

Healthy store

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drug paraphernalia, we were already selling some fruit and vegetables but needed to do more, and I really love to learn how to make things better.”

Radman’s Market is being transformed from a passably okay store to a neighborhood amenity with an attractive, well-stocked produce section, bulk items, herbs and spices and, soon, fresh meat and poultry.

The two-year project to launch the TL prototype is the work of the 10-member Tenderloin Healthy Corner Store Coalition. (See The Extra, Issue 136, for the full story.) Members are neighborhood nonprofits like the Vietnamese Youth Development Center and TNDC, plus such city agencies as DPH’s Tobacco Free Project and the Feeling Good nutrition program.

The Tenderloin has 70 corner stores, the coalition determined in a survey. While all but eight sell alcohol and cigarettes, more than half carry no fresh produce.

Coalition members took that information, interviewed residents about their shopping habits, selected 50 stores to survey in detail to determine which was mostly likely to succeed as a model and produced a “Healthy Shopping Guide.” Then, working with consultant Sutti Associates, they winnowed the number to 10 stores, then three, then Radman’s.

“We still have a lot to do before April 13th,” Radman told The Extra March 28. In the new expanded space sat just-delivered meat cases. The meat won’t be in by the “grand reopening” but soon after. “The expansion was an absolute headache and took three months longer than it was supposed to,” he says.

Boxes of dry goods and cans are still stacked on the floor, waiting to be stocked, and the bins that will hold the beans and other bulk items haven’t arrived yet. The bins will be placed between two smart-looking, wood-slatted shelves, invitingly displaying produce in the window.

Radman excused himself to ring up a customer with a huge bunch of perfect, unblemished bananas.

“Nice,” said the customer. “I saw them through the window.”

Besides the redesign consultation that will last several months, the model project also carries tangible assistance: \$16,000 worth of new metal dry goods shelving, 20 bulk bins, prop-up shelving and LED lights for the cold produce case.

“Those lights are essential,” says Larry Brucia, CEO of Sutti Associates, who’s been overseeing the redesign. “They’re cool, so the produce stays fresh longer.”

Radman’s remake has taken longer than other store remodels Brucia’s been involved with, mainly because of the expansion, he says. “But there’s no doubt — Fadhl’s going to have a great store when he’s done.”

Of the \$16,000 outlay, part of a privately funded pilot program, \$4,000 is earmarked as a low-interest loan that may be forgiven if Radman’s meets the program criteria for three years.

On April 13, a preview will show what a good neighborhood market can be.

Radman’s and Coalition members will be there to offer Sunday Streeters games and prizes, dance performances, interactive art and live music, and, best of all, taste testings and health and nutrition information.

Radman’s will remain the TL’s model healthy market, but one or two more such stores will be added in the neighborhood this year under the city’s new Healthy Food Retailer Incentives Program.

The stores haven’t been selected yet, but 10 Tenderloin storeowners showed up at a February workshop to explain the program for interested merchants. ■

ELDER PROFILE



PHOTO BY PAUL DUNN

Tess Diaz-Guzman, 55, prepares pork adobo at JT Restaurant at 953 Mission St., which she owns with her husband Juan Guzman. JT’s is “vital to the community,” says Angelica Cabande, director of SOMCAN.

‘Mama Tess’ serves Filipino elders a taste of home and community

BY ANNA CHALLET

SOMEONE WHO doesn’t live or work around Fifth and Mission might walk past the Mint Mall and miss the tiny JT Restaurant. For those in the know — elderly residents in the neighborhood, construction workers, Filipino and Latino families — the South of Market business is a haven for many with its home-style chicken and pork adobo, as well as its vital role as a community space.

At the center of it all is owner and chef, Tess Diaz-Guzman, “Mama Tess” to those who know her.

“I’m proud because everybody calls me [that],” she says, laughing.

Diaz-Guzman, 55, owns JT Restaurant with her husband Juan, whom she married in 2010. Formerly a butcher and originally from the province of Laguna in the Philippines, she came to San Francisco 13 years ago, shortly after her first husband died.

Her brother, already established in San Francisco, had opened the Filipino eatery in the 1990s. It was called Filipinas until Diaz-Guzman and Juan took charge and renamed it JT Restaurant, the initials for Juan and Tess.

A COMMUNITY HUB

One in 10 SoMa residents is over 65 and living alone, and more than a third of them are below the federal poverty line. The city’s rising rents are squeezing nonprofit social service providers and small businesses that are part of the safety net for low-income seniors and families.

James Chionsini, an organizer with the nearby advocacy group Senior and Disability Action, says small businesses like JT Restaurant are particularly important for seniors living alone.

“If you live in a small room, you need a community place,” he says. “Places like Tess’ are an access point. They provide the community with ways to survive.”

JT Restaurant fills that need. The nearby West Bay Pilipino Multiservice Center has brought seniors there to sing karaoke, and organizations like Chionsini’s have used the space for receptions. Diaz-Guzman also caters for West Bay and Centro Latino in the Mission, where she gets to know elders in both neighborhoods.

Many in the surrounding Filipino community tend to cook at home rather than eat out because of the expense, Diaz-Guzman says, but elderly people in the neighborhood come to the restaurant just to see her.

“If they have a problem they can talk to me,” she says. One neighbor who is 87 and living in senior housing on Ellis Street called her recently when she had a medical emergency and needed help getting to St. Francis Hospital.

Tenant advocates leave flyers in the restaurant about meetings and rallies. Diaz-Guzman has had seniors come in asking about housing in the neighborhood, and organizations like the Bill Sorro Housing Program leave literature there as well.

“[The restaurant] is a central place, and it’s vital to the community,” says Angelica Cabande, South of Market Community Action Network director.

BUSINESS HAS SLOWED

Diaz-Guzman says business, especially at lunchtime, has slowed with neighborhood changes. She used to get more customers who worked in the area, from nearby places like the San Francisco Chronicle, which had heavy staff cuts in recent years, and the Federal Building. The influx of gourmet food trucks is having an effect, too.

Workers from new companies in the area “go to the food trucks,” she says, “or they don’t need to go out because they have a restaurant in their building.”

An uptick in construction work in the neighborhood in the last year has

helped a little with the lunch business, but the loss of income means there’s not as much to go around. She sends money to her four children in Manila, ages 17 to 33, whom she hasn’t seen since she came to this country.

Last year, she’d saved enough money to hire a lawyer so that her two youngest could apply to join her here and finish their studies.

Working all the time helps keep her mind off how much she misses her children. “It’s hard when you have kids. They’re a part of you. That’s why I want to keep busy,” Diaz-Guzman says.

DREAMS OF GROWING HER BUSINESS

The restaurant’s dark green chairs and ceramic tile-topped tables are showing their age. Photos from when she won third place for the parol lanterns she made for the Bayanihan Community Center’s annual Christmas festivities are in a frame behind the counter.

“Sometimes I have a dream that I want to grow,” she says. But modernizing the restaurant would take money.

She’s tried taking City College classes to work on food presentation skills, but often had to be late or miss class altogether because of her catering responsibilities. Teachers from the Renaissance Entrepreneurship Center around the corner eat at the restaurant and have asked her to come take classes, she says, but the evening classes begin during her business hours, and she can’t afford to lose any money.

“I’m happy though, even when I can’t pay the rent,” she says. She gets to the restaurant at 4 a.m. and often doesn’t leave before 11 p.m., and she cleans houses if she’s not getting enough business.

“People say, ‘You do everything.’ That’s life.” ■

Anna Challet is a reporter for New America Media.