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From Apex of Hot Dog World, Even Pyramids Look Small

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In the long-simmering [hot dog wars](#) outside the [Metropolitan Museum of Art](#), the grill smoke has cleared and — for the moment, and probably not much longer — Dan Rossi is the last vendor standing.

Mr. Rossi, you may recall, stormed the corner of Fifth Avenue and 82nd Street, perhaps the most coveted weenie-vending spot in the city with its hordes of hungry tourists and lack of nearby restaurants, in 2007, declaring that as a military veteran he had the right to do business there without paying the city a dime.

After a flood of imitators followed in his wake (forcing out a concessionaire who was paying the city \$650,000 a year), the police [clamped down last summer](#). Vendors received stiff fines, and some were arrested, including Mr. Rossi, who spent a night in jail. The vendors took the hint and steered clear of the museum — all except Mr. Rossi.

“Best thing that ever happened to me, getting arrested,” Mr. Rossi, 60, said recently, while — you guessed it — selling hot dogs to a long line of tourists in front of the museum. “The police scared everyone off, but I’m not leaving.”

But Mr. Rossi’s days of monopoly are numbered.

The [Department of Parks and Recreation](#), which has been looking to diversify the culinary offerings outside the museum with an eye to what Parks Commissioner [Adrian Benepe](#) called “healthy options,” selected a vendor to set up shop next to Mr. Rossi: a purveyor of high-end cupcakes (\$3) and milkshakes (\$5).

Under a proposed contract, Cake & Shake of Long Island City, Queens, will pay the city a total of \$659,350 over five years. A Cake & Shake co-owner, Gina Ojile, said she was not spoiling for a fight. “I don’t think there will be animosity with the hot dog vendors, because we’re offering a different product,” she said, though she could not resist adding, “It was somewhat embarrassing for the parks department to offer only hot dogs and water.”

To observe what might be the twilight of Mr. Rossi’s moment atop the food chain, City

Room invited him on an art-walk through the museum. Though he had seldom set foot inside, he pinned the little metal entrance clip to his blue sweatshirt and obliged.

In the American Wing, he marveled at a sculpture of Cleopatra by William W. Story and declared it sublime. He noted that he could cut stone into blocks, but acknowledged, “There’s a big difference between this and a square block, let me tell you.”

After viewing a few more pieces, it became clear: Mr. Rossi, a skilled mechanic, mason and tinsmith, seemed to look at the art thinking, “Could I make that?”

He looked up at the glass atrium overhead and said he helped construct it when he was a union sheet-metal worker. This provoked a discussion distinguishing between the creation of a true artist and mere mechanical expertise. For example, he marveled at the carvings on some ancient Egyptian stone artifacts, but added that many of the monuments were not so hard to make.

Even the pyramids, he said, were simply examples of engineering, good craftsmanship and hard work. “One block at a time, with enough guys?” he said. “Come on, of course we could. What’s the big deal?”

At one point, though, Mr. Rossi turned to a sphinx-looking sculpture and said: “This, there’s no way in God’s creation that I could do this.”

He strolled through a gallery of Medieval art and marveled at the craftsmanship of some stained glass, eventually fixing on an intricate marble portico.

“This is hard,” Mr. Rossi said. “This is hard to do.”