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Food Festival in Chinatown Draws Thousands, but Chilly Rain Forces Early Closing

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It was the Year of the Brrrrrr yesterday for a sidewalk food festival offering Asian *bonne bouches* at discount prices. Despite an unseasonable drizzle and chill, thousands of fans of dim sum crowded nine blocks of Chinatown that were closed off from traffic.

Known as Taste of Chinatown, the festival was the latest attempt to lift the lagging restaurant business in one of the world's largest Chinese districts, where gentrification, scant parking and the Sept. 11, 2001, destruction of the nearby World Trade Center have combined to drag down the neighborhood's economy.

"It's a little crazy, but fun," said Julie Dahl, 26, a legal assistant living in Greenwich Village, who brought along two friends to sample dim sum, a Cantonese phrase that has been translated as "little heart" or "heart's delight," or just appetizer.

Emily Pecot, 26, a film script supervisor who lives in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, stood in line for a half-hour for an especially popular table at Peking Duck House. After she finished a dumpling, Ms. Pecot said, "You can spend, I don't know, \$50, if you wanted, for Peking duck and this way you only have to spend \$2."

But John Traugott, 68, a hospital chaplain in Rockaway Park, Queens hinted at some of Chinatown's problems. He said that even though he and his wife, who is Taiwanese, come to Chinatown once every two weeks, they go more often to Chinese restaurants and stores in Flushing, Queens.

"It's a little closer and there's usually free parking," he said. "That's very hard to do here in Chinatown. We're going to spend \$25 for 3 hours of parking today."

Like other neighborhoods in Manhattan, where real estate values have soared in recent years, parking lots, garages, and street parking have turned scarce as residential developments replace them, Chinatown community advocates say.

Moreover, nearby Wall Street has become more residential, putting added pressure on parking and removing customers from Chinatown businesses since a growing number of Wall Street residents work far away from Chinatown.

But what might have taken years or even decades to hurt Chinatown accelerated into a single moment when the World Trade Center was destroyed. So, like salt in food, the center's financial support for the neighborhood economy was only noticed when it was gone.

Bonnie Wong, president of Asian Women in Business and the principal organizer of Taste of Chinatown, said: "Chinatown jewelers lost 25 percent of their business, just like that, because customers, mostly men, could walk to Chinatown to shop. They couldn't walk to the Diamond District," more than three miles to the north.

The three sectors hit worst by the 9/11 recession — restaurants, jewelers and gift shops — were all small businesses unaccustomed to working together, Ms. Wong said.

Festivals, like Taste of Chinatown, are designed not only to educate consumers in adding more restaurants to their list of Chinatown favorites, but also to educate the restaurant owners themselves, who may never have cooperated with businesses next door to them or considered opening longer hours to accommodate customers.

Fifty-one restaurants in the heart of Chinatown — Mott, Mulberry, Bayard and Pell Streets — banded together for the festival, which was also sponsored by Multicultural Radio Broadcasting of New York, NBC television and The New York Times.

Nine of the group are rated 20 or higher in the Zagat Survey for the quality of the food. (The "21" Club is rated 22).

Most of the restaurants and bakeries lose money when they offer dishes like Peking duck crepes for \$2 each, or green soy pea cooked in wine, roast pork buns, or sticky wild rice sie mai for \$1 each.

Yesterday's festival was the fourth such event since October 2004, when it attracted only a few thousand eaters, Ms. Wong said. Last April, however, an estimated 35,000 crowded Chinatown for five hours.

Yesterday, after the festival opened at 1 p.m., the rain dampened the crowds around 3:30 p.m., and many restaurants pulled in their tables.

Most of the crowd was Asian, meaning the number of new customers may have been limited. Ms. Wong said that many visitors find it hard to believe that Chinatown is in a recession because the sidewalks are so crowded with tourists. But that is on the weekends; businesses suffer on the weekdays, she said.

What Chinatown needs, Ms. Wong said, is not only tourists from Arkansas and Italy, but regular customers from New York, New Jersey and Connecticut.

To help with that, the next project for her group and other community advocates is a nighttime Taste of Chinatown, only this time for jewelers and gift shops. No word yet on whether wind chimes will cost \$1.