

Tenderloin without Joe's: 'There's a void in my life'

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

neighborhood dwellers and fellow city citizens but other-county Baysiders and tourist converts, too, lost their prime Wild West, Italian haunt. Moreover, from the theaters to nearby mom-and-pops, Original Joe's was good for everyone's business.

A sign outside the front door on 144 Taylor St. says: "Closed due to fire, opening soon." But five months later, rumors question whether Joe's will ever rise from its ashes.

"Yeah, I miss Joe's," says a worn, older man on Frank's end stool. The bleary-eyed woman next to him leans in, echoes the sentiment, then confides, "They make a lot of money, you know."

Historically, the skids famously met the old-timey middle class and sometimes celebrities at Original Joe's. And whether you had half a heat on or not, it was a pleasant step up to equality.

"A lot of people come from out of town, too, and drink here first, then go eat at Joe's," says Frank, who frequents Joe's himself. "Now (my) business is off. People who came to town before New Year's were real disappointed." Frank says his business is down less than 10%.

It's a shame, too, he adds, that street people hang around O.J.'s and piss on the sidewalk.

Around the corner at EXIT Theater on Eddy Street, manager Richard Livingston feels the loss as much as anyone. The restaurant's back room served as EXIT's cabaret and stage for its Diva Festival each April and the S.F. Fringe Festival in September. The Fringe put on 18 performances and held its opening and closing night parties at Original Joe's.

"It's a tragedy, a tremendous loss," Livingston says. "Our performers and audiences go there before and after shows."

"People come to the Tenderloin for several things in their evening. Now, they are less likely to stick around the neighborhood."

Besides offering the city's best \$6 Manhattan and finest bacon platter, says actor Sean Owens, who recently starred at the EXIT, O.J.'s has been the go-to spot for actors from all over the world during the Fringe Festival where cast celebrations abound.

"The bar stools have birthed countless play concepts for me personally, and the booths have been the scene of everything from last-minute rehearsals and direction to impassioned diatribes on the nature of art," Owens says.

Losing the cabaret room where the Fringe and Diva Fests cooked in an "informal but professional" milieu is unthinkable, he says. The staff treated artists like extended family and served affordable meals while original songs, monologues and dialogues filled the air. It was "magic" that can't be replaced, Owens says.

Since 1937, and the days of its sawdust-covered floors, the restaurant served man-size portions of Italian food and steaks and chops. Like a scene from central casting, aging, tuxedoed waiters with accents strolled among the burgundy Naugahyde booths, serving patrons ranging from governors and mayors to drifters and chippies.

"We have everyone from the head politician to the head prostitute in here and we love them," the restaurant's John Duggan told the Chronicle the day of the fire. "But the person who really made us Original Joe's is the common man."

"It was so egalitarian," Livingston continues, "open to everybody, casual or formal and it crossed age and class. There's no substitute — nothing fills that need."

For years David Seward, CFO of Hastings Law College on McAllister Street, has walked the four blocks to the restaurant with groups or to eat alone at the counter and pore over his newspaper. It's so familiar that he knows Thursday is corned beef and cabbage day.

"You don't realize how important something is until it's gone," Seward said in an interview. "The food is good and solid. I was just thinking of Joe's yesterday and the prime rib. But it was more than a restaurant. You always saw somebody you knew. And it was so democratic, small d. It felt like a large family. There's a void in my life."

Last September, the month before the fire, friends from New Orleans visited Joe D'Alessandro, president of the San Francisco Convention and Visitors Bureau.

"The first place they wanted to go for lunch when they got off the plane was Joe's," D'Alessandro said. "And of course we market all parts of San Francisco. I think its closing has upset the regulars and beyond. There's quite a disparity of people."

People even hold the community feeling in higher regard than the food, though there's no hav-

ing one without the other.

Across the street from O.J.'s, at TNDC headquarters, Senior Project engineer Nick Griffin is one of scores of employees feeling deprived.

"If it was permanently closed, it would be a real shame and a big deal," Griffin says. "I liked the ambiance, the community, just the culture of the place. It's a venerable institution. It would sadden me if it went out of business."

Kevin Westlye, executive director of the Golden Gate Restaurant Association, couldn't recall a big restaurant being closed more than a few days in the last 20 years.

