

Lunchtime for seniors in the central city

Good food, pleasant company and, of course, the price is right

BY TOM CARTER

MUCH has been written about the free lunch, so little about the \$1.50 to \$2 lunch. Poor and low-income seniors all over town know they can shun soup kitchens, pay a little, and get a big difference, whether it's lunch in a senior center or at a church. It's like switching to a loge seat from the bleachers, or bus ride to a taxi.

At senior lunch sites, Tenderloin seniors remove themselves from the hoi polloi. No standing outside in line at St. Anthony's with younger people and the occasional ill-mannered rowdy. No sitting in cramped quarters in noisy settings. No getting rushed out to make way for others, either.

You get a smaller, more genteel community and the opportunity to make friends among your peers. Sometimes there's a movie or music and a chance right there to hook up with social programs. The food's pretty good, too, nutritionally balanced and with seconds, when available.

One reason seniors have it so good come lunchtime is that the lion's share of their meals are subsidized by the city. The Department of Aging and Adult Services bankrolls lunch at 42 sites serving those age 60 and over. Its \$8 million budget provides 1.7 million lunches and breakfasts to San Francisco seniors and disabled adults; about a million of those meals are delivered to housebound people. The department uses 15 food providers, including one in the Tenderloin, Project Open Hand at 730 Polk.

The subsidized lunch sites ask seniors discreetly — maybe just a sign on a jar — for \$1 to \$2 donations. Few respond. Seldom does a donation jar end up with even \$20, and for most, the cheap lunch from the city becomes the free lunch.

"We have more demand than we can handle," says Department of Aging Director Anne Hinton. "We keep being asked by the sites for more (lunches). We can't. We've been fortunate that we haven't had to cut our budget." Much of the money comes from the state and the feds, and they "encourage" sites to ask for donations, Hinton says.

"A lot of people sign up (for meals) because of the diversity we deliver — Japanese food, kosher, Chinese, Latino and Southern style. The last thing we need is seniors not eating. That's the slippery slope of bad health, and it can lead to dementia."

The seven sites in the Tenderloin and SoMa serve an average of about 500 seniors per lunch. (See sidebar page 5.)

KROC CENTER

On a recent Monday, Bill Utzig regarded his full plate of Salisbury steak with mushroom gravy, boiled potatoes, turnips and carrots, beets and fruit, plus a half-pint of milk.

"Oh yeah, pretty good," Utzig says, digging in. He and four others are seated at a round table big enough for eight in the dining room of the Salvation

Army's Ray and Joan Kroc Corps Community Center on Turk Street.

Across from him is Mary Vitale, her white hair set off by a jaunty red beret that matches her sweater. She has just offered him her 4-ounce steak, and he has gratefully accepted.

Many of the 26 seated seniors know each other by name or face. Sometimes 50 occupy the main-floor room. A dozen others come in for takeout lunches. Every diner without exception, management says, has signed at the desk for a lunch before 11 a.m. and paid \$1.50.

The food comes from the Salvation Army kitchen at 850 Harrison St., where Anthony Pardi has put together the meals for three years. His fare, as fresh as he can make it, comes mostly from the Food Bank and goes out each weekday to sites in four neighborhoods.

Yolanda Shiffer heads the Kroc Center kitchen staff that apportions the lunches. Volunteer waiters serve them to the tables where the Salisbury steak aroma has already enticed the diners.

"We're not a restaurant and we're not a soup kitchen," Jack Harmon, a waiter three days a week, says as he passes by with two hot plates. "We're a senior meal program and we're very cheerful."

Vitale and Utzig talk quietly about other senior meals in the city. Utzig is a student of senior lunch offerings and generous with his information, recommending Muni lines and walking directions to his favorite sites — Old First Church on Sacramento, the Russian Center on Anza Street, the Jewish Community Center on California.

"But the tables are too close together at the Jewish Community Center," Vitale says. "I always go there, though, when I have an upset stomach because the food is bland."

JCC charges \$2, as does the Russian Center, where Utzig will go Tuesday.

"Stuffed peppers," says Utzig. "Delicious. They cook them right there and bring them to you hot. You take the 38-Muni, but not the Express, and walk just a couple of blocks. But you have to call them a day ahead between 2 and 3 p.m."

There were leftovers, so Utzig got a plate to go.

CURRY SENIOR CENTER

Also handy in the Tenderloin is lunch on the second floor of the Curry Senior Center, at 333 Turk St. It got so popular that it doubled in October. The center, which had been serving lunches since 1972, went to two 90-seat sessions, at 11 a.m. and noon. The sessions average 162 diners. That's seven days a week, 365 days a year, or 59,130 meals a year.

"It (the patronage) has increased dramatically," says Curry Executive Director Dave Knego. "At the end of the month it's more. March 31 we had 185; April 2 (when government checks began arriving and more seniors splurged on restaurants) we had 140."

