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They've survived earthquakes and Prohibition, but can Bay Area bars survive coronavirus?



Even famous, long-standing joints may not survive the pandemic

By **LEONARDO CASTAÑEDA** | lcastaneda@bayareanewsgroup.com and **MARISA KENDALL** | mkendall@bayareanewsgroup.com | Bay Area News Group
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OAKLAND — Heinold's First and Last Chance Saloon has only closed twice since 1884, once when the 1906 earthquake leveled much of the Bay Area, and in 1929 when then-owner Johnny Heinold had surgery.

The bar survived the 1918 flu pandemic and Prohibition — they sold soft drinks during that dark time — and has been serving Oaklanders through a couple of world wars, the rise and fall of the Black Panther Party and two tech booms. But the bar where Jack London used to do his high school homework might've finally met its match: the coronavirus pandemic and a lockdown order that has brought the bar's revenues down to zero.

Heinold's is in better shape than other bars thanks to a robust reserve fund the owners have been using to pay their five bartenders and other assorted bills during the lockdown. But how long will those savings last?

"I am refusing to answer that question in my own head, on grounds that it would cause me to go insane," co-owner Elliott Myles said. "I need to take it a day at a time."

As the region enters its 11th week under lockdown, bar owners are faced with a daunting decision: do they keep going, feeding off savings and whatever they can make on to-go orders, or do they call it quits and close up the treasured dive bars, watering holes and music clubs that help fuel the Bay Area's celebrated nightlife.

"It's going to lead to business and personal bankruptcies, we're going to lose beloved cultural institutions," said Ben Bleiman, founder of the San Francisco Bar Owners Alliance. "I wouldn't be surprised if 40, 50 percent of the bars in San Francisco never reopened."

It's already started. Such well-known spots as Oakland's Stork Club, the famed Saddle Rack country bar in Fremont and The Stud, San Francisco's oldest gay bar, have all announced they will not reopen, although the Stork Club holds out hope of eventually finding a new home. ([Here's a rundown of all the Bay Area clubs and restaurants that won't be reopening.](#))

Bleiman, who owns three bars in the city including Dr. Teeth and Soda Popinski, said maybe one in 100 bars are doing okay business right now.

In an effort to provide some relief, the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage Control started allowed bars to sell closed bottles of beer or liquor to go, though Myles noted his customers can get the same stuff cheaper at stores like BevMo. Bars with kitchens can sell mixed drinks to go if the order is paired with food, and on Friday the department expanded that and will now allow bars without kitchens to sell cocktails if they partner with a restaurant.



SAN FRANCISCO, CA.- MAY 22: Elly Simmons, co-owner of Specs' Twelve Adler Museum bar in San Francisco, Calif., talks about the challenges of reopening the historic drinking establishment in a post COVID-19 world, on Friday, May 22, 2020. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

That's what Elly Simmons is trying to do at Spec's Twelve Adler Museum, the bar her father started in the heart of San Francisco's North Beach 52 years ago. So far, they've been able to sell some closed beers to go, as well as face masks bearing the bar's eponymous spectacles on them.

"We have no idea what's going to happen, I have no idea how well it's going to go," Simmons said. "People miss each other, and they want to support us."

Simmons, who owns the bar with her daughter, also launched a GoFundMe drive to help pay the bills. She's been blown away by the support, but still runs into regulars who just want to go back to the bar for a drink and some conversation.

"I wish my dad was here to hear them all. The place is very beloved," she said. "Many people, their parents met here — or they did."

The closures have also been a blow to the local music and live entertainment scene. The Caravan Lounge in downtown San Jose, for example, is unable to host its punk and metal shows, as well as a long-running comedy night, burlesque revue and performance art show called Circus of Sin and even a poetry slam.

Ron Lucatelli, who owns the bar with his wife, Bev, said he's worried about the Caravan's future and is frustrated by what he says is a lack of clear information or guidance from government officials. He doesn't think the rules around selling drinks with food will help him much.

