

# Riggs Liquors Fans the Flames of Reopening

by Teddy Durgin



**R**iggs Liquors in Northeast Washington, D.C., has risen from the ashes like the Phoenix of lore. That mythological bird lived in the desert, consumed itself by fire, then later rose renewed from its own ashes. By most accounts, the phoenix lived for 500 years before rebirth. Riggs was only down for 18 months. But don't say "only" to owner John Yoo. He thought he'd be back up and running in six months after an accidental blaze destroyed his store in December 2016. It wouldn't be until June of this year.

So what happened? In late 2016, Yoo was having some work done on the front overhang of his store's roof section in preparation of a new awning. The workers had stripped it all down to the bare metal. But because the metal itself was heavy, they opted to do the work on a Sunday because there would be no people interfering with the job.

"They decided to remove the awning with blowtorches to cut through the metal," Yoo recalled, during a recent interview with the *Beverage Journal*. "Unfortunately, that caused a spark on the inside of the building, and that caused the fire. Thankfully, no one was hurt. The people doing the work called the Fire Department when they saw smoke coming out of the building. But by that point, it was too late."

"There were so many aspects of [reopening] that were SO difficult!" he exclaimed. "Dealing with insurance, dealing with general contractors. It just took so long. Everything takes its time. Insurance needed to run its course. Unfortunately, with the general contractor ... let's just say, I wasn't his only client!"

Yoo continued, "I had never been through a situation like this. Had I had someone I could reach out to a little more, who maybe

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"I had never been through a situation like this. Had I had someone I could reach out to a little more, who maybe had gone through this, that would have been helpfu..."

~ John Yoo

had gone through this, that would have been helpful in navigating the finer aspects of what to do, how to do it, and when to do it. I'm not going to say I'm an expert now, but I learned a LOT!"

What did he learn? "I learned that when you find a general contractor, make sure you sign a timed contract with them. 'This needs to be done by then, that needs to be done by this date.' Unfortunately, I didn't put any of that in my contract."

On a positive note, rebuilding Riggs Liquors gave Yoo the opportunity to make improvements that were not possible before. The difference between the old store and the new is quite remarkable. Yoo said, "Truth be told, back when I purchased this store in 2002, it was not a good-looking store. I made some improvements over the years, but it was nowhere near where I wanted it to be. Every cloud has a several lining, so I took this opportunity to totally redo the store. My customers who were with me 'before,' their jaws dropped when they came in for the first time and saw the 'after.'"

The biggest improvement, according to Yoo, is the flow of the store. Before, Riggs Liquors was very cluttered. "I now have just as much, if not more, product on the floor," he stated. "But it's now shelved and displayed in such a cleaner manner. People can now walk more comfortably down the aisles. It's no longer one person having to wait for another person, because they couldn't be in the

same aisle at the same time. Just the overall beauty of the store is so much better than what it used to be."

Yoo has also taken the opportunity to upgrade his store's product selection. Before the fire, Riggs Liquors was a big beer store. "I was known as the biggest beer retailer in the city," Yoo said. "I think I am on my way

back to that. But now I am focusing more on craft beers and expanding my imports to more than just Corona and Heineken. I had a decent selection of wines before. But now I have it laid out to where customers can find the Cabernets, the Merlots, there's a French section. I'm trying to become more of a general market store."

Yoo intends to stay out ahead of the curve moving forward. Chiefly, he plans to bolster his store's presence online and via social media to appeal more to 21st century customers. "I'm not old, but I'm not necessarily young," he concluded. "I'll be 48 later this year. The social media stuff doesn't come easy to me. I want to be more outgoing in that way to my customers. I want to post about upcoming wine tastings, get people excited about new products that are coming ... get people excited about Riggs Liquors!" ■





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