

Pacific Garden
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Bill Lovejoy/Sentinel

Pacific Garden Mall food vendor Elizabeth Tarkington says most of her customers consume their purchases on the run.

Street eats

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STROLLING along a tree-lined avenue, eating a simple lunch purchased from a street vendor, seems a cosmopolitan thing to do. You can experience it in most cities of the world and Santa Cruz is no exception.

Elizabeth Tarkington serves up five varieties of hot dogs, pretzels, bagels and a few other offerings from an old-fashioned rolling cart set up on the Pacific Garden Mall. A couple of blocks down, another cart offers similar wares.

"It's faster than 'fast food,' Tarkington says. "It's very cheap, and very fast. People can stand up to eat — very few sit down — most keep going."

Lots of people, including lonely-appearing elderly ladies, seem to find buying and eating "street food" a sociable thing to do, the vendor says. "Some of them will ask to sit on the extra stool — and if there's a break, I'll talk to them."

There are lots of regulars, she says, especially coffee regulars, who come three times a day.

"One guy gets a bagel dog with cheese every single day," she adds.

It may look casual, but street vending is serious business. Licensing is necessary, and an inspector arrives on the scene about once a month.

"The owners (Carlton Hegi and Emory Davidson) insist that the cart must be kept immaculate," Tarkington says. "I clean it all day long, whenever there's a break."

It's not always easy to turn down the inevitable "beggars" who ask Tarkington for free food about "every other day."

"I'm pretty cut and dried — I tell them, 'This is a business and I can't do that,' though I might feel sorry for them, sometimes."

The cart is open every day, all the year around, and Tarkington says business is better than last year. If it rains, "we

put up an umbrella and sell food."

Tarkington likes her job and wants to keep at it for a long time.

"People are the most interesting thing there is," she says. "I like people."

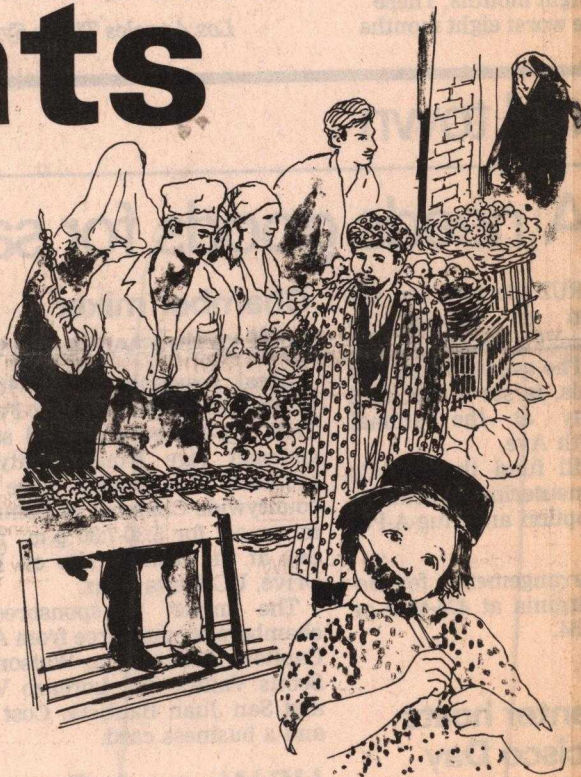


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