

SRO-cooking classes latest trend toward healthful eating habits

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Adults with Disabilities in SROs: Survey and Recommendations" lived in proprietary hotels.

"The majority of them do not have any," said Vining. He also said it varies by neighborhood, with communal kitchens less likely in the Mission and Tenderloin SROs than Chinatown.

Clarisa Ferguson, 36, knows what it's like to not have a kitchen. An admitted late-night snacker, she has lived in numerous private hotels since becoming intermittently homeless in 2004.

"It's hell," said Ferguson. She is on disability and going to school. "You can't eat your regular food like you want to."

Now living at The Rose, she likes using the community kitchen a lot, even if it means going in late at night to work around others' schedules.

"I'll come in when no one else is here," she said.

Many others, though in need, are not as accommodating. Ironically, Sumiyata Monoarfa, who makes a large monthly meal for her fellow residents at the Dalt (see August 2012 Central City Extra), doesn't use the community kitchen much. The stove has only four burners, and the kitchen is often crowded, she said.

"For my regular meals I usually eat out," said Monoarfa, a former self-employed paralegal and tax expert who is disabled. She takes medications for cholesterol, high blood pressure and other issues, which means she needs to eat on a regular schedule.

Monoarfa said she is allowed to use the kitchen after its midnight closing time to make the group meals, which take several days to prepare. She said many Tenderloin SROs don't have their own kitchen, and often companions of Dalt residents will drop by so they can eat together. She tries not to take over the kitchen for her events.

Adrienne Markworth, executive director of the nonprofit Leah's Pantry, said communal kitchens are common, but not used much. Cooking is personal, and residents may not be used to the different spices, smells and methods of others in the shared space, she said. There is also the need to store the food and cooking equipment. Some kitchens are equipped, but securing personal items so they don't get stolen might



Adrienne Markworth, executive director of Leah's Pantry, leads the initial cooking class in the community kitchen at the Rose Hotel to help SRO residents make healthier choices about their eating habits. Rose resident Franklin Croney is on her left. A salad plate is prepared for each participant.



PHOTOS BY MARK DONEZA

require carrying them back and forth.

"We find they're not used a lot," she said.

That might just be because of scheduling. Hatty Lee, a community organizer with TNDC, which has community kitchens in almost all of its 31 buildings, said that most residents cook in their own rooms, probably because the kitchens are in use.

Leah's Pantry offers SRO residents nutrition workshops using rice makers, crockpots and microwaves for the limited cooking allowed. Recipes often are for soups or stews, using items from the San Francisco Food Bank and other food distributions for the needy. The

recipes also are designed to reduce effort, for instance, suggesting cooking a chicken whole, making it easier to break apart for storing leftovers. Such efficiencies are especially important for the elderly or others with mobility issues.

After a pilot program last fall, Leah's Pantry plans to give out 200 kitchen kits this year including cutting boards and utensils funded through the city Human Services Agency. Currently, Leah's Pantry is working with TNDC's Curran House, Compass Family Service's Clara House and Mercy Housing's Rose.

"The benefit is increased fruits and vegetables," said Markworth.

Emily Dore, senior program coordinator at Leah's Pantry, recently led the first of six weekly classes at The Rose in the hotel's communal kitchen. Participants tasted a variety of citrus and had discussions that included their health goals, such as breaking habits like deep-fried takeout and late-night snacking.

She then brought out packs of instant noodles — the staple of cheap eats — that were given away by the Food Bank that day. She showed the residents how to add cabbage, celery, onions, mushrooms and green bell peppers. Another tip was to cut the seasoning packet, which contains a lot of salt,

to make it healthier.

"We're thinking, 'Of course, people are going to eat it,'" Dore said of the packaged noodles. "We don't want it to go to waste."

Attendance at the Pantry's initial class in January at the 76-unit Rose was sparse, about a handful. Others passed through the room to pick up sweet potatoes and other items the Food Bank dropped off earlier that day. Those there were eager to participate.

One was Franklin Croney, 58, a former money management case manager who weighed 450 pounds when he became homeless in 2007. He moved into The Rose several months later,

but couldn't shake the depression that caused him to gain weight until he needed a wheelchair to get around. A few years ago, through the help of others, he decided to lose the weight. He's lost more than 130 pounds, and is no longer in a wheelchair.

