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<https://www.bizjournals.com/sanfrancisco/news/2024/02/22/harringtons-downtown-tonic-nightlife-redco.html>

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Food & Lifestyle

An old San Francisco bar gets new life, and points to a path forward for downtown



Managing Partner of Tonic Nightlife Group Ben Bleiman, Managing Partner at REDCO Development Chris Freise and Managing Partner of Tonic Nightlife Duncan Ley at Harrington's.

ADAM PARDEE



By **Alex Barreira** – Staff Reporter, San Francisco Business Times
Feb 22, 2024 **Updated** Feb 23, 2024 1:39pm PST



See Correction/Clarification at the end of this article.

For generations, workers trod a path through downtown to Harrington’s bar – longshoremen near the waterfront, grocers in the Produce District and more recently magazine editors and real estate brokers working in the high-rises that sprang up around the low-rise building at 245 Front St.

Lately, those feet have been scarcer. Foot traffic is half what it was in 2019. And with the city’s Financial District in tough straits, there have been no shortage of ideas to revive it: everything from light shows to drag brunches, bakeries and tailor shops, the conversion of older buildings into housing.

The pandemic and the chaos it unleashed into financial markets and work culture have forced a reset on downtown, along with the trading of buildings into new hands with divergent plans. But the fate of the longtime Irish pub on Front Street may be different: New owners plan to reopen Harrington’s Bar & Grill in time for St. Patrick’s Day.

It joins a range of buzzy hospitality and retail investments in the northern Financial District, like Tyler Florence’s new Wayfare Tavern on Pine Street and another Osha Thai on Montgomery. But the reopening of Harrington’s – shuttered since October 2020, with fitful efforts to revive it since then – promises more than a nostalgia play.

The historic bar’s resuscitation is a reminder that downtown San Francisco needs more than a how and a where. It needs a why.

Saving a piece of downtown history

For Henry Harrington, the Irish immigrant who opened the business in 1935, the why at the time was straightforward enough: The repeal of Prohibition and the busy wharves of San Francisco made for a place where he could set up a pub like the one he ran back in Ireland’s County Cork.

His great-grandson Ken, who tended bar when he wasn’t teaching math at the University of San Francisco, and the rest of the family had been searching for a buyer or long-term

lessor to pass the torch to since the bar closed in 2020. They had serious interest from a dozen possible buyers, with plans ranging from total redevelopment to partial preservation. One proposed a trendy hookah bar.

But the Harringtons settled on Chris and Jason Freise of Redco Development, who partnered with Ben Bleiman and Duncan Ley of Tonic Nightlife Group. Tonic will operate the bar and helped secure an SBA loan and insurance for the new business.

It helped that the Freises had a “100% Irish” grandmother who gave St. Patrick’s Day a holy place on the family calendar. The group signed a lease with an option to buy the business and the 10,000-square-foot building for a set – but undisclosed – amount.

What the Freises didn’t offer was the highest price. That didn’t matter, Ken Harrington said. The family had an offer to sell the business in the 1950s for “three times what it was worth.” They passed then, too.

In a part of town ostensibly dedicated to making money, it turns out that there are still some who value history, heart and hard work more.

“We really did make a decision not to go for the money,” Ken said of himself and his father Robert, both with decades behind the bar. “They are truly good people, care about San Francisco and will bring Harrington’s back to its glory days. We really have enjoyed the four years getting to know them. They get it.”

Redco and Tonic aren’t the only investors. A cohort of roughly 150 friends and longtime patrons, with many times more Harrington’s memories between them, contributed a crucial portion of startup capital for the investment. It’s telling that many hail from the commercial real estate community and were themselves coming off of not-so-stellar years themselves, but felt compelled to pitch in.

“We wanted to keep it all,” Chris Freise said. “We want to not only invest with our patronage but our wallets and say, ‘This stuff is worth saving.’”



“We really did make a decision not to go for the money,” said Ken Harrington, a longtime mathematics professor at University of San Francisco — and veteran bartender of Harrington's — on picking the pub's next owner. “They are truly good people, care about San Francisco and will bring Harrington’s back to its glory days. We really have enjoyed the four years getting to know them. They get it.”

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Tonic brings to the table a long track record of opening and managing San Francisco bars such as Soda Popinski’s, Bullitt, Tonic, Teeth, Rebel, Royal Tug Yacht Club, Wild Hare, Lightning Tavern and Cease & Desist. The pair have been outspoken advocates for the local industry through the SF Bar Owner Alliance, playing an influential role in local city policy on nightlife businesses.

