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By Norma Meyer

From Hollywood To The Homeless: Nonprofit To Collect Leftovers From Oscars For Free Meals

LOS ANGELES – Hollywood glitterati at tonight's Academy Awards ball will dine on a lavish Wolfgang Puck spread of Oscar-shaped smoked salmon with caviar and delectables made with \$70,000 of imported truffles.



Tomorrow, in a starkly shabbier world, hundreds of homeless will eat the leftovers, just as they have for the past 11 years.

Cuisine from the recent 5,500-guest Grammy Awards party also ended up on Skid Row.

“Thank you, Hollywood!” Melzina Smith, 49, said as she dived into a lunch of miso-poached salmon, Catalan grilled vegetables and seven other epicurean dishes the next day at the Downtown Women's Center.

Actually, Smith has Helen Palit to thank.

On-call 24 hours a day, seven days a week, and with little fanfare, turbo-charged, silver-haired activist Palit and her nonprofit Angel Harvest pick up and immediately distribute unused food from the nonstop and often ostentatious showbiz soirees to 51 soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters and senior programs in Los Angeles.

Perishables that might have been dumped instead have provided free food for nearly 8 million meals since 1995, when Palit founded Angel Harvest.

“It makes you feel extremely special to eat what the movie stars ate,” said Regina Mosley, 51, a Skid Row hotel resident who savored the surprise feast at the women's center.



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The next day, the leftovers fed 2,500 poverty-stricken people, including women at the Downtown Women's Center.

The night before, at the record industry's Asian-themed blowout inside the Convention Center, VIPs such as Justin Timberlake and Beyoncé pecked at limitless buffets while bare-chested, tutu-clad male aerialists performed overhead, diva Chaka Khan sang on stage and mango rum cocktails were handed out at bars sculpted from ice.

The unused cornucopia fed 2,500 poverty-stricken people throughout the city, some on gritty streets where cardboard boxes are home.

In recent months, Palit, who describes herself as the “Robin Hood of Gourmet Food,” has gathered donated leftovers from the People's Choice and Screen Actors Guild awards, the premiere of “The Pursuit of Happyness” and parties with Bunny hostesses at the Playboy mansion.

It doesn't have to be haute cuisine for Palit to dispatch her truck. After Winchell's Donut House whipped up the world's largest apple fritter in a bid to be listed in “Guinness World Records,” Angel Harvest carted off the 5,000-pound pastry for the needy.

“All of us have been to some sort of an event – be it a wedding or a company event or an association event – and seen extra food,” said Palit, who has picked up surplus eats from bar mitzvahs, UCLA dining halls and the 135 parties thrown during the weeklong 2000 Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles. “Nobody wants food to go to waste.”

Palit modeled Angel Harvest after her successful City Harvest, a New York “food rescue” agency she founded in 1982.

Hollywood is a land of excess unto itself, which can mean top-of-the-line victuals for the homeless.

“They've had caviar. Maybe they don't know it's caviar,” Palit said.

CAROL KRON / Copley News Service,
Dancers entertained at the 2007 Grammys
featured Asian, Moroccan, Cuban, Spanish

This year, for Academy Award-winners, elite at the Governors Ball, caterer-to-“Oscar Goes Organic” menu that and risotto with black truffles from

“I would be sick if I would see this great have to make enough. I cannot say, then I have Clint Eastwood come in and And I would say, 'No, I have none.' I'm know where the leftovers are going.”

