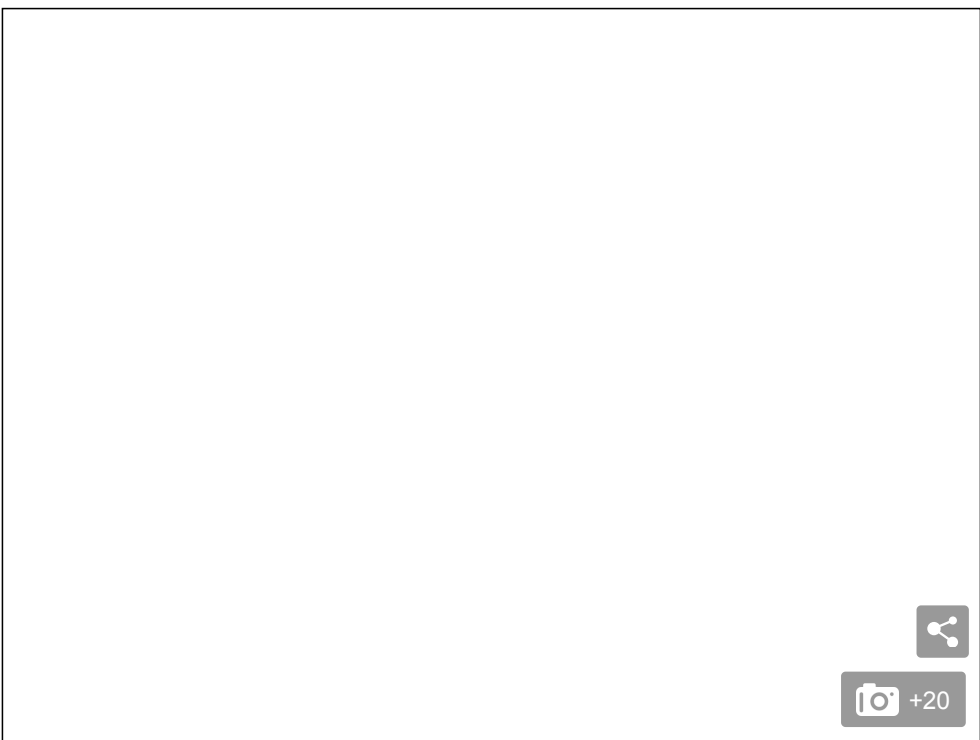
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People peer in the window of Lexington Candy Shop as the crew of the TV series Louie prepare to shoot an episode inside





Philis (center), his business partner Robert Karcher (left) and actress Scarlett Johansson (right) on the set of the 2007 romantic dramedy The Nanny Diaries

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Cheered on his old team

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She loves to jetset

▶ **Harry Potter actor, 36, who played Ron Weasley's straight-laced brother Percy reveals he became a bar tender when the roles dried up**

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Took to Instagram on Monday

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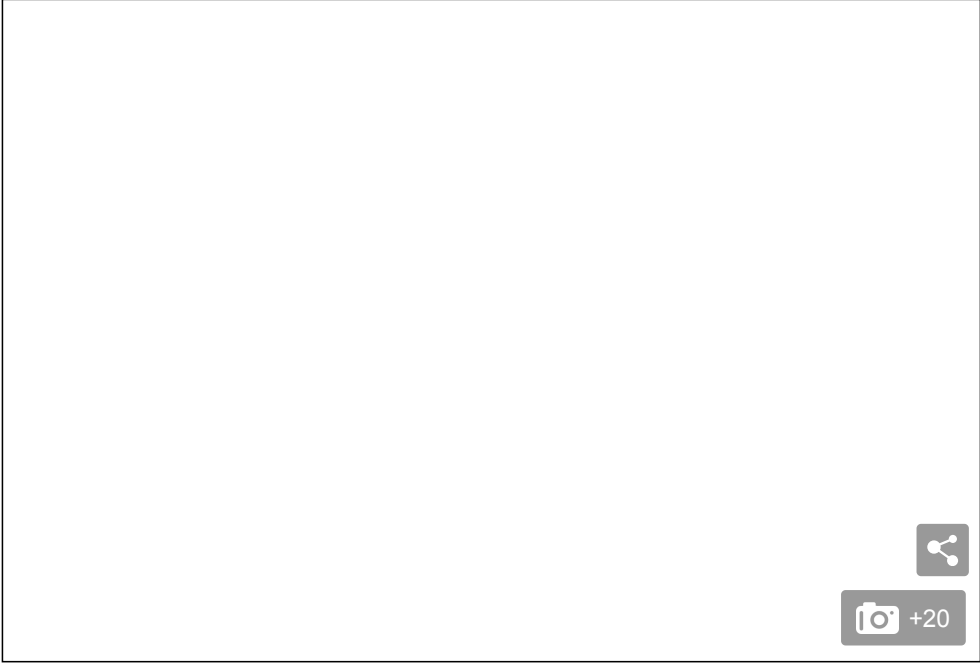


