

Polk Gulch/Civic Center Neighborhood Guide

Bruce Townley

The Holiday Inn on Van Ness in San Francisco is in an interesting neighborhood, my neighborhood in fact. One of the things that makes it dynamic is its central location, situated in the interface betwixt so many other parts of town. Van Ness Avenue itself is one of the main traffic and transit arteries of the City and serves as a pipeline for folks trying to get out of town, across town, or just a few blocks. There are three San Francisco Municipal Railway bus lines on Van Ness. (Everybody really just calls it Muni as in: "A truck on Sacramento making a delivery to that noodle factory there held me up on Muni this morning for almost HALF AN HOUR!") The #42 Downtown Loop, the #47 Van Ness, and the #49 Van Ness/Mission all travel the length of Van Ness. On Polk Street, a block east and parallel to Van Ness, runs the #19 Polk bus which is more or less parallel to the Van Ness routes. A block to the north of the hotel is the Van Ness terminus of the California Cable Car line, the opposite end of which is on Market Street near the Ferry Building on the Embarcadero. This Cable Car line crosses the Powell Street line which will take you to either Fisherman's Wharf or Union square, depending on which side of Powell you catch the Cable Car. The #1 California Muni Trolley Bus line can be caught nearby (at Sacramento for outbound to the primarily residential Richmond district and at Clay St. to go downtown). Muni provides service from about 6AM to midnight. For \$0.85 you get a transfer on the busses and streetcars that is good for two to three hours or two additional trips (whichever comes first). The Cable Car costs \$2.00. And remember: when standing, HOLD ON.

Susan Shepard's In The Neighborhood states that even before the Great Fire of 1906, Polk Street was a noted commercial strip or shopping area for both Nob and Russian Hills. In fact, in days of yore (whatever that means), it was known as Polk Strasse "for its large population of German merchants." Nowadays Polk Gulch is one of the older Gay areas in the City and falls under the spheres of influence of both the opulent Pacific Heights and Marina districts as well as the turbulent ethnicity of Chinatown. If you find the time during the convention you will doubtless get a kick out of strolling down Polk either south towards the Civic Center (lotta rough edges here) or north towards the tonier Marina. This article admittedly only scratches the surface of an eminently browseable area. If nothing that I have listed in the following guide attracts you, take a look for yourself!

RESTAURANTS

#1

Thai Bar-B-Q:

Inexpensive to Moderate

730 Van Ness (Between Eddy and Turk)

441-1640

Monday-Friday 11:30am-2:30pm & 4:30-9:30pm

Saturday 12:00-3:00pm & 4:30-9:30pm

Sunday 4:30-9:30pm

Yes, it's really spelled that way, apparently even in Bangkok. Thai food and barbecue TOGETHER; pretty much an unbeatable combo. Don't let the High Tech appurtenances put you off, that big old grill that forms the centerpiece for the stainless steel and neon (and, oddly enough, Quasi-Monet Impressionistic paintings) tells you right off where the real action is. Thai food tends to be both somewhat sweet as well as very spicy and peppery all at once which creates an ideal taste environment for barbecue. I have had both the duck noodle and the calamari dishes and can recommend them both highly. Also high marks for the prompt service. **A-**

#2

Little Thai:

Inexpensive

2348 Polk (Near Union)

771-5544

Lunch Monday-Saturday 11:00am-3:00pm

Dinner Daily 5:00-10:00pm

Little Thai but big taste. Since there are at least three different curries listed under each category it's kinda pointless to go into a Thai restaurant expecting pablum. But, like I say, the complexity of the flavoring of Thai cuisine isn't at all a matter of incinerating the palate but more of tickling it with a whole range of seasonings. Little Thai is a very worthy purveyor of this cuisine. **A-**

#3

Aux Delices:

Inexpensive

2327 Polk (Near Union)

285-3196

Monday 5:00-10:00pm

Tuesday-Sunday 11:30am-10:00pm

Patty Peters and Gary Mattingly and myself have taste-tested most of these here restaurants and I would say that the Aux Delices is our personal fave of the ones listed here. The old restaurant radar was pinging at a fabulous rate when I first stepped over the threshold and by golly it was even better than I initially thought. Vietnamese is the main cuisine served here as well as a smattering of French dishes too (hence the name of the place). Vietnamese food is somewhat less peppery than Thai but no less tasty. Make an effort to get to this place. **A**

#4

Tai Chi:

Inexpensive

2031 Polk (Near Broadway)

441-6758

Monday-Saturday 11:30am-10:00pm

Sunday 4:00-10:00pm

I get the feeling when I'm in the Tai Chi that this must be what it's like to be in a restaurant in Beijing, at least a little bit. No fancy decoration or real decor of any kind, atmosphere noisy and hectic (and then it gets crowded) all of which doesn't do that much to distract one from the food which is hearty and very tasty. The fare is Hunan and Szechuan and all served up with an engaging homeyness and lack of ostentation. **A-**