Project Open Hand prepares the Curry fare that's planned by a nutritionist, and Andy Burns, on loan from Open Hand, runs the lunch period. At the beginning of the month, Burns makes a pitch for a \$2 donation, "but there's no pressure." The cash box averages about \$5 a session, Burns says, perhaps "a generous" estimate.

The figure doesn't surprise Aging's Hinton.

"I'm assuming people can't afford it," she says. "Some places they pay a little more and elsewhere maybe just a quarter. They have very fixed incomes that have gone down while prices of everything have gone up. The SSI cost of living was discontinued last year and dropped from \$850 to something like \$790. And a lot of seniors think when they're old all medical costs are taken care of. That's not the case."

Jim Hall, 66, partially blind ("I can see shadows") and suffering from diabetes and depression, is a four-year regular at the Curry Center, where his donation is determined by his medical expenses. He worked 15 years loading Sacramento Bee and Chronicle delivery trucks until he was disabled. Now living on 15th Street, he gets \$780 from Social Security

and \$173 from SSI, down from \$183 in 2008.

"I'll give \$15 to \$30 here, depending on what I have left after Medicare (expenses)," he says, at a table between Curry lunches.

Seniors start lining up outside the building shortly after 6 a.m. On this early April weekday, 50 people were in line by 7:30 a.m..

The menu is turkey sloppy Joes with vegetables, berry pie and milk. Chicken is always a favorite and would have attracted an additional 10 diners, Burns guesses.

At the first table, though, the Joes, healthy as they are, aren't a complete success. An Asian woman sidles up to Stephen, 63, who doesn't want his last name used, and strikes a deal: her plate for his milk. It's a good trade for Stephen. On his way home he'll take the meal to an 85-year-old blind lady friend.

"What do I like about this place?" repeats the buoyant Stephen, a five-day-a-week regular. "Her company." He shoots a smile across the table at Dorothy Carberry, 88. "And the entertainment, the staff, the food, the beautiful women! Shall I go on?"

Carberry doesn't like the sloppy Joe, either. "I like turkey plain," she says.

"But the meals are good and wholesome," says Stephen. "And you don't have to rush. It's really community, and you get to know everyone." Carberry gets up to leave. "Don't pick up any sailors on the way home," he says, and she grins back.

CANON KIP SENIOR CENTER

Each weekday, beginning at 8:30 a.m., seniors sign up for one of the 85 lunch tickets at Canon Kip Senior Center at 705 Natoma St. The Department of Aging lunch is offered by Episcopal Community Services, which runs Canon Kip.

Felicitas Juridico, 79, has been coming here since her husband died in 2007. Almost every day she puts a little something in the donation jar. But money is so scarce that when a man last weekend was told about the donation jar, he caused a stir by dropping in a \$5 bill.

"You need to ask, and say please," Juridico says. "If you keep quiet, it doesn't happen."

Monroe Gaines, 72, has been coming here three years. A former volunteer at St. Anthony's and Hospitality House, he now volunteers here seven days a week handling chairs for the center's events and eats here five days a week.

"It's my second home," Gaines says, working away on chicken and vegetables.

Episcopal Community Services recently conducted a 2009-10 consumer satisfaction survey: 76.5% of the 88 who completed the survey said the food was good or excellent. The survey also showed that 80% ate at least twice a week at Canon Kip and 37% were daily diners.

Gaines, a 40-year city resident who lives with his daughter on Potrero Hill, said once a month he puts \$20 in the donation jar.

But for some, the Canon Kip lunch is a lifeline for the penniless. Carol Trufant, 68, is a mental health professional and K-12 teacher who fell on hard times a year ago. She worked in family and group therapy for years but as jobs dried up she turned to substitute teaching.

Her last job was with the Mount Diablo Unified School District in the East Bay. It ended April 2009 and she came to San Francisco desperate to find work.

As her funds ran out she had to choose where to put her SSI and Social Security dollars. They went for professional licenses and certificates and a half-dozen classes that keep her qualifications updated. She also pays for a business license for her counseling company, Intergroup Resolutions.

"No one will hire someone who isn't current," she says calmly, offering a weak smile as she pushes aside her empty plate. "The renewals and courses are expensive. One renewal was \$140. But I have to have these in place if I want to re-enter the job market."

Every day she scans computer screens in the city's libraries frantically looking for jobs, and then uses her free, disabled transportation pass to travel throughout the Bay Area tracking down leads.

"I'm living in shelters, one near here now, with ex-cons, prostitutes and drug addicts," Trufant says, "And I get very tired being on a computer all day."

It's the closest thing to a complaint she utters.

"No, I didn't make a donation today," she adds in her calm, sweet voice. "My last dollar was for a medical expense to keep myself healthy. I have a quarter. It's for coffee tomorrow." ■



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

Mary Vitale and volunteer waiter Jack Harmon linger after lunch in the Kroc Center's dining room, where diners pay \$1.50 and Harmon keeps the atmosphere light and friendly.