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A Neighborhood Stages a Culinary Comeback

By TARA DUGGAN

In the small hilltop neighborhood of Bernal Heights on the southeastern side of San Francisco, you can see the makings of an edible renaissance.

It doesn't have the cutting-edge restaurant scene of the Mission District or the tourist pull of the Ferry Plaza. But an influx of innovative food companies, embraced by a community with a fervor for locally grown businesses and food, has turned the neighborhood into something that would have been unthinkable a few years ago: an epicurean destination.

Alyson Jacks moved to Bernal Heights 20 years ago when the neighborhood was best known for its drug trade; the commercial strip, Cortland Avenue, had only a handful of unremarkable restaurants and liquor stores.

"In my time living here it's been an extraordinary transformation," said Ms. Jacks, wearing a black sweatshirt with "Bernal Heights" in gold letters. "I don't have to get in my car to get anything."

Local residents trace its initial revival in the early 1990s to the opening of Good Life Grocery, a midsize market, and Liberty Cafe, which later drew a following for its upscale twist on chicken potpie. After young families, attracted to the neighborhood's tiny Victorian homes and narrow, walkable streets, created a real estate boom a few years ago, others built on the culinary foundation that had helped spark the turnaround.

The latest batch of food businesses focus on handmade products. Last month, an indoor marketplace at 331 Cortland Avenue opened with six kiosks inside 1,000 square feet. At Bernal Cutlery, Josh Donald slowly sharpens knives with Japanese whetstones behind an ornately carved wooden counter. Paulie's Pickling sells East Coast-style deli sandwiches from a space barely larger than a pickle crock. Ichi Lucky Cat Deli offers fish and prepared sushi rolls. El Porteño Empanadas fills beef empanadas with meat from Prather Ranch and sweet ones with

banana and dulce de leche. There's also an organic produce stand and Wholesome Bakery, which sells [vegan](#) and gluten-free sweets.

The owner of the building, Debra Resnik, was inspired to create the market while volunteering at La Cocina, a San Francisco nonprofit organization that supports food entrepreneurs. The vendors previously had street food stands or worked in catering, and Most of the vendors live within blocks of the market.

“I love that it's all artisan food, and I love supporting local people that we live around,” said Joey Bennett, who has lived in the neighborhood for eight years and brings her young children to the marketplace.

Another draw has been Sandbox Bakery, which Mutsumi Takehara, a former Slanted Door pastry chef, opened in December on the opposite end of Cortland Avenue, bringing refined French pastries and Japanese-style buns to a quiet stretch of the street. Ms. Takehara, originally from Osaka, Japan, first came to the Bay Area to work at Chez Panisse and now lives in an apartment above the bakery with her two young sons.

She had some trepidation about the location.

“I was definitely concerned about the foot traffic because no one who didn't live in Bernal Heights would come to the neighborhood,” Ms. Takehara said. But she said that lately she has noticed more customers coming from other parts of town.

She now sells 800 to 1,000 pastries a day. The favorite is negi-miso, a delicately sweet and savory challah-like bun twisted with white sesame seed, green onion and miso paste.

Another business that attracts people from outside Bernal Heights is Avedano's, a butcher shop that opened in 2007 in a historic meat market. Avedano's porchetta, a rosemary-perfumed pork shoulder and belly roast, is sold by the slice to be reheated at home.

The butchers — including one of the store's owners, Tia Harrison, who is also a chef and owner at the restaurant Sociale — cut the meat by hand from whole animals, including grass-fed beef and lamb. Its butchery classes are sold out through September.

The classes are one way that local residents, who often see one another while shopping at the Alemany Farmers' Market at the foot of the hill, have gotten more involved in the food scene.

A new initiative called Bernal Bucks encourages residents to spend money in the neighborhood. When people make a donation to certain community causes, they receive

stickers that they can place on \$5 or \$10 bills that they pledge to use in the neighborhood in return for rewards and discounts from local businesses.

In front of the gift store Heartfelt, gardeners can drop off extra fruit or herbs in a red vintage wagon as part of the produce exchange called Fruits of the Hill.

“Sometimes people leave a jar of jam,” said Heartfelt’s owner, Darcy Lee, who plans to open a modern tea shop on Cortland Avenue.

Ms. Jacks, the longtime resident, said she was happy about all the new food businesses opening near her home, but she would like to see more of a balance in the services the neighborhood offers.

“I wish there was a post office,” she said.