

Restaurant critic lines up his choices

PHOTOS: CARL ANGEL



St. Anthony's food servers get ready for the lunch-time throngs.

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you go through the line a second time.

A black couple sat across the table from us. Both were loud and vulgar. About all we could do was eat our food quietly and hope they did not turn their focus on us. It was a very intimidating situation and underlines one of the less desirable aspects of eating at a soup kitchen. One meal you're engaged in friendly conversations with people at your table, other times your fellow diners are angry or threatening.

Haight Ashbury Food Program, Friday, lunch

Diamond Dave and I arrive a little late. Serving started at noon. About 30 to 40 people are in line, with a full house inside. We stand where we are for about 20 minutes before there is any movement. It's 45 minutes before we are served. We are lined up against a fence that walls off a parking lot. The lot belongs to the Hamilton United Methodist Church, which has a child care center and a family center and runs

up talking to each other. This was not the case with the Haight soup kitchen line. People were talking to one another as we walked up and Dave knew several people in line.

One reason for the difference is that the Haight Ashbury Food Program is not located in the Tenderloin. It has a distinctly different patronage. Many of those served by the soup kitchen are people who sleep in Golden Gate Park. Numerous men standing in line had bedrolls and backpacks with them. A woman in her 20s was a dozen spots ahead of us. Many women stand in food kitchen lines, but they are usually older.

A further distinction between the Tenderloin soup kitchens and the Haight Ashbury Food Program is the number of families being fed here. When I entered the dining hall, there were two families with small children and a third family sat down while Dave and I were eating. I did not see any families at either Glide, the one time I was there, or St. Anthony's.

The soup kitchen is entered

We were handed plastic serving trays like the ones at St. Anthony's, a knife and folk wrapped in a paper napkin. When the soup dispenser filled our soup bowl, he put it in one of the slots for vegetables. We then moved forward to a steam table where four people served the remainder of the meal. Dave was given a beef stew entree while I went for the vegetarian version.

The soup was tomato-based and contained the usual suspects — corn, carrots, celery, peas, string beans and spinach. It was hearty and the vegetables were not cooked to death. Spinach is not something normally found in a vegetable or meatball soup. It's there because Judy Woods, the food program coordinator, believes that as long as an ingredient is healthy and fresh, it can go into the soup. That day a lot of spinach was donated. That was evident from the vegetable entree, which was spinach with onions and celery. My main course was potato and cauliflower in a tomato sauce that wasn't much different than the soup. It also featured spinach. It was, however, all good.

One problem was a lack of condiments, mainly salt and pepper. The vegetarian entree in particular could have used salt. Dave's entree had two pieces of beef as well as potatoes, onions, celery and spinach. His sauce seemed thicker than my entree's, but that could have been a result of my meat envy, which was running high at this point. I had to willfully resist asking Dave for one of his pieces of beef.

We both also got a slice of pizza. Mine was mushroom and Dave's was pepperoni. These were handed out until there was no more and we must have been among the last to get pizza, since maybe five minutes after we were served I noticed people's trays didn't have a slice. As Woods told me later, the food program relies on donations for the bulk of their foodstuff. There is a small budget that is used primarily to purchase meat.

The final element to our meal was half a large doughnut. We also were given cups and a volunteer went around pouring cranapple fruit juice from a pitcher.

Because of the families, because so many of the people seemed to know one another, because it was located in a residential neighborhood, because the staff of volunteers chatted with the diners, I found the Haight-Ashbury soup kitchen an altogether different and less institutional experience. They feed only 10% of the number St. Anthony's does, about 200 on average, so in a sense that's not surprising. But I enjoyed the experience. While I enjoyed the food at the other places, I enjoyed going to the Haight-Ashbury soup kitchen. I plan to go back.

Lunch at Glide

The line in front of Glide Memorial Methodist Church stretched down Ellis Street just 20

feet short of Jones, so Lola and I knew that the wait would not be long. Glide's line moves in spurts, as they let in 20 people at a time. The people in the Glide line are solitary and wait silently.

We are inside the building in less than 20 minutes. We enter the lobby and thread our way to the right, through a hallway that opens up to a large room with three rows of tables and chairs — 120 people can be seated at one time. But there is constant motion and within three minutes of entering the hall, we are at the front of the line.

