

Diner a landmark – nostalgic token of an earlier time in the Tenderloin



THE WAITRESS

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The Lafayette is open daily 7 a.m. to 10 p.m., employs four to five workers depending on the hour, about half as many as at Manor House, which closed at 3:30 p.m. because Mimi feared being in the neighborhood's seedy center after dark.

Mei and Nam, the day cook, get off work in late afternoon when the owners of eight years, Stanley and Stephanie Yang, come in and take over as cook and waitress. Prices are a dollar or two above the Manor House menu. Lunch ranges from \$5.20 for a cheeseburger with hash browns (a thin dime more than a hamburger) to \$11.60 for prime rib, which costs a dollar more at dinner. Corned beef, a Thursday special, is \$6.80; Manor's cost \$4.95. Still, a \$6 Lafayette lunch of a hot ham sandwich with veggies and mashed potatoes is a good deal, and the chef's salad for \$6.45 probably beats anything in town.

In fairness, by way of explaining Manor House's across-the-board lower prices, building owner TNDC kept the rent down provided Mimi would anchor prices at rock bottom because most of her customers were poor, dependent on Social Security or disability checks.

TAKING OVER FROM UNCLE JACK

The Yangs bought the Lafayette from Stanley's uncle, Jack Chow, after Stanley served a stint as apprentice cook. Uncle Jack, they say, owned the place for nearly 40 years until he retired and went back to China.

On a Sunday evening, 45-year-old Stanley is at the counter, wiping his hands on a rag, and Stephanie, a pretty, talkative waitress with a ready smile and gay laugh, is at the cash register. He says some of Mimi's customers always crossed over to the Lafayette, but now his business is up maybe 10%.

"She served cheaper dishes," Stanley says. "Our quality is definitely better." My eyebrows go up. "It's what customers say," he adds quickly.

He shops at Costco, Restaurant Depot and farmers' markets, same as Mimi. His regulars start coming in around 11 a.m. every day and he says 7 in 10 have been customers more than five years. Manor House closed on Saturdays. "We couldn't close for even a day — people would complain," Stanley says.

The Lafayette's most popular item is prime rib, he says, though the turkey dinner is high up there. Daily specials are popular, as well, he says: "It's like a neighborhood cafeteria."

One customer, Dave, who insisted on a first-name basis, theorizes that all old-timey restaurants in the city run the same menu day after day, week after week.

"Isn't corned beef and cabbage on every menu on Thursday?" he asks, and



Mei, inset above, is the Lafayette's daytime waitress, and she rules, queen of the counter since 1986. Her domain is the Tenderloin diner with 10 deep-red Naugabye booths that generally are filled with regular customers, some who have been coming here for decades. Stanley and Stephanie Yang, above right, own the place — he is the night-time cook, and she picks up where Mei leaves off.

immediately answers his own question. "Yeah, yeah, Lefty O'Doul's is about the same, too." Dave is alone in the first booth, turned sideways, his arm resting on the back. A knee is hiked up on the seat in a domestic sprawl. "It's a San Francisco menu."

"The Tennessee Grill," pipes up the only other customer. He's in a booth across from Dave, finishing dinner. "That's another one," referring to the Taraval Street stalwart. Likewise, Original Joe's back in the day.

"The only loss was on Friday night when they got rid of Swiss steak," says Dave, his history credential dating to March 1984 when he first crossed the Lafayette threshold. He even remembers when Mei was hired.

THE LAFAYETTE FAMILY

Dave lives up the street. Years ago, he dropped in once on his way to work as a security officer. He's eaten here pretty much every day since. But in recent months, because he visits a friend in a rest home on Sundays, it's been merely "19 times a week."

Dave, talkative, lives alone and the Lafayette is like his family, but he calls it "relationships." It's not uncommon for three or four booths to be in a common conversation. Maybe someone drops in, like a pickup ball game, to kick the talk forward with something new. Money, women and George Burns' purple jokes, it's all game, and their voices and outrageous judgments about life fill the place. "Only one out of five women are any good," one proclaimed on a recent Sunday.

Rarely does Stanley join in, while

"Mei's a little abrasive, but she has to be. She loves a good argument and I love to argue with her, my sparring partner. She runs the drug dealers off who hang around outside. 'Move your office!' she tells them."

Donna Lisa Stewart
LONGTIME CUSTOMER OF THE LAFAYETTE

Stephanie laughs at everything.

"You're a Manor House customer or you're a Lafayette customer," Dave declares. He ate at Manor House three or four times in nearly 28 years, praising the banana-strawberry milkshake. But he feels that dishing out a buck or two more at the Lafayette is a small price for what he gets.

"We build relationships," Dave says. "The customers know each other, you sit down and socialize with your friends, sit with the same people, tell the same stories — or accepted lies. It's a family neighborhood restaurant."

On a morning in April, Don Brochette, 67, is sitting in the back booth at the window, whose ledge goes toward the door and holds a half dozen healthy plants, a green touch Mimi's lacked.

The booths were here before Brochette, who lives on Turk, started coming in 1972.

"But Donna Lisa would know how long they've been here," he said. "She's in once a week, sometimes twice. She started coming here in 1957 when she was in the service."

"I love the booths," Brochette continues, growing lively with introspection. "They stack the food here. I love Mei — she's the main reason, a good waitress, friendly, always busy cleaning things." Mei, seated momentarily in the booth across from him, laughs. "And the new cook is good." He pauses, looks around. "You know, you can relax in a booth, spread out."

