

Savory S.F. food and goodwill

*Ex-cons, addicts
run restaurant*

By Mim Swartz
Special to The Denver Post

San Francisco – Since the 1849 Gold Rush, food has mattered in this city, where traipsing the hilly streets and breathing the bay's salt air, not to mention soaking up the seductive smell of just-baked sourdough bread everywhere, can work up a person's appetite.

Regularly named among the top dining cities in America – San Francisco enjoys a healthy rivalry for that honor with New York – this food-trendy city of 776,000 boasts an estimated 3,000 restaurants.

So how does a visitor know where to eat, other than settling for walk-away seafood cocktails at touristy Fisherman's Warf or trying for big-name establishments with hard-to-get reservations and Nob Hill prices?

Unless you're with a local, you probably wouldn't know about the popular Delancey Street Restaurant, a 185-seat eatery along the Embarcadero in South Beach.

Billed as "an ethnic American bistro," it serves very good down-to-earth food at great prices. It also has an upscale (but not too) atmosphere with wood, brass and copper décor and linen-covered tables with fresh flowers, a wall of windows with limited waterfront views and a bar that serves beer and wine.

The noise level makes chatting easy, and the views of the Bay Bridge from the glassed-in patio are eye-popping. The convenient location on the Municipal Railway N line, two blocks from SBC Park (home of baseball's Giant's), makes the inexpensive (for San Francisco) valet parking (\$4) even more of a surprise.

And unless you knew the restaurant's background, you never would guess its clean-cut waiters, busboys and chefs with such sweet, fresh-scrubbed faces are all ex-convicts, former drug addicts or alcoholics trying to turn their lives around.



Workers at San Francisco's inexpensive Delancey Street Restaurant get food training and a chance to turn their lives around.

The restaurant serves lunch and dinner daily except Monday and brunch on the weekends. All money from the meals and tips (valet parking too) goes back into the Delancey Street Foundation, which, with no government funding, helps those who have hit bottom climb up by teaching them three marketable skills. Five hundred residents live in apartments above the restaurant in a sprawling, four-story stucco building the foundation built. Residents must stay two years, although the average stay is four.

The foundation's name comes from the street on New York's Lower East Side, where European immigrants settled after coming to America in the early 1900s to start their new lives. (Among other enterprises the foundation operates in San Francisco are a café-bookstore, a moving company, a car service for executives coming to town and a Christmas tree lot. It also has operations in four other locations, including the San Juan Pueblo in northern New Mexico, where foundation residents make Southwestern style furniture and pottery sold by mail order nationwide.)

And while some say the food tastes even better when

you know you're helping a good cause, the Delancey Street Restaurant can stand on its own cuisine-wise.

"Just the fact in such a foodie town that the restaurant is still thriving says something about our place," says Stephanie Muller, a one-time "junkie in the gutter" and now assistant manager who helped open the restaurant 14 years ago.

"It's just been the best for us and for all the people," Muller adds. "We've graduated hundreds of people who have gone into the restaurant industry because of their training here."

Lunch items run from \$3.95 for a hot dog to \$7.95 for a grilled Ahi tuna sandwich, and they also cook up items such as half of a spit-roasted rosemary and garlic chicken (a favorite among regulars) for \$8.50 and six heart-healthy spa specials (under 500 calories) for \$10.50-\$11.75.

Dinners range from \$9.50 for the spit-roasted chicken, to \$10.95 for rotisserie beef au jus, Serious Soul Food Gumbo or slow braised lamb shank, to \$13.95 for grilled rack of lamb or bourbon-glazed rib eye steak.

Several San Francisco restaurant, including Wolfgang Puck's Postrio, Roti, Allegro and Tommy Toy's Cuisine

Chinoise, initially help train cooks, waiters and maitre d's.

Service is exceptionally friendly – waiters undoubtedly learn to shed their attitude when they enter the foundation program – and smooth, except where there are kitchen glitches, such as running out of whipped cream and having to mix up a new batch for the signature Herbie's Corner Drug Store Hot Fudge Sundae.

One waiter, a 30-year-old Taryn Washington, who came to Delancey Street after serving 10 years on a drug-related kidnapping and robbery charge, first bussed tables when he got involved with the restaurant. Now he works half the time in the kitchen learning about the food and the other half as a waiter.

"I kind of get the whole restaurant in one week," he says.

The foundation operates on a trimester system, and residents get to ask for the jobs they want to do each period.

"Besides being modeled after a crazy, extended family, we're modeled after a university," Muller says. We kind of look at ourself like Harvard. But, where they take the top 2 percent of the people they interview, we take the bottom 2 percent."

The details

Delancey Street Restaurant, 600 Embarcadero (at Brannan Street), San Francisco. Reservation suggested, 415-512-5179. Open 11am to 3pm, 5:30 to 11pm Tuesday-Friday; 10am to 3pm, 5:30 to 11pm Saturday – Sunday (except when the Giant's have a home game at nearby SBC Park). Limited menu 3-5pm Tuesday – Sunday.