

## TRENDSPOTTING

# Pull up a chair: Outdoor dining isn't going anywhere

By **Jon Marcus** Globe Correspondent, Updated August 25, 2022, 12:00 p.m.



People dine in Chicago's River North neighborhood, where some streets are still closed to car traffic to allow restaurants extra room for outdoor dining, on July 14, 2022. JAMIE KELTER DAVIS/NYT

**SAN FRANCISCO** — Even at a time when al fresco dining has become ubiquitous, this city's Lower Pacific Heights neighborhood stands out.

Red metal tables under a red canvas awning front a pizza place. A bar across the street has commissioned original art for the partitions that surround its sidewalk seating. Paper lanterns and hanging ferns decorate the outdoor booths of a Mediterranean-style café. Even the entrance to a doughnut shop is flanked by tables in the open air.

It started as an emergency measure at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but San Francisco's "Shared Space" program, which encouraged outdoor dining, has been made permanent, and more than 1,000 restaurants have added tables on sidewalks, streets, and in "parklets."

"There are always opportunities in challenges," said Adriano Paganini, Milan-born owner of the Italian restaurant The Tailor's Son at the end of this busy block of Fillmore Street, who has added permanent outdoor booths in a motif that echoes the black-and-white tiled décor of the building's façade, with a roof and curtains that roll down to block the wind.

When al fresco dining started during the pandemic, “customers got used to it,” Paganini said. “As soon as we reopened, I had people sitting outside with umbrellas,” since at first the seating wasn’t covered. Then they realized they liked to be outside. “We’ve been doing this in Europe for the longest time, weather permitting.”

Cities worldwide are embracing outdoor seating, vastly expanding the opportunity for travelers to dine al fresco. More than half of full-service restaurants in the United States now serve outside, according to the National Restaurant Association. And food and cuisine are among the top reasons people say they’re picking which destinations to visit this year, the market research firm Destination Analysts reports.

The trend is evolving well beyond the stopgap measures of construction barriers and plastic cones. Five-star hotels and Michelin-starred restaurants are transforming it from shabby to chic. It’s taking the form of pop-ups, picnics, cocktail gardens, and poolside dining. Gourmet cuisine is being offered up in caves, heated yurts, and converted ski gondolas, and on tables in the shallows of the ocean.

“Ultimately I think the genie’s out of the bottle. This is a culture change for American cities,” said Rob Fojtik, vice president of neighborhood strategy at the tourism bureau Choose Chicago; a new, permanent “Chicago Alfresco” project not only encourages outdoor dining but uses it to make community spaces more active and inviting.

“From a tourism perspective, that type of environment is exactly what you want,” said Fojtik. “When the temporary program expired, we got a huge influx of people saying that they wanted it to continue, that it was the best thing that came out of the pandemic.”

Four in 10 consumers say the availability of outdoor seating makes them more likely to pick a particular restaurant, the National Restaurant Association found.

Restaurants like it, too. Outdoor dining can significantly expand its capacity. A third said it accounts for 40 percent or more of their sales, the restaurant association reports, and about 15 percent said they make 70 percent or more of sales outdoors.

“The success of outdoor dining has also been a success for indoor dining. It’s created two different styles of dining,” said Brice Jones, cofounder of FREEHOLD Hospitality, whose “Freehold in the Park” popped up during the pandemic and has now become a recurring warm-weather highlight of New York’s Union Square.

One reason is that al fresco seating is a counterbalance to a less welcome outgrowth of the pandemic: stricter rules for reservations, including nonrefundable fees.

“It’s a little bit more casual and a little easier” to sit outside in spaces that can usually accommodate large groups and often don’t require booking ahead, Jones said. “When you think about outdoor dining, you think about going to almost a beer garden setting and hanging out with friends and having a casual meal.”

Meanwhile, Fojtik added, “The pandemic stuff aside, and the safety of being in the open air, there’s just a desire to be with people. You can be inside four walls any time of year, but to be outside is lively.”

That’s gotten more appealing as restaurants have dressed up their outdoor dining areas, which during the pandemic tended to be thrown together.

Set up by the employees of a cocktail bar called Jaguar Sun as a quick fix during the pandemic, Sunny's Steakhouse took over the lot of an unused roofing factory in Miami's Little River neighborhood. Originally little more than a few picnic tables, a cobbled-together wood grill, and some string lights, it's now being rebuilt from scratch as a permanent restaurant, said Jaguar Sun owner Will Thompson.

"It was punishing by the end — the heat and the rain and breaking it down every night. We were just beat," said Thompson, a Jamaica Plain native who previously tended bar at Drink, Lolita Cocina, No. 9 Park, and other Boston restaurants. "But our guests demanded we come back."

The permanent outdoor Sunny's is expected to open around the end of this year, with a full-scale kitchen, live music, and white tablecloth service.

It's a widespread craze.

The Hotel Bel-Air in Los Angeles has launched Bel-Air Under the Stars, offering Wolfgang Puck-curated charcuterie beside a fireplace in the garden. Hotel Plaza Athénée has created La Cour Jardin in its courtyard, with lunch and dinner service. Montage Los Cabos has continued an outdoor restaurant called Talay — also started as a pandemic pop-up — with Thai street food. Even the Dorchester in London has opened a rooftop restaurant and bar.

"It's no longer about COVID and having air circulation. People like the fresh air, the atmosphere, the views," said Christopher Cowdray, CEO of the Dorchester Collection. "Everyone has just gotten into the spirit."

The outdoor dining space created during the pandemic by the Alexandrian hotel in Alexandria, Va., was so popular that the hotel has now set up a "cocktail garden" with fire pits and lounge areas. The Black Cap Grille in North Conway, N.H., converted its outdoor patio into a year-round, dog-friendly outdoor dining space.

Some of these al fresco projects are especially inventive. Eden Roc Cap Cana resort in the Dominican Republic has introduced multi-course dinners in a nearby cave. Playa Largo Resort and Spa in the Florida Keys serves dinner at tables with Adirondack chairs placed in the shallows of the ocean during Key Largo sunsets. Rosewood Las Ventanas al Paraíso resort in Los Cabos, Mexico, has added dining to the private grotto of its pool.

The Chanler at Cliff Walk in Newport, R.I., now offers high-end picnics and heated luxury yurts for year-round outdoor dining. And Telluride, Colo., has converted 25 retired ski gondolas into heated "dining cabins" decorated by local artists and shared by restaurants that serve meals in them.

More of these initiatives seem likely. Connecticut lawmakers in March extended for at least another 13 months relaxed rules for al fresco dining. Sacramento, Calif., has approved a permanent outdoor restaurant seating program.

There are some obstacles. It's hard enough for restaurants to find employees for their indoor tables, never mind added outdoor ones. Diners can be more exposed to interruptions and disruptions. "It's hard to sell a bottle of wine for \$100 when there's a homeless guy asking for money," one restaurateur said. As Paganini spoke outside his restaurant in San Francisco, a dog sniffed threateningly at a corner of the table.

But all of that is offset by the attraction of the bustle of the street, said Paganini, pausing for effect between each word.

"People ... really ... want ... to ... be ... outside."