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Extra Central City

Published by San Francisco Study Center

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Sampling the soup kitchens



THERE IS SUCH A THING AS A FREE LUNCH — AND BREAKFAST AND DINNER, TOO

PHOTO: CARL ANGEL

St. Anthony's, Friday, lunch

St. Anthony's has been serving food for 51 years, feeds 2,000 people a day and recently served its 29 millionth meal. I was served food within 15 minutes of getting in line.

Eight food servers stand behind the counter: five are lined up assembly style, one hands out juice in cups and two replenish supplies. The food is served on a brown plastic food tray, like a TV dinner, but twice as large. Today's food was couscous and Spanish pork, broccoli, half a doughnut, a cup of juice, a thick slice of bread and a slab of butter.

Opposite me was an elderly black man. We talked back and forth for a few minutes. He mentioned that Glide's staff were bossier than at St. Anthony's and that here the food is hot. He left and two boys sat down. It turned out they were seventh-graders from St. Brigid's School on a field trip to the Tenderloin with their teacher. Other St. Brigid students were eating here as well.

The most popular eateries in the Tenderloin are the soup kitchens; people stand in line to get food. It's free food and it's big business. Millions of dollars are spent giving away food — St. Anthony's spends \$1.2 million annually just for its lunches; Open Hand's lunches at North of Market Senior Services cost \$240,000 a year; Glide's estimated \$1.99 a plate translates to a daily tab of \$7,500. They and other food programs are part of a huge San Francisco industry that feeds the poor, and the Tenderloin is the industry's headquarters.

Hundreds of people work in the soup kitchens, and hundreds of others are working in related businesses.

Astonishing quantities of meat, vegetables, grains are consumed for free in the Tenderloin every day. Franciscan friar Alfred Boeddeker's 51-year-old legacy, St. Anthony's dining room, reached a stunning benchmark Dec. 15 — its 29 millionth meal.

The biggest food distributor to service agencies is the S.F. Food Bank: 40 staff and hundreds of volunteers get 15 million pounds of food a year into the kitchens of 400 agencies. Citywide, 20 organizations regularly serve meals, according to the September 2001 "San Francisco Free Eats Chart" that is updated every three months by The Free Print Shop, an all-volunteer group formed in 1968. "Regular" ranges from a once-a-week brunch at All Saints' Episcopal Church in the Upper Haight to Glide's breakfast, lunch and dinner five days a week. Six sites serve only one meal a week; three serve twice a week. Five serve breakfast, 10 lunch, 10 dinner.

The eateries are spread around 14 different neighborhoods, but six of the 20 are in the Tenderloin. The *Extra* visited all six, plus others for comparison.

The students were not entirely out of place. Every day, one can see younger people in line at the dining room. There are also women in their 30s and 40s who are cleanly dressed and do not appear to be

substance abusers who line up each day. Because of its noon-time feeding schedule and hearty meal, St. Anthony's is the choice of people who have flexible schedules but are perhaps strapped moneywise. With

a St. Anthony's lunch, one can survive with a sandwich for dinner. So for people who have a steady living arrangement but very little cash, St. Anthony's offers a real solution to the question of how do they get by.

St. Anthony's, Tuesday, lunch

Today I am eating with Stan. We get there about 11:50. If I were by myself, I could have gotten in on the senior line at 11 a.m. It's for people over 60 and those with children.

The line runs around the corner and extends about 30 feet down Golden Gate. This is the line for the first feeding of the general public and we are inside the dining room in about 25 minutes. The menu today: spaghetti with marinara source topped with Parmesan cheese. The vegetable is a half ear of corn. There's a large slice of fresh bread, two cookies and a cup of milk, the only beverage other than juice or coffee I was served at a soup kitchen.

The spaghetti was not overcooked, which is a real trick when feeding hundreds of people. Neither was the corn. It was not the white or light yellow corn sold at my supermarket, but it was hearty, not soggy like KFC's. I enjoyed it and wished for seconds — but there are no seconds at St. Anthony's unless

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