

# Sampling Tenderloin's soup kitchens

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truth of this statement becomes apparent. Lunch is salad and a sandwich. The salad is served on a paper plate by volunteers who pass them over the heads of the people sitting in the front rows. People from the back seats come forward to take the plates and sometimes drop a few pieces of salad in the bargain. Now I regret not being served later rather than sooner.

The salad was plentiful: it consisted of cashews, blueberries, tomato, Colby cheese, spinach and kale. The salad dressing was creamy Italian. Since I was one of the first served, my portion was scooped from the top and had an inordinate amount of kale and very few other items. I nibbled on the kale leaf and left the tough, thick stems.

The sandwich was two slices of white bread bonded by a salmon spread. About half of the sandwiches appeared to be made of whole wheat. People were invited to have seconds and a couple of people did. I was not one of them. There was also a fruit drink, Kool-Aid, I believe.

Dessert consisted of fresh fruit — blackberries, bananas, seedless grapes and a few oranges — in stainless steel bowls on a shelf near the steam table. Rogers asked that people not take any fruit until the meal was over. Yet a man and a woman got up and began helping themselves to the fruit. Seeing this, about half the assembled put their plates down, and went over to the fruit bowls. Rogers kept repeating that the dessert was to be eaten after the meal. Eventually, he shut up.

The meal ended unceremoniously, with people dumping their salad plates in a plastic trash bag on the way out. Twenty-one people were served lunch. About one-third were black, the rest a sprinkling of Asian, Latino and white. Four were women. Many were regulars, as Rogers spoke to them by name.

Rogers said the Rescue Mission gets most of its food from the Food Bank and donations from friendly markets. They have a modest budget for meat, which is usually only served at dinner, he said.

Before getting in line at the Mission, I strolled through

Boedekker Park. I overheard one man call out to another that Glide was serving porkchops that day. Glide, a scant 1½ blocks from the Rescue Mission, starts seating an hour earlier — and no sermon. If food were the only issue, surely anyone with the slightest common sense would be in Glide's line.

One can only conclude that even among the recipients of handouts, some people prefer simple food with Bible study over a more elaborate meal served on a mass scale. And the Rescue Mission obliges them.

## A choice experience

My regular beat is restaurant reviewing. I am not going to say that the food I ate at the various food kitchens was as good as what you find in the restaurants I review. It isn't. What is remarkable is that the difference isn't nearly as great I as might have imagined. The vegetable soup served at the Haight Ashbury Food Program might well be served at several less expensive Tenderloin restaurants. The spanish pork and couscous I ate at St. Anthony's was of a similar quality: not really first rate but perfectly acceptable at one of the lower priced diners.

The place where food kitchens and restaurants divide is in the matter of choice.

With the notable exception of the Haight Ashbury Food Program, none of the soup kitchens offered any choice and even there the meals were very similar except the vegetarian variant was minus the meat. Otherwise, it was eat this or not.

And choice in the matter of attendance. I enjoyed this assignment. Enjoyed the chance to see a world I'd only walked by, to sample food I'd only imagined, to share the experience with a friend or fellow co-worker. But in each case, it was my decision whether to go or not. It was my choice. For the other people on the line, they can choose which soup kitchen to eat at but not whether they are going to eat at one or not. They have no choice in that regard. And I'm sure that fact impacts how they perceive their dining experience. And I bet it's not a plus. ■

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL



The S.F. Rescue Mission served salad and a sandwich for lunch.

# 'THIS PLACE FITS MY AGE'

Marjorie Beggs

The North of Market Senior Services dining hall at 333 Turk fills to capacity early and fast for the 11:30 a.m. daily lunch. By 11:45 one cold December morning, 95 people were already sitting down eating a hot meal — egg drop soup, chicken stir fry, steamed rice, broccoli, carton of low-fat milk, orange. There are no lines here. When you eat at this meal site, the only one just for seniors, volunteer servers bring your meal to your table.

Rain pounded on the room's skylights, but inside it was warm and bright. The seniors, mostly men, pay a suggested donation of \$1.25 if they're 60 or older and \$3.50 if they get carded for being too young. But no one is turned away if they can't pay. A few people talked quietly at the round wooden tables, set for four, but most ate silently.

"I come for the food and the ambience," said a man wearing a jaunty black hat who lives South of Market. He's been coming here for several years, he said, avoiding St. Anthony's or Glide, because "it feels better here — safer."

At noon, when site coordinator Mary Jackson called out, "Seconds!" 20 people took her up on her offer.

North of Market Senior Services has been feeding neighborhood folks since it opened in 1972. Up to 800 clients a month use the agency's services, which also include health care, case management, social day care, and alcohol and drug programs.

By 12:10, the only people left were the black-hatted man and an 88-year-old woman wearing a scarf and heavy sweater (most people here keep their coats on while they eat). Her grocery

cart, stowed behind her chair, overflowed with personal possessions. Though she comes here often for lunch, she said, she always looks at the menu first.