The day we went Glide's kitchen was undergoing renovation. We are handed a paper plate of food and told to find a seat. On the thick cardboard plate is a ham sandwich, potato salad and berry cobbler. We also were given a paper cup, which holds a packet of salt and one of pepper and a plastic pouch of mayonnaise and one of mustard.

The sandwich is made of thick white bread. There are two slices of ham, some tomato and a thin slice of lettuce. After spreading the mayonnaise and mustard and sprinkling the pepper, I bite in. It's a pretty good sandwich. The bread has good texture and is fresh. The ham is not too salty. This is a sandwich I would gladly pay \$3 for in a deli. The potato salad is equally good.

The berry cobbler is tasty,

though a tad sweeter would have been nice. For a drink we were offered a pitcher of water.

As we finished our lunch, I began making notes. The woman sitting across from me asked, "What will you give it, one star or two?"

This marked the only time someone spoke to me without my engaging them in conversation first, although I had taken notes at just about every venue I visited.

The woman explained she was a volunteer at Glide, then added, "But I also eat here. I'm poor." She was cleanly dressed, in her late 40s or early 50s and accompanied by a man who also looked nice. I had heard that the staff at Glide were bossy and rude, but I did not find that the case at all. And I thought the food was excellent.

What surprised me at Glide was the almost lavish way the food was served. The paper plates were the most expensive kind, even though they needn't have been since no hot food was served. Only the Rescue Mission used paper plates and they were the cheapest type. All other projects served on reusable food trays. Then there was the plastic fork and paper cups, all disposable and hence a recurring expense. The condiments — the mustard, mayonnaise, salt and pepper — all in individual packets.

Glide: True Grits

Dinner is served at Glide Memorial Methodist Church Monday through Friday from 4 to 5:30 p.m. On the evening of Nov. 28, it's cold and rainy, so Glide's yellow-jacketed security guards marshal the line of diners off the street and snake it up a stairwell. One of the guards hands out meal tickets, and 25 people at a time enter the small, upstairs dining room. (The main dining room, in the basement, is temporarily closed for renovation.)

Once inside the dining hall, the line moves quickly. Glide serves about 3,000 meals a day, according to a brochure, and they know how to do things efficiently. People are requested to leave their bags by the door. A worker hands out Styrofoam cups stuffed with paper napkins. Plates of food are handed out in assembly-line fashion. Diners sit at three very long tables covered with plastic cloths. Pitchers of coffee and water are spaced around. The room is nicely lit with soft, track lights that spotlight children's artwork on the walls.

Tonight's meal is a tuna sandwich — some with white bread, some wheat — with lettuce and tomato, a small bag of Lay's, a red Delicious apple, and a square slice of pumpkin pie. One man uses his empty potato chip bag as a doggie bag so he can have his pie later. Another man hordes unused sugar packets. No prayer or religious service is offered, but one diner shouts, "God is love," before taking his first bite.

The following morning, the rain has broken, and the line for breakfast at Glide (served every day, 8-9 a.m.) stretches all the way along Ellis Street to Jones. Paul, an occasionally homeless man who says he has been in San Francisco for 35 days, guesses that today's menu might include grits, eggs and bacon. Not a good guess, as it turns out.

"[Glide]'s not really as cracked up as it should be, as it's supposed to be," says the 43-year-old, who closely resembles another Paul, the actor Winfield. "To me, St. Anthony's is more organized than Glide, and the food's better. When it rains and you're up around St. Anthony's, they turn it into a drop-in, where you can come in for two or three hours, maybe four. Here, you're just plain asked out. When you represent The Man Upstairs, you're supposed to represent him to the fullest."

Inside we're served a muffin, a small container of milk, a bowl of cereal, a red Delicious, and a bagel with a schmear. Coffee and water are on the tables, which stay remarkably neat and clean considering the volume of people dining. True to Paul's words, a security task force member (with a gifted bass voice) asks people to leave and not to sit nursing a cup of coffee. But there's no cruelty in his act. The massive line outside and the limited space inside create

Food Not Bombs, Friday

The compact car with four people and a remarkable amount of food inside, pulls up. The 75 or so people standing around U.N. Plaza do not all immediately form a line. They continue to stand around in groups and only gradually drift over when the food is set out. The soup, the main entree on the FNB menu, is in four five-gallon white plastic paint cans. Another two cans are filled with fruit smoothie.

