

Next time you're on Polk Street, give The Bell Tower a ring...

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In her novel *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong encapsulates the experience of living in Los Angeles, explaining that you fall asleep by the pool one day, and when you wake up, it's ten years later.

It's that level of relaxation that comes to mind on any given afternoon at The Bell Tower Bar and Restaurant on Jackson and Polk Streets. Situated along an otherwise bustling commercial corridor, The Bell Tower functions like an open-air version of *Cheers*, the Boston establishment of TV fame, but with a much younger feel and a menu that draws patrons from far beyond the Polk Gulch.

Owned and operated by Barbi Tice and Lou Vittes, the business started in 1993 when the two converted an old Photomat store. That was no easy feat, Tice points out, her voice slightly strained from reliving the memory of 13 years past. But the renovation paid off, and this roomy, unpretentious interior nowadays appears natural as daylight.

There's a sturdy bar counter with all the trimmings of the



The official greeter at the Bell Tower.



trade. Paneled glass windows facing either side of a busy street corner slide open to let in the capacious air on sunny days.

Barbi, by the way, doesn't just own the place. You'll find her dressed in jeans and a leather apron, taking orders, bussing tables, and refilling the water bowl of the official house greeter, Ashka. Not much of a talker, Ashka is a full mastiff who might easily double as the bar bouncer. Most of the time, you'll find her sprawled out alongside the fire hydrant on the corner, taking a siesta.

Next to the hydrant is the wooden bus bench for the little-used 27-line stop, which tends to accommodate Barbi's overflow crowd most afternoons, when the restaurant starts filling up.

In case you're new in town, here's the scoop on Polk Street: It's one of San Francisco's more path-beaten commercial corridors, stretching all the way from

City Hall to Ghirardelli Square. The blocks extending between Post and Broadway are commonly known as the Polk Gulch, and include quite a few watering holes, both straight and gay. You'll also uncover authentic cuisine from many parts of the world; the legendary Lumiere Theatre just up the street on California; and, if you can believe it, only one Starbucks.

The Bell Tower serves a savory, substantial menu of food all the way till midnight. Some of its more frequently ordered dishes include the Portobello and roasted red bell pepper sandwich, the "fire-roasted" quesadilla (with tomatillo sauce and chipotle aioli), the barbecue pork sandwich, and a fish and chips plate, though they recently replaced their potato wedges with regular French fries. There are also four selections of gourmet pizza. (The small size costs less than \$7).

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Dinner entrees are available until 10 p.m. Some of the more popular are the shrimp cakes, the pan roasted fish of the day (which comes with gnocchi in a sun-dried tomato pesto), bar-beque pork ribs and Cobb salad.

There's also roasted duck, stuffed chicken breast and a few other meat dishes, most of which cost well under \$20. There's a wine list and friendly servers who let you sample wares before plunking down your money.

In short, The Bell Tower is affordable. The service is great. It only gets loud and a little bodacious in the evening, and you can sit there for hours and forget there's such a thing as a clock.

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