
Most Popular

risis is hitting the
1 of Silicon Valley
rkers

4. Cruise ship with
coronavirus-infected
passengers and crew

5. Why more people may get
reinfected with COVID as
the BA.2 sub-variant...

6. Film crew robbed at
gunpoint at Twin Pea
S.F. police say

BAY AREA // SAN FRANCISCO

Happy hour 'in a coma' at downtown S.F. bars as workers trickle back to the office



Chase DiFeliciano

March 28, 2022



Happy hour isn't what it was in downtown San Francisco bars before the pandemic, but it's making a slow comeback, including at Sutter Station on Market Street.

Felix Uribe/Special to The Chronicle

A workday winding down and the sun diving lower in the sky has long meant one thing for many thirsty, working San Franciscans: happy hour. That special time between the stress of work and the commute home when a pint and a bar bite offer respite from the day's drudgery, or at least it used to.

Two years of telework and empty offices have meant the disappearance of the 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. golden hours when many watering holes around the city, especially downtown, saw their swiftest sales during the work week. Now with Mayor London Breed encouraging businesses to order workers back to offices a few days a week or more, the ritual is returning — but it's not like it was.

Monday and especially Fridays are seeing less foot traffic downtown, which makes midweek after-work happy hours more likely. Some people still working from home are also choosing neighborhood saloons closer to home rather than venturing to other parts of town.

“Thursday is the new Friday,” said Marc DeVore, a bartender pouring beer for a mostly full bar at Sutter Station Tavern, a quintessential after-work spot that sits on Market Street in the Financial District, an area that used to be flooded with workers, and potential customers.



Bartender Marc DeVore pours a drink for a customer at the Sutter Station bar in San Francisco, where the lack of returning office workers has impacted happy hour crowds.
Felix Uribe/Special to The Chronicle

At 5:30 p.m. on a recent Thursday, the bar had office workers crammed behind tables while the place continued to fill up during the better part of an hour. Though business is still down by about 75% compared to before the pandemic, said longtime owner Barbara Alessi.

Thursdays have also been a recent bright spot for the House of Shields, said Dennis Leary, owner of the wood-paneled pub on New Montgomery Street, near the Financial District.

Happy hour “in terms of a packed bar with after-work people to me is, right now, not dead, but in a coma,” Leary said.

Not having that revenue during the pandemic has been “brutal,” he said. Leary said workers not coming back to offices full-time could make things unsustainable for the business.

Leary said he is seeing more demand for private events and room rentals as conferences start to come back to the city and more people carve out time after work for in-person events. Case in point, his bar had a paper sign reading “Closed for private event” plastered on its windows one recent Wednesday afternoon.



Customers gather at the Sutter Station bar on Market Street in San Francisco for an after work drink. The culture of happy hour has changed with the emergence of hybrid work schedules. Now, bar owners say, Thursday is the new Friday.
Felix Uribe/Special to The Chronicle

Last week looked a little like the past in downtown San Francisco as major events like the Game Developers Conference at the nearby Moscone Center and the NCAA men’s basketball tournament at Chase Center brought people back to the city’s

streets. But more events bringing people in to the city, and bars, are only part of the equation, as the number of workers returning to the office remains small.

National data from Kastle Systems, which tracks swipe card access for offices, show that on average for the top 10 metro areas it tracks, including San Francisco and San Jose, office attendance has climbed back to about 40% this month of what it was in 2019. Meanwhile events like NBA game attendance and dinner reservations have all increased close to 90% or more from where they were three years ago.

Data collected on visits to the downtown core for Downtown SF, the area's community benefit district, show more people coming to the area on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday than on Mondays and Fridays, dating from the beginning of the year into the middle of March.

Some researchers predict that long-term hybrid work models will see workers using those three midweek days for in-office work, while working remotely on Mondays and Fridays.