The smoothie is quite delicious, made of bananas, apples and oranges. Both the smoothie and the soup are served in Styrofoam cups without plastic spoons, which is no problem, unless you wear glasses.

The soup — it's always vegetarian, sometime vegan — is made from whatever ingredients FNB has been able to collect that day. Their main supplier is Rainbow Grocery, which David, one of the cooks, says usually provides enough vegetables and grains to make 20 gallons of soup. Tonight's fare heavily features beans and rice. Different people do the cooking so the style of the soup varies greatly.

Poet Diamond Dave, who's helped serve at Food Not Bombs for years, says all FNB meals are cooked at private homes. Tonight's soup is very tasty, chewy owing to the beans and rice but

it also has a lot of flavor. David said he used a blender to puree potatoes to serve as the base, then mixed in other beans, rice, corn, string beans and celery, plus the water. "We cook it a really long time," David told me.

FNB has also brought several bags of day-old bread, a pizza, scones and pastries, which are gone in a flash. The breads come from Arizmendi, a bakery in the Inner Sunset that donates its day-old product to the poor every day. Food Not Bombs gets Friday's take.



Food Not Bombs is famous for its vegetarian soups, which are usually made from Rainbow Grocery donations.

It looked good. The breads are put on the stone ledge and people just come up and take what they want.

Food Not Bombs goes back to when Art Agnos and later Frank

Jordan were mayor and the group's founder and chief leader, Keith McHenry, was frequently arrested for serving food to the homeless. The group was always identified as anarchists. Maybe they are. Free spirits serve this food.

There is no talking in a loud or authoritarian manner. The servers speak to their guests in conversational tones. No one told the people what to do, as in larger programs. There were six volunteer workers and they seemed to know many of the regulars. Mostly, the talk was saying hello.

One woman said she looks forward to Friday nights because she really likes the scones from the bakery.

FNB serves a lunch meal at Haight and Stanyan on Tuesday and all other meals at U.N. Plaza, in the area behind the entrance to BART/Muni. They serve Monday, Wednesday, Thursday and Friday nights, starting sometime between 5:30 and 6 p.m. The size of the crowd they feed relates directly to the arrival of General Assistance checks. On check night the crowd is somewhat sparse, no more than 20 or 30. The night before check day usually ensures a turnout of more than 100.

San Francisco Rescue Mission, lunch

San Francisco Rescue Mission is a storefront on Jones Street, right next to the Campus All Male Theater. At 12:35 p.m., one person was ahead of me. By the time the doors opened at 1 only eight people were waiting, including a man with a woman asleep in his shopping cart. Inside, rows of folding chairs face a steam table with a glass counter cover. I sit in the first row assuming that I will get fed faster. (This proves correct although with unforeseen consequences.) Other people fill in behind me.

Chaplain Earl Rogers, the preacher, greets everyone and begins his sermon. It's the usual stuff: commit yourself to God and He will provide you the fortitude to endure your difficult circumstances. Rogers says he's 55 but was born again 13 years ago. I later find out he's a retired B of A executive. He preaches five days a week, at lunch and dinner.

At one point Rogers says, "Our mission here is to get out the word of God. The food is secondary." When lunch is served, the

— Billy Lux



The lunch-time line at Glide stretches down Ellis Street almost to Jones.

a potentially fractious pressure point that demands quick turnover.

Later I spoke with Calvin Gipson, the managing director of the daily free meals program at Glide, regarding his policy on feeding volunteers.

"We always feed our volunteers," says Gipson. "I would take Paul's comment with a grain of salt. Especially if the volunteers come off the street, not only do we feed them at a special meal time, we clean the entire dining room to make sure when we do feed our volunteers that they're in a very clean space, and we order extra food for them."

Let's say we're serving beef stroganoff on a particular day for lunch. Well, in addition to that, for our volunteers, we might throw in roast beef or barbecue ribs. And they probably eat double the size of portion, because this is our appreciation for folks that help us out, especially if they're off the street. We treasure our volunteers. I only have a staff of 18 people. Eighteen people cannot serve 1,000 people each meal, so we're heavily dependent on volunteers and deeply appreciate them."

Before leaving, Paul waves good-bye. "I'll be in San Francisco for a while," he says. Implicit in his voice is the romantic/fatalistic notion of men in motion, people without commitments or cell phones. The notion says, Maybe we'll meet again, maybe not.

