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EDITOR'S PICK

SPOTLIGHT

## Downtown SF alley comes to life for second Bastille Day celebration

By James Salazar | Examiner staff writer

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This year's "Bastille on Belden" block party celebrates The City's French roots while also jumpstarting downtown San Francisco's future.

Courtesy of Downtown SF Partnership

After a three-year hiatus, “Bastille on Belden,” the Belden Place block party celebrating French culture and cuisine, will return for a second year, taking over a narrow alleyway in the heart of downtown.

But this year, the event will not only celebrate The City’s French roots, it’s also laser-focused on jumpstarting downtown San Francisco’s economic and cultural future.

Organizers say “Bastille on Belden” is one example of how The City is reimagining public spaces and drumming up business for an area that has been dependent on office workers, whose presence has largely dried up due to pandemic-era work-from-home trends.

“What we wanted to do is really turn the view back to the restaurants, put the emphasis on the dining and the French cuisine and the French history of that area,” said Melissa Buckminster, Downtown SF’s director of marketing and communications.

During the Gold Rush, Belden Place was known as the French Quarter due to its large settlements of French immigrants who came searching for fortune. But that history is far from obvious in the downtown of today.

“There was nothing going on as far as the French community was celebrating,” said Olivier Azancot, the owner of Cafe Bastille, who threw Belden Place’s first Bastille Day celebration when he opened his doors back in 1990.

Azancot tapped into that history to create an event that drew throngs of customers to his restaurant every July, some who were eager to imbibe during the day.

“It became a bit unwieldy because so many people would come,” said Buckminster. “I’ve heard stories that you could not even walk down Belden because so many people were there.”

The celebration’s evolving scope gradually outgrew the restaurant. Recent editions were moved to the pedestrian alley before the pandemic brought the festivities to an abrupt halt three years ago.

Downtown SF, a community benefit district, stepped in last year to revive the event and connected with Azancot.

New expansion efforts included adding the alley's other restaurateurs into the mix, a move that was met with initial hesitancy as flashbacks of gargantuan crowds in the tiny pocket between Bush and Pine streets were conjured up.

“Being able to sort of elevate that sometimes forgotten history while also supporting these local businesses is something that (our agency) is always all about,” said Buckminster.

According to Azancot, Friday will be Café Bastille restaurant's best day of the year. He will be serving up rosé and a highball spritz, and any two glasses of wine or cocktails will get your table a complimentary plate of mini quiches.

“It's a way to promote restaurants downtown,” said Azancot. “It's a way to say, ‘Okay, we're still here. Something is happening. It's amazing what is going on.’”

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If You Go

**What:** "Bastille on Belden"

**Where:** Belden Place, San Francisco

**When:** Today, 4:30 p.m. to 9:30 p.m.

**Cost:** Free

**James Salazar**

News Producer

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