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which helped revive Wall Street in the 1990s. But in the meantime, this part of town can do a lot to help itself by giving people a reason to make the voyage besides work, or to stick around after hours.

“We absolutely cannot bring downtown back unless it is fun,” Bleiman said. “And we can’t sit back and wait for others to do it for us. That’s why we’re doing this still and I believe it’s going to happen.”



Henry Harrington, the founder of Harrington's Bar & Grill.

HARRINGTON'S BAR & GRILL

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share their tales and christen the bar's new chapter. They'll include some longtime employees who were recently rehired.

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A HISTORY WORTH SAVING

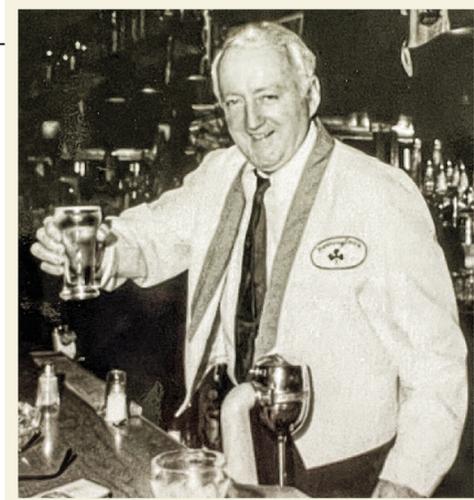
Harrington's customer base changed as downtown did over nearly a century.

1940

1950

1950s

The Harrington family had



1935

Irish immigrant **Henry Harrington** opened Harrington's. The repeal of Prohibition and the busy wharves of San Francisco

The Harrington family had an offer to sell the business in the 1950s. They passed.



1980s

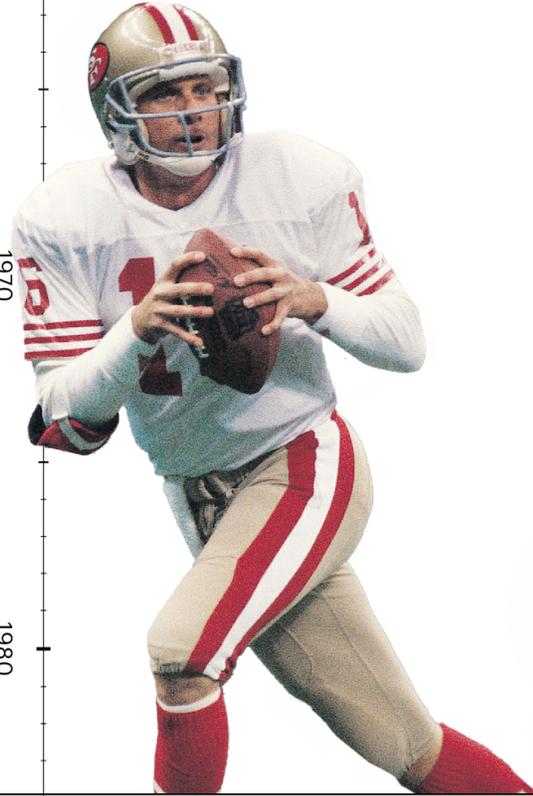
Mike Harrington, Henry Harrington's grandson, took over the 245 Front St. pub from his brother Jim, who died unexpectedly in 1978.

made for a place where he could set up a pub like the one he ran back in Ireland's County Cork.

1960

1970

1980



The pub played host to notable people like 49ers quarterback **Joe Montana**, team owner Eddie DeBartolo Jr. and team executive Carmen Policy, who once came to the bar with a group of 30.

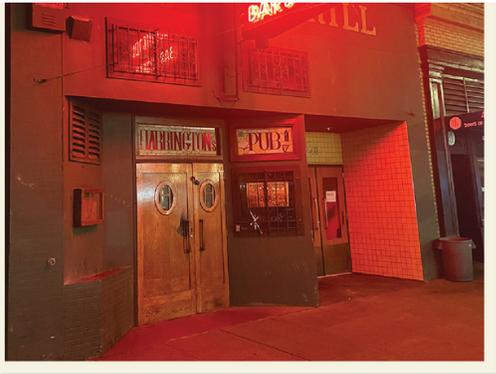
1990

2020

Hit by the pandemic, Harrington's shut down in October.

