

### Is San Francisco ‘back’ post-COVID? Locals aren’t convinced.

It’s Monday night in [Louie’s Bar](#). A few line cooks dodge each other in a cramped kitchen. Bartenders mill about by taps, shaking drinkings and making conversation with the usual patrons on their stools. There’s a steady stream of customers, but it’s nothing compared to its numbers before COVID.

Louie’s is tucked into an alleyway in San Francisco’s South of Market neighborhood, markedly different from the rest of its block on Stevenson Street by its brick exterior. The spot was once a [whaler’s bar](#) before becoming a happy hour spot for tech bros in the Financial District later on, but is down 33% from its pre-COVID numbers across the board, according to Chef Ben Baehrend.

Baehrend (known simply as “chef” to regulars and his coworkers) sports a Red Sox hat, an indicator of his home state of Massachusetts. He’s worked in the restaurant industry for 35 years and at Louie’s for nine, through the height of the pandemic.

“When we were busy, I had more staff,” he said, then gestured toward the kitchen and bar. “I miss that.”

Louie’s typically raked in \$10,000 on Fridays before the pandemic hit. Now, Baehrend says their revenue is between \$5,000 and \$6,000 on the first night of the weekend — cutting profits nearly in half.

## G\_Championship Assignment

This follows a nationwide trend of [restaurants](#) and [businesses](#) throughout the country struggling from pandemic losses, but it's particularly exacerbated by San Francisco's post-pandemic work-from-home culture.

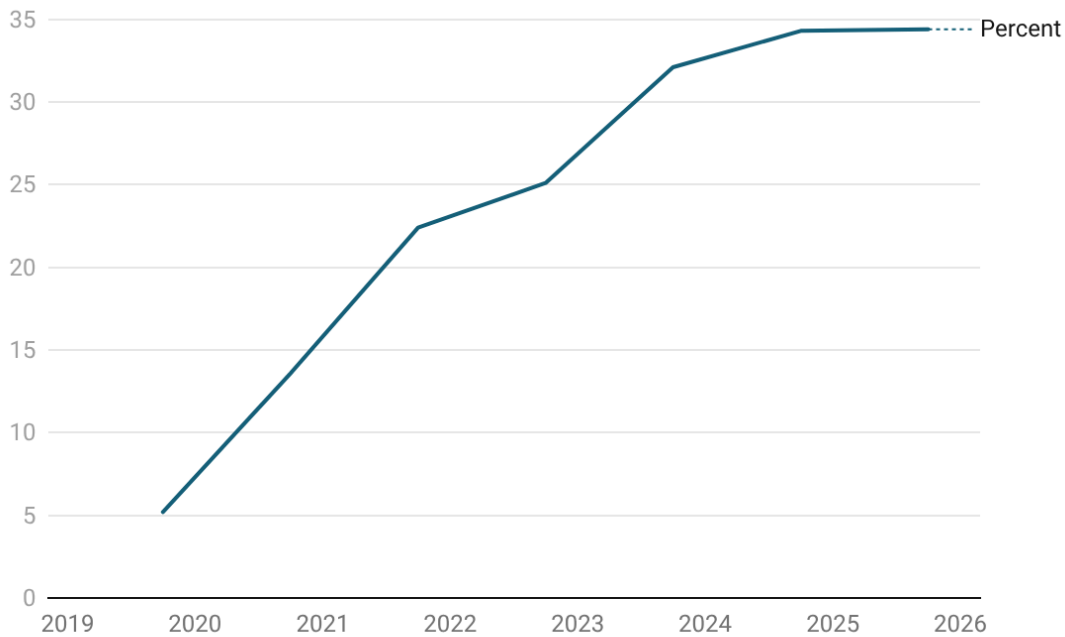
People in San Francisco are largely returning to work, according to data from the [Census Bureau's American Community Survey](#). In 2021, 45% of San Franciscans worked from home. Most recent data from 2024 says that statistic has fallen to about 21%.

Dominic Laituri, who works at a gay bar in the city, said even with more people coming into work, their typically hybrid work weeks are part of the reason why businesses haven't seen their usual coffee runs in the morning nor rushes during lunch and happy hour sessions.

Because people aren't in the office as frequently as they were before COVID, massive [skyscrapers are vacant](#) in the city, according to [data](#) from the San Francisco government.

## Office Vacancy Rate in San Francisco

Percentage of vacancy in offices, per reported Q4 numbers.



Source: SF.gov • Created with Datawrapper

Laituri and his coworkers, veterans in the industry, lament about the once-bustling bar culture, particularly impacted by changing [cultural attitudes among Gen Z](#) and major store closures, like the [San Francisco Centre](#).

“It's just so different now,” Laituri said. “You don't meet as many people from different parts of the Bay like we used to.”

The Centre was perhaps one of the most notable closures, he said, but [empty storefronts](#) still line the main streets in San Francisco.

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“The empty storefronts ... it doesn't lend itself well to making the city seem appealing or safe, for that matter,” Laituri said.

Gael Lala-Chavez, the executive director and president of LYRIC Center for LGBTQ+ youth in San Francisco, said closing spaces like malls and cafés eliminate third spaces for youth, putting them at further risk of isolation.

“There needs to be more youth-affirming spaces in the city,” they said. “We need more community centers; we need more opportunities for young people to gather.”

There is, however, a way to get people back into the city. Baehrend rolled his eyes as he said it, but finding “gimmicks” could be the key to filling restaurants and, subsequently, streets.

As such, Louie’s does a special [Saturday Supper menu](#) every week. The bar Laituri works at hosts themed nights and drag shows. And Wayde McCloud, a longtime San Francisco resident, attends.

McCloud lives in Chinatown, near bars with karaoke specials, gay bars with underwear-themed nights and the city-sponsored [Night Market](#) every second Friday.

“They're trying to get people in, besides happy hour,” he said. “I think it’s making people more creative.”

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In tandem with individual businesses working to get people back in their doors, Mayor Daniel Lurie's ["Heart of the City" initiative](#), launched last fall, aims to promote an economic comeback for the once COVID-decimated downtown streets.

Lurie's office did not respond to a request for comment on how exactly the mayor is working with individual restaurants and bars to promote a lively downtown area.

Regardless, McCloud hopes these new efforts put forth by the office and individuals bring back the "artsy scene" he remembered when he first moved to San Francisco in 2002.

"Everyone was painting, there were streets where artists were selling random stuff and people who wanted to be dancers would do their own performances," McCloud said. "I think it's going to make San Francisco more creative again, bring the artsy feeling back that it used to have."

Still, Baehrend looks back on his pre-pandemic time in the industry with fondness, nostalgic for the community fostered in his dimly lit bar and the late-night shifts followed by long nights out.

As he sat at a table sharing plates of pasta and a bottle of wine with coworkers, he said, with a laugh: "It's a shame it won't go back to the way it was before COVID. Maybe all of these changes are for the best, but I miss how it used to be."