

# Farmers market vendor to reopen Manor House

Menu prices will rise but be 'reasonable'

By Tom Carter

AS JOHN AKINS contemplated re-opening the noted Manor House restaurant on Jones Street — a favorite of seniors that has been shuttered more than a year since Mimi Yee gave it up — one thing was clear: menu prices will be higher.

"I'll have reasonable rates for the neighborhood," says Akins, who expects to open in mid-March. "I can't have Mimi's prices — they're reflective of 15 years ago. If there are 15 items on the menu, for example, four or five will be low-cost so anybody can afford it. But they won't be like before."

"The \$3.50 breakfast, no way I can do that. The variables have gone up. I can't afford to give it away, but I'm not there to gouge anyone."

Yee quit Manor House Feb. 18, 2013, because of her husband John's declining health. He had been the main cook, standing for long hours six days a week.

The closing ended a bittersweet story of triumph where a Chinese American waitress quit her job across town to manage a Skid Row eatery with no idea how to handle the often rough clientele, but she knew she would have to earn their respect.

Through perseverance, honesty and treating everyone with respect, she did, even if she had to chase some customers down the street to pay her. In the early days, she'd have to call the cops three and four times a day to clear away the sidewalk drug dealers.

Yee kept menu prices amazingly low because TNDC, the building owner, gave her a break on the rent with her guarantee to keep prices down for hundreds of old-timers and other habitués of the city's poorest neighborhood. And Manor House was solid in the fabric of the community, even known in the East Bay. TNDC Executive Director Don Falk begged her to stay. But she couldn't.

"We were determined to replace Mimi with someone else who would serve the community like she did, offering food security," says Falk. "We passed up a lot of other offers, but John gave us the opportunity to adhere to that vision so we offered him a below-market rate, too."

Akins, a strapping six-footer, was standing in his Heart of the City Farmers Market stall arranging pastries and amiably chatting with anyone who came near. He has sold his baked goods there for 18 years — the \$3.50 sweet potato tart is his best seller — and in November, he will have 19 years at the Alemany Farmers Market. He also has a small hole-in-the-wall restaurant on Lombard near Gough called Golo. His business card bills it a boutique cafe.

Akins didn't know 210 Jones St. was available. "A friend who knew I was looking for a restaurant told me in June." Akins says he never talked to Falk but rather to Kirsten Fletcher of Ventura Partners, a Santa Cruz real estate development outfit with an office at 456 Ellis St. The company manages TNDC's commercial portfolio. Some years ago, it surveyed the availability of fresh food in the Tenderloin for TNDC and researched a prototype supermarket that could serve the neighborhood.



PHOTO BY TOM CARTER

John Akins (left) at farmers market sells pastries to TL activist Michael Nulty.

When Akins signed his seven-year lease in December it was agreed that prices at Manor House would be reasonable.

Akins never met Yee, never ventured into the Manor House, either, he says. All he knows is what he found when he went inside to begin a modest renovation and to replace some equipment in the 49-seat cafe. It turned out to be a \$12,000 cleanup job.

"I was shocked at what I found," Akins says. "The stove was filthy. I wonder why the place was so dirty. I've never seen anything that needed that much work."

Department of Public Health inspectors' scores for Manor House usually were mid- to high-80s, an "adequate" range, the website says. Golo scored 86 in June but 91 in January 2013 and it had

a 98 in 2011.

Akins will shop at farmers markets, Restaurant Depot, San Francisco Produce House and Costco, similar to where Mimi shopped. He hasn't decided his menu yet, but plans to be open six days a week, 7 a.m. to 8 p.m., "with maybe dinner to go."

Mimi was open six days a week but closed at 3:30 p.m. She was afraid of the neighborhood when the sun went down.

What about operating in the rough neighborhood? Akins was asked.

"Yes, the belly of the beast," he says, ringing up a sale from an 18-year customer, a lady he had been teasing. "But I feed people. I'm not there to do battle. I'm a small businessman there to feed people. The peacemaker is food." ■

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I've been living in the Tenderloin since April, 2005 having moved here from the upper Van Ness Ave. and upper Polk St. districts, where I lived since 1965 when I moved to San Francisco. It's a great place to live, mainly because of its sense of community and diversity.

The Extra's reporting about the TL is excellent, right on and very, very important. Kudos to Geoff Link's "My Take" article on Twitter and Mark Hedin's articles on CBAs and the Grant Bldg. I read the S.F. Chronicle every day and I don't think they're covering these issues as thoroughly as The Extra is. I also liked the obits on Collyne Cook by Marjorie Beggs and Al Shapanus by Mark Hedin. As a senior I felt I got to know them even though I never met them.

Please keep up the excellent work!

— Ed Bellber

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**CENTRAL CITY EXTRA** is published monthly by the nonprofit San Francisco Study Center Inc., serving the community since 1972. The Extra was initiated through grants from the S.F. Hotel Tax Fund and the Richard and Rhoda Goldman Fund. The contents are copyrighted by the San Francisco Study Center, 944 Market Street, Suite 701, San Francisco, CA 94102.

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