



# Cooking for 3,000

## Inside new dining room with chefs, guests

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the dishwashing area efficiently — it's now on the upswing.

"It was like wearing a new pair of shoes," said Executive Chef Char Marsden, who has been at St. Anthony's on and off for more than 13 years. Marsden, 53, an Aussie who has been cooking since age 18, said, "We got a few blisters, but now we're starting to hit our stride."

Blisters, indeed.

The sheer size of the place — nearly half again the size of the old dining room — can cause feet to ache, especially for the 45 to 60 volunteers who hustle back and forth delivering and returning food trays.

"There's a lot of walking, and they (volunteers) are up there in age," Marsden said.

"You realize how big it is when you're carrying a tray and go back there 40 times a day. You could walk 6 miles in a day doing that."

St. Anthony's diners, though, probably haven't noticed. For them, the spacious new dining room is a godsend.

"They could not believe that this place was built for them," Marsden said. "Their reaction has been overwhelming gratitude."

Dining room manager Lydia Bransten, 49, who began her St. Anthony's career in 2006, says, "What we're trying to create here is a dignified, respectful place for people to come in and eat in community. Having that reflected in the space in which they're eating is really important. And because the dining room is not as tight, folks are more comfortable, and when you're more comfortable you're more pleasant."

The new dining room was needed to accommodate the "changing face of hunger in the Tenderloin," says St. Anthony's communications associate Jessie Brierley. "With a population that's growing and changing, it was important that St. Anthony's have a flexible space."

That changing face of hunger over the years has prompted St. Anthony's to change its menus to accommodate the fluctuating population. Meals now are typically healthier and more varied. Diners are offered a well-balanced selection of meals that consist of an entree, starch, vegetable, fruit and dessert with fruit juice, Tang or water to drink. Entrees rotate daily and typically include roast chicken, baked salmon,

pizza and chili, with specials like pasta puttanesca, ginger lentils and chickpea curry.

Once in a blue moon there's a beef dish, such as about five months ago when chefs made 3,000 hamburgers on the kitchen's two 6-foot-long grills.

"We had the whole Tenderloin smelling like a Burger King," Marsden said, noting that at the old dining room chefs were unable to grill food.

That hamburger experiment was wildly successful, but hasn't been repeated. Too expensive. A typical meal with beef costs \$2,500, Marsden said.

The executive chef, who spent her career in the restaurant business before joining St. Anthony's, plans menus a month at a time.

She normally has about 60 combinations of meals to choose from and bases her decisions on food she knows she'll always have — such as turkey, chicken and hot dogs — and then augments the meals if special items magically come her way.

"My reservation book (for guests) is always full here," Marsden said, grinning. And through it all she tries to focus on their health, offering food that is both tasty and nutritious.

"We are using much more fresh and even frozen food and vegetables than we used to," she said.

And the dining room's guests flock to the healthy stuff. Right?

Umm, not so much.

Many live on hamburgers and French fries when they have money to spend, so that compels Marsden to periodically "pull fast ones on them." That means mixing vegetables and meat or meat and beans so they have to eat the healthy with the tasty.

"They usually say, 'This is good, you know, because it has a hunk of meat in it.'"

Adds Sanchez: "Our clients are a fragile population. They don't have the same immune systems as your average person has, so we try to make sure that the ingredients we use are fresh and that we're putting out a safe meal every day."

The dining room serves 2 million pounds — 1,000 tons — of food a year. Onsite and off it stores 4 tons of food, and also keeps on hand a three-day supply of canned earthquake emergency food, some of which it adds to meals once a year, then replenishes.

The dining room obtains most of its food from three sources: individual and

corporate donors, the S.F.-Marin Food Bank and BiRite Foodservice Distributors. Up to a quarter is donated.

Four tons sounds like a lot of food, but St. Anthony's six chefs — three in the prep area downstairs who organize the food, and three upstairs who prepare it — are careful to avoid waste.

"We try to balance out our quantities," Sanchez said. "It's a fine line. You don't want to run out, but you also don't want to have too much leftovers."

Leftover food is quickly placed in the kitchen's rapid-cooling "blast chiller" to be stored for future meals.

"What was cooked today may not be able to be used tomorrow, but we can store it and the next time we serve that meal we can add it to it," Sanchez explained.

The kitchen crew begins preparing each day's meal at 6:30 a.m. to be able to start serving at 10. By 2:30 p.m. the kitchen's clean, ready for the next day.

Staff clean as they go.

"You are never resting; there is always something to do," Sanchez said.

Part of that may be due to all the new-fangled appliances he and his colleagues have at their disposal — which must be painstakingly cared for. They include six new 55-gallon steam kettles that can each cook 100 pounds of food at once, two 6-foot-long grills, three Baxter ovens that can cook 13 sheet pans of food simultaneously, and a combination steam/convection oven.

"We just have more equipment now and are able to produce more food more efficiently," Marsden explained. "It's probably not any faster than it used to be, but it makes it tastier and we can accomplish more."