“Our menu consists of a bag of potato chips and peanuts, occasionally,” he said, adding that he’s still paying \$700 just in PG&E bills to keep the venue refrigeration system going.

If it closes, it’ll be the end of an era — it’s been around since the 1960s and is the only one left of a chain of 10 independently-owned Caravan Lounge bars inside Greyhound bus stations throughout California.

“This is the craziest bunch of malarkey I’ve ever seen,” Lucatelli said “In addition to the crisis itself, which is real, we need to be safe. But we also need to live and make a living.”



OAKLAND, CA – MAY 22: Eli’s Mile High Club is photographed in Oakland, Calif., on Friday, May 22, 2020. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

Even the places that have been selling to-go aren’t exactly thriving. Eli’s Mile High Club, which has been a revered blues club, and mainstay Oakland bar since the 1970s, is selling bottles of liquor, cases of beer, and beer, shot and meal combos for pickup and delivery.

The bar has let go of about 30 of its 40 pre-pandemic staffers, and is scraping in enough money to stay afloat.

“I’m maybe 75 percent sure we’re good,” said co-owner Billy Agan.

But Agan’s biggest fear is the health officials will allow bars to reopen for regular service too early. If bars hire back their workers and stock up on alcohol — a COVID-19 second wave could be devastating. Even if that doesn’t happen, running a socially-distant bar will be challenging. Eli’s has a back patio where customers can spread out, which will help. But the bar makes a lot of its money from shows and events, and there’s no telling when those will be back..

For most bars, it’s hard to know what the future holds. Throughout the city, bars are chained shut or boarded up in a way that would make that Anti-Saloon League swoon. From touristy spots like Tommy’s Joynt on Van Ness Avenue, covered in baby blue plywood, to padlocked Chinatown mainstays like Buddha Lounge and Li Po, to the White Horse Tavern on Nob Hill, where the hobby horse mascot hangs from the building front wearing a bandana face mask — they’re all closed indefinitely.



OAKLAND, CA – MAY 22: Laura Chittock, the booking agent and manager of the Stork Club, touches a wall of band stickers at the bar and music venue in Oakland, Calif., on Friday, May 22, 2020. The bar, like all bars in California, is closed due to the coronavirus pandemic. Now the Stork Club is shutting down, hoping one day to reopen. (Doug Duran/Bay Area News Group)

And for some, like Oakland's famed Stork Club, the worst has already come. Husband-and-wife managers Laura and Tom Chittock had to pack up and leave their Telegraph Avenue home of more than 20 years earlier this week. With no shows to host, the Chittocks couldn't keep paying the \$10,000 a month in rent and other bills it cost to keep the rock venue going.

"We had to stop," Laura Chittock said. "We had to make a very difficult decision."

The Chittocks say they have every intention of reopening in a new location once the pandemic is over. But it won't be quite the same: The Stork Club first opened on Oakland's 12th Street in the early 1900s, and the bar is covered floor-to-ceiling with stickers left by bands who have played there.

"We can't take that with us," Laura Chittock said. "It's all lost."

Staff photographer Karl Mondon contributed to this report

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Leonardo Castañeda | Demographics reporter Leonardo Castañeda is a reporter covering demographics and the income divide as part of The Mercury News' Living in the Bay Area team. He graduated from San Diego State University with degrees in journalism and economics, and previously reported in America's Finest City. He also speaks Spanish, holds strong opinions about burritos and can be reached at 408-920-5012.

lcastaneda@bayareanewsgroup.com

[Follow Leonardo Castañeda @LeoMCastaneda](#)

Marisa Kendall | Housing reporter Marisa Kendall covers homelessness as part of the Bay Area News Group's housing team. She previously covered litigation for The Recorder in San Francisco, and started her career reporting on crime and breaking news for The News-Press in Southwest Florida.

mkendall@bayareanewsgroup.com

[Follow Marisa Kendall @MarisaKendall](#)

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