

Tu Lan down — not out — in permit loss

‘We worked things out’ with the city

BY JONATHAN NEWMAN

FOR TU LAN, Sixth Street’s venerable go-to for quick, hearty and cheap Vietnamese fare, the temporary closure order issued July 27 by the Department of Public Health was nothing new — it weathered temporary closures for food safety violations five times in the past three years.

What followed was a shock.

On Aug. 8, at the close of a 15-minute hearing, Population Health and Prevention Director Dr. Tomas Aragon issued his two-word judgment: “License revoked.”

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for a fan’s view.**

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Ordinarily, temporary closure orders are resolved at informal hearings, often within 24 hours of the order’s issuance at which the health inspectors report their findings of violations,

the restaurant operators promise to improve, and the restaurant is back up and running. And so it had gone for Tu Lan since November 2009 — the beginning of a spate of low health inspection scores.

But this time Environmental Health Senior Inspector Mohammed Malhi, frustrated that Tu Lan’s owners were not making the required improvements, asked Aragon to impose the ultimate penalty.

“We engaged in three years of outreach and education and the problems were not corrected,” he said.

Malhi and his partner, Inspector Beronica Lee, presented a damning indictment of Tu Lan’s food service practices and evidence of three years of unresolved food handling problems to Aragon, including the persistent presence of mice and cockroaches — “serious vermin harbinage,” Malhi called it — unclean food prep and service, improper food storage and refrigeration, negligent hand washing by staff and restaurant walls and ceilings in disrepair.

Malhi recounted the particulars of five inspections by six different inspectors in less than three years. Under a food handling and service scoring system that sets 100 as perfect, Tu Lan’s

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TL’S TOP CULTURAL EVENT

21st Fringe
Festival features
41 acts

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CENTRAL CITY



S A N F R A N C I S C O

SOME ARE PERFECT



PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA
Hang Nguyen of Saigon Sandwich shows off a tofu bamb mi, touted by USA Today. The little shop on Larkin Street has a Symbol of Excellence for consecutive high scores from health inspectors.

Clean bill of health

Restaurants in TL, as a rule, rate pretty darn good

BY TOM CARTER

AFTER TU LAN, a central city culinary institution, closed because of health violations, The Extra checked out 38 restaurants from the more than 120 in the Tenderloin to see how they measure up.

In the city’s poorest neighborhood, three very different restaurants scored a perfect 100 in the Department of Public Health’s latest round of inspections: the decorous Old Siam Thai on Ellis, little specialty sandwich shop Le Pettit’s Kitchen on Golden Gate and the franchise burger joint Carl’s Jr. on Market.

Some places we picked for our survey are well-known citywide, others are local favorites, all do steady business.

Unannounced, inspectors drop in during restaurants’ working hours to evaluate how closely followed the city’s health code is and to derive a score based on the violations they find. A perfect score of 100 keeps the inspector away for a year. A low score with several high-risk dings makes the inspector a familiar face. DPH says a score of 90 or more is good, 86-89 is adequate, 71-85 “needs improvement” and 70 and below is poor.

Three 90s or above in a row brings a bonus: the Symbol of Excellence, a sign to be posted like a badge of honor. And The Extra found that more than a third of the 38 restaurants we checked have them. Besides the three perfect 100s, others that are spic and span include All Stars Donuts, Burger King,

L.A. Cafe and a pair of El Castillito Mexican restaurants, 14 in all (see sidebar).

Some longtime restaurants, like Little Henry’s Italian Food on Larkin Street, barely miss an Excellence award by a point here or two points there. Or Celtic Coffee near Hastings with a three-point spread in the high-80s. Once ratings plunge, however, comebacks are uncommon. Few stage a dramatic turnaround, as Tu Lan envisions.

But it happens, and the most recent example in the Tenderloin occurred in Little Saigon. Saigon Sandwich at 560 Larkin St. is climbing out of a hole deeper than Tu Lan’s. Saigon Sandwich was first in San Francisco to serve banh mi, opening in the early Seventies about the same time as its Skid Row counterpart that premiered in 1973.

Indeed, the Larkin Street shop in February 2011 had racked up an alarming 13 violations, from lousy storage and old and dirty walls and ceiling to temperature and food cleanliness problems. Moreover, the inspector found no one in charge. The result was an unheard of 46. Since then, Saigon Sandwich has regrouped and twice scored 96, well on the way to its own Symbol of Excellence.

“It’s one of our success stories,” says DPH’s Food Safety Director Richard Lee. “We helped guide their renovation and they moved their food preparation next door” on Eddy Street.

And it has gotten its own culinary kudo, maybe not the praise that Tu Lan got from a generous Julia Child, but an admirable showing in the media’s constant search for the best sandwich in Food Nation.

USA Today listed Saigon as San Francisco’s top spot for “Sandwiches to make you drool.” The humble little nook that only offers eight kinds of sandwiches was named with the sandwich leaders in 16 other cities, as recommended by Zagat, the guidebook publisher.

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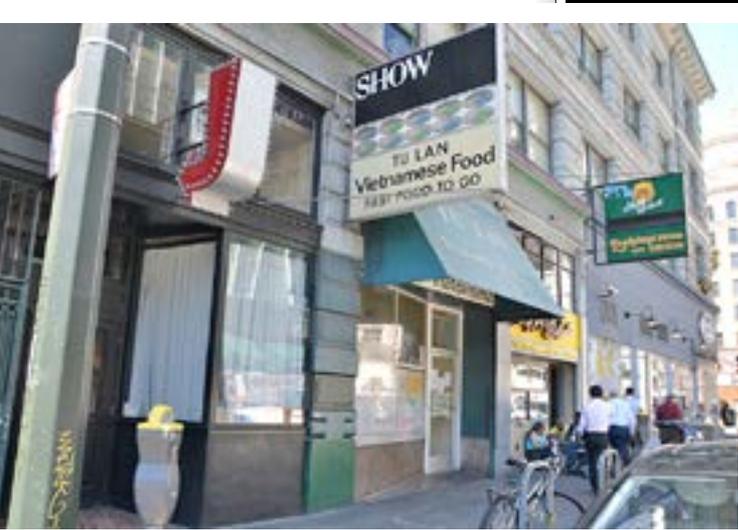


PHOTO BY MARK DONEZA

Tu Lan owners agree to remodel the restaurant and take on a managing partner.

“To our dear
customers ...
we hope
to see you
soon”

Sign on
Tu Lan’s door