"I was a commercial cook for 55 years, with Local 44," she said, explaining why she's a little picky even in her reduced circumstances. "Still, this place fits my age, whether I like it or not. At least this food is cooked — you're not eating out of your hand. I hate that!"

She wouldn't tell *The Extra* her name or where she lived — "you're like those social workers, always trying to get information out of me" — but she did say that she appreciates this place because "you don't know when there's another meal coming."

Actually, the chicken stir fry was tasty and plentiful, well-seasoned with lots of chicken chunks. Few people left anything on their plate.

Project Open Hand staffs and caters the lunches, using funding from the Office of Aging, U.S. Department of Agriculture, donations and its own coffers.

North of Market Senior Services also serves a cold breakfast daily, from 8 to 9 a.m., with food provided by the San Francisco Food Bank.

Breakfasts average 60 people a day, lunches just over 100. But at the end of the month, when the Social Security money is running low, 120 may show up for lunch.

Open Hand Director of Senior Services Julie Wasem says they serve 40,000 lunches a year at the North of Market site. Though she can't estimate how many taters or carrots that adds up to, she knows how much bread each lunch costs: \$1.60 for raw materials, \$6 when you add in preparation, personnel

and overhead. The more modest breakfast costs about 50 cents for the raw materials, paper plates and utensils, according to Jean Tokarek, North of Market Senior Services administrator.

Two paid Open Hand employees work the meals aided by 25 volunteers on a rotating schedule. One volunteer, who's been helping out here for the last three months, doesn't think much of the folks who come here to eat. "They have false pride and ego. They're not appreciative of what they're being given," he said.

Coordinator Jackson, who's worked lunches and breakfasts here for three years, thinks most of the people ARE appreciative, perhaps just a little cranky, and she wishes that more of them would stick around after a meal for other on-site services. "After all, many are homeless and they have problems related to their age," she said.

Still, hunger is a basic problem. Everyone involved in this food program acknowledges that some seniors high-tail it out of here for a second lunch at another site. Back-to-back lunches may be their only food for the day.

As the dining hall is shutting down, another volunteer, in a well-worn Open Hand baseball cap, measures coffee into the huge urn in preparation for breakfast. He lives in the Western Addition, he says, and works lunches here every day, refilling the urn weekdays and also clearing tables weekends.

"I've been a volunteer since 1975," he said cheerfully, though he asked not to be quoted by name. "I'll be 81 next week. This is pretty good work, and the food's not bad." ■

## HAM AND EGGS, SERMON ON THE SIDE

Billy Lux

The Tuesday-to-Friday breakfast at City Team Ministries (164 Sixth St.) follows a 30-minute Bible study, which starts at 9 a.m. Entering the high-ceilinged, fluorescent-

lit room, each person takes a cereal bowl and a Styrofoam cup.

City Team serves up to 150 breakfasts a days, and the cup inventory helps them track the number of guests. A few room dividers split the hall. In the front, where the classroom is, rows of chairs face a music stand-cum-pulpit; the back, the dining room part, features about a half dozen round tables, large enough to seat eight to 10.

On the last Wednesday in November about 75 people arrive for Bible study. The hungriest gather at the tables, so as to be first in line at mealtime. The rest, maybe two-thirds of the people, sit in the classroom area, cup and bowl in one hand, a Bible in the other. The minister—standing in front of a sign that reads, "Suicidal? Call 1-800-SUICIDE" — begins with a prayer, delivers a vaguely warlike sermon on the Old Testament tale of Amaziah, King of Judah, then closes with another prayer.

The congregation is mostly male and mostly beaten down by life. But one strapping young man in the crowd energetically bounces his knee during the religion lesson while hiding a martial-arts magazine behind his Bible.

The sounds of the final "amen" barely fade before the food line forms. A small, middle-age woman clutching a Pop-eye doll chooses to remain in her front-row seat, gazing adoringly at the minister, now engaged in passionate hermeneutical debate by a disturbed man who came late and got to hear only five minutes of the sermon yet has a distinctly Judaic take on the tale. Fifty more people who didn't want to attend Bible study enter from the street and extend the back of the line, which moves at a reasonable pace.

The line first passes by a self-service counter of cold cereals, milk and sugar. In no time, this area gets quite messy. The

bowls are shallow and a lot of milk splashes on the floor. At a separate counter, two volunteers neatly serve the warm food.

Today's menu includes a good-sized ham steak, instant mashed potatoes, and two slices of bread. Mashed potatoes might seem a strange breakfast choice to some, but none of these diners appears to be anything other than grateful for them.

A bolted-down stereo system softly pipes Celine Dion and other easy-listening types in to the hall. There are not enough seats at the tables for everybody, so about half the crowd eats in the classroom area with plates in laps. Plastic spoons and forks have been handed out, but no knives. The ham is too thick to cut with a fork, however, so some diners chomp on it as it dangles from the utensil. Others put it between the bread and have it as a sandwich. A number of people go back for seconds, and the strapping young man, ready to fight the world, even gets thirds. ■