

PATIOS ADD TO CITY'S VIBRANCY

Growth of al fresco dining seen as key to a European-style street culture

Private seating configurations can infuse the realm with fresh energy. Vibrant and lively streets, in turn, support businesses and help strengthen a community's sense of place. Scott Edwards, Vancouver's manager of street activities. When restaurateur Daniel Frankel moved with his family to Vancouver more than 35 years ago, they found a city unlike those they had left behind in Israel, where the Mediterranean climate was perfect for eating outdoors and people did it in droves.

"When we moved here in 1979, Vancouver patios were three, four, five tables," he said on the sunny patio of his Tap & Barrel restaurant in Olympic Village. "Al fresco dining wasn't what it is today."

He said his family, along with business partners, changed that when they opened Bridges at the newly transformed Granville Island in 1981.

"That was the first mega patio," said Frankel.

The city and province were not as quick to see the appeal of eating and drinking while exposed to the elements — and because patios weren't licensed, part of that pioneering experience meant racking up liquor violations.

Bridges' sprawling sun-soaked patio, which sits on a dock on False Creek, has been joined by dozens of others throughout the city. They're popping up like sun umbrellas in all the touristy hot spots — and they're getting bigger and bigger.

Along with a city policy to encourage more outdoor meals by inviting the opening of more "parklets" (a seating area for public use built over a parking space) and "streateries" (similar to parklets but built for joint commercial and public use) and allowing existing patios to extend their hours, Vancouver has been allowing ever larger outdoor eating areas.

The number of patio licences for sidewalks or other public places granted by the city's licensing department peaked at 320 in 2014, dropping to 316 last year. This doesn't include restaurant rooftop patios and patios on private property, which don't require a city permit.

In 1998, the earliest city figures available, there were 127 licensed patios in Vancouver. This number grew steadily to 209 in 2001 and 272 in 2006, before hitting 300 in the summer following the 2010 Winter Olympics.

"The number of applications definitely increased toward 2010," said Scott Edwards, Vancouver's manager of street activities. "What people learned is that the extension of the business to the active street front, like they have in Europe, enlivened street culture."

A recent city report put the number of sidewalk patios, licensed and unlicensed, at more than 550. Meanwhile, Vancouver continues to invite the creation of parklets, which are maintained by the sponsoring business. After a pilot project started in 2013 saw the creation of six parklets, city staff recommended in June to allow more to be created.

Money. - cjk

Staff also recommended improving weather protection for sidewalk patios so they could be used during bad weather, something it said businesses strongly supported. City staff said in its report to council that "experimentation with new public and private seating configurations can infuse the realm with fresh energy. Vibrant and lively streets, in turn, support businesses and help strengthen a community's sense of place."

"Patos animate and activate a space," said Frankel while sipping a beer on the Olympic Village Tap & Barrel's upper patio. "It generates a certain energy and level of fun."

The view from his seat overlooks False Creek and includes many of Vancouver's postcard elements: foot ferries, sailboat marinas, a seawall busy with cyclists, pedestrians and joggers, Rogers Arena, the North Shore mountains, condo towers and cranes.

To that list of Vancouver symbols, Frankel would add a large, busy, crowded patio.

His restaurants boast some of Metro Vancouver's largest, including the 325 seats at the Olympic Village, made possible by encroaching on part of the seawall and plaza to add 50 seats with the city's permission. There's almost 300 seats at the Tap & Barrel's Convention Centre location, while the restaurant's Shipyards location at Lonsdale in North Vancouver boasts 350.

"Patios probably represent 50 per cent of our seating companywide," said Frankel.

The B.C. Restaurant and Foodservices Association applauds the city for "streamlining red tape" for licences, said president Ian Tostenson.

More and bigger patios are a "natural evolution" for Vancouver diners, who are used to seeing a more vibrant outdoor dining scene when they travel. "We've come to expect it," Tostenson said.

He said patios mean an uptick in business for restaurants during spring, summer and fall, except when it rains like it did in June and restaurateurs "actually felt that in their sales."

Return on investment is good for patios, according to research from U.S. restaurant industry consulting firm Vucurevich Simons Advisory Group. It estimated an outlay of US\$200,000 to open a patio would translate into \$500,000 over the season.

It said patio seating can increase restaurant revenue by 30 per cent — and restaurants are anxious for a piece of that, according to industry analyst Joe Stanton of Elevate Research.

"It's become a very important trigger that restaurants are trying to pull to grow revenues," Stanton said from his St. Paul, Minn., head office.

"Lots of folks are doing it, but doing it right is important. If not done right, it could end up doing more damage to the restaurant's reputation than if they didn't add a patio," he added.

Stanton said the two biggest problems are not enough staff and not delivering food and drinks fast enough.

"Customers have an even higher expectation of what the patio experience (as opposed to indoor dining) should be," he said. "If you slap up some tables and chairs next to a parking lot, where they can smell the fumes of the cars, you're going to get customers saying the patio was a miserable experience and I'm not coming back."

He said restaurants have to pay attention to speed of service, accuracy of the order, taste of the food, ambience, cleanliness and atmosphere when opening a patio.

"I don't have any data on a bigger ticket size for seats on a patio, but anecdotally, they're bigger moneymakers," said Stanton. "You can definitely increase your revenue potential."

"A sunny day can double a restaurant's business and some days you'd want more patio seats," said Pete Mahony of Mahony and Sons, which operates two mega patios, including a 250-seat space at Stamps Landing.

He said Vancouver has probably reached "peak patio" because "there are not a lot of spots left on the waterfront." Frankel pushes for as many patio seats as he can when opening.

"Patios definitely help increase the profit," he said. "People definitely drink more when they're on a patio. They also take their time more. They enjoy the sun."

"If we had a 20- to 30-seat patio, it would be pretty difficult to get turnover and volumes on that patio."

And "in the wintertime, you can certainly capture some additional square footage if you have a covered licensed area. So it absolutely does help the revenue model."

But how does one super-sized patio attract punters when the competition is usually right next door? Close to the Tap & Barrel's Convention Centre location, there's also Lift (90 outdoor seats), Cardero's (100), Tapshack (300), Cactus Club (200) Mahony & Sons (160) and Bellaggio Cafe (160).

"There's enough people to go around," said Frankel. "We're firm believers that competition breeds trade. We welcome other businesses, other patios."

"We'd love to see more patios opening up, side-by-side, just like you have throughout Europe and in Australia."