Regular customers David Root (left) and Dan Galvin raise their beer glasses at the Lark Bar in San Francisco.
Constanza Hevia H./Special to The Chronicle

That shift is still happening, and the midweek after-work bar crowd shows it. One example was last week at 5:30 on Tuesday at the Lark on Third Street in San Francisco. One of the bar's regulars, David Root usually drinks Stella Artois on draft but they were out so was working on a hefeweizen beer. A union audio engineer and stagehand, he's enough of a regular customer that his black-and-white street photography covers one of the bathrooms like wallpaper.

He lives in Oakland but comes in three or four days a week after work for a beer, or maybe a shot of Fernet-Branca. "Last Thursday it was popping," Root said, noting how more people tend to come in during the Tuesday-to-Thursday period. "On Friday, it was dead."

Elsewhere inside the Lark there were a subdued handful of drinkers spaced out at the bar and tables, but the expansive parklet outside on Stevenson Street was mostly full of people, many of them attending the conference. By 7 p.m. the crowd inside had thinned out.

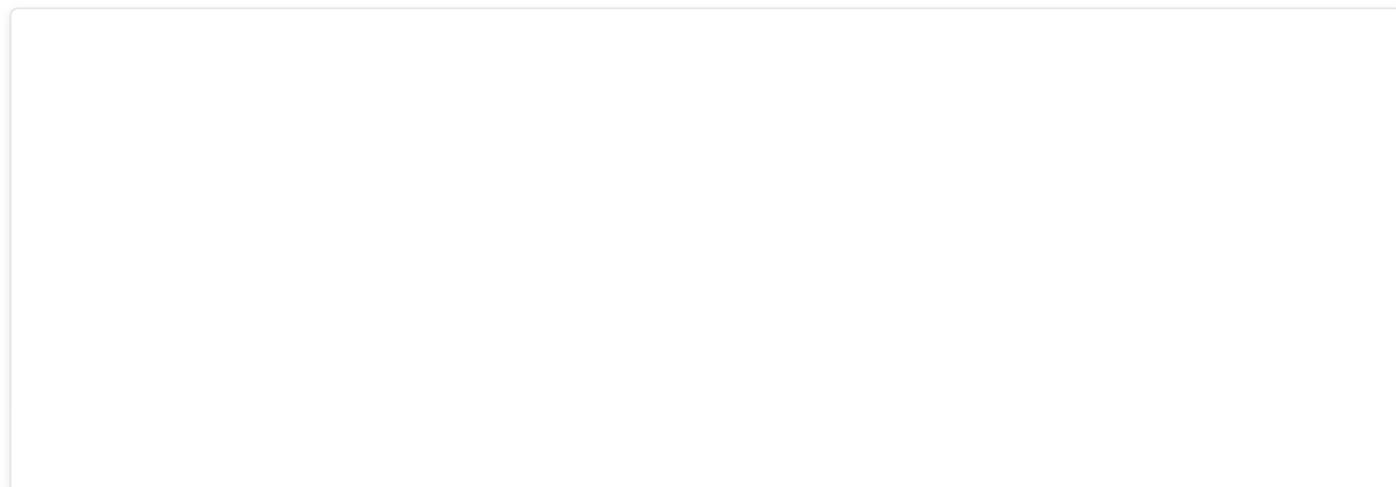
Brian Sheehy owns the Lark and a host of other bars including Pagan Idol, Bourbon & Branch, Rickhouse and Local Edition, many of which are close to or in downtown. He said the Lark has done well throughout the pandemic, despite not seeing the same sales as before. “Each week that goes by is seeing more folks visit our bars, especially during those happy hours,” Sheehy said.

He said Thursdays have also seen a strong uptick in sales recently.

Less time spent downtown means some people are spending more happy hours in neighborhood establishments.

Rana Chedyak owns Nook, a cafe on the corner of Hyde and Jackson Streets in Nob Hill that’s as popular for her homemade hummus as it is for its beer and wine. Many neighborhood residents still working from home come in after they wrap up for the day to have a drink, or just to hang out, Chedyak said, which is why she’s thinking about extending the cafe’s hours.

Drought Map



Track water shortages and restrictions across Bay Area

Check the water shortage status of your area, plus see reservoir levels and a list of restrictions for the Bay Area's largest water districts.

