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Rainbow Room's Lease Terminated

By [CHARLES V. BAGLI](#)

The Ciprianis, Italian restaurateurs renowned for their elegance, Bellini cocktails and very expensive pasta, have lost their lease for the Rainbow Room atop Rockefeller Center for failing to pay the rent. But in what is shaping up to be a very public fight, they are vowing to remain there.

The Ciprianis announced a few days ago that they would close the adjoining Rainbow Grill this weekend because of the economic crisis and a continuing lease dispute, but would still operate the main Art Deco space for catered affairs, dinner and dancing.

On Friday morning, however, Tishman Speyer Properties, the landlord at Rockefeller Center, told the Cipriani company that it was terminating the lease because the company had failed to pay millions of dollars in rent since September. Under the lease, the Ciprianis have three days to get out.

But as with all things Cipriani, they have their own version of events. The family — led by Giuseppe Cipriani, 43, whose grandfather founded Harry's Bar in Venice — says that the termination notice is part of a continuing effort by Tishman Speyer “to drive them out of business” at the Rainbow Room, according to their lawyer, David Rozenholc.

Mr. Rozenholc said Tishman Speyer had imposed an “insanely high” rent when the Ciprianis renewed their lease for the 64th and 65th floors at 30 Rockefeller Plaza a year ago. The Ciprianis challenged the rent increase and the matter went into arbitration. After Christmas, the arbitrator came down on the Ciprianis' side, and cut the rent to \$6 million a year, from \$8.7 million, according to two executives who asked not to be identified because arbitrations are supposed to be private.

Still, there's the matter of the back rent. And Tishman Speyer wants them out for failure to pay.

“Since September 2008, Cipriani has failed to pay its rent for the Rainbow Room,” said

Robert Lawson, a spokesman for Tishman Speyer. “As a result, we are forced to end its lease. The Rainbow Room is one of our city’s great institutions, and we will immediately begin the process of finding another great restaurateur to operate the space in the first-class manner that New Yorkers and visitors deserve.”

But the Cipriani have no intention of vacating the premises, Mr. Rozenholc said. “We are going to fight it in court,” he said. In any event, the current fight has all the fanfare and acrimony that accompanied the Cipriani’s takeover of the Rainbow Room management a decade ago.

Giuseppe Cipriani fired 250 union employees who had helped make the restaurant a favorite among New Yorkers and tourists alike, igniting a long battle with the restaurant workers’ union.

At the same time, the Cipriani set about converting the Rainbow Room into a catering hall and restricting public access to the restaurant and its famed revolving dance floor. [Tim Zagat](#), then the chairman of the city’s convention and visitors bureau, denounced the move. “It’s a terrible thing for the city and for Rockefeller Center to close off the public from the high-end tourist attraction in New York where people imagined themselves to be Fred and Ginger,” he said at the time.

Ultimately, the family compromised — with the union and on its vision for the Rainbow Room.

Wealthy European tourists, Wall Street bankers and others have flocked to the Cipriani’s upscale restaurants and catering halls in Manhattan, including Cipriani Wall Street, Harry Cipriani on Fifth Avenue in the Sherry-Netherland Hotel, and Cipriani Dolci at [Grand Central Terminal](#). But the Cipriani have also tangled with restaurant reviewers, other landlords and District Attorney [Robert M. Morgenthau](#). Later this month, they will close their banquet hall in the former Toy Building on 23rd Street near Madison Square Park as part of a settlement with the landlord there.

In 2007, Giuseppe Cipriani and his father, Arrigo Cipriani, then 75, pleaded guilty to charges related to tax evasion and were fined \$10 million. And last year, the State Liquor Authority accepted the family’s offer of \$500,000 to settle charges of more than four dozen violations of state laws at nine venues, including the Rainbow Room. In exchange, they were allowed to keep their liquor licenses.

Tishman Speyer, which gained control of Rockefeller Center in the late 1990s, brought in the

Ciprianis to manage the Rainbow Room because it wanted an operator who would pay a higher rent and add some pizzazz to what it thought was a tired location. The former operators, Joseph Baum and [David Emil](#), had been paying about \$2.6 million a year and offered to overhaul the Rainbow Room. But they were unwilling to pay as much as the Ciprianis.

Some things did not change. Hicham Dardari, a waiter at the Rainbow Room for two decades, paused on Wednesday to reflect on its mystique and recall some of the celebrity patrons he has waited on: Neil Armstrong, [Al Pacino](#), [Robert De Niro](#). Mr. Dardari said he believed that the room was popular because it allowed ordinary people and luminaries to dine and dance together in an elegant setting.

The Cipriani company issued a statement Friday saying that the landlord's campaign would put 300 employees out of work. "We fully anticipate that we will prevail against these frivolous actions," the statement said. "Unfortunately, we are dealing with an uncompassionate and greedy landlord who has not made any efforts to resolve our differences in a reasonable manner."

Jake Mooney contributed reporting.

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