



Legacy Business Registry Staff Report

Hearing Date: February 27, 2023

TONY NIK'S CAFÉ

Application No.: LBR-2022-23-018
Business Name: Tony Nik's Café
Business Address: 1534 Stockton St.
District: District 3
Applicant: Sebastian Scala, Proprietor
Nomination Date: September 21, 2022
Nominated By: Supervisor Aaron Peskin
Staff Contact: Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
legacybusiness@sfgov.org

BUSINESS DESCRIPTION

Tony Nik's Café, originally a dry-cleaning service named Madame Nicco's French Laundry, was opened by Italian immigrants Angelina and Antonio "Tony" Nicco during the 1920s Prohibition era and 1930s Depression years. In 1933, after the repeal of Prohibition, Tony opened Tony Nicco's Café, becoming one of the first bars to obtain a liquor license in North Beach. At the time, food was required to be served with alcohol, which led the business to include Café in its name.

In 1949, the bar was remodeled, adding a stylish bar canopy, the unique checkerboard wooden wall tiles, and wall mural by a local artist names Nadine Torrance, all of which are experienced by patrons today. Tony retired in 1951 and sold the bar to Charles "Butch" Lavagnino, a lifetime friend and bartender who changed the name to Tony Nik's. Butch owned and operated Tony Nik's for nearly 50 years, and in 1999 sold the business to Mark Nicco, Tony's grandson. Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19, Tony Nik's was forced to close from March 15, 2020, to June 2, 2021. In March of 2022, the bar was sold to its current owner and longtime General Manager, Sebastian Scala.

The business has been owned and operating by people of Italian descent, serving as a popular location for residents and locals of North Beach. The bar has also hosted numerous actors, athletes, artist, and politicians throughout the years proving to be an important place of gathering for all walks of life. Great care has been taken to restore and maintain the elements that makes Tony Nik's Café unique, such as the original neon "Tony Nik's" sign that hangs outside, one of the oldest signs in North Beach. The interior features unique décor such as the stylish bar canopy, the unique checkerboard wooden wall tiles, and wall mural by Nadine Torrance has been enjoyed by patrons for nearly seven decades and will continue to serve North Beach for decades to come.

CRITERION 1

Has the applicant operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?

Yes, Tony Nik's Café has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years:

1534 Stockton St. from 1933 to Present (90 Years)

Legacy Business Program

Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





CRITERION 2

Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?

Yes, Tony Nik's Café has contributed to the history and identity of the North Beach neighborhood and San Francisco.

The Historic Preservation Commission recommended the applicant as qualifying, noting the following ways the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community:

- The business is associated with craft and classic cocktails.
- Several actors, athletes, artist, and politicians have spent time at Tony Nik's Café. The bar has hosted celebrities throughout its many decades in service, including Winona Ryder, Keanu Reeves, and Sammy Hagar. Pat Burrell, Shawn Estes, and Sergio Romo would often come in for a quiet drink to unwind after a San Francisco Giants victory. David Chiu threw his inaugural launch party at Tony Nik's when running for Board of Supervisors; and Vice President Kamala Harris would often come in as she and the previous owner, Mark Nicco, were colleagues and good friends.
- The property is mentioned in the North Beach Historic Context Statement that was adopted December 7, 2022. The parcel was surveyed during the 1984 North Beach Survey and was determined to be eligible for National Register of California Register. The Planning Department also lists the Historic Resource Status of this property as, A - Historic Resource Present.
- There have been several features and articles on Tony Nik's Café throughout the years including ones written by The San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, and Eater San Francisco. Further, the bar was written about by Herb Caen's articles in The Chronicle. Thrillist has featured Tony Nik's as one of the top 25 nightspots in San Francisco. More recently, the bar has been mentioned in the Dear San Francisco show at Club Fugazi. Tony Nik's Café has also received numerous awards including Eater San Francisco naming Tony Nik's the second-best cocktail bar in the city in 2019, San Francisco Bay Guardian's Best of the Bay awarded Tony Nik's as the best first date bar in the City, and SFGATE praised the bar as a must stop destination when in North Beach.

CRITERION 3

Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?

Yes, Tony Nik's Café is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

The Historic Preservation Commission recommends that Tony Nik's Café qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) and recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Original neon sign.
- Glass brick tile entrance.
- Identity as an iconic bar.
- Bar canopy.
- Checkerboard wooden wall tiles.
- Wall mural by Nadine Torrance.

Legacy Business Program
Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





CORE PHYSICAL FEATURE OR TRADITION THAT DEFINES THE BUSINESS

Following is the core physical feature or tradition that defines the business that would be required for maintenance of the business on the Legacy Business Registry.