#5

Little Joe's:

Inexpensive-Moderate

1919 Van Ness (At Jackson)

776-4000

Friday & Saturday 8:00am-1:00am

Sunday 8:00am-Midnight

I dunno who all of these Joes are (there are restaurants in SF named "Little" and "Original" and even "Baby Joe's"), but who really cares, huh? I've never gone to this place for breakfast but indeed you can. And I guess you can even get a pizza or linguine with clam sauce at the crack of dawn if such you desire. The food's pretty good here and certainly very filling with a bewildering array of daily specials which include a mammoth seafood stew and even chicken livers (though not in the same dish). Unpretentious and good fun. **B+**

#6

Victor's Pizza:

A Good Deal

1411 Polk (Near Pine)

885-1660

Open weekends 'til 11:30

Also known as Victor's Daughter's to reflect the current ownership. I guess this is a place that concentrates on pizza and certainly does a very find job of it. You can get the other standard Italian specialties too if you're not in the mood for pizza, inexplicable though that turn of events may be. **WARNING:** There is a pizza place a few doors north of Victor's called Steve the Greek's or somesuch, and the place is something of a fraud. No fooling. Yeah, the time I was in there they'd upped the prices and had "forgotten" to change the menu to reflect this. So **WATCH OUT!** **A-**

Steve's gets a C-

#7

Monasteri's:

1725 Polk (Between Clay & Washington)
673-7174

Weekends 11:00am-11:00pm

Moderately high for Pizza,
but worth it.

A little slice of Chicago in the heart of San Francisco. Pizza is deep-dish style, robust and very toothsome. There is also a selection of sandwiches, some of which emerge from the oven piping hot, and others which are of the more familiar submarine or hoagy variety. Friendly service in a somewhat spartan but pleasantly airy space. A-

#8

Swan Oyster Depot:

1517 Polk (Next to See's Candies)
673-1101

Monday-Saturday 8:00am-5:00pm

Inexpensive (mostly under \$10)

OK, I really haven't eaten at this place yet but I walk by it nearly every day after work and, man, the joint is always packed and everybody looks like they are really enjoying themselves. The indispensable Jane & Michael Stern (in their wonderful Roadfood and Goodfood) term Swan's as "one of California's and America's incomparable eating pleasures." A fish market as well as a seafood raw bar it has all of the outward signs of a swell eating experience. Guess I've been a chump for not going. Don't you be one too. Ungraded, but worth checking out

#9

Miz Brown's Country Kitchen:

1356 Polk (At Pine)
771-4221

Monday-Friday 7:00am-Midnight.

Saturday 7:00am-2:30am

Inexpensive

Not nearly as hokey as the name would tend to indicate, Miz Brown's claims to be nothing more than a lunch counter that stays open pretty late. Kind of a Howard Johnson's but with more home-grown appeal. Nothing really special but very amply provides the comfort of filling one's tummy in a comfortable atmosphere and there are hundreds of posh joints that can't even claim to do that. B+
[[editor: good milkshakes!]]

#10

Grub Stake II:

Quite Reasonable

1525 Pine (Between Polk & Van Ness)

673-8268

Sunday-Saturday 7:00am-5:00am

Don't really know the whereabouts of the Grub Stake I, but I haven't lost any sleep over it either. #2 is right in my back yard as it were and it's a swell little place. Rather like Miz Brown's, the menu is limited in the sense that it's lunchcounter fare (breakfast items are served at all hours, along with the more typical burger/sandwich/fries). The Grub Stake is a Polk Gulch institution, at once extremely funky and also very homey. The food is quite filling and substantial. **A-**

#11

Bob's Broiler:

Fairly cheap, but who cares?

Corner of Polk and Sacramento

The one time I was in this place I got something they called "Chicken Fried Steak". What arrived on my plate was this glutinous ovoid that had something of the texture of a Nerf Mini Football, but none of the fun. I guess the mound of damp objects next to the "steak" were french fries but you couldn't prove it by me. Avoid this place with its '50s moderne style signage at all costs. **D-**

#12

Ahern's Bakery:

Very reasonable

1946 Van Ness (At Jackson)

885-5060

Sunday-Saturday 5:30am-8:00pm

Delicious pastries together with steaming, fresh java served up by crisply uniformed waitresses. (I find myself inexorably drawn to the Almond Bearclaws. There are dozens of other choices.) Ahern's is a little sliver of heaven that makes it worth getting up in the morning. Fripperies such as croissants are downtoned for the classic coffee cake and the like which emerged from the ovens on the premises not that long ago. **A**

NON-RESTAURANT BUSINESS

#13

Cala Foods:

Supermarket

Corner of Hyde & California
Open 24 hours

A full service grocery store tucked away in this odd little corner. The exterior is one of the more extreme statements of '50s moderne (kind of a combination of a boomerang and a bow-tie, all very brightly hued in the latest designer colors of 35 years ago) but inside you should quickly find your grocery-related needs.