Croney doesn't use The Rose's kitchen; he says it's not convenient. He is very proud of the infrared oven he bought after the hotel caught him with a skillet he wasn't supposed to have. He said the skillet was a greasy way to cook anyway. Croney said preparing his own food cheaply is important for him to continue losing weight.

"I don't have to worry about going

to the store for fast food anymore."

Amy Orlandi, nutrition education program coordinator at the Food Bank, which started its own classes last summer, geared toward SRO limitations and sometimes using unfamiliar fresh vegetables from its giveaways, said it's hard to say how popular the classes are. A handful to a dozen show up, depending on whether the SROs promote the classes. Some residents were professional chefs, others don't boil water. But it's important they have a choice on what they eat and how it's prepared, she said.

"People come from all backgrounds. It just gives people more options." ■

Nonprofits' policies on cooking in SROs.
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Preparing a meal in SRO room

Resident of Rose Hotel makes do despite many cooking and culinary challenges

FRANKLIN CRONEY works with chef-like precision: Three minutes to heat the potatoes au gratin and 13 minutes for each side of the two pork chops, before combining them for uniform temperature.

Croney is in his carpeted living room at the Rose Hotel overlooking Sixth Street. It's also his bedroom and ersatz kitchen. Croney is cooking on a NuWave infrared oven, a plug-in device that sits on a television stand by the window, a few feet from his bed. He also has a microwave — which is where he keeps his dishes — that sits on milk crates next to a sink and mirror.

His TV is on a storage tower where he keeps canned goods. He eats sitting on a chair in the middle of the room; next to it is a chair for guests. A full-size

"There's no other way to cook in this place."

— Franklin Croney

refrigerator, a \$30 purchase from a resident getting evicted, is in a corner.

As a corner room, Croney's is larger than most SRO units, an accommodation for his disability. It also has a bathroom. For Croney, who in three years has dropped from 521 pounds to 387 pounds, the amenities are a godsend, the difference between life and death.

"There's no other way to cook in this place," said Croney, 58, touting his

NuWave, also used to boil eggs and make vegetables. "That's my pride and joy."

For many residents of SROs, their options for making meals at home are extremely limited. The Rose has a community kitchen, but, Croney said, its four-burner stove fills up fast with others making meals at the 76-unit hotel on Sixth Street. He had used an electric skillet in his room before buying the NuWave oven and grill, but was caught by management and told not to use it. The skillet was too greasy a way to cook anyway, he said.

Croney's meal this day was a special treat, from mail order Omaha Steaks. He usually doesn't eat so extravagantly — his meats mostly come from the corner market — but once every few months he'll splurge.



The potatoes come out of their package frozen and Croney heats them in the microwave. The pork chops, also frozen, get a mix of cinnamon, garlic powder and other herbs that help with blood pressure and replace salt. A flick of the switch and the infrared oven is on, swirling the toppings around the cooking container. Before long, drippings are running into a pan inside.

When both sides of the pork chops are cooked, Croney puts the potatoes in. The oven can keep them warm. From the hallway there's the smell of the spices he uses, something Croney said has made him popular and inspired others to make their own meals.

While waiting for his meal, neighbors dropped by to check on him, with management also calling. Croney said a resident broke the elevator, and he had not left his room for three days. He has trouble with the stairs. They wanted to know if he needed help getting the potatoes and onions donated as part of their Wednesday drop-offs, or the cooked food that sometimes comes by. One friend brought a container with fish on purple cabbage and yellow and orange lentils.

"You can actually eat like this on Sixth Street," Croney said. Mimicking a large bone to his mouth, he said: "I do my King Henry the Eighth at night." ■

— ERIC LOUIE

Franklin Croney, a resident of Mercy Housing's Rose Hotel, prepares meals in his room, trying to cook as healthily as possible under the circumstances so that he can continue to shed pounds. He has a refrigerator, a luxury that not all SRO residents have in their rooms. He brings out the pork chops and puts them on the grill of his electric oven, 13 minutes per side. The potatoes are frozen, and he'll put them in the microwave that sits on milk crates for three minutes, then keep them warm in the oven. Finally, he's ready to eat and sits on a chair in the middle of his room.



PHOTOS BY MARK DONEZA