

# Cooking options in SROs vary by hotel

All ban hot plates, allow microwaves; most of the renovated hotels have community kitchens

BY MARJORIE BEGGS AND ERIC LOUIE

**B**Y DEFINITION, SRO rooms don't have kitchens, and if the hotel is old or not owned or managed by a nonprofit, its residents are unlikely to have access to a communal kitchen.

Nonprofits have made the most headway in trying to help people eat more healthily, independently and inexpensively. But variations from hotel to hotel are common, even within those owned by the same nonprofit.

Hot plates and electric skillets are universally banned in rooms because of the potential for fires. Microwaves, crockpots and refrigerators usually get a thumbs-up.

Mindy Talmadge, city Fire Department spokeswoman, said there is nothing specifically saying SRO residents can't cook in their rooms. But since the rooms are generally designated for sleeping, and don't have other requirements like sprinklers, there are restrictions on ignition sources that limit food preparation in the rooms.

Jacquie Hoffman, Mercy Housing's regional vice president of property operations, says some of Mercy's rooms come with small appliances. For those that don't, staff help residents get them.

"I think we do realize good nutrition is tied to other things," she said. "It's one of the things we want to do to support people."

Community kitchens, like those at Mercy's Rose and Dudley hotels, are a popular addition when SRO hotels are renovated. Residents bring their own food and cookware, and sometimes there are community meals. The Rose and Dudley kitchens both close for the night, and each has its own scheduling policies.

There may be community kitchens in the new and renovated SROs, but those are a minority of the 500 SROs in the city. A survey conducted last year by the SRO Collaborative about seniors with disabilities living in SROs found that only a third of the 151 respondents had full access to a kitchen.



**An SRO Collaborative** survey found that only a third of SRO residents have access to community kitchens. But conditions can discourage use.

When they do, there can be downsides, Hoffman says. Sometimes they get overcrowded, and some residents don't treat others' personal property with respect. "And then people get upset," she said.

Almost all of TNDC's 31 buildings have community kitchens, says Hatty Lee, community organizer. The kitchens are open 24/7 in some SROs, but most have 6 a.m. to 10 p.m. or midnight hours. The deciding factors include what staff are available to supervise and noise.

"You probably don't want people cooking up a storm at 2 a.m.," Lee said.

Doug Gary, co-director of DISH, property manager of six SROs, says all its 450 supportive housing units have microwaves and mini-refrigerators.

"But we're in old buildings with structural limitations, so putting in community kitchens isn't an option now," Gary said. "It would be costly, of course, but it would also take units offline."

He believes that most nonprofit developers and service providers are

doing what they can, given their constraints, to meet their residents' food needs. "But, sadly, what is largely available now is inadequate," he says. And in inner-city SROs, the problem "is at the core of food justice for the poor."

As a model of progress, Gary points to the just-opened Kelly Cullen Community, whose 172 studio apartments in the beautifully renovated old YMCA come complete with a kitchenette — a full-size refrigerator, two-burner stove top, microwave and sink. Every resident also can use the well-equipped 5th-floor community kitchen.

That's one answer to the problem, he says, "doing incredible rehab. The other is finding a mix of private-public money to rehab parts of buildings. I think there's room for the philanthropic community to contribute to this effort."

Among Tenderloin Housing Clinic's 16 SRO hotels, all master leased with funding from the Human Services Agency, six have communal kitchens. Almost all of its other hotels have at least microwaves for tenants to use, and some also have stovetops or stove/oven combos, says Krista Gaeta, THC deputy director.

THC's room policies are familiar: Small refrigerators, microwaves and other cooking equipment with no open flames are allowed. No hot plates.

"We do unit inspections with the pest control service every month, which allows us to monitor the situation to some degree," Gaeta wrote in an email. "That said, hot plates and other unsafe cooking equipment have gone undetected. Luckily, we've only had a few fires or other incidents involving cooking equipment over the years."

What keeps nonprofit owners and managers from doing more for their residents is complicated, Gaeta said in her email. "The electrical systems in the old SRO buildings are not always equipped to deal with modern needs (microwaves, fridges, TVs and lights



PHOTOS BY MARJORIE BEGGS

**All 172 units** in TNDC's new Kelly Cullen Community have kitchenettes, including plenty of storage for food and cooking utensils.

at the same time). It's an issue we are looking into, but it's very costly. We do our best to provide community kitchens when space and budget permit."

Meantime, they try to innovate: "We hold a weekly food pantry at most of our sites with food from the S.F. Food Bank," she wrote. "One site has a '2 buck chuck' contest every week following the pantry. Each tenant can use whatever they got from the pantry and then supplement with no more than \$2 of other ingredients. There have been some great, creative meals to come out of this."

