

What mom-and-pops say about keeping it fresh

There's a corner store on almost every street in the Tenderloin, sometimes more than one, some not on a corner. They're also called mom-and-pops because many to most are owned and operated by family members.

Unlike Bayview-Hunters Point, the Tenderloin is lower income, more densely populated and has no supermarket (Bayview has at least three).

Tenderloin corner stores are small in a grocery business where size matters. A study Ventura Partners conducted for TNDC in 2007 concluded that even a grocery as large as 17,000 square feet "isn't warranted financially."

Since few TL corner stores are even 2,000 square feet, the shortage of floor space may become an obstacle to the success of the Healthy Food Retailer Incentives Program, which requires

that 35% of selling area be devoted to fresh fare.

Central City Extra reporters Brian Rinker and Mark Hedin conducted an informal survey of about 30 mom-and-pops to learn how the owners feel about Supervisor Eric Mar's incentives program for retailers. Some had not heard of it, others didn't know how it would work.

But many had some comment about offering more fresh foods, and most said their decision would be all about economics. They were in business to make money, all said, and will stock what pays the bills.

Here's a sampling of their views.

— Geoff Link



PHOTOS BY MARK HEDIN

Mohammed Meftah, 12, poses in front of the produce at his father's no-alcohol Green Valley market on Ellis Street, next door to the Red Sea Market that does sell liquor and cigarettes, which Khalid Meftab also owns. K&S Produce Market is ranked by the Healthy Corner Store Coalition as No. 2 in the Tenderloin. Baalouach Ali hoses down the sidewalk in front of his halal butcher shop on Geary Street, which is a destination for Muslims from around the Bay Area.

CALIFORNIA PRODUCE

No. 1 in the neighborhood

California Produce is the only four-star corner store in the Tenderloin. It has 300 square feet and stocks mostly fresh fruit and vegetables, maybe the closest to a supermarket selection this side of Market Street. It's in the prosperous northwest corner of the neighborhood. It displays its wares attractively on the sidewalk in front of the store with colorfully scalloped awnings over clean boxes brimming with apples, tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage and more.

The Corner Store Coalition awarded California Produce an 82% rating, its highest among the 56 mom-and-pops the group surveyed. It has a wide selection of whole grains and fresh meat and poultry along with the many fruits and veggies. The store even has WIC pending. But those healthy features stem from the owner's Muslim faith, according to Abraham, working the register on a recent day.

"It's religious preference for us," he said. "We don't believe in it (alcohol). It breaks up families."

K&S PRODUCE MARKET

Red-ribbon winner

A distant second in the ratings is K&S Produce Market located about a block from No. 1-ranked California Produce. The coalition rated K&S at 70%. The store is owned by Qais, who also has the Halal Market at 1000 Howard St., which also snubs cigarettes and booze.

"I don't like to deal with alcohol and tobacco," Qais said. "It's a headache. You can't sell healthy food outside and inside you have alcohol. It's more safe for the customer. I want to bring families in."

CADILLAC MARKET

'People don't want organic'

The Cadillac Market is located on a particular stretch of Hyde Street notorious for public displays of smoking crack, consuming alcohol, urinating, defecating and drug dealing. People hang out on the sidewalks 24 hours a day like it was their living room. Such behaviors are not unusual in the Tenderloin, but markets located in the more extreme areas have great incentive to sell liquor and junk food.

Irfan Ali, who's owned the Cadillac Market for six years, hadn't heard about the Healthy Food Retailers Incentive Program, but doesn't think it will work in his store.

"People around here don't want organics," said Ali as a customer leaned over the counter and rattled off which lottery scratchers he wanted to buy. Four people waited in line, each holding either a tall can or 40-ounce bottle of Old English malt liquor.

Ali does offer some healthy food options. In a refrigerator just right of the counter, he has heads of lettuce, which he said sell "all right." He gets five or six heads at a time, any more would go to waste, he said. Bags of chopped-up lettuce sell better, he added. Near the store entrance is where Ali keeps fruit, such as bananas, apples and oranges, in cardboard boxes on a shelf. At one time he even tried to sell tofu, but it went bad because no one bought it.

The Tenderloin Healthy Corner Store Coalition gave the Cadillac a two-star rating out of five, almost 54 percent.

Ali feigned interest in the city's proposed healthy foods program, shrugged his shoulders and said he needed to think about it. A moment later he admitted that he likes his store the way it is. Just then a man stumbled into the market to buy alcohol. He barked at the

owner Ali, telling him to quit talking and tend to business.

HYDE & O'FARRELL MARKET

Fresh food 'moving very well'

Moe, the owner, proudly points to a tidy display of healthy-looking melons and other fresh fruit, crediting his participation in the WIC program for a recent upswing in his fresh food sales. "It's moving very well," he said. However, that display and the other space he has devoted to produce is plainly less than 35% of retail space, and Moe said it would be unrealistic to expect that he would do more. "I don't think any liquor store around here has more vegetables and fruit than I do."

