

'It's a place you can trust and it's so cheap you can afford it'

► CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

A random poll of people walking by one Friday afternoon confirmed the restaurant's niche.

"It's good, very reasonable, and a lot of retired people go there," said Larry Sheppard, 65, a retired hotel clerk who lives in a nearby SRO. "I don't know anything bad about it."

A 30-year TL resident, Sheppard said he didn't eat out until he retired two years ago. After discovering Manor House, he eats there a couple of times a week, packing home half his spaghetti if it's lunch. He praises owner Mimi Yee and the other waitresses as "good people." Only once has he seen any trouble inside — a man arguing loudly with his girlfriend.

"She (Mimi) put her foot down, kicked him out," Sheppard said, leaning on his cane. "She doesn't allow any trouble. And I don't think she gets any guff anymore. Most people respect her. And if you're short of money, she'll help you out. It's one of the better places in the TL."

"It's a fantastic restaurant, food and service," said Ann Williams, passing by on a visit to her old neighborhood. She lived here from 1979 to 2003 and ate at Manor House five times a week before moving to Berkeley.

"I'd recommend it to anyone," Williams said.

Sherry White is a recent convert. She's lived in the neighborhood four years but only discovered Manor House three months ago when she got a job at the Rescue Mission store around the corner on Turk. Now she's a daily regular and esteems the menu's fruit salad.

"Everything's fresh," White said on her way to work. "It's thoroughly good, with an enjoyable, friendly atmosphere. They know people by their first names. It's a wonderful place to visit. And I've never seen any trouble in there."

A look at its Department of Public Health record shows Manor rising and just short of excellent, a designation given when health inspectors issue a grade of 90 or more out of a possible 100 points. In 2006, Manor got 79, in '07 it was 85 and this year 88. Two blocks away, Original Joe's, closed by a fire since October, scored 79 on its last inspection in February '07.

Manor has 14 formica tables and nine seats at the counter. Maximum seating is 49. The front of the counter is a foot lower than the main counter to accommodate up to three wheelchairs, a change that came five years ago, along with a front door buzzer for the disabled.

Waitress May Ling takes an order while a customer behind her picks up takeout food.

I slip in at a vacant table in front near the counter. A young Chinese waitress arrives in

two minutes to take my order. Corned beef seems a good test. You figure a cheap restaurant buys fatty and tough meat. If anything sets a tone, this will be it. The soup would be a curiosity. I picked that, too, plus decaf coffee.

Just salt, pepper and hot sauce are on the brown formica table. There's no napkin container — a smart move, I figure. The clientele is mostly black and white single pensioners, welfare recipients from SROs, some neighborhood workers. Street people with dicey behavior come and go, too. Who would take a napkin container?

It's fairly quiet. Many single men sit alone eating. Maybe 1 in 4 has a cane or walker or battery-operated wheelchair. Only two women are seated at tables. One is a waitress on her lunch break. The other is a regular who orders a chocolate shake to go.

Four minutes later, the waitress brings my soup with three packets of crackers. The soup is hot, thick with pieces of potato and celery, a little bland, but salt helps.

As people pass the cash register to leave, head waitress Mimi Yee, co-owner with her husband, John, who runs the kitchen, never fails to say goodbye. She calls them by their first name and wishes them a good day. If she doesn't, another nearby waitress does. The customers answer back.

Everybody knows Mimi. In September, the neighborhood's Tenant Associations Coalition gave her its Unsung Hero award for having good food and maintaining a pleasant atmosphere.

The main course arrives, hugely filling the plate, suitable for a recruit in basic training. The waitress leaves a serrated knife, a likely sign of the struggle to come.

The mound of potatoes has a good texture — with a few lumps which I like as assurance it was made from scratch — and the brown gravy the cook makes is passable. The canned corn is a generous helping. And the four thick strips of corned beef over boiled cabbage is fork-tender, fairly tasty and neither too fatty nor salty. I've had tougher and less of it at \$19.

A workman in blue uniform arrives for takeout. Another woman comes in. People at the counter talk among themselves and to the waitresses.

Mimi comes to my table, my third waitress in 15 minutes. She recommends the custard over the ice cream and I go with it.

"Whipped cream on it?"

"Sure."

She takes the coffee cup and returns it filled, along with the white-capped dessert. The coffee goes down okay. The custard is a thick, dull-yellow rectangle, and not bad tasting as a poor but respectable cousin to flan.

On the wall, signs announce Pie! \$1.95 a slice, with ice cream \$2.95, and T-bone steak with the usual extras for \$11.95, the most expensive meal on the menu. Tables empty and get reoccupied with a steady flow of customers who always find a seat.

"That was fast," a smiling man two tables away says to the waitress who brings his lunch.

"Hi, my friend," Mimi says to a man lingering at the cash register to chat with a man on a counter stool. "Thank you," she yells after someone. "Have a good day — get some rest!"

