

Napa Valley *Register*

Downtown Napa restaurants expanding outdoor dining options

[Jennifer Huffman](#) Jun 12, 2020



Two visitors from Livermore enjoyed outdoor seating at Alpha Omega Collective in downtown Napa last week. A number of downtown restaurants are adding new or additional outdoor seating to accommodate more space between customers. Jennifer Huffman, Register

Downtown Napa's sidewalks could start to look a little livelier in the coming days and weeks.

https://napavalleyregister.com/news/local/downtown-napa-restaurants-expanding-outdoor-dining-options/article_852b996a-4a80-50c2-b6d8-787ebdce99a2.html

In an effort to draw in more diners while maintaining social distance, a number of downtown Napa restaurants are adding new or additional outdoor seating.

In recent weeks, at least 10 businesses have requested city permits for more outdoor dining, including Napa Valley Bistro, Oxbow Public Market, Napastäk, Don Perico, Compline, Gabrielle Collection taste +, Bounty Hunter, Napa Palisades Tavern, Grace's Table and First & Franklin Marketplace.

Bernardo Ayala, owner and executive chef of Napa Valley Bistro, 975 Clinton St., said he's added a second row of four tables to his outdoor seating. He now has eight tables for outdoor diners.

Even though diners can now eat inside, with the distancing currently required between inside tables, he can't fit enough people inside alone to make it work economically, said Ayala.

"You can only do half the business" as you normally would, he said.

He feels that as the community starts to emerge from quarantine, "People may feel more comfortable sitting outside."

There's plenty of room on the sidewalk for the extra seating, he noted. "Actually, it looks good," he said. "There is plenty of space for people to walk. Our sidewalk is nice and wide."

Ayala said that when his business reopened last week, he had modest expectations. "I was expecting 50%" of his normal business, he said, but it came closer to about 65%. "I can't complain," he said. "I think the outside seating definitely helps."

Last Saturday, he was fully booked for dinner reservations.

"It's good, but it would be good if we could seat everybody," said Ayala. "We still need to be careful about safety."

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Alexis Handelman, longtime owner of Alexis Baking Company, has closed indoor dining, but added a second row of outdoor dining on the Third Street sidewalk. This has boosted outdoor tables from five to eight.

“We’re trying to bring in as much revenue as we possibly can in a way that we can,” said Handelman, who also does delivery.

“Just doing takeout was not giving us enough revenue to make our expenses,” she said. “I have long-term employees and financial commitments that I want to be able to honor, and it’s very, very hard” under the current circumstances, she said.

“There are parts of my business that have gone away, like catering,” she said. “No one’s having parties for 100. People aren’t having huge weddings.”

Handelman said her landlord has deferred part of her rent, “but he’s only deferred it — not reduced it. I’m going to be on the hook for a lot of rent come August.”

She’s not ready to open the inside café for dining just yet. “There are too many avenues of exposure” in such a small space, she said.

What’s her plan for going forward?

“Aye, aye, aye, that’s a really hard question,” said Handelman. Outside dining is fine for a while, but come the warmer summer months, “It won’t be terribly pleasant to sit outside,” she said. “People will be flocking to air conditioned spaces.”

Matt Stamp at Compline Wine Bar, Restaurant and Merchant, said to adhere to social distancing requirements, his business will expand its patio footprint but keep the same number of tables. Compline is located within First Street Napa.

“We love our patio. It’s one of the reason’s we picked the location we’re at,” he said.

Compline is not using indoor seating at this point, Stamp said. “We feel that it’s a safer for both our staff and our guests.”

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“Once we become more comfortable, we will reopen the inside of the dining room.”

Stamp said the business has pivoted in a number of ways.

“We are a restaurant first, but we also operate a wine retail shop and do wine education,” he said. Compline has been doing an increasing amount of virtual wine education through Zoom. “I host a class every Monday night,” he said.

“And our retail store has remained successful though this time.” In addition, Compline does home delivery of both food and wine.

The restaurant is also encouraging dining at off peak hours.

“Everyone wants a 7 p.m. Saturday night reservation and a 12:30 or 1 p.m. lunch reservation,” he said. To spread out customers, Compline has decided to keep its kitchen open throughout the afternoon.

“We’re seeing a lot more tables at 3 or 4 p.m. for lunch or an early dinner,” Stamp noted. “It allows you dine in a space with fewer people,” and allows the restaurant to serve tables throughout the day, instead of all at once.

More outdoor seating is also planned for Oxbow Public Market — in the parking lot between Gott’s Roadside and the main Oxbow building.

“...We feel that the more exterior common seating we can offer to customers, the better our merchants will fare over the coming months,” said the Oxbow’s application for temporary use.

“Exterior common seating creates a safer environment for guests and will have a much higher demand than interior seating until the weather cools in December,” the application said.

The Market would like to temporarily convert the parking lot into a common outdoor seating area with a variety of 8- and 6-foot picnic tables with attached benches.

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“We would also add umbrellas to shade many tables during the day and string lighting to provide a nice ambiance for the early evenings.”

The tables with benches will be placed a minimum of 7 feet apart so that the required social distancing can be maintained, the application said.

Barricades will block the First Street entrance, and temporary fencing will block the trash compactor room.

Restaurant tenants will be able to apply for a license to use this temporary seating area, said the application.

Craig Smith, executive director of the Downtown Napa Association, said he thinks outdoor dining will “absolutely” help downtown restaurants recover from COVID-19’s economic impacts.

Smith believes two strategies will be important. “Outdoor dining is one, and surprisingly, take-out or curbside pickup is another. Restaurants who didn’t do to-go were worried about getting into that. It’s a lot more complicated than stuffing food in a sack, but a number of restaurants have figured out how to do it and how to do it well. For some, take out is now 75% of their business,” he said.

Normally, the city fee for a sidewalk application is \$620, but the city will be waiving it, according to Napa City Councilmember Mary Luross.

“The City is exploring other initiatives with partners, such as a grant program, to support businesses in reopening,” said Luross in a Facebook post.

“We are working on the best way to defer the fees moving forward, and we understand that our business community is struggling with additional costs at this time.”

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