NEW PRINCESS MARKET

'Up their asses'

Woel Masarweh, owner of the New Princess Market at Eddy and Hyde streets, received a call from the Arab American Grocers Association asking him to attend a meeting about a new city program to encourage corner stores to sell healthier foods.

Masarweh couldn't make the meeting, but he really wanted to go. Not because he was interested in the program, he just wanted to give the city a piece of his mind.

Masarweh's corner store has been in the Tenderloin for more than 20 years. It's located right in the thick of it, surrounded, he said, by alcoholics, drug addicts and dealers. Many patrons are low-income people who live off government assistance, who come here to take advantage of the many services offered. His store profits from the sales of cheap malt liquor and junk food.

"I sell 30 cases of King Cobra in a week, but I can't sell a single case of lettuce in a month," Masarweh said.

People in the Tenderloin just don't

buy healthy, he said. He knows; he tried selling healthier foods about 1½ years ago.

"Every store has the same shit," he said. "I wanted my store to be different." He started stocking more produce and dedicated a row of shelves to high-fiber cereals and fancy organic cookies, crackers and sauces. He even stocked organic, gluten-free, milled grain products.

"When I sell organics and healthy food it makes me feel better," Masarweh said. "Yet it doesn't work."

No one bought them. The grains still sit on the shelf untouched, collecting dust. Customers preferred the cheaper cereals, and much of the produce rotted.

Masarweh would only try to sell healthier foods if the city paid him what he normally makes — or more. Or, the city could remove all his current patrons and replace them with higher-income, healthier ones. That, too, would work, he said.

Otherwise, the city "can shove their incentives up their asses," Masarweh said. "I'm not in business to please the city, unless it makes me money."

EMPIRE MARKET

'Throw more than half away'

Owner Alex Alhaj: "We have produce. The most important things they need, we have it. Oranges, potatoes, lemons, avocados, bananas..." But, he said, "Not so many people buy it. We throw more than half away."

DALDAS

'The issue is delivery'

Owner Bill Multani says of the proposed ordinance: "I'm aware of it. It's a good thing." He said produce distribution is a challenge. "I wish there was a

distributor out there. The issue is delivery. To sell produce, you have to have an image of freshness. And you have to have somebody deliver it."

He said that for a distributor to deliver to a market, there's a minimum order, which may be more than the store can sell. "In the beginning, you're not going to sell that much."

"My opinion is they (program organizers) should have a line of vendors lined up. For the first six months, three months, then after we see how they're going. If you want me to expand, I'm gonna have to cut down other stuff. We'd love to do it, but we're here to make money. Anything for the community, we're willing to do it. The community's always first."

STARLIGHT MARKET

'You're stuck with it'

Part-owner and manager J.J. simply said, "We cannot sell everything. We like to sell good stuff, of course." He buys his produce at the produce market under the highway on Jerrold Street "when I have a chance." As for Mar's proposal, "It sounds good to me, we'll see what happens." Echoing Daldas owner Multani, he said that distribution is an obstacle. "Sometimes you don't have time" to go to the market, he said, but if it gets delivered, you have to take what the distributor brings, you can't pick and choose, "You're stuck with it."

SUPERETTE MARKET

'It's good news'

Wahid, working the counter, when asked of Mar's bid to improve small-market fare, said: "I wish. It's good news. Alcohol always bring you all the bullshit," he said, as a client staggered to the counter, change and a can of Olde English 800 malt liquor in hand, as neighborhood demographics change, he said, the market might change as

well, to accommodate families and students, but for now, "People don't buy too much."

J&E DELI

'Not interested'

Word about the new healthy food program hasn't yet spread to all the corner stores of the Tenderloin. J&E Deli owner Brian Panday said he's health-conscious, but has not heard of the Healthy Food Retailers Incentive Program.

"I don't eat junk food," Panday said pointing to the purple grapes he was eating behind the counter. Panday might treat his body like a temple, but his store is a different story. It has racks and racks of junk food with a steady stream of customers who make a beeline to the cold beer. He's not interested in carrying healthier foods. It's too costly, he said, and time-consuming. In fact, Panday doesn't carry any produce. He got those grapes across the street at Heip Thanh Food Market, a purveyor of produce that figured prominently in The Extra's 2007 survey (see sidebar).

Panday said neighborhood people use food stamps and WIC to purchase food. His store isn't authorized to accept either. The business was red-flagged years ago because of the previous owner, said Panday, who bought J&E Deli in 2007.

Another reason the healthy foods program won't work for him, he said, is because he can't cut back on liquor. The program demands that a store dedicate 35% of its floor space to healthy foods, and no more than 20% to tobacco and liquor. He said a lot of his profit comes from selling booze.