The bill is \$6.25. I leave \$7.50. When I ask a waitress for a receipt, she hands me back the bill.

MIMI Yee came here from China in 1982. Her husband John, whose parents were already here, preceded her. She was 23. They left a very simple life, but weren't poor, in a city bigger than San Francisco outside of Hong Kong.

"Everybody was the same," she says. She learned a little English in school. After high school, she worked in a clock factory. There was no pressure. Things were manageable. They went to movies on weekends and relaxed.

Arriving in the United States was a shock. "Here we were like newborn baby," she says.

She got a waitressing job at the Bashful Bull restaurant on Noriega near 19th Avenue. The customers were nice people who worked at museums, schools and hospitals, she says. John worked hard at various Chinese restaurants.

Their daughter was born here. With no time for school for herself, Mimi learned more English from customers and her daughter. Her daughter thinks what she sees and reads now about China is the way it is. Not so, Mimi tells her. "We thought Americans were what we saw in movies," Mimi says, "very nice and beautiful, not people standing around asking for money."

But that was one of many jarring revelations to come.

After 10 years at the Bashful Bull someone told Mimi about an opportunity. The owner for 25 years of Manor House restaurant downtown wanted to sell because his wife was terminally ill. Mimi and John took a look.

The place had been empty for eight months and was filthy. Mimi didn't know how they did business. But she and John made the gutsy leap and signed their lives away to get the Tenderloin restaurant. Three people worked a week to clean it up. She figured the neighborhood might be a little rough, but she couldn't have imagined what it turned out to be like.

She wanted to quit after the first month, and 12 years later still can't find the words to describe the dimension of the ordeal.

"It's hard to explain how hard it was in the beginning," she said. "I didn't know how to handle these people. They don't know me and they give me hard time. I didn't know about the things they did — why do they do these things? I was very scared. I wanted to quit. But I couldn't."

Her section of the Tenderloin in the mid-'90s was the equal of any skid row. Customers were rude and threatening. The few friendly ones couldn't make up for the many abuses. Customers left without paying. Many demanded credit, which she gave and, consequently, lost a lot of money.

One day, drug dealers blocked her door and she couldn't get past them to open. She called the police four times that day. Some customers, she recalls, put their drug paraphernalia on the table and said it was part of their medicine. She didn't know any better. Customers mysteriously disappeared for long periods in the bathroom.

"I learned later why people were in the bathroom so long. Before, I never knew. I never thought about it."

One day, while cleaning a table, she realized nothing was on it. Everything had been stolen. Losing five pairs of salt and pepper shakers a day then was average.

"I lost money the first year," she said. "I knew it would be rough, but not this rough. I had no experience. The second year was a little better. Customers complained, but they'd come back."

"I don't know how I made it and paid all the bills. It's not easy to survive in San Francisco."

The neighborhood frightened customers from the Bashful Bull who came by to visit.

"Oh, Mimi," they'd say, "why did you do this?" On a recent trip to the Bashful Bull, where prices are notably higher, this reporter found that she's remembered fondly.

Mimi has a handsome, wide face and dark eyes that look directly, innocently, without judgment. She speaks calmly, with little inflection. When she's moved to smile, she lights up the restaurant.

Her ability to deal squarely with people to earn their trust and confidence is as key to the restaurant's success as two major developments in the neighborhood in 2000. That October, the Tenderloin Police Station opened, and in December, TNDC bought the Antonia Manor.

Drug dealing outside dried up — Mimi could "feel" the difference — and TNDC's hotel renovation included the restaurant. When it reopened four years ago after being closed eight months, it sparkled. It was lean and functional and cheery. Old customers gleefully announced in neighborhood meetings that Manor House was back. They returned in force, and as the word spread, even "better" customers started showing up.

Part of Mimi's self-education was learning the difference between customers' personalities in the Sunset and those in the Tenderloin, and how to adapt.

As she speaks, a glassy-eyed young woman eating alone at a table behind her yells, "I'm going to the bathroom when I finish. And nobody's gonna stop me!" A young man across the room taunts back, "I can go to the bathroom any time."

Apparently, the woman's waitress told her the bathroom was being used and she couldn't get in. Mimi turned at once and assured the woman she could go to a second bathroom anytime and asked her to keep the noise down.

"You got to learn to say no sometimes," Mimi says. "You can't be too nice to certain people. They'll push you two steps back."

"But everything has changed. Now the people know me. I do business. I don't give them hard time. But anything happen, I pick up the phone and call police."

"They respect me. I respect them. Very important. I used to get mad. It's no use. You hurt yourself."

She no longer gets stiffed now for extending credit. She has a "pay ahead" policy. She arranged for case workers to send more than 20 clients' checks to her at the beginning of every month for clients who request it. Mimi meticulously keeps their bank tabs, going over the balance with the customer at every visit, even advising economic shortcuts that will keep them solvent through a month of dining at Manor House.