SATURDAY NIGHT FEEDER

An Interview with Mother Brown

Billy Lux

If you're in need of a free dinner in the Tenderloin on a Saturday night, the place to turn is not Glide or St. Anthony's, but Mother Brown's United Council of Human Services. From 4 p.m. until the food runs out, Mother Brown's crew of five volunteers serve to-go containers of hot food out of the Central City Hospitality House, a men's shelter at 146 Leavenworth, near Turk. Mother Brown recently spoke to *Central City Extra* about her efforts on behalf of the homeless and the hungry.

The Extra: How many meals do you serve in the Tenderloin?
Mother Brown: We bring in 300 hot meals every Saturday, and when there's not 300 people, we give them seconds. But 300 is the limit of meals we have funding for.

Extra: You prepare the meals in Bayview?

MB: Yes, we also have Mother Brown's dining room in Bayview.

Extra: Is there a religious service before your meals?

MB: No, we just bless the food.

Extra: What's the most rewarding experience you've had doing this type of work?

MB: Seeing that people have dinner and don't go to bed hungry and that their bellies are full. St. Anthony's and Glide are closed on Saturday evenings, so if we weren't there, a lot of people would go to bed hungry. We're the only ones in the Tenderloin serving on Saturday evenings. I could never get into my bed comfortable knowing that somebody could be missing out on a good home-cooked meal.

Extra: The most frustrating experience?

MB: People not wanting to fund what we do. It's such a needy cause. We could use more food, or money to buy food. Some of the programs that are closed up on Saturday probably could afford to give us a little grant to fill in the gap, but everybody's so territorial. We share out here in Bayview with everybody. When we get an abundance of something, we spread it around to other agencies. We make sure that we give away everything that we have.

Extra: What's your most popular dish?

MB: Smothered chicken wings and buttered corn! They love that. Another favorite is my meatballs and vegetables, with mushroom gravy over rice.

Extra: How long have you been serving free meals?

MB: I founded the United Council of Human Services and started serving in 1981. In 1984, at Sixth Street and Folsom, there was a vacant lot, and I also started serving meals there. Then, in 1986, they started construction at the site we were feeding on, and I had to serve off the top of my Seville Cadillac. I brought big old pots down and sat them down right on top of the Cadillac. Now that site's a recreation center. Next we went to Seventh and Howard, at a mini-park. We served there until the police ran us away in 1987. The policemen told us not to feed these people. We'd already started passing the food out, and I said, "You can't take hot food away from hungry people!" The people were already smelling the food and got upset. The police called six paddy wagons and eight backup cars down on me. I got pumped, and thought, Now I want to do what Martin Luther King would do! I was ready to go to jail, but they wouldn't take me. We've been at Hospitality House ever since then.

The Extra checks it out

At a quarter to 4, fewer than a dozen people were lined up on Leavenworth along the front of Hospitality House. They were waiting for Mother Brown to let them inside to get their Saturday night dinner. It wouldn't be a hot meal, but would be it be as good as Mother Brown's reputation?

A van was parked at the meter out front with a cast of characters getting in and out, talking with people in the queue. Soon a chubby black woman in a Santa getup popped out of the van and gathered everyone in line into a circle formed by holding hands. She led them in reciting the Lord's Prayer with an amen chorus by a man with a cane who a little while later tossed his empty brown-bag-wrapped beer can in the gutter.

Prayer over, Santa said a few inspirational words and everyone went back to leaning against the building to wait some more. Finally, as the grumbling from the lengthening time increased, Mother Brown sent for the first group to come inside to get their meal.

We climbed the 29 steps to the room where food was distributed. On a table, each meal was stacked for the taking as people filed in and out, intoning thanks.

Mother Brown's hot meals may be quite something, but this cold meal was almost nothing: two white bread sandwiches bagged separately—one could have been peanut butter and jam, the other a wafer-thin baloney slice with American cheese. The culinary highlight was a 1½-ounce bag of Lay's. A 4-ounce orange tangerine Juicy Juice topped it off.

I gave mine to a young man who was lying on the sidewalk at the corner of Golden Gate. He thanked me profusely and stuffed it all into his plastic-bag pantry, put it behind his back for safekeeping and laid back down.

— Geoff Link