

# Longing for a lucrative liquor license

## Grand Liquors lost its permit, was reinvented as Tip Top grocery

BY TOM CARTER

Tip Top Grocery Market at Taylor and Turk doesn't sell alcohol, but the owner would like to.

"Beer and wine would be nice," Karim Rantisi says. He's standing near his store's well-kept deli. "Everybody's selling beer and wine. But I'm not pushing."

It's something he thinks the neighborhood, or at least his average customer, wants. "You know, a six-pack." He's been a grocer in the immediate vicinity for 24 years, and he knows the business.

"I wake up every morning and think, 'What can I do for the neighborhood?'"

Rantisi's eyes, almost expressionless, seem to verge on sadness — or anger. He looks blankly in the direction of his old store that he lost four years ago, Grand Liquors, on the intersection's southwest corner at 67 Taylor St. It's still empty. But he figures that when the inevitable gentrification of that Turk Street block happens, which City Hall encourages, some new merchant will get a beer and wine license, just like the one he lost.

Pretty ironic.

### HOW HE LOST HIS LICENSE

In June 2009, Rantisi lost his month-to-month lease for Grand Liquors when the landlord shed him after 20 years. The sidewalk in front of the store was a notorious hangout for street toughs, widely considered a neighborhood nuisance.

The mayor's office was hot to offer property owners rehab incentives not just to perk up the seedy block, but to make it a fashionable art corridor, not a thing to interest the shifty, loud crowd forever idling around Grand Liquors' door, too often a headache for TL cops.

But the crammed, 1,200-square-foot store was iconic in the way it had endured this truly rough and scuzzy corner. Grand Liquors had the usual mom-and-pop fare plus a variety of fresh meat. In its last days it added a perk to its package liquor line: Just inside the door, a half-barrel full of little plastic bottles of vodka, two for \$3.

Rantisi lost his store but landed on his feet — sort of. He secured the 2,700-square-foot space at 90 Turk St., catty-corner from Grand but in the special use district that limited liquor licenses in about half of the Tenderloin.

City agencies wrote him that they liked the "positive" effect his planned enlarged grocery with veggies and meat would have in the neighborhood. Only 1 in 4 small Tenderloin stores sold produce then, the letter said. But its authors, the Department of Public Health and the Office of Economic and Workforce Development, disdained his plan to relocate his booze operation — transfer his license — given "the oversaturation of liquor stores in the Tenderloin."

The family-run Grand Liquors had been one of 74 liquor licenses in the 28-block special use district created by 1999 legislation aimed at banning new TL liquor stores.

City Hall and a large contingent of neighborhood antiliquor activists opposed Rantisi. They said liquor sales endangered public health and safety. The Planning Commission denied his request to transfer his Type 21 off-sale li-



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

**Karim Rantisi, 46, sells no alcohol at Tip Top because he lost his liquor license when he moved his store across the street.**

cense to his new store across the street.

Rantisi's family and his brother Jack's family — 14 men, women and children in all — took a 50% drop in income from lost liquor sales. "But we had no choice," he says. Plus, they had to pay for the Tip Top build-out.

"We have bad neighborhood," he concedes. "Maybe too much crime and drugs." And that's the real problem, he says, not booze.

Rantisi sells cigarettes. He pulls out a pocket calculator, taps in some figures, "Yes," he says, "about a 14% or 15% markup." More, and they wouldn't sell. "People would go somewhere else."

Cigarettes sell well. They're one of his top five items. The others are hot food, deli fare, cereal and, surprisingly, clothes. People buy a lot of T-shirts, underwear and jackets.

### ON THE JOB EVERY DAY

Working a seven-day week he takes either Saturday or Sunday morning off. Rantisi, 46, has made Tip Top a bountiful store with a full line of groceries and with aisles, sections and more than 20 glassed refrigeration cases. It has a variety of fresh meat, frozen dinners, bottled waters and sodas, canned and boxed foods, peanut butter, cold cuts, sunglasses, Raid, Liquid-Plumr, yogurt, milk, paper towels, hot coffee just inside the door, packaged donuts, candy, batteries, hundreds of items.

"Got any flour?" a man in a rush asks breathlessly. Rantisi points him in the right direction.

The Tenderloin Neighborhood Healthy Shopping Guide gives Tip Top a 56.3% score, 12th highest on the 56-store list. The report says Tip Top's highlights are: low-fat milk, lactose-free milk, fresh eggs, whole grain bread, whole grain tortillas, frozen fruit and vegetables, fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh and frozen meat and poultry and fresh and frozen fish. Also, it accepts EBT and credit cards.

In back are cucumbers, plums, apples, lettuce, bananas, tomatoes, and more on two three-tiered stands and in a 20-foot three-tiered bin. They occupy way less than 5% of the floor area.

"I buy everything fresh in South City, even if I lose money," Rantisi says.

"But customers want hot food and deli items. Food to go. They don't have kitchens. I have 60 kinds of cereal."

The hot food to-go counter and deli are side-by-side — corn dogs, lasagna, macaroni and cheese, kebobs, buffalo wings and more, all competitively priced. A small burrito is \$1.29, a cheeseburger with fries, \$6.

He's told about the healthy food legislation and program, the \$16,000 each participating store would receive from the city, \$4,000 of it a loan at 3% interest, forgiven in three years if a store stays with the criteria of redesign, consulting and education.

Rantisi's eyes look upward. He says 16 grand "is nothing today." He looks around. He needs a hood for his hot food operation, he says, not cheap under city codes. And, yes, he could move items around for efficiency and better sales, suggesting a design consultant could be helpful.

"It's a nice chance for the city," he says. "Nothing wrong with it. For me, if

I want new design, I don't know how this works. But I'm willing to try.

"But the problem is still no kitchens in SROs. No kitchens, no buyers." He adds: "Fruit is okay."

Rantisi knows well the caveats that come with City Hall incentives.

The city offered to help him four years ago during his move to Tip Top. OEWD talked of PG&E energy rebates on Rantisi's sky-high electric bills. Rebates didn't work out.

They offered consultation, too. What Rantisi got were a poster touting fruits and vegetables and another for dairy products, both obscured now by his necessary protective metal gate. Outside he got an 8-by-6-foot mural on the wall next to the door; it's signed JACE. Rantisi can't remember which city agency helped provide these three years ago.

The mural shows a lovely tan woman in a sleeveless gown holding a basket of fruit. But someone has scratched out her eyes. ■

### CENTRAL CITY

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