The city has begun to weigh in on the issue of how SRO residents feed themselves.

Paula Jones, director of food systems for the Health Department and chair of the Board of Supervisors' Food Security Task Force, said that in January, the task force put nutrition in SROs on the front burner for future examination. "A lot of people are on the same page at this point."

Last summer, ImproveSF, a city initiative that solicits ideas to address specific issues, got more than 100 suggestions about how to improve nutrition for low-income SRO residents — from cookbooks and food carts to apps that help collect unused food. ■

## OBITUARIES

### JESSE 'DEXTER' SLOBIN A user of crystal — but nice

More tears were shed than words spoken by the dozen friends and acquaintances of Jesse "Dexter" Slobin gathered in the community room of the Coronado Hotel for his memorial March 14, one day before he would have turned 45.

All who voiced their thoughts and memories of Mr. Slobin, who was known as Dexter, shared an appreciation of his warmth and decency.

Rev. Glenda Hope, who presided, read from one of the two cards on a table also holding a candle and Mr. Slobin's photograph. "In the years that I have known you, you shared kindness and strength and put faith back in my heart," it read.

Terriann said he was "a very wonderful person. Like a lot of people, he had problems, but he had a kind heart."

"He was real nice," another woman said, tearfully recalling traveling to Lake County with him to bury her son. Afterward, they visited a lake where Mr. Slobin had been startled by the sound of a bullfrog. "I thought it was cute that he didn't know what a bullfrog was," she said.

Out on Ellis Street, Craig, a Coronado neighbor, called Mr. Slobin, "the nicest person I've ever met. He was just reckless in his behavior. He self-sacri-



ficed himself. He was always there for others, always. I've never met someone that outgoing and friendly."

Craig, who hinted that he and Mr. Slobin shared a certain kind of drug problem, also attested to his unflinching honesty.

This, despite what Craig called Mr. Slobin's "terrible life."

He "had no chance at all," Craig said, explaining that he's heard that Mr. Slobin was raised in an orphanage and lived on the street for years.

Clarence Johnson Jr., his caseworker of more than five years, said Mr. Slobin had told him he had a sister, but wouldn't provide particulars. "I'm his emergency contact," Johnson said.

Ricky, Terriann's husband — they held hands during the memorial — said Mr. Slobin had "spent most of his life on the streets. Methamphetamine was his

religion, and so is mine," Ricky said. "He became comfortable that he would use the rest of his life."

But Mr. Slobin wanted to be a DJ — he preferred "house" beats and industrial beats — Ricky said, and also had hopes of getting a permit to sell on the street poster-size prints of his digital media artwork that he would spend hours working on in his hotel room.

"He was on that computer all the time," said Dave, who called Mr. Slobin his best friend and Ricky backed him up.

"I'll sure miss him," he continued, while searching his pockets for a coin he'd found that he said somehow portended that he would soon follow Mr. Slobin's fate. "I know we're going to the same place." He couldn't find the coin.

"There's a lot of us who are next," Ricky said.

Mr. Slobin had hung out on the corner of Church and Market streets for "over 20 years" Ricky said. "He was homeless for so many years. At least he didn't die homeless. We spoke two days before he died. He was grateful to have a roof over his head."

Ricky said that Mr. Slobin, who lived on the 4th floor, collapsed and was "screaming for help" in the hall on the night of March 5. He couldn't breathe. Eventually, paramedics came and were able to revive him and take him to the hospital. He died there the next day, Ricky said.

Johnson recalled: "For three or four weeks I was telling him, 'Your color has

done changed,' but he was more interested in hanging (out). I wish he would have listened to the doctor and took care of his health."

Mr. Slobin took some advice, but not to the point of checking in to S.F. General, Johnson said.

"He was afraid they would keep him," Judy, a former manager of the Coronado, chimed in.

Johnson said that Mr. Slobin was prone to outbursts when in pain. "When his body wasn't right, he would voice it," Johnson said. "He would get boisterous" and have to be told to quiet down.

"He had some kind of internal digestive disorder," Ricky said.

"He got introduced to the crystal, and that's when everything went bad," Johnson said.

Johnson understood that at some point Mr. Slobin had worked in nearby SROs, perhaps as a desk clerk or security. He'd been on General Assistance at the time he became a client of CATS, when he was taken in seven years ago by the SFHOT team. He eventually got SSI and his room at the Coronado, and when his health issues emerged, Johnson said, a room with a bathroom.

"Payday was a bad thing for him," Johnson said. "He'd say, 'I'm going to be up for a couple of days, so don't bother me.' ... I think it's a bad day for a lot of people." ■

— MARK HEDIN