- Bar.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Small Business Commission include Tony Nik's Café currently located at 1534 Stockton St. in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
Legacy Business Program

Legacy Business Program

Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





Small Business Commission

Resolution No. _____

February 27, 2023

TONY NIK'S CAFÉ

Application No.: LBR-2022-23-018
Business Name: Tony Nik's Café
Business Address: 1534 Stockton St.
District: District 3
Applicant: Sebastian Scala, Proprietor
Nomination Date: September 21, 2022
Nominated By: Supervisor Aaron Peskin
Staff Contact: Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
legacybusiness@sfgov.org

Adopting findings approving the Legacy Business Registry application for Tony Nik's Café, currently located at 1534 Stockton St.

WHEREAS, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; or

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for more than 20 years but less than 30 years, has had no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years, has significantly contributed to the history or identity of a particular neighborhood or community and, if not included on the Registry, faces a significant risk of displacement; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and identity; and

WHEREAS, the subject business is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business; and

WHEREAS, at a duly noticed public hearing held on February 27, 2023, the San Francisco Small Business Commission reviewed documents and correspondence, and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry application; therefore

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission hereby includes Tony Nik's Café in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

Legacy Business Program
Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission recommends safeguarding the below listed physical features and traditions at Tony Nik's Café.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Original neon sign.
- Glass brick tile entrance.
- Identity as an iconic bar.
- Bar canopy.
- Checkerboard wooden wall tiles.
- Wall mural by Nadine Torrance.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission requires maintenance of the below listed core physical feature or tradition to maintain Tony Nik's Café on the Legacy Business Registry:

- Bar.

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the Small Business Commission on February 27, 2023.

Katy Tang
Director

RESOLUTION NO. _____

Ayes –
Nays –
Abstained –
Absent –

Legacy Business Program

Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





Legacy Business Registry

Application Review Sheet

Application No.: LBR-2022-23-018
Business Name: Tony Nik's Cafe
Business Address: 1534 Stockton St.
District: District 3
Applicant: Sebastian Scala, Proprietor
Nomination Received: September 21, 2022
Nominated By: Supervisor Aaron Peskin

CRITERION 1: Has the applicant has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?

☒ Yes ☐ No

1534 Stockton St. from 1933 to Present (90 Years)

CRITERION 2: Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?

☒ Yes ☐ No

CRITERION 3: Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?

☒ Yes ☐ No

NOTES: n/a

DELIVERY DATE TO HPC: December 21, 2022

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
Legacy Business Program

Legacy Business Program

Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org



Member, Board of Supervisors
District 3



City and County of San Francisco

AARON PESKIN

September 21, 2022

Director Katy Tang, Via email <Katy.Tang@sfgov.org>
San Francisco Office of Small Business
City Hall, Room 110
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
415-554-6134

Director Tang:

I am writing to nominate Tony Nik's Café for inclusion on the Legacy Business Registry.

Established in 1933, Tony Nik's Café has marked North Beach's neighborhood with its illustrious presence and familial vibe for decades. It was originally instituted as a dry cleaning business "Madame Nicco's French" by Mark Nicco's grandparents who immigrated from Italy and then changed to Tony Nicco's Café. Now with the recent ownership transition, Sebastian Scala, a longtime frequenter and manager, is reinventing new ways to preserve Nik's Cafe's historic mark by featuring cocktail classics.

Tony Nik's Café would benefit from inclusion on the Legacy Business Registry, and it is my honor to nominate it for inclusion.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Aaron Peskin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Aaron" being more prominent.

Aaron Peskin



Legacy Business Registry Application



Business Information

Business name: Tony Nik's Cafe

Business owner name(s): Sebastian Scala

Identify the person(s) with the highest ownership stake in the business

Current business address: 1534 Stockton St. SF CA 94133

Telephone: (415) 269 – 6738

Email:

Mailing address (if different than above): 1918 Powell St. SF CA 94133

Website:

Facebook: Tony Niks

Twitter:

7-digit San Francisco Business Account Number (BAN): 1 0 1 7 7 8 8

Do any of these describe your business? (select all that apply)

Requires at least 51% of the business be owned, operated, and controlled by the business designation below.

☐ Immigrant-Owned Business

☒ Owned by Person with a Disability

☐ LGBTQ+-Owned Business

☐ Veteran-Owned Business

☐ Minority-Owned Business*

☐ Woman-Owned Business

**Minority is defined as on or more of the following racial or ethnic groups: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Middle Eastern or North African; Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander*

Contact Person Information

Contact person name: Sebastian Scala

Contact person title: Proprietor

Contact telephone: () –

Contact email:

Business Location(s)

List the business address of the original San Francisco location, the start date of business, and the dates of operation at the original location. Check the box indicating whether the original location of the business in San Francisco is the founding location of the business.