In this scene from the movie, Johansson, a 20something New York City nanny, takes the child in her care to Lexington Candy Shop for food





Filmmaker Woody Allen (right) shot a scene of his 2013 comedy *Fading Gigolo* at Lexington Candy Shop. Here Allen poses with Philis in the diner



Karcher (left) and Philis (right) pose with *Fading Gigolo* star John Turturro at Lexington Candy Shop

▶ [ex Patrick Whitesell, 54](#)

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She's been staying with her Beckham pals

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Let their hair down in snowy Colorado

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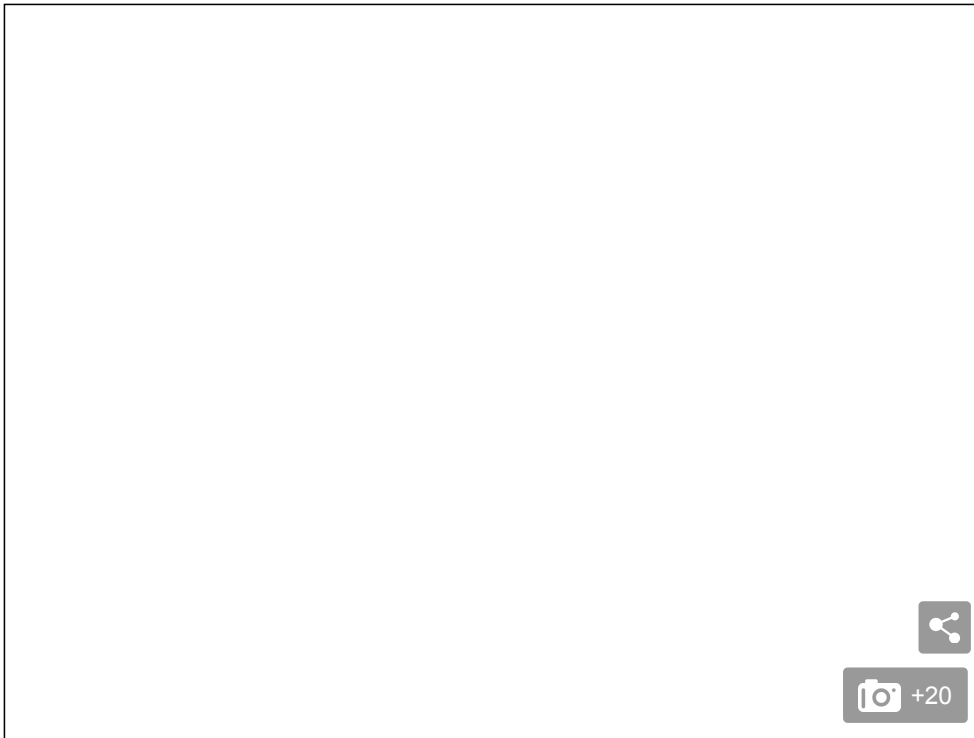
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Has been just as big a hit with critics as it has been with fans

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The 38-year-old supermodel looked fit as ever

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### Philis makes a cameo in Fading Gigolo as a diner employee who pours a character a drink

Though they both grew up working in various roles at the restaurant, Philis's trips from the suburbs of Long Island to Lexington Candy Shop were longer and reflected the family's upward mobility. But sitting in a booth inside the store among the hustle and bustle of a weekday lunch crowd, he questioned whether owning a restaurant is still economically viable.

'When you make business decisions you have to keep your emotions in check,' he said. 'You have to look at logistically will it work for your future, your family because neighborhoods are changing between rents and prices and inflation and everything else - can I maintain the same standard of living for my family that my dad provided for me?'

'Yes, there is the emotion and the historical side, but financially, with all the changes, is it doable? Is it doable for five years? Is it doable for 15 years? Is it doable for 40 years? That's when we would sit down and really break it down and then make a logical decision. So, we'll see what happens. We got time,' he said.

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The couple got engaged on Christmas Day

▶ Simon Cowell's girlfriend Lauren Silverman wows in a plunging lace-up swimsuit as she strolls along the beach with son Eric in Barbados

▶ John Legend and Chrissy Teigen trade in snow for sand following vacation in Wyoming... in wake of Legend's debut album anniversary

▶ Madonna, 61, and her toyboy beau Ahlamalik Williams, 25, have said I LOVE YOU and are already 'getting serious', reveals his father

▶ Prince Philip is feeling 'much better' Charles tells well-wishers on the way to church with Queen and other royals

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The 48-year-old reality star got emotional

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## From a \$1.25 stain remover spray from Aldi to the top laundry detergent on the market: Your definitive guide to the best and worst household products of 2019



Consumer experts from Choice have revealed the best and worst household products of 2019, after testing hundreds of supermarket items.