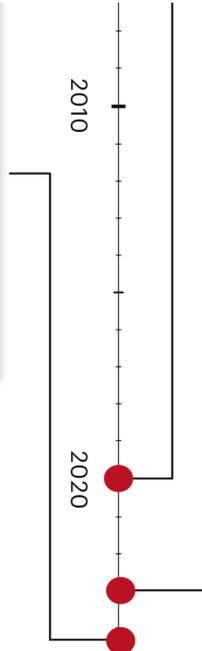
2000





2024

The sign at Harrington’s Bar & Grill was lit for the first time in years — a welcoming omen for the iconic pub’s comeback expected as early as March.



2023

A new ownership group signed a lease with an option to buy the business and the 10,000-square-foot building for a set — but undisclosed — amount. “We really did make a decision not to go for the money,” said **Ken Harrington**. “They are truly good people, care about San Francisco and will bring Harrington’s back to its glory days. We really have enjoyed the four years getting to know them. They get it.”

PHOTOS BY HARRINGTON’S BAR & GRILL; RICH PILLING | SPORTING NEWS;
ADAM PARDEE | SFBT; ALEX BARREIRA | SFBT

It’s those stories, traded across the bar, that animate Harrington’s legacy. It’s the lore — like the stories of Henry dodging bullets in the 1920s as he escaped Ireland for France in a fishing boat with his son Leo, on his way to San Francisco via Canada and Montana.

When the first Harrington’s on U.S. soil opened in 1935, Henry enlisted Leo (now of legal age) to tend bar and drive a truck along the shoreline to pick up thirsty longshoremen from the nearby docks. A motto on an old Harrington’s matchbook captures the vibe: “You’re a stranger here but once,” it reads.

As the area that’s now the Financial District evolved from its blue-collar origins, so did the crowds at Harrington’s. It became a staple for the surrounding offices. In the early 2000s, one magazine based in a nearby office tower sent reporters there in search of editors on deadline. More recently it cemented the loyalty of the commercial real estate community, some of whom made the leap from barflies to benefactors in this latest chapter.



Part-owners of Harrington's pub, from left to right: REDCO Development co-founder Chris Freise; Tonic Nightlife Group co-founder Ben Bleiman; Patrick Harrington; and Tonic Nightlife Group co-founder Duncan Ley.

ADAM PARDEE

A new, old story

Robbie Silver, who leads the community benefit district encompassing the Financial District and Jackson Square, is tired of the narrative that downtown is doing nothing but bleed retail businesses.

The executive director of the nonprofit Downtown SF Partnership has spearheaded activation efforts designed to make the area a place workers will want to linger after the office or bring their families on weekends. One recent event – a free, first-of-its-kind holiday light show projected onto downtown skyscrapers themselves – drew more than 67,000 people and an estimated \$8 million in related spending.

Depressing headlines about office leases and big-box store closures, he said, ignore a trend towards fewer vacancies at the pedestrian level. Silver said an upcoming report from his group may show there have been more ground-floor openings than closures

over the last two years in his district. For now, he offered this nugget: his group counted 17 new tenants filling empty ground-floor spaces in 2023, primarily food and beverage spots that may indicate renewed demand.

Silver is a fervent believer in the need for creativity and an embrace of San Francisco's unique character as the route to a more dynamic downtown. This summer will see the return of his group's "Drag Me Downtown" series, consisting of free pop-up performances from local drag queens, kings and trans artists across downtown bars. But the unique spirit also includes places as unsequined as Harrington's.

"I think it's time for San Francisco to tell a new, old story," Silver said.

That's why the choices of downtown's longtime property owners like the Harrington family will become especially important over the next few years. The diverse collection of family and institutional owners spent the pandemic waiting out an uncertain market. And by the looks of a lot of empty ground floors downtown, some appear content to keep on waiting until the perfect tenant or building buyer comes knocking.

Property owners will need to decide if their next move will be strictly about dollars and cents or if there's room for something else in their calculations – like the spirit that kept the Harringtons going.

Ken recalled hosting his great-grandfather Henry, then in his 80s, at the bar shortly before the pub's founder passed away.

"He was so happy that I, a Harrington, was working there," he said. "And he would be so happy that we took this so deep, to nearly 100 years."

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Image: Harrington's Bar & Grill

Mike Harrington, Henry Harrington's grandson, poses in the Irish pub with a commemorative photo of his grandfather's football team in Cork, Ireland, and an Irish coffee. In the 1980s Mike took over the 245 Front St. pub — and later met his wife and lifetime partner, Kathleen, there after she came in looking for a job and (to hear the family tell it) "got more than she bargained for."

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