

A_Championship Assingment

Are San Franciscan Restaurants Back? Or Has the Pandemic Buried Them Six-Feet Deep?

The city is now well past the unglorious days of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the days when San Francisco was plastered on nearly every cable television network and every social media platform as a ghastly sight that could've been pulled straight from the pages of the "Zombieland" script.

However, it's been more of a crawl, instead of a two-feet-first sprint into the memory of 2019.

In Frisco's Yerba Buena neighborhood, restaurants have begun to pop up, with some even finding consistent success. Over on 199 New Montgomery St., the Yemeni coffee house Sana's Cafe has been growing for the past three years.

"There have been ups and downs, regardless, but it's been more consistent than in the past," said manager Moshtok Al-Amri. "Last year was good; it started picking up last year, it's been almost consistent. It's really good to see the big difference from the first year we opened; the whole city was dead the first year. But afterwards, for the following years, it has been really, really packed."

When walking through the front doors of Sana's, the first thing that hits you is the aroma of high-quality coffee, followed by the stunning visuals of desserts and breakfast sandwiches before you. A head turn to your left, and you will see the traffic that Al-Amri is talking about.

Lining the window walls is a row of tables, and on Tuesday, they were full to the brim with laptop-toting, blue-lanyard-wearing, and suited-up visitors who came into California for a local data convention. The clientele isn't just what meets the eye: the bustling AI workers who are desperate for a quick energy boost aren't the only ones coming into Sana's for a break in their days.

Every day, regular people come into Al-Amri's coffee shop, and for a moment, San Francisco feels vintage. Whether it's locals coming in and becoming consistent regulars, books and drinks in hand, or tourists coming in to see what's what, Sana's is a slice of the past brought to 2026.

Those previously mentioned AI workers are, of course, the hot-button topic of this year and the biggest indicator that you yourself are in a post-COVID era.

San Francisco has become synonymous with being the home of artificial intelligence magnates OpenAI and Anthropic, in addition to more and more that will undoubtedly find their way into The City by the Bay. The topic of AI is one of contentious, table-shaking debate, whether it be for its impacts on the [local housing market](#) and [the environment](#) in which we live.

On the flipside, the conventions and offices of AI conglomerates have brought both visitors and workers back into San Francisco, and for Al-Amri, the mass influx of people is a huge boost for his business.

“It is more consistent[than immediately after COVID restrictions were lifted]. The conferences are big, but not fully back. There are several months toward the end of the year, where there’s a whole gap where there are mostly smaller conferences,” Al-Amri explained. “I would say if they have more conferences throughout the whole year, and not just one or two, and have at least three to four events each month, that would definitely keep it either stable or probably push it up a little bit more.”

The Michigan native is touching on something that has been studied, with each year removing us from the brutal sprawl of the pandemic.

According to [a study](#) conducted by data analyst Annoushqa Bobde, foot traffic on San Franciscan weekends was between 71-75% of what it was in 2019 during 2025. Compare that to weekdays, where the city saw figures as low as 43% on Fridays and as high as 52% on Tuesdays just last year.

When the sun goes down, and those same patrons from the coffee shop are looking to grab a late-night drink at the bar, the picture becomes a little murkier for buisness owners.

One positive side of the equation was largely boosted by Senate Bill 395, introduced by Mayor Daniel Lurie and State Senator Scott Wiener. The bill created 20 new liquor licenses and aimed to lower the price of a food-and-drinking establishment's ability to serve alcohol down, a huge assist in an economy that has seen major turbulations and rising prices under the administration of President Donald Trump.

The problem is that the economy in question is so constrictive that young adults in their twenties, freshly turning 21 or approaching 30, are too focused on saving enough money to pay their rents or student loans. The younger over-drinking-age population neither has the time nor the cash to make frequent trips to the bar, which has contributed to a generation of young Americans deciding that [they are uninterested](#) in picking up a bottle or a can of beer.

“Yeah, the socialization skills are not fucking there,” said Dennis Leary, business veteran and owner of The House of Shields, a bar located on the corner of 39 New Montgomery St. “People aren’t socializing; they’re staying at home, getting their food delivered, their cannabis delivered, and they’re looking at the fucking screen all night. For me, that does not bode well for the future of cities and civilization itself.”

The contrast of the comments from the experienced and renowned Leary and the young and freshly started Al-Amri perfectly exemplify the situation of the San Franciscan food and beverage business community. The COVID drought is staying in the rear view mirror for some owners, while the affects are still sticking out like sore thumb for others.

“I’m trying to leave San Francisco. I was a chef for a long time. I’m over the commute. I’m trying to downsize my life and limit my exposure to San Francisco,” Leary said, rolling cookie dough out of a bowl onto a baking sheet. “What every operator is going to tell you is that doing business in this city is like death by a 1000 cuts.”

The city is halfway through seven years past the pandemic, and the question of a rebound is still high in the air, like a flyball in Oracle Park. If Leary and Al-Amri are outfielders in the game of business, then it's up to leaders like Lurie and Weiner to provide them with what they need.

“People don't open big restaurants anymore,” Leary said. “They can't fucking afford them. You just can't do it.”