

## Healdsburg and Windsor ease downtown alcohol rules to help local restaurants



SLIDE 3 OF 5

Tiffany Krankemann, right, Rachel Ellis, and Ryan Beach enjoy drinks with their friends on the Windsor Town Green in Windsor, California, on Thursday, July 23, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

[KEVIN FIXLER](#)

THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

July 25, 2020

Friends Holly Hunt and Deb Kravitz unwound a few feet apart on a shaded bench in the Healdsburg Plaza on Thursday, their first get-together in months, celebrated with a takeout dinner and a toast, each holding aloft plastic cups brimming with colorful cocktails.

Hunt, who owns Russian River Tea Company, was inspired to head to the city's downtown greenspace to support another small business during difficult financial times, and invited her friend to the mock happy hour. The chance to wrap up work for the day and enjoy a "peach fizzy thing" outdoors in the pleasant evening temperature was too much to pass up, she said.

“I’m working six days a week right now, because I don’t have any employees. I need a couple drinks,” Hunt joked. “Just look at it, it’s gorgeous. It’s nice. We haven’t visited in a long time.”

Healdsburg and Windsor have opened the door for such low-key outdoor gatherings by relaxing rules governing alcohol consumption in designated public areas. While it won’t be like New Orleans or Las Vegas, where open containers are allowed almost citywide, in both local towns, imbibing is now legal in downtown spaces, including the Healdsburg Plaza and Windsor Town Green.

The eased city restrictions followed new state guidelines allowing restaurants to sell beer, wine and mixed drinks out the door for delivery and to-go with the purchase of food. Tasting rooms and restaurants say those softened regulations, allowing sealed alcoholic beverages to leave from a pick-up window, have prevented them from closing permanently amid the pandemic.

“We would not be in business without that,” said Laura Sanfilippo, co-founder and co-owner of Duke’s Spirited Cocktails on the Healdsburg Plaza. “With how high the rents are, there’s just no way.”

So there’s hope that the additional allowances on open containers — for adults of drinking age willing to partake responsibly — will prove an additional lifeline.

“We’re already operating with paper-thin margins right now, not allowing indoor seating and limited outdoor seating. Even if it’s just an extra \$100, that’s huge right now for a small business like us,” added Floyd Wells, owner of Corks & Taps restaurant in downtown Windsor. “All of these things are what’s going to help us get through this, and there’s still no guarantee.”

Cities in Sonoma County have long permitted people to share a bottle of wine or crack a few beers during special events in public spaces. But those events have all been canceled this year because of the pandemic, leaving parks and squares open to the type of small, private, outdoor gatherings that health authorities have said amount to safer interaction if social distancing and other key ground rules are followed.

But what to uncork when you do meet up?

In Sonoma, a rule has existed on the city’s books for decades allowing people to enjoy a drink in the city’s downtown plaza. Healdsburg first, and then Windsor last month, opted to follow suit, granting temporary clearance for open possession of alcohol on some sidewalks and in parks in their downtown areas.



Bartender Tia Nowak places lids on a pair of cocktails that were ordered to-go at Duke's Spirited Cocktails in Healdsburg, California, on Thursday, July 23, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

Windsor Mayor Dominic Foppoli, a winery owner, said the change is meant to aid local businesses and encourage residents to reconnect, get outside and socialize in a safe way.

“Windsor has such a strong sense of community, and one of the hardest things socially and emotionally to deal with is not being able to get together,” said Foppoli, co-owner and chief executive officer of Christopher Creek Winery south of Healdsburg. “This makes life a little bit more normal and positive and kind of breaks up the monotony of shelter in place.”

But industry watchdogs aren't so keen on local municipalities — including those in Wine Country — becoming more awash in alcohol by opening up shared public grounds for unrestricted drinking. The relaxed regulations may help businesses get by and also give a bump to city sales tax revenues, but they're taking the state in the wrong direction and leading to greater alcohol dependency, said Michael Scippa, public affairs director with San Rafael-based Alcohol Justice.