If the business moved from its original location and has had additional addresses in San Francisco, identify all other addresses and the dates of operation at each address.

Original San Francisco address: 1534 Stockton St. Zip Code: 94133

Is this location the founding location of the business? (Y/N): Yes

Dates at this location: From: 1933 To: 2022

Other address (if applicable): Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From: To:

Other address (if applicable): Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From: To:

Other address (if applicable): Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From: To:

Other Address (if applicable): Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From: To:

Other address (if applicable): Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From: To:

Applicant Disclosures

San Francisco Taxes, Business Registration, Licenses, Labor Laws and Public Information Release.

This section is verification that all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses are current and complete, and there are no current violations of San Francisco labor laws. This information will be verified. A business deemed not current with all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses, or has current violations of San Francisco labor laws, will not be eligible to apply for grants through the Legacy Business Program.

In addition, we are required to inform you that all information provided in the application will become subject to disclosure under the California Public Records Act.

Please read the following statements and check each to indicate that you agree with the statement. Then sign below in the space provided.

- ☒ I am authorized to submit this application on behalf of the business.
- ☒ I attest that the business is current on all of its San Francisco tax obligations.
- ☒ I attest that the business's business registration and any applicable regulatory license(s) are current.
- ☒ I attest that the Office of Labor Standards and Enforcement (OLSE) has not determined that the business is currently in violation of any of the City's labor laws, and that the business does not owe any outstanding penalties or payments ordered by the OLSE.
- ☒ I understand that documents submitted with this application may be made available to the public for inspection and copying pursuant to the California Public Records Act and San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance.
- ☒ I hereby acknowledge and authorize that all photographs and images submitted as part of the application may be used by the City without compensation.
- ☒ I understand that the Small Business Commission may revoke the placement of the business on the Registry if it finds that the business no longer qualifies, and that placement on the Registry does not entitle the business to a grant of City funds.

Name: Sebastian Scala

Signature: Sebastian Scala

Date: 09.27.22

TONY NIK'S CAFÉ

Written Historical Narrative

INTRODUCTION

a. Describe the business. What does it sell or provide?

Tony Nik's Café is a cocktail lounge located at 1534 Stockton Street in the heart of North Beach. The café serves beer, wine, liquor, and non-alcoholic cocktails. The Lounge at Tony Nik's is the perfect afternoon hideaway for an intimate rendezvous or a private oasis to unwind with friends. The Lounge is also perfect for your special occasion, equally comfortable for small gatherings or larger celebrations.

Step in and step back in time. Entering Tony Nik's will bring you back to an era of friendly and professional bartenders, ice cold beer, delicious cocktails, and drinks served just the way you like them.

b. Describe who the business serves.

Tony Nik's Café serves locals, tourists, restaurant industry people, and those needing a place to unwind after a long work day.

c. In about 2-5 words (15-30 characters), describe what the business is known for.

Cocktails and community.

CRITERION 1: The business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years

a. Provide a short history of the business, including locations and owners.

Tony Nik's Café was originally home to Madame Nicco's French Laundry, owned and operated by Angelina and Antonio "Tony" Nicco during the 1920s Prohibition era and the 1930s Depression years.

When Prohibition was repealed in 1933, Tony immediately opened Tony Nicco's Café, one of the first bars to open in North Beach. Tony Nicco's was called a café because, at that time, food was required to be served with alcohol.

The bar was remodeled in 1949, adding the stylish bar canopy, the unique checkerboard wooden wall tiles, and the wall mural by local artist Nadine Torrance.

In 1951, Tony retired and sold the bar to Charles "Butch" Lavagnino, a longtime friend and bartender. Butch changed the name of the bar to Tony Nik's and was no longer required to

serve food. The Tony Nik's sign that still hangs outside the bar is the original sign, one of the oldest signs in North Beach. Butch owned and operated Tony Nik's for rest of the century, close to 50 years, through the many changes that took place in North Beach and San Francisco.

Tony Nik's was sold in 1999 to Mark Nicco, Tony's grandson. Great care was taken to restore and maintain the bar with all of the special and unique elements intact.

In March 2022, longtime General Manager Sebastian Scala purchased Tony Nik's Café and is currently the owner.

b. Provide the ownership history of the business in a consolidated year-to-year format.

1933 to 1951:	Antonio Nicco
1951 to 1999:	Butch Lavagnino
1999 to 2022:	Mark Nicco
2022 to Present:	Sebastian Scala

c. Describe any circumstances that required the business to cease operations in San Francisco for any significant length of time.

