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No Permit? No Touching the Pistols



Emily Berl for The New York Times

BANG! Targets in the window at John Jovino Gun Shop.

By ARIEL KAMINER

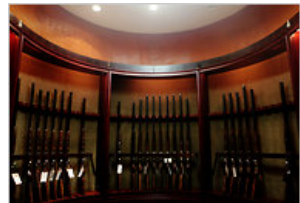
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You don't find a lot of retail businesses that officially turn away buyers. But when I visited the John Jovino Gun Shop, the city's oldest, the mildest inquiry elicited a swift and gruff response. Show me your police identification, I was told, or goodbye. The store does not sell to civilians.

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Among the reasons this policy is remarkable is that it isn't actually true. John Jovino does sell to civilians, as a subsequent phone call confirmed. But apparently it is not eager to do so.

To run a gun shop in this of all cities is to weather a great deal of regulatory — even hostile — scrutiny. In 1993, John Jovino in particular proved that there is such a thing as bad publicity, when a Columbia professor linked its wares to nearly 1 percent of the gun crimes in the city. Since then, Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg has made the tightening of the city's gun-control laws one of the proudest hallmarks of his administration. Last week, he redoubled his efforts to export them to the rest of America.

The laws on the city's books are just part of the story, however. And the several months, and several hundred

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dollars, that it takes to get a permit are just the beginning of the challenge for those New Yorkers seeking the added confidence — or risk — of a handgun beneath their pillow.

In the Pelham Parkway section of the Bronx, Olinville Arms also caters largely to law enforcement, a clientele that, from the looks of the store, does not place a high value on décor. Big piles of gun-related paraphernalia sit next to a few hundred leather belts, running up to size 58; pink girly-girl tank tops with police logos hang above school crossing-guard patches.

The actual guns, save for a few shotguns positioned below two dusty deer heads, are kept out of sight. But not out of earshot: the store has a shooting range, separated from the shop only by the thinnest of barriers, and each discharge rings out at a disconcerting volume.

When I asked about personal protection, a salesman suggested a revolver — a Smith & Wesson, a Ruger or a Colt. “You could try it out,” he said, “and if you like it you could go for a semiautomatic.”

But he did not seem as if he cared one way or the other, especially since I did not have a permit, which meant I was not allowed to handle the merchandise. Go online, he suggested, and see what looks good.

I found it hard to imagine buying a gun based on looks, but the sales counter was lined with an advertisement for a hot pink rubber sheath for dressing up a hunting rifle, an accessory that appeals, the salesman said, to “a certain kind of person.” Then a few more powerful shots thundered out. You get used to it, he said with a shrug.

When I did finally get my hands on a gun, it wasn't in a dingy police shop; it was in the rarefied retail environment of a Madison Avenue boutique. Right next to the flashy “Sex and the City” fantasy of Jimmy Choo shoes, stands Beretta, a hushed, elegant space that seems far removed from Manhattan's bustle and slush. Its elegant double-height parlor is lined in dark wood and accessorized with cashmere sweaters and large-game trophies that peer down superciliously from their mountings.

The gun room on the third floor makes even the parlor seem cluttered and hectic. All but silent, it has the look of a private club and the feel of another century. Don't ask to see a Glock; Beretta sells hunting rifles. Some 400 of them, ranging in price from about \$1,000 to \$170,000, are arranged along the walls. Above the rifles are photographs of hunters proudly displaying their quarry: a tweedy fellow surrounded by a few hundred pheasants in concentric circles; a driveway lined with half a dozen huge bucks and a pile of 75 or so wild boar, shot at the country estate of [Nicolae Ceausescu](#).

A salesman handed me a 20-gauge semiautomatic (at the lower end of the price range), which he said would be easier for a novice. Then I raised it to my shoulder, and pointed.

Holding a top-of-the-line gun is supposed to make a person feel powerful, confident, in control. Instead, I felt ridiculous. My stance was all wrong, and in any case I would never pull the trigger — not to kill an intruder, not to kill a bird. That moment of truth reaffirmed what was already beyond doubt: I am a pacifist, or a coward, depending on your perspective. But just as important, I am a New Yorker. In a city where we all live right on top of one another, playing with guns feels as out of place as wearing prairie dresses and engaging in plural marriage.

The day I visited John Jovino Gun Shop, on Grand Street, a happy, ruddy-faced family followed me in, pushing a stroller. They were visiting from Sweden, they explained before anyone thought to ask, and they wanted to make sure to see a real live gun store.

I informed them that New York is one of the hardest places in the world to buy a gun. They seemed surprised.

In fact, I said, the whole process can take up to six months. They laughed. In Sweden,



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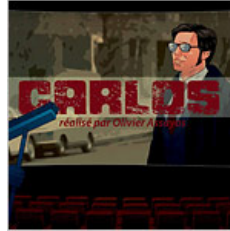
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