On the other side of town, the Dubliner in San Francisco's West Portal neighborhood does things a little differently. Owner John Mattiassi, a bearded, burly presence behind the bar, said he used to offer happy hour drink specials before the pandemic but doesn't anymore since reopening last March: "We need the money."

But, he said, sales have been coming back.

"Honestly since we reopened we have been busier," Mattiassi said. "People are home more and want to get out and have a few drinks."

The after-work crowd is noticeable at the cash-only Philosopher's Club up West Portal Avenue right by the train station, where some commuters prefer to stop off on their way home instead of staying downtown. That includes Joaquin "J." Castro who bellies up to the bar around 5 p.m. on a recent Wednesday, nursing a glass of Fernet with a ginger ale back.

Castro said he commutes downtown for work from the Outer Sunset three days a week. When he walks into the Philosopher's Club around 5 p.m. most of the bar

stools and tables are empty. By the time he's onto his second beverage, spots at the bar are increasingly rare real estate.

"Nowadays there is usually a decent crowd during the week from 3 to 5" said owner Deb Sullivan, leaning on the bar with a backdrop of her paintings of local sports heroes like Steph Curry on the wall behind her. Before the pandemic that was more like 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.

"I tell them, you can come in here any time and be happy any hour," Sullivan said with a grin.

Back downtown at the Sacramento Street after-office standby Irish Times, Sullivan's idea holds true. Most of the tables are still full at 6:30 p.m. this past Thursday with one March Madness game wrapping up and Duke gearing up to take on Texas Tech at San Francisco's Chase Center.

Outside, the 1 California bus whizzes by, standing room only. High above the bar in the rafters a sign reads "Always Happy Hour."

More for you

Mayor Breed wants office workers to return to S.F., but not everyone is on board

[Read Now](#)



Here's how many days a week Bay Area companies want their employees back in the office

[Read Now](#)



Chase DiFelicianantonio is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. Email: chase.difelicianantonio@sfchronicle.com Twitter: [@ChaseDiFelice](https://twitter.com/ChaseDiFelice)

Sign up for the Bay Briefing newsletter

Start your day with the Bay Area's best source for journalism.

Email

SIGN UP

By signing up, you agree to our [Terms of use](#) and acknowledge that your information will be used as described in our [Privacy Policy](#).



Written By
Chase DiFelicianantonio

Reach Chase on

Chase DiFelicianantonio is a reporter at The San Francisco Chronicle on the Transformation team, where he covers tech culture, workplace safety and labor issues in San Francisco, Silicon Valley and beyond. Prior to joining The Chronicle, he covered immigration for the Daily Journal, a legal affairs newspaper, and a variety of beats at the North Bay Business Journal in Santa Rosa. Chase has degrees in journalism and history from Loyola University Chicago.

[VIEW COMMENTS](#)

Top of the News



Is Will Smith's Oscars slap considered assault or battery under state law?

Current and former Bay Area law enforcement officials agreed that Will Smith's decision to slap comedian Chris Rock was a misdemeanor offense. They also agreed that it would be foolish for a...

BY RACHEL SWAN

California wildfire smoke may rise to 'practically unbearable' levels

BY KURTIS ALEXANDER



Biden's tax on billionaires: These Californians might have to pay it

BY TAL KOPAN



Meet the Bay Area mayor who wants you to get rid of your car

BY RACHEL SWAN



Will Smith stole the show at this year's Oscars — and not in a...

BY MICK LASALLE



San Francisco Chronicle

[TOP](#)

ABOUT

Our Company	Terms of Use
Privacy Notice /Notice At Collection	Careers
Your California Privacy Rights	Advertising
Interest Based Ads	

NEWSROOM

Ethics Policy	News Tips
Endorsement Process	Newsroom News

CONTACT

Customer Service	Newsroom Contacts
----------------------------------	-----------------------------------

[FAQ](#)

CCPA

[Do Not Sell My Personal Information](#)

SERVICES

Subscriber Services	Membership
e-Edition	Place an Obituary
Reprints & Permissions	Store
Corporate Subscriptions	Subscription Offers
App	sfgate.com

[Archives](#)

