

The Virginian-Pilot

PilotOnline.com

A trolley-car cigar bar will soon open in downtown Norfolk — perhaps the only one in the country

By MATTHEW KORFHAGE
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT | SEP 25, 2019



An old Rhode Island Public Transportation Trolley purchased by Primo Cigars and Coffee in downtown Norfolk, Va., on Thursday, September 12, 2019. The trolley is being converted into a cigar lounge. (Kristen Zeis / The Virginian-Pilot)

This fall, downtown Norfolk will be home to something that might not exist anywhere else in the country: A cigar bar inside a trolley car.

Michael Vecchione, owner of [Primo Cigars and Coffee](#), bought the decommissioned cherry-red trolley car this spring, plopping it down in the parking lot outside the Southern Eats restaurant at 435 Monticello Ave. It's been parked for months as a passing curiosity, and a visual echo to the light rail trains rolling

through downtown.

Vecchione is busy installing wood trim, high-backed leather seats and tables so he can open it up soon as a place for smokehounds to sip Scotch from Southern Eats restaurant while smoking a fine Dominican Majestic from Primo Cigars — in a temperature-controlled, ventilated space.

The idea, Vecchione said, was almost a lark. His cigar shop is inside Southern Eats restaurant, and he was trying to find a way that patrons could drink whiskey and smoke cigars in comfort.

“To have an indoor smoking area, you have to have a separate ventilation system — completely standalone and in a separate room from your main room,” Vecchione said. “Well, with Southern Eats, that was impossible. We would have had to have done a lot of construction to section off an area. Adding to that, it’s a five-story building with the HVAC on the roof.”

So in a meeting with city officials, he asked somewhat jokingly about just throwing a shipping container into the parking lot, an eyesore of an idea that didn’t get much traction.

“Then I was like, ‘You know what would be cool?’ And I kind of just threw it out there: I was like, ‘What if maybe a train car, because of the light rail going by? Or like a trolley?’” Vecchione said, laughing. “I don’t know why I just got stuck on a trolley car.”

To his surprise, the officials he talked to were not opposed. They liked the connection between the trolley car and the light rail.

And so he bought himself a trolley car.

He said he tried to find an old Virginia Beach or Norfolk trolley car, but resorted to buying one from Rhode Island through a very specialized broker.

“She’s the one that does all the trolleys for Disney,” Vecchione said. “Disney needs, like, a fleet of trolleys. They go through her. She has the connection on all the different trolleys and yards.”

But still, a trolley car cigar bar is an untested idea. Vecchione said Norfolk officials reached out to cities all over the country trying to find something similar, and came up dry.

It took months to figure out how to regulate his idea for a trolley bar, especially one outfitted with ventilation.

Finally, the city offered a solution: The trolley was not a vehicle. It was a building, an extension of the restaurant. Vecchione had to hire an architect, hard-tether the trolley to the ground so it couldn't move, and get his plans approved by Norfolk's Architectural review board.

Vecchione said most of the heavy lifting is done, and so he hopes to have his trolley bar up and running by the time the weather turns — and smoking and drinking on the restaurant patio becomes a lot less attractive.

He'll take out some of the original trolley seating, replacing it with luxuriant leather chairs he got from Nordstrom right before it closed.

"We're going to set the waiting area for the restaurant up with trolley seats — so I'm going to kind of bring a piece of the trolley into the restaurant. And then in that area of the trolley we took out, we'll have leather furniture that I got from Nordstrom."

The trolley will preserve a lot of the original decor, including brass poles, and will seat 12. Vecchione said bachelor parties and other groups have already approached him about renting it out for their special nights. Meanwhile, some customers from out of town have told him they'll try to route their business trips through Norfolk if they get to puff and sip in a trolley car.

But while smokers may feel like they've got a new indoor drinking space downtown, Vecchione offers a caveat: No cigarettes. No vaping. And at least for now, no food.

Just pipes, cigars and booze.

"I'm a traditional tobacconist," Vecchione said. "A lot of the lounges around here that allow cigar smoking are also cigarette smoking. And a lot of cigar smokers are not cigarette smokers. The tobacco in premium cigars is handled very differently from what you're getting in cigarettes. And the smoke is very different. ... I mean, part of the cigar smoking experience is taste and aroma. You're changing that when you add in cigarettes."

Matthew Korfhage is food writer for The Virginian-Pilot. For a decade, he wrote about restaurants, bars and beer in his hometown of Portland, Oregon. He accepts Dungeness crab and Upright Brewing beer by mail.