[Femail](#)

▶ Martin Lawrence, 54, and his fiancée Roberta Moradfar, 38, look smitten as they sit courtside at the basketball in Los Angeles

▶ Tom Cruise spotted by eagle-eyed fans in VIP section of Lady Gaga's Enigma residency in Las Vegas  
Enjoying the show

▶ Kevin Hart thanks his fans and encourages them to 'be better' ... after premiere of Netflix docuseries that recounts several scandals

▶ Rande Gerber spotted out in New York City... just days after an interaction with a 'freaking out' Pete Davidson in daughter Kaia's apartment

▶ Orlando Bloom gets into a playful screaming match with fiancée Katy Perry's relatives during a raucous game of Taboo

▶ Nina Agdal wows in bikini during trip to 'paradise' with beau Jack Brinkley-Cook and his mom Christie (and even serves as their photographer)

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▶ Jennifer Lopez cuts a boss look in black Chanel belt as she and Alex Rodriguez shop for commercial real estate in LA

▶ Bindi Irwin 'grateful' to be home for New Year with her 'beautiful family' after celebrating Christmas with fiancé Chandler Powell in the US

▶ 'I bounced back quickly': Zac Efron opens up about his brush with death after

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## Revealed: The bestselling foundation this YEAR - and it boasts over one thousand five-star reviews



Locating the right foundation is a bit like finding the perfect pair of jeans: it takes time and patience. And now, beauty giant Mecca have revealed the best-selling foundation of 2019.

**Femail**

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▶ Young Sheldon's Iain Armitage, 11, says he loved Cats ... as film proves one of Hollywood's biggest box office busts of the year

▶ Model Lara Stone poses for a rare selfie with property developer boyfriend David Grievson as they enjoy a romantic trip to Barcelona

▶ Lucy Hale slithers in snakeskin patterned coat as she rehearses for Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve hosting gig alongside Ryan Seacrest

▶ James Packer cracks a rare smile as he jokes around with a female friend during a wintry holiday in Aspen with girlfriend Kylie Lim Day out

▶ Georgina Rodriguez puts on a cheeky display in the pool after jet-ski ride on Dubai holiday with Cristiano Ronaldo... after denying they secretly married

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▶ Kendall Jenner shows her spiritual side in 'Jesus Is King' sweatshirt on one year anniversary of Kanye West's Sunday Service

▶ Lizzo teases her cleavage in leopard Savage x Fenty robe... after clapping back at a body-shaming troll on Twitter The Truth Hurts artist

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TODAY'S TOP VIDEOS

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## Minnie Driver steps out in stylish cropped jacket and black knit beanie in West Hollywood after enjoying family Christmas



The British actress, who's 49, paired the jacket with a black top and loose-fitting black and blue patterned trousers. She added a pair of black bover boots.

**TV&Showbiz**



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▶ herself cooking one of ex's mother's recipes

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▶ Jessie J shares emotional Instagram post about 'healing' as she offers mental wellness advice to her followers amid Channing Tatum split

▶ Kanye West completes a year of Sunday Services in LA's Skid Row neighborhood ... where he defends T.I. and says he has 'vision' for homeless problem

▶ Kelly Rowland is casually stylish in white sweater and knit pants as she runs errands in Beverly Hills  
The Destiny's Child singer

▶ Jessica Simpson hits the slopes with daughter Maxwell and brother-in-law Evan Ross during family trip to Aspen, Colorado  
Hitting the slopes

▶ 'I nearly burst into tears': Fatboy Slim became emotional listening to his viral Right Here, Right Now remix that samples Greta Thunberg

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▶ Kris Jenner is picture perfect wearing a vibrant green gown for dinner with Corey Gamble in St. Barts

▶ Disney star Devan Leos avoids jail in

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Herinner je hem? Haal diep adem voordat je ziet hoe hij er nu...

Healthy George

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## Karl Stefanovic kisses pregnant wife Jasmine Yarbrough while flaunting his dad bod at the beach in Noosa... after his cheeky baby announcement

He finally confirmed his wife, Jasmine Yarbrough, is set to welcome the pair's first child in 2020 on Monday.

**TV&Showbiz**

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BFFs with her husband's ex Mary Jo Eustace in selfie... years after cheating scandal:  
'I never thought this pic would happen'

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writers weren't trying to 'sideline' Rose Tico... after fans speak out about Kelly Marie Tran's beloved character

▶ **Sir Tom Jones, 79,**  
admits he eyes up women in their thirties but confesses 'it's mostly the grandmothers who fancy me'

▶ **Mariah Carey**  
braves the snow for a spot of shopping at Louis Vuitton in Aspen with her beau Bryan Tanaka

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The 39-year-old beauty rocked the bright outfit

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