But The Extra found that a kitchen fire closed Mecca at 2029 Market St. five months last year. "Most of our 30 employees came back after drawing unemployment," says co-manager Josh Pearson.

O.J.'s employees scurried for other employment or unemployment checks. But they might find it hard to match their tips, Westlye said. O.J.'s has had its share of big tippers, the late Jerry Garcia among them.

"I know they are moving toward reopening," Westlye said. But from a conversation he said he had with Frank Duggan, he had no more details. Efforts to reach the Duggans failed. For two weeks wire-protected industrial lights have been hanging from the restaurant ceiling.

A short block and a half from O.J.'s, at the Bijou Hotel on Mason, receptionist Jill Schultze says she recommended Joe's for years and will continue when it reopens.

"When I was a concierge at the Sir Francis Drake I'd recommend it only to people who wanted to see the old San Francisco," she said from behind the Bijou desk where she's worked since October. "They worried about the homeless, though. People here are more adventurous and I'll be recommending it when the restaurant opens."

"It's got that old-school, Tenderloin feel and the Italian waiters are great. It's a good place to take your parents — like an oasis."

"Sure, its closing adversely affects the neighborhood," Tenderloin police Capt. Gary Jimenez says from his office. The Duggans donated a pair of dinners as door prizes for the monthly community forum at the police station. "Original Joe's complemented Golden Gate Theater. They were a dual attraction. People walked up the street for a traditional San Francisco meal. Of course the theater hasn't been open for a while."

Hundreds of Bay Area residents who came to Golden Gate Theater productions made a beeline to Joe's. And thousands over the years have chased the old city image.

"Legally Blonde" was its last production, in

February 2007.

Now, a no-loitering sign is up in Joe's doorway. Vagrants idle there anyway. Jimenez says when he drives by and sees them he stops, gets out and asks them to move along.

Across Taylor Street, drug trafficking has increased, Jimenez said. The previous day police busted two women selling drugs across the street near Chop It Up, an oxymoronic beauty salon and barbershop. "For one of them," Jimenez says, "it was the fourth arrest for drugs in that same block in the last three months. The mayor wants that block cleaned up."

(The cleanup occurred several days after Jimenez's remarks. In a follow-up interview, the captain said the Duggans had complained to the police and mayor's office about drug activity across the street. TNDC, which owns the barbershop building, was concerned as well. In mid-February, plainclothes cops moved in. "They made some lucky buys and made five or six solid arrests," Jimenez said. The Knock Out Posse from the Western Addition

was operating in the TL, he said. The Chop It Up owner has agreed to close. "The Duggans' main concerns over reopening were the drug traffic and a good insurance adjustment," Jimenez said.)

On the street 30 minutes later three cops put two dope-dealing suspects in handcuffs in Joe's north doorway alcove. The suspects, a man and a woman, sat on the sidewalk cross-legged, their backs against the restaurant wall. Across the street 10 people milled in front of Chop It Up.

At the corner, Swinder Multani, owner of Daldas grocery on the corner of Taylor and Eddy, lingers in the back of the store and thoughtfully calculates his loss.

"Joe's brought people to the neighborhood from all over the city," he says. "They'd buy quick stuff here, cigarettes, gum, beer. Maybe \$30 a day I averaged losing. I dunno, it's been winter and raining. Could be more."

A block and a half away, the spacious, finely appointed Hilton Hotel lobby is abuzz with guests checking in. A trio of young, big-bellied men in T-shirts, khaki shorts and flipflops are first in line. At the west end, Ken Muse, one of four employees working the concierge desk, rolls his eyes. "Oh," he says, "we all miss Joe's." The lady co-worker next to him working a computer nods vigorously without looking up.

Muse dials a number and hands over the phone. Debbie Larkin, Hilton spokeswoman, is on the line.

"The hotel regularly refers guests to Joe's for traditional San Francisco dining — on the order of Tadich's," Larkin says, then adds, "Joe's is a giant. It's like an ancient tree in the neighborhood." ■



PHOTO BY LAURIE GALLANT

Sean Owens, who starred in *Diva Fest* shows in *Original Joe's* cabaret room, says each production there was "magic."



PHOTO BY LENNY LIMUJO

Swinder Multani, whose *Daldas* grocery is up the block and across the street from *Joe's*, says the restaurant's customers would spend maybe \$30 a day at his store.