56 YEARS AND COUNTING

Two weeks later, on a Saturday about 12:30 p.m., Donna Lisa Stewart arrives smiling, showing beautiful teeth as she says hello to everyone on her way to the back booth. Her long silver earrings flash and her turquoise nails are evident

as she plops down Spike, her little black and white dog, then sits beside him across from Brochette, who is finishing lunch.

She was a 17-year-old medic in the Army, taking courses at the Presidio in 1957 when a sergeant at Letterman Hospital recommended to her a Greek restaurant in the Tenderloin called the Lafayette Cafe. Get the mousakka, he suggested.

"That's what I came in for," Stewart recalls, as Mei hands her a menu. "The food's always been good, and nothing has changed much since. They go out of their way for you here. Mei's a little abrasive, but she has to be. She loves a good argument and I love to argue with her, my sparring partner. She runs the drug dealers off who hang around outside. 'Move your office!' she tells them."

She laughs. Stewart was in the Army seven years and lived in several cities before returning to San Francisco in 1971 — and to the Lafayette. She lives at the Alexander Residence.

Stewart's unusual because she used to dine at Manor House almost daily until it closed, and once or twice a week at the Lafayette, which had better food, she says, but Mimi's was cheaper. Now, she's been eating lunch five days a week at the Salvation Army's Kroc Center, \$1.50 for seniors to eat inside, \$2.50 to go.

"It's hard to find a cheap place," she says. "I couldn't afford to eat here if it wasn't for the Salvation Army."

Her favorite Lafayette lunches are turkey, sometimes corned beef, "but ask them to slice it thin." The daily special, she points out, you can get any day. "It cracks me up." Today, though, she orders

scrambled eggs, sausage, hash browns, toast and coffee. Cost: \$7.95.

It's pretty clear that the Lafayette, with all its elements, has a strong nostalgic pull.

"I've seen people here I haven't seen for years and years," Stewart says. "A man comes down from Seattle every now and then just to see the people here."

HANDLING HARD CASES

It's a self-protecting community, too. Unruly customers rarely come in, but when they do, the hefty regulars handle the problem themselves. Calling the police is the reluctant last resort. A crazy man came in off the sketchy Hyde Street block the week before, yelling and swearing incoherently, likely high on drugs, Brochette says. He grabbed the guy and muscled him out with only "a little" resistance.

Stanley and Stephanie clean up after closing at 10, then step out into the dark street together. When asked one Sunday evening if he wasn't afraid at that hour, he said no. "I guess we live in the better part of the Tenderloin."

"Yeah," Dave cracked from his booth, "but he needs the protection."

The old boys talk like that. The chef keeps to himself. And the waitresses laugh like crazy. ■

LAFAYETTE COFFEE SHOP

LOCATION: 250 Hyde St. in the Tenderloin. HOURS: open 7 days a week including holidays from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. Breakfast, lunch and dinner.



THE CUSTOMERS

Donna Lisa Stewart has been a Lafayette regular since she was 17 and an Army medic. That was 1957. Spike, not so long.

It's not hard to imagine Humphrey Bogart, a loose liplock on a dangling Camel, sliding onto a stool, asking around for some creep who owes him a C note.

The prime rib was better the next day

I ordered prime rib, one of five that chef and owner Stanley Yang expects to serve on Sunday nights. Mine arrived in short order with split pea soup, salad, green beans and mashed potatoes with gravy. The soup was thin, swimming with carrots and bok choy. It was enjoyable and tasty. The salad was exactly what Manor House served — iceberg lettuce with a slice of tomato and Thousand Island dressing. Passable.

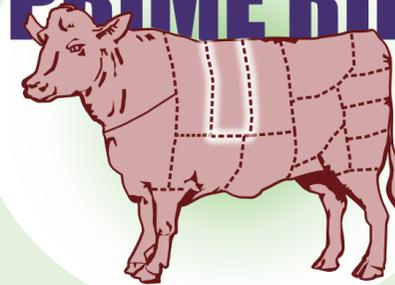
The prime rib arrived medium rare, as ordered. Its 8-inch length varied from ½- to 1-inch thick. The accompanying green beans were fresh and okay, though the potatoes were watery and the gravy lacked taste.

I couldn't eat the meat. I chewed and chewed and chewed. The flavor wasn't bad, but I couldn't break it down and ended up leaving moist wads on the side of my plate. So, after bread pudding for dessert, far too sweet for my palate, I took the remaining, thinner half of the prime rib home and put it in the refrigerator.

Late the next afternoon, I took it out and ate it with a cup of coffee. It was real good and tasty, inexplicably tender. I swallowed every bite, easily. ■

— Tom Carter

PRIME RIB



DIGITAL ILLUSTRATION BY LISE STAMPEL

HEALTH VIOLATIONS FIXED RIGHT AWAY

The Lafayette, like every restaurant, gets unannounced inspections from the Department of Public Health and the one April 16 was not its finest hour. After a couple of years of "adequate" scores in the 80s, it came up "poor," in DPH terms. With 13 violations, it plunged to an embarrassing 61. Just one violation, however, was "high risk." It involved "the transmission of food borne illnesses," nothing to take with a grain of salt. It was corrected that day.

As in the past, Lafayette makes all of its corrections within a week, and all of these problems were fixed by April 23. ■

— Tom Carter