Plus, he added, if people want fresh produce they can go to any number of stores nearby, like across the street at Heip Thanh. Or they could go a block up to K&S Produce Market or two blocks

2007: The Extra and Leno both ahead of the curve

Fresh food in the Tenderloin has long been a topic in Central City Extra, from soup kitchen coverage to stories about the farmers' market and neighborhood food pantries.

In July 2007, we surveyed the Tenderloin for stores carrying fresh food. As I walked every block I noted which mom-and-pops stocked a dozen or more varieties of fruits and produce, counting 24 such niches of neighborhood nutrition but leaving out the two dozen that had only onions, potatoes, apples and bananas and such minimal staples.

At the time, then-Assemblyman Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, had an interesting piece of legislation that would have created a pilot program that would give incentives to mom-and-pop grocers in poor neighborhoods to stock fresh fruits and vegetables. It also would have given rebates to food stamp holders who bought fresh.

The Legislature passed AB2384 and Gov. Schwarzenegger signed it, but then he pulled a fast one. He didn't provide for the \$500,000 in his budget that the pilot called for, and the program went dormant. Ken Hecht of California Food Policy Advocates in Berkeley was incensed. He called the paltry sum less than small peanuts — "chump

change." He said the governor should have ponied up after publicly supporting the measure.

I called now-state Sen. Leno to see if, after six years, there was any new development regarding AB2384, or its ideas.

One positive fallout from his bill, Leno said, was that it had appealed to the federal government because it addressed affordability in low-income communities and accessibility to fresh food. It was a strike against Type II diabetes, too.

"The federal government liked the idea and provided funding for a program," Leno said. "It sent an RFP to all the states. Massachusetts was chosen. It was in 2008 or 2009, I think."

But he has not resurrected his bill and it didn't seem now to be on a front burner. Even with the state's coffers brimming for the first time in recent years, a bill would have a rough time because major efforts will try to refund programs that were deeply cut, he said. "I realize, though, that's no reason not to try. And I'd consider reintroducing it."

He didn't know the details of Supervisor Eric Mar's bill, but said he supports action that promotes healthy food. ■

— Tom Carter

over to California Produce. Both stores took the top two slots in the Tenderloin Neighborhood Healthy Shopping Guide, while J&E got two stars, ranking 30th of the 54 stores that participated.

SALAMA HALAL MEAT

'We have our community'

Baalouach Ali said that his customers "come, like, 20 miles, 100 miles," to shop there. "It's a special place for them," he says. "Cause it's kosher, it's halal." The store also specializes in Mediterranean foods they offer that are hard to find elsewhere. Given that they cater to such a particular clientele, Ali said, stepping away from the meat-cutting board behind the cooling case in the small, dark and crowded store: "I don't drink, I don't smoke, I don't want it. We have our community."

SERVE WELL MARKET

'Go to the farmers market'

Sam, working behind the register, animatedly poooh-pooohed the notion of improved fare. "I've known for a long time," he said. "I heard about it." But the people who shop at his store, he said, "don't have money to buy the good stuff. They want to fill their stomach. They have the farmers market, they can go there."

FOX LIQUOR AND DELI MARKET

'Do our best to get into it'

Jesse Dhillon, the new owner of Fox Liquor and Deli, first heard about the Healthy Food Retailer Incentive Program while listening to news radio. He got interested and began preparing the store for a healthier flair.

"We're going to do our best to get into it," he said, referring to the new program. His parents, co-owners of the store, agree, he said.

Fox Liquor and Deli, on the corner of Larkin and Eddy streets, is located near Little Saigon. Dhillon and his parents, who live in Benicia, began running the store just over a year ago. They opened up the back room, increasing the floor space, and started selling more produce, healthier grains and even included Indian and other ethnic foods.

"We're trying to be the neighborhood's mini Safeway," said Dhillon, who also admits it won't be an easy task to sell health food here. "It's hard being in the Tenderloin," he added. "Most people aren't here to go grocery shopping."

Still, Dhillon remains optimistic. He said the trends might be changing toward a healthier clientele.

"There's more diversity in the neighborhood now — not just alcoholics — more professional people," he said.

Ross Gell, the Fox's clerk, wasn't so sure about the push toward healthier.

"Certain neighborhoods, healthy food works for them," he said. "Our type is that of people who live off Social Security."

Gell wanted to know if the city meant organics when it said healthy food. Organic foods come with a much higher price tag.

"We live in a country where you can buy a pound of chicken for either \$1 or you can buy a pound of chicken for \$6," he said, pointing out the cost difference between free-range organic and cooped-up birds fed chemicals.

Dhillon said that because they are on the western edge of the Tenderloin, the transition to stocking healthier will be easier than for stores farther in. ■