

Manor House — TL landmark eatery — closes

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a large storefront, making him Mimi's landlord, sent his sentiments to The Extra via email from the East Coast where he was on business.

"Mimi is an exceptional person, and that is obvious to anyone who steps inside Manor House," Falk wrote. "It is truly a community gathering place, not only because the food is affordable to Tenderloin residents, but also because she serves it with love. Her warm charm has created a unique Tenderloin institution, and I'm proud that TNDC played a key role in supporting it."

Last year, Mimi won TNDC's Kelly Cullen Community Service award for her long tenure of providing low-cost meals that average \$3 for a big breakfast and \$5 for a balanced lunch that's often more than one person can eat. But she didn't appear at the nighttime awards ceremony at the Hilton Hotel a few blocks away, reluctant to go out at night. The award was later delivered to her at the restaurant.

TNDC's commercial management agent, Ventura Partners, said it is looking for another restaurant operation to take over: "Our goal is to find a food-related community use within the same spirit of Mimi's Manor House Restaurant." A spokesman said a nonprofit with a job-training program was a possibility, too.

TNDC had given the China-born Mimi a rent break for her promise to furnish low-cost meals. She often went a step beyond and allowed tabs for certain customers.

'NAME YOUR PRICE'

"Don (Falk) wanted me to stay," Mimi said. "He said, 'Name your price.'" She smiles. "He offered no rent. I didn't know if he was kidding. He said he was serious. He has been very good to me. But I said no."

"I started from nothing 17 years ago," she reflected, staring blankly, caught in a flood of thoughts and emotions she kept close. "I just don't have the words. I really appreciate everyone ... I want to keep the relationships."

"People say I helped lots of people, but they helped me — we had to help each other. You respect them for them to respect me for that long time."

How will she keep the relationships?

She looks blank again.

"I don't know," she says. "No way to do it."

Mimi went out of her way over the years to get along with a rough and unpredictable crowd. Her patience was as famous as her firmness in adhering to her principles and to basic business practices, such as chasing down the sidewalk after people who had skipped out without paying. She was determined not to fail, to do the right thing and go the extra mile. Here's what one person said in a Yelp review of Manor House three years ago:

"I am a money manager for formerly homeless adults with mental health histories. I frequently write checks to Mimi on behalf of my lower-functioning clients so they can eat at her establishment. Not only does she keep a tab AND give my clients meals on credit, she also contacts case managers in the community when she is concerned over someone's choice of diet."

"And if I want a client's tab to be spread out over the months, she will assist me in budgeting the tab, designing a personal menu for the client's budget, and monitoring the diet. Yes, she will arrange meetings between myself, the client, the case manager and herself to set an agreement. This is WAY beyond what restaurant owners do!"

Mimi had more than two dozen such customers.

Unofficially "Mimi's," or the "people's restaurant," as some have called



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO 2008

Mimi's sister, May Ling, takes an order in 2008, when Manor House was featured in The Extra.

it, has evolved over many years. It was Manor House when Bill and Althea Yee, Mimi's aunt, operated it before 1996.

Marvis Phillips, community activist, has eaten at Manor more than 30 years and remembers the old version vividly as a dingy, hole-in-the-wall Skid Row restaurant with blacked-over windows, "solemn," he says. Bill cooked, Althea waited tables and someone else washed dishes.

"But it was lunch and dinner," Phillips says. "They opened at 11 a.m. and closed at 5:30. Dinners were about \$4. They had noodle and vegetable soup five days a week, chowder on Fridays and were closed on Saturdays. No breakfast."

"Bill had a television propped up in the kitchen and when you came in he'd tell you to go sit in a corner and leave him alone because he was watching a game and betting on it. Someone else watching with him, he thought was bad luck."

"It was a good place to eat. I ate dinner there every day about 4."

The Formica counter was in the middle then, the kitchen in front in a corner against what are now windows.

Druggies didn't deal inside but hung around outside, sometimes causing problems on the sidewalk.

Althea Yee was talkative and her English was good. She knew all the gossip and neighborhood developments. "Everyone loved Althea," Phillips says. "She liked being complimented, too. And you never left hungry."

GOOD FOR A LIGHT TOUCH

She didn't keep tabs, but was good for a light touch. "Toward the end of the month if I was short I could always get a \$5 loan," Phillips says. "She was that way with a lot of people."

When Althea died in December 1995, Bill, in his 60s, didn't want to continue without her. After 25 years of the Manor, he handed the baton to Mimi and went back to China to live.

In a feature on Manor House in the July 2008 Extra, Mimi said the place was so filthy when she took it over that it took three people one week to get it clean. She had other, more serious problems, though.

She had been a waitress for 10 years at the Bashful Bull restaurant on Noriega near 19th Avenue — where the customers were nice — while her husband worked at various Chinese restaurants. Then the opportunity to have her



Mimi takes a break from front of house work to pose with her husband, John, for a 2008 Extra "Jones Street gem" profile.

own restaurant came up from a relative and she took it, figuring the Tenderloin wasn't all that different from the avenues.

She wanted to quit after the first month.

"It's hard to explain how hard it was in the beginning," she said in 2008. "I didn't know how to handle these people. They don't know me, and they give me hard time. I didn't know about the things they did — why they do these things? I was very scared. I wanted to quit. But I couldn't."

Her school of hard knocks included rude, threatening customers, some demanding credit and leaving her with a mound of unpaid bills that nearly ruined her, addicts using the bathroom to shoot up, dealers working at the door (one day she had to call the cops four times), and then the smaller stuff, like losing five pairs of salt and pepper shakers a day to theft.

"I learned later why people were in the bathroom so long," she said. "Before, I never knew. I never thought about it. I don't know how I did it and paid all the bills. It's not easy to survive in San Francisco."

Fortune smiled in December 2000 when TNDC acquired the Antonia Manor with the help of the Redevelopment

Agency to preserve the hotel's 134 units as affordable housing, a 100% Section 8 building housing seniors and persons with disabilities. TNDC shut it down to upgrade and reopened in 2004. In that time, Manor was closed almost a year for a face-lift.

"When we renovated, we moved the kitchen in order to create windows along the Jones Street wall, bringing 'eyes to the street,'" Falk wrote. "It was to enhance safety and allow ample light into an otherwise dank and dark space. We also offered her below-market rent in return for Mimi's agreement to continue serving low-cost food."

The years since have been good as the Manor reputation spread, even into the East Bay where Tenderloin residents sometimes move, or have relatives there who visit. It has scored fairly high on its Department of Health inspections, usually in the high 80s, but never nailing three 90s in a row to get DPH's excellence certificate to display.

Her attitude remained consistent: If customers were nice, she was nice, she says. When they weren't, she was direct, laying down the ground rules, seldom raising her voice but keeping it strong, showing command, running her restaurant. And Mimi raised the bar. ■