“The problem is it normalizes the relationship between supposed happiness and alcohol,” Scippa said. “It perpetuates the idea that life is always better with a drink in your hand, and it couldn't be further from the truth. Kids are going to look around and all they see is their parents drinking at every opportunity, on the street and in parks. So when do we say enough?”

Alcohol sales have soared during the pandemic, with in-store purchases nationwide up by 54% at the outset of California's shutdown in March compared to the same period last year, [according to New York-based market research firm Nielsen](#). Those numbers leveled off to an average of about a 23% increase through April, but with online sales skyrocketing by more than 475% during that same period.

City officials and local law enforcement say the new policies have so far led to no noticeable rise in drinking-related issues, including public intoxication or DUI arrests. “It appears to be working

as the city intended and we will continue to monitor the situation,” said Healdsburg Police Chief Kevin Burke.



Ryan Beach, right, Tim Labra, and Chris Denny carry their drink orders from KIN restaurant across McClelland Drive to their seats at the Windsor Town Green in Windsor, California, on Thursday, July 23, 2020. (Alvin Jornada / The Press Democrat)

On Thursday evening in Windsor — the night the town has closed downtown streets for the past month to promote local restaurants — a couple hundred people set out folding chairs on the Town Green to picnic together with family and neighbors at safe distances. Footballs and Frisbees were tossed and a handful of residents brought cornhole boards for after-dinner competitions.

Cotati resident Kate Smith, 27, made the drive north to Windsor to meet up with her friend Cori Miller, 26, for the first time since the county’s stay-at-home order took effect in March. The two plopped down on a pineapple patterned blanket and chatted while sipping a sauvignon blanc from Napa Valley that Miller served in reusable plastic cups.

“I came not even a month ago and there weren’t this many people here, so I guess it’s growing,” Miller said. “It still seems really spaced out, which is nice compared to years past on a Thursday night. That’s why we picked it, because this is where we feel most safe.”

The Windsor Town Council’s unanimous approval permits people to walk about and carry open containers between 8 a.m. and 10 p.m. in its downtown boundaries around the Town Green: north of Walten Way and south of Windsor River Road, between Highway 101 and Railroad Avenue. The program is in place until June, when it will be reviewed with a chance of becoming more long-term.

“I don’t want to say it’s like New Orleans, but it is kind of,” said Brenda Lynch, owner and winemaker at Mutt Lynch Winery in Windsor. “I want it to be a draw, but a small draw. If it gets too big, then we’re in trouble because of the crowds. But I think this is a really good thing for our community.”

Healdsburg was less permissive in its changes, which are set to expire in January. All public alcohol consumption must take place between 6 a.m. and 11 p.m. in the downtown plaza or nearby West Plaza Park, and city staff has the authority to discontinue the program if issues arise, according to Mark Themig, director of the city's Community Services Department.

Healdsburg's boundaries may be slightly amended as early as Monday, when the council is scheduled to review whether to close Plaza Street to traffic, freeing up more space for pedestrians and patrons next to the city center. The approval would allow drinking there, too, as a pilot program.

Healdsburg resident Domenica Catelli, co-owner of Catelli's restaurant in Geyserville, applauded the idea of expanding public gathering and patron space in downtown. On Thursday, she stopped by Duke's with visiting family before walking across the street into the plaza with some mixed drinks for a scaled-back version of her 50th birthday celebration.

"I'm double-fisting," Catelli said, balancing a strawberry daiquiri slush in one hand and a gin-and-yuzu cocktail in the other. "This is actually very surreal to be able to walk around with an open container in Healdsburg. It's going to be really hard if they ever try to go back, because so many people will be like, 'Wait, that worked, why can't we do that, too?' ... So long as people behave themselves."

*You can reach Staff Writer Kevin Fixler at 707-521-5336 or [kevin.fixler@pressdemocrat.com](mailto:kevin.fixler@pressdemocrat.com). On Twitter @kfixler.*