

Soup Mama Sumi, Dalt's special chef

She treats neighbors to monthly simple, but prep-heavy, feasts

By Tom Carter

SUMI MONOARFA is the woman of the hour at 2 p.m. on Tuesday, July 17. She has prepared a free hot meal for residents of the 177-room Dalt Hotel. She and her menu have been announced in big letters on a sign in the lobby already suffused with a tantalizing aroma to make even indifferent mouths water.

For five years, Sumi has offered these monthly meals and in the process has become a cherished Dalt institution, a food angel who fervently holds healthy eating paramount.

She's standing in the basement community kitchen smiling at her spread of food, sweating slightly, welcoming 80 maybe more men and women, many of them disabled, most of them old, who arrive by twos and threes over the next hour. Those without food containers take the Styrofoam bowls that Sumi offers and tell her how great the food is, how wonderful she is. Those missing out know that later they can stop by her fifth-floor room and get leftover meals she refrigerates.

The menu took her a couple of days to bring forth: Moroccan lentils, fruit salad and dessert squash.

In a medium crock, Sumi spoons around pieces of iceberg lettuce, cantaloupe, red plums and fruit cocktail in Light Ranch Dressing, all ingredients gleaned from the Food Bank's hotel drop the day before. Often, residents give her all or some of their share, knowing she'll use it for community meals. People leave food outside her fifth-floor door. A case of cauliflower or broccoli is common; sometimes, like chocolate bars, it's a tip.

Vegetarian lentils are simmering in a 5-quart Crockpot next to 15 pounds of lentils seasoned with beef bullion and bones steaming in a gleaming white 8-gallon roaster. Both batches are imbued with a half-dozen spices, cumin slightly dominant. Her squash dessert is an experiment. Sumi washed a bushel of acorn squash, cut them in half, then baked, scooped out and filled them with mashed figs seasoned with brown sugar and a pinch of Chinese tea powder. With the skin so soft, you could eat the whole thing, or just the filling. And it's all absolutely healthy, a theme Sumi trumpets religiously.

At her elbow is Stephen Long, a three-year Dalt resident. He's her cheerful, devoted helper and gave her the big roaster as a gift.

"I help as much as I can," Long says, dishing lentils. "I'm blessed financially and try to give back as much as I can. There are some people here who wouldn't get to eat today if it weren't for Sumi. So many people needed help, and she saw it and stepped up to the



Sumi Monoarfa works on the acorn squash for dessert.

SUMI'S BBQ RIBS, PORK OR BEEF

After washing the ribs, I poke holes in the meat with a fork and rub seasoning on one side. My seasoning is a homemade Cajun blend that I got off the Internet, plus cumin. Add a little water to the roasting pan and broil on high for 10-15 minutes, or until the meat has a nice crust. Then turn the meat over and season the other side and broil for another 10-15 minutes. After both sides have a crust, add a little more water, cover with foil and bake the meat at 375 to 425 degrees until tender or the meat starts to separate from the bone. Baste the meat once or twice during baking, but never turn it over.

The BBQ sauce is usually a

mixture of bottled hickory smoke and honey BBQ sauce to which I add diced onions and minced garlic, dried red peppers, bay leaf, brown sugar and yellow mustard. Cook it on low for about 15 minutes, stirring occasionally to keep from sticking and to make sure the sugar is not clumped.

I then drain most of the meat juice into a glass jar to save and freeze for future soups. Then add the BBQ sauce to the meat and broil it for about 5 minutes or until it is like a dark paste on the meat. If you leave the juice from the meat in the pan, it will make the BBQ sauce runny and it won't stick to the meat.

plate, so to speak." Her barbeques, he admits, are his "awesome favorite — but all of her soups are delicious."

The TNDC-owned and -managed Dalt is filled with the poor and many don't know how to cook. After she moved in nearly eight years ago, Sumi began to notice that much of the Food Bank deliveries went unused. She started corralling the excess to provide occasional meals for everybody. Five years ago she locked in the last Sunday of every month, sometimes spontaneously adding more days.

"By the 10th of the month, some people have minimum money," she explains, "and when the social workers make a meal to honor the month's birthdays, and they're serving chicken, I might do a potato salad so the money they save

can go for more chicken for everyone."

Juneteenth was an example. When social workers did pork ribs, Sumi said, as she sat in a neighborhood coffee shop, she made 30 pounds of potato salad. She's wearing small, gold hoop earrings, her black hair is pulled back. Her handsome round face breaks into a smile when she recalls bells going off in her head when they announced barbeque chicken was planned for the tenants' meeting eight days later.

"I thought right away — beans and Spanish rice," she says, beaming. "We've been getting tons of beans and everybody loves them — pinto beans and red and white, especially on a cold day."

It takes her three to four days to prepare a meal. Nevertheless, she's cooking con-



Above: Dalt resident Mike Niemczyk (right) is served by Sumi and her volunteer assistant Stephen Long. Left: More than half of the Dalt residents enjoyed her meal of lentils, fruit salad and squash-and-fig dessert.

PHOTOS BY MARK DONEZA

stantly. When Food Bank drops, say, a case of bell peppers, or a load of carrots, much of it comes her way. She can spend a whole day cutting and peeling before precooking and putting food in the plastic containers she buys at a dollar store to freeze in a refrigerator that Dennis Katrones, a former resident, gave her.

Sumi, 60, grew up in an extended family in the East Bay that included four brothers, three sisters, cousins and close friends. Her father is Indonesian, her mother is black. As a teenager she did much of the cooking using her trusty Betty Crocker cookbook and knowledge she gained by watching relatives cook. She loved it. She also worked in restaurants to supplement the family income.

On top of it all, she seemed naturally generous. The Baby Name Wizard Website's dictionary definition of her full name, Sumiyati, says it's a traditional Indonesian name: "Su" means kindness in Javanese and combines with the Arabic "miati" meaning hundreds — "thus 'Sumiati' means a lot of kindness."

She was a self-employed paralegal and tax expert for 22 years. But after five years in Europe in a marriage that went south, she got sick and returned to the Bay Area, settling in the Tenderloin.

Sumi's cooking has strong Asian and Cajun influences. She's found wondrous recipes and cooking shortcuts on the

Internet, including a Website that adjusts a recipe for any number of people to be served.

Her efforts and deeds are far-reaching. Hell-bent on healthy eating, she'll mix white rice that everyone likes with the brown rice nobody likes, just to edge everybody closer to the healthier brown. "And they eat it!" she exclaims, like she's scored a goal. She'll also sneak into a dish a veggie like cauliflower — that some people tell her they hate — yet, surrounded by flavor, they gobble it up.

"Cooking from scratch is an art and I love it," Sumi says. She doesn't measure anything, dumps spices into her hand to ogle amounts she likes, but won't taste anything because her taste buds are fading. She's so confident, she goes "by smell only."

Sumi cooks only with olive oil, includes as many fresh ingredients as possible, and uses no salt — "It's bad for you. People can bring their own." Trader Joe's gives the Dalt unsold bread and much of it falls to Sumi. Residents generally disdain the healthy 9-grain type — until she turns it into soup croutons. Suddenly, they like it.

Others hear her message and appreciate that she's looking out for them. Her meals get people contributing, draw them together, even if for just a joyous blip of communal feeling in the community room.

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