The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which is putting on tonight's Tuscan-themed extravaganza in a ballroom near the Kodak Theatre, will have Angel Harvest truck off what's left, from sushi to gold-dusted chocolate Oscars, for the 12th year.



in Los Angeles, where buffet stations and Indian foods.

nominees and 1,600 movie-industry the-stars Puck will create an elaborate includes spiny lobster Shanghai style Perigord, France.

food going to waste,” Puck said. “But we 'OK, I ran out of beef at 11 o'clock,' and say, 'Can I have two slices of beef?' happy to make a little more because I

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Before Angel Harvest packs up the gourmet goods, food has to be separated out if it contains poppy seeds or was cooked with alcohol, such as the prime rib of Wellington with port wine reduction from the recent Screen Actors Guild Awards dinner. Poppy seeds can look like opiates in a drug test and not all liquor dissipates from cooked food, Palit said, so nothing made with these items is delivered to centers treating drug abusers or alcoholics.

Angel Harvest never knows what it will get until the truck arrives. The haul from the star-studded Environmental Media Awards included chocolate and strawberry organic milk. Clam chowder and shrimp cocktails were among the 800 pounds of leftovers from "The Pursuit of Happyness" premiere, a movie, ironically, in which Oscar nominee Will Smith plays a homeless father.

Last Christmas, the organization received 6,000 surplus gourmet cakes with names such as Death by Chocolate donated by an upscale baker. Palit recently got 12 cases of fresh fruit and vegetables that were unused props for a commercial.

According to U.S. government statistics, more than 27 percent of food produced for human consumption is tossed each year. That figure makes Palit crazy. She cites a study indicating that about 900,000 men, women and children in California regularly experience hunger.

Palit's passion began with potato skins. She was running a soup kitchen at Yale University in 1981 when she noticed the restaurant across the street discarding the cooked insides of the potatoes after making potato-skin appetizers. Palit asked the chef for the leftovers.

Soon Palit, who had been a truck driver in college and thrives on logistics, was living in New York where she started City Harvest. Her work has inspired more than 200 "neighbor-feeding-neighbor" programs worldwide.



CAROL KRON / Copley News Service

Helen Palit, founder of the nonprofit Angel Harvest who describes herself as the "Robin Hood of Gourmet Food," helped wrap up leftover items after the Grammys celebration.

In 1995, Palit said, she got separate calls from top executives at Capital Cities/ABC and the Walt Disney Co., as well as from songwriter Mike Stoller. All had become concerned about the food waste they saw at entertainment events in Los Angeles.

Palit soon relocated to Southern California and Angel Harvest was born. One of its first pickups was from the premiere of the 1995 Disney movie "Mr. Holland's Opus." Over the years, Palit has tallied 3,900 food donors, including grocers, who regularly or occasionally call her. The edible gifts are tax-deductible.

Branden Chapman, who produces the Grammy telecast and post-party for the National Academy of Recording Arts & Sciences, said the music giant began donating surplus party food to Angel Harvest in the late 1990s at the urging of the gala's longtime caterer, Along Comes Mary. Before that, Chapman said, the academy worked with various hotels to take the food, which usually was thrown out.

"We're very happy to give back to the community," Chapman said.

Near midnight, as this year's Grammy party at the Convention Center wound down, Palit was in the catering kitchen surveying the mountains of 60 leftover menu items. She counted crates of romaine lettuce that never made it into the salad.

"This is just a teeny-tiny bit of what is out there," Palit said.

For the next two hours, Palit, professional truck driver Rick Honnes, his two teenage children and their two friends, all wearing latex gloves, began dumping the leftover food into plastic bags and loading it into a refrigerated truck. By 2 a.m., they were done.

Honnes and crew spent the next six hours delivering the provisions to numerous shelters. Later in the day, Honnes retrieved forgotten desserts to give to the homeless, such as mini ginger cheesecakes topped with candied lavender flowers.

Some of the 40 women at the downtown shelter called the mouthwatering Grammys-provided lunch a "gift" and "a blessing from God." They wanted to know what the glamorous party was like. Was Britney Spears there?

Claire Miller, 28, an Ohio college graduate who fell on hard times and is living at the Union Rescue Mission, cracked up her tablemates as she dug into a piled-high plate.

"Maybe we'll find one of Beyoncé's hairs in here," Miller said with a laugh.