She still works 60-plus hours a week, shopping for deals in her off hours with her husband at Costco, Restaurant Depot and Cash & Carry. Every day, he peels 30 pounds of potatoes and makes mashed potatoes, potato salad and American fries, but they buy the French fries out.

There is no time for recreation. She's tired at the end of the day. She's 47, John is 58. Her idea of having a good time is sitting down to listen to the older customers' life stories. Otherwise, she remains cautious, ready, alert.

When customers ask how it's going, her pat answer is "so far, so good — because you never know from one moment to the next."

Things are better than ever, though, she says. She and John talk about what the neighborhood changes will bring, the new Salvation Army and St. Anthony buildings, for example. It'll be more and better business, she thinks, and hopefully the right kind of customers.

"Customers are like friends. Feelings all have changed. A lot of regulars don't have kitchens and treat it like home. They say it's like a community room here. I know the feeling."



ON a Tuesday in June, I slip into a seat at 10:15 a.m. The place is two-thirds full.

Service is a little slower today for no reason. At a table behind me a fat man belches rapidly three times and an amused man and a woman nearby turn to him. The smiling man nods and says, "That means it's good, it's good." The couple resume their own breakfasts.

You can get two eggs any style, potatoes or rice and toast for \$2.95. But I ask Mimi what's the most popular breakfast. She says biscuits and gravy or grits and eggs, because people say they usually can't get them at other places. Both are \$3.50.

I choose biscuits with scrambled eggs and sausage. Adding decaf coffee pushes the bill to \$4.65, and I get ice water in a plastic glass with a straw and coffee refills.

When it arrives, the eggs are a good color and tasty, the sausage is good quality, and half the plate has a thick, gray gravy swimming over two floury biscuits. The gravy appears flecked with ground beef, redolent of mess-hall SOS. The taste is passable. And this is a load to last four hours.

At the register two men in painter's clothes pay and leave, and Mimi explains figures on a notepad to a woman and tells her how much meal money she has left.

The clean white walls and pale aqua south wall, and the red spin stools at the counter keep the place from being dingy yet give it an old-timey feeling. Mimi put children's drawings from a City Hall art project, on a back wall. "Customers need to know what kids are doing," she says.

More women are in today. "May, May!" a lady calls to a waitress who comes over to her table immediately. A woman and her daughter slip into counter seats. And it seems a ground rule that when a customer sneezes, the nearest waitress does the blessing.

A man comes in, uncertain if he's going to stay, eyes darting, saying to no one in particular that he wants to sell his hat for \$2 and buy some crack.

At the counter, LeAuthy Carpenter has just ordered a \$1.75 bowl of oatmeal. When it arrives, he'll douse it with brown sugar. He's lived in the neighborhood since 1979 and has a disability. Right now he's in a shelter, waiting

for an SRO room. He seems happy and younger than his 46 years. Carpenter says he gives half his SSI check to Mimi every month. He eats here twice a day, every day, having chicken and turkey at least four times a week.

"I run a tab," he says. "It's easier that way. I always have a place to eat."

It was 10 years ago on the street that a stranger leaving the restaurant with fish and chips told Carpenter how good they were. So Lee, as his friends call him, walked in and basically never left.

"I love the place," Carpenter says. "They treat us like family. They won't beat you out of your money. It's a place you can trust, and it's so cheap you can afford it."

He pauses to order hot water and lemon for tea.

"They were closed for remodeling eight months," he says. "I came right back. Nothing here compares with it. It's the best restaurant in the country."

At a table behind him an old blind woman with her cane is helped into a seat by a young woman. A waitress comes to the old woman's side and gets introduced as Mimi. But no, the waitress says, she's not Mimi. The old woman gruffly yells, "Mimi, Mimi get over here!" Mimi appears and slips her hand into the old woman's.

With her other hand the old woman gives Mimi a large shopping bag. "Here," she says, "these cookies are for you." Mimi thanks her profusely. The old lady launches into rapid-fire queries about Mimi's family, calling everyone by name. She seems happy then, and announces she's having coffee — "I never eat anything and I say whatever I want" — and is treating her new assistant to breakfast. She lifts her skirt hem to get a folded brown napkin out of her stocking. "Here," she says, handing it to Mimi.

Mimi unfolds it and finds money. "I'm taking a five and a one," Mimi says and hands the packet back. The old woman returns it to her stocking.

Afterward, Mimi says the old woman comes in almost every day and only has coffee.

"She's grouchy if you don't know her," Mimi says. "She's nice. But you have to let her know you."

That's how it works at Manor House. ■

The Manor House's cook and co-owner, John Yee, is even more the unsung hero than his wife, Mimi. His touch keeps customers coming back and the restaurant's ratings rising.



PHOTOS BY LENNY LIMJOCO