#14

Big Apple Discount:

Store

Corner of Polk & Clay
Sunday-Saturday 9:00am-10:00pm

Hasn't really made up its mind to be a grocery store (they stock an aromatic array of oriental items), hardware/variety, or a 5 & Dime so it tries to be all of the above and succeeds pretty well.

#15

Jug Shop:

Beer/Wine/Liquor

1567 Jackson
Friday & Saturday 9:00am-9:00pm
Sunday 9:30am-7PM

Seems to me like every time I go into this place there's some yuppie trendoid whining about how he's switched from French to California wines because they're almost as good. Pay these over-paid riffraff no nevermind and head for the beer selection. It's quite impressive for a place that isn't all that huge. Prices are good too. Check it out: a case of Anchor Steam Liberty Ale for under \$20! And the gal at the cash register asks you if you want that chilled! Hum baby!

#16

Walgreen's Drugstore:

Drugstore

1524 Polk
Sunday-Saturday 8:00am-Midnight

A good basic drugstore.

#17

Clean Well-Lighted Place for Books:

Bookstore

Opera Plaza (Turk & Van Ness)
Weekdays 10:00am-11:00pm
Friday & Saturday open 'til Midnight

A very pleasant, well stocked place to browse, don't let the cuteness of the name put you off. Staff is pretty knowledgeable but not stuck up about it. All new books.

#18

Acorn Books:

740 Polk (At Ellis)
Monday-Saturday 10:30am-8:00pm
Sunday Noon-5:00pm

Bookstore

A very enjoyable array of used books including collectibles.

#19

Fantasy Etc.:

808 Larkin
441-7617
Friday & Saturday Noon-7:00pm
Sunday Noon-6:00pm

Bookstore

A smallish place crammed with all kinds of Sci-Fi and Fantasy titles handy to the breathtaking Tenderloin. A San Francisco and an SF tradition.

#20

Paperback Traffic:

California & Polk
Friday & Saturday 10:AM-11:00pm

Bookstore

Not a really huge place but the selection is choice and as the name indicates it is mainly, if not exclusively, softcover. A largish Gay Lit section as well.

#21

Around the World Books & Records:

1346 Polk
474-5568
Friday & Saturday 10:00am-10:00pm
Sunday Noon-8:00pm

Books & Records

#22

Books & Company:

1220 Polk (Near Sutter)
Friday Noon-5:00pm
Saturday & Sunday Noon-6:00pm

Maybe it is somewhat unfair to those running these two shops just to lump together like this, but they are rather similar with their quirky, diverting locales and selections of used books.

#23

Rooks & Records:

2222 Polk (Near Vallejo)
Friday & Saturday 11:00am-10:00pm
Sunday 11:00am-6:00pm

Books & Records

This place has the Gary S. Mattingly Seal of Approval for its wide selection of compact discs. Just like most other places, they are cutting back on LPs but some good buys still lurk here. Solid selection of new and used books.

#24

Bay Area Records & Tapes:

Records

1444 Polk

(NOT the Record Factory, even though that's what the sign says.)

Friday-Sunday 10:00am-10:45PM

The initials spell out BART, the acronym for one of the more frustrating local transit systems, but don't let that bother you. More or less gratifying choice of used records. Worth a look.

#25

Lumiere Cinema:

Repertory Movies

1572 California St.

885-3200

One of San Francisco's finer repertory theatres showing both foreign and the more interesting of the domestic crop of films. (Lynch's Blue Velvet had its San Francisco premiere here, the re-release of The Manchurian Candidate also took place here.) If you like movies you probably should look up this place. Who wants to go to a Sci-Fi con anyway?

Franklin	Van Ness	Polk	Larkin	
				Union
		3 2		Green
			23	Vallejo
		4		Broadway
				Pacific
	5 12		15	Jackson
		7		Washington
			14	Clay
		11		Sacramento
		8 16 25		California
		20		
		<— Hotel 6 9		13
		10	24	Pine
			21	Bush
			22	Sutter
				Post
				Geary
			19	O'Farrell
				Ellis
			18	Eddy
		1		Turk
	17			Golden Gate

Franklin Van Ness Polk Larkin