By most reasonable predictions, St. Anthony's Dining Room will continue to accomplish more in the years ahead just to keep up with demand — for Marsden a lamentable prospect.

"I wish I didn't have this job," she said, not because she doesn't like it but because the number of down-and-out guests is growing.

In a city famous for its wealth and prosperity, the jarring sight of people lined up around the block for free meals is disconcerting.

"What I see on the street is that our clientele is increasing," she said. "And the crowd now is younger and younger, and there are women and families. It's heartbreaking." ■



Clockwise from top left: Chef Teresa Huang, left, and volunteer Rob Holstead move food into the prep area where three chefs work. A guest digs into a satisfying meal that includes ham and collard greens over barley, and an assortment of healthy side dishes such as polenta and an English muffin. Volunteer Patricia Davis bits her stride while serving during the height of meal service. Chef Sonya Trejo, left, and kitchen trainee Cbip Daughbry make polenta in one of six new 55-gallon steam kettles. Lydia Bransten, dining room manager, center, chats with a guest, left, and a volunteer at the start of a weekday meal service. "What we are trying to create here is a dignified, respectful place for people to come in and eat in community," Bransten says.



# Plinking in the park

## Boeddeker piano a joyful surprise

By MARJORIE BEGGS

PUT A PIANO in a garden — or anywhere unexpected — and people will come, smiling, surprised, wanting to touch, play, listen. That's what artists-musicians Dean Mermell and Mauro fortissimo discover every time their 2-year-old Sunset Piano project places a piano outdoors somewhere.

Boeddeker Park was the latest spot. The upright stood in the park's Celebration Garden for two-plus weeks until mid-October, drawing young and old, accomplished players, chop-stickers and many who'd never before pressed a piano key.

"The first day it was here, a lovely, older Cantonese-speaking woman was attracted to the men from Sunset Piano playing it," says Kasey Asberry, creator and volunteer coordinator of the Celebration Garden, a mix of ornamental and edible plants in the park's northeast corner. "She was very shy, kept motioning that she

didn't play, but they encouraged her to sit down and touch it."

She did, experimenting, listening carefully to the results.

"She was so intent, it didn't matter that she was unschooled — she was truly playing music," Asberry says.

Sunset Piano is the brainchild of fortissimo, born Di Nucci, who's adopted the name fortissimo, abbreviated ff, the musical designation for "loud." He launched the project on Half Moon Bay's bluffs to bring what he saw as an out-of-favor instrument back to the esteem it deserves. He and Mermell collect and restore the pianos themselves, then send them out into the world.

They've placed pianos in U.N. Plaza several times and hauled 12 grand pianos to Golden Gate Park's Botanical Gardens for 12 days in July.

Betty Traynor, longtime head of Friends of Boeddeker Park, read about the project and stopped by the Botanical Gardens to check it out.

"I thought, why not see if we can bring a piano to Boeddeker too," she says. Mermell said yes, Traynor got the okay from Boeddeker staff, and the piano was delivered two months later.

"I really didn't know what to expect, but the piano was treated with respect and appreciated by all," Traynor says. "Going around with the flyers to tell neighbors about it, I always got big smiles. Some people were puzzled: 'Outside, not inside?' But then they got it — there would be 'music in the air' at Boeddeker."

Mermell told The Extra in an email that surprise and delight is common when someone encounters a piano outdoors. "It's out of context. Like good art, it causes people to re-evaluate their place in the world, and perhaps be more open to wonder."

Official sponsorship of the Tenderloin event was through Rec and Park, Friends of Boeddeker and U.C. Hastings' Demonstration Gardens, which partners with the Friends to cultivate the Celebration Garden. Asberry is director.

Asberry, who plays piano "a little," volunteered to watch out for this one, covering it every night and before she watered the garden so it wouldn't get wet.

"One day, just as I was putting away the hose, an elder gentleman came up the steps slowly and walked to the piano," she recalls. "I rushed over, uncovered it

and said he should feel free to play, that it was here for him. He asked, 'Really? Just for me?'

He sat and, without sheet music, launched into a Bach piano concerto.

"Though I was wearing heavy work boots, I couldn't help but dance," Asberry says.

Another day, four children, cousins, squeezed onto the piano bench, plinking away. She taught them some listening games, dividing the keyboard and playing four-part, call-and-response songs, and, she says, ignored their dirty hands: "Washing hands first — it's one of those rules you just don't break with playing piano, but they played their parts so joyfully and deliberately, it didn't seem to matter."

The piano was so popular, Traynor got its run extended for two days, then held a farewell party, inviting the neighborhood.

Traynor hopes to bring the piano back to the park in the spring.

"I play a little and did sit down and play some chords. It really had a nice sound — I'll be practicing for its reappearance next year."

Mermell says that piano now is in storage with more than two dozen others, awaiting the next round of placements in the spring. ■



PAUL DUNN

On the piano's penultimate day at Boeddeker, gospel musician, teacher and Demonstration Garden staffer Rodney Wright, 69, plays for Samuel Gonzalez, 7.