

## THE INSIDE SCOOP

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### **Chefs work year round to feed those in need Haight program also teaches cooking**

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[GraceAnn Walden](#)

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It's never too late to begin a new tradition, especially during the holiday season. This column generally revolves around the Bay Area's celebrity chefs, trends in the food industry and restaurant openings and closings, both lavish and mundane, but today the spotlight turns to chefs who are dedicated to helping those less fortunate.

In San Francisco, the estimable Mary Risley and her Food Runners scour the restaurant landscape for leftover food donations. Almost every county has a similar organization. Although it is well and good to gather food, at the receiving end someone has to turn the donations into something edible.

At Glide Memorial Church, head cook Carl Mosley and his team, supplemented by volunteers, feed up to 3,000 people daily. Nearby at St. Anthony's Foundation dining room, food operations coordinator Mike Kearney and his crew prepare 2,000 meals a day. At the South of Market

institution Martin de Porres House of Hospitality, a team of volunteers, some of whom have volunteered since the beginning, makes breakfast and soup most days.

Then there's the Haight Ashbury Food Program where the Chinese proverb, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day. Teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime," might well be the perfect motto.

It's the place where chef Dan Vegas, of Puerto Rican-Hawaiian heritage and San Francisco-born, not only oversees the program, but teaches some of the neediest clients how to cook.

Vegas, 61, graduated from City College of San Francisco's Hotel & Restaurant Hospitality program in 1962. In his decades in the food industry, he's worked for frozen food companies, hotels, an airline and as a cook on a submarine in the Vietnam War era.

He is one of just six paid employees of the program. He was waiting for a full-time job at CCSF when this job came up, but you get the feeling that he could never leave.

Every 12 weeks, he takes about a dozen low-income people into his cooks' training program. They come through referrals from the San Francisco Social Services Department, St. Anthony's residential

drug and alcohol rehabilitation program, or simply off the street. They must apply and meet certain guidelines. Vegas says he has an 85 percent success rate, with his grads getting jobs as prep and pantry cooks and dishwashers, in restaurants, nursing homes and other institutions.

Tuesdays through Fridays, his fledgling cooks, with the help of volunteers, cook multicourse meat and vegetarian menus.

On a recent Tuesday, the crew was preparing 20 gallons of a chicken noodle-vegetable soup and 12 gallons of a vegetarian soup. With the chicken that driver and assistant chef David Gensey had picked up at the San Francisco Food Bank, Vegas was showing the students how to make chicken cacciatore.

The kitchen, in the basement of United Methodist Church, which houses the food program, is a beehive of activity, with cooks fluffing cooked rice, stirring and seasoning soup and getting ingredients ready to cook. Everywhere in the cramped kitchen, a place more suited to four cooks than 13, there is hotel pan after hotel pan of minced, diced and cut vegetables: onion, mushroom, carrots, eggplant and celery. The program feeds anywhere from 300 to 700 people.

"Sometimes, I look outside and if the

line is very long, we start prepping more food," Vegas says.

At the end of the counter, 46-year-old Alfredo Newton, who learned about the program through his caseworker, cuts spaghetti. Vegas gently shows him a trick to make it all the correct length. Newton says he's like to be a chef some day.

In another part of the kitchen, 43-year-old Anthony Henderson, a large, bearded bear of a man, is this week's student chef. Each week, Vegas appoints a "boss" to teach them how to supervise others.

Henderson, whose goal is to cook in the Merchant Marine Academy, says, "I've learned a lot in this program, especially self-discipline."

Just about everyone who works for the food program is a graduate of the cooking class. Food service director Judy Woods was in the first class, and before that was a homeless drug addict. "This program saved my life," she says.

Gensey, the driver, was also in the first class. Before that, "I was a cocaine addict for 30 years," he says.

Robert Nious, 41, was homeless and incarcerated before he came to this program. "I'd like to go on to the City College program," he says, "but I'll have to come up with the tuition."

Maggie Hoang, a 30-year-old single mother of a 21-month-old child, is Chinese-Vietnamese and lives with her family. After getting her certificate of completion, she would like to enroll in the Bread Project in South San Francisco, where she can learn how to bake everything from pastries to bread. The Haight Ashbury and Bread Project collaborate, says Devra Edelman, executive director of the Haight Ashbury program.

Wendy Wood, a 41-year-old petite woman with sandy blonde hair, has just graduated from the Bread Project and is also an alum of the Haight Ashbury program. Now she volunteers. Her wish? To go back to school and study childhood obesity.

At noon, the cooks and Vegas leave for the John Adams School campus of CCSF for an hour-long class. Here they will work toward their ServSave certificate, a federally-mandated program that means they have learned the principles of sanitation. They also learn menu planning and some nutrition.

"This program doesn't end after 12 weeks -- the door is always open if someone wants to come back," Vegas says.

What about Vegas' wish list?

"I'd love to have a steadier supply of

protein and fresh vegetables -- as much fresh food as I can get. Oh, and a bigger facility, would be nice."

Santa, are you listening?

If anyone else is, here's where to help: Haight Ashbury Food Program, 1525 Waller St., San Francisco 94117; (415) 503-4480. Web site: [www.thefoodprogram.org](http://www.thefoodprogram.org).

*GraceAnn Walden is a Chronicle staff writer. Read her "Cook's Night Out" column each Sunday in the Pink section. E-mail her at [gawalden@sfchronicle.com](mailto:gawalden@sfchronicle.com).*