Tony Nik's Café closed from March 15, 2020, through June 2, 2021, due to the global outbreak of COVID-19.

CRITERION 2: The business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community

a. Describe the business' contribution to the history and/or identity of the neighborhood, community, business sector, or San Francisco as a whole.

Tony Nik's Café was one of the first places in San Francisco to get a liquor license when Prohibition was repealed in 1933. Antonio Nicco, the original owner and an Italian immigrant, opened Tony Nicco's Café in December of 1933. This business venture affirmed the emerging status of North Beach as an Italian neighborhood run by Italian people. Throughout the bar's history, Tony Nik's has been owned and operated by people of Italian descent.

Since the 1930s, generations of San Franciscans have been congregating at Tony Nik's Café, making this classic cocktail spot home. Businesses have launched, romances have flourished, and friendships have formed throughout the years at Tony Nik's. The bar is the first place that many people think of going to once they're off work, eaten dinner, or need a place to relax.

b. Is the business associated with significant people or events, either now or in the past?

Many actors, athletes, artists, politicians, etc. have spent time at Tony Nik's. Whether it was Winona Ryder and Keanu Reeves talking about their next film or Sammy Hagar checking in to

drink his signature tequila, Tony Nik's has housed many celebrities. Pat Burrell, Shawn Estes, and Sergio Romo would often come in for a quiet drink to unwind after a San Francisco Giants victory. David Chiu threw his inaugural launch party at Tony Nik's when running for the Board of Supervisors. And Vice President Kamala Harris would often come in as she and previous owner Mark Nicco were colleagues and good friends.

c. How does the business demonstrate its commitment to the community?

Tony Nik's Café is dedicated and devoted to cultivating community within North Beach and the surrounding areas. Tony Nik's sponsors bocce ball tournaments and contributes to fundraisers for the San Francisco Italian Athletic Club, the Salesian Boys and Girls Club, homeless shelters, nonprofit organizations, and trash pickups. Community is everything to Tony Nik's.

d. Has the business ever been referenced in the media, business trade publication, and/or historical documents?

Tony Nik's Café has been in the news repeatedly over the years. They have been featured in The San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, and Eater San Francisco, including Herb Caen's articles in The Chronicle. Thrillist has featured Tony Nik's as one of the top 25 nightspots in San Francisco. And Tony Nik's has also been mentioned recently in the Dear San Francisco show at Club Fugazi.

e. Has the business ever received any awards, recognition, or political commendations?

Tony Nik's Café has received numerous rewards. Eater San Francisco named Tony Nik's the second-best cocktail bar in the city in 2019. San Francisco Bay Guardian's Best of the Bay awarded Tony Nik's as the best first date bar in the city. SF Gate chose Tony Nik's Café as a must stop destination when in North Beach.

f. How would the community be diminished if the business were to be sold, relocated, shut down, etc.?

If Tony Nik's Café were to close, the community would lose so much. Located in the heart of North Beach since 1933, a piece of the neighborhood's history and San Francisco's history would be gone.

CRITERION 3: The business is committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business

a. Is the business associated with a culturally significant building, structure, object, signage, mural, architectural detail, neon sign, or any other special physical feature that defines the business?

Tony Nik's Café has an iconic neon sign that protrudes out over Stockton Street, which has become synonymous to the bar. In addition, the glass brick tile that graces the outside of the bar harkens back to an era gone by.

b. In a few words, describe the main business activity you commit to maintaining.

Tony Nik's Café is committed to serving cocktails and community in an environment that is safe and warm to everyone who enters its doors.

c. What challenges is the business facing today?

Coming out of the COVID pandemic, the biggest challenge is securing people's confidence that they can come in, sit either inside or outside with a mask or without, and know that this is a safe, health-conscious environment.

Legacy Business Program staff will add the following details:

a. Features or traditions that define the business and should be maintained for the business to remain on the Legacy Business Registry.

Bar.

b. Other special features of the business location, such as if the property associated with the business is listed on a local, state, or federal historic resources registry.

The Planning Department Historic Resource Status of the building at 1534-1538 Stockton Street is "A - Historic Resource Present." It appears eligible for the National Register or California Register through a survey evaluation in 1984.









FOOD // RESTAURANTS

Tony Nik's in North Beach is still cool after 85 years

Maggie Hoffman

Dec. 4, 2018 | Updated: Dec. 5, 2018 11:39 a.m.



1 of 5



Bartender Devon Hersh at Tony Nik's bar and lounge on Wednesday, Nov. 28, 2018, in San Francisco, Calif. Tony Nik's is located at 1534 Stockton St.

Photos by Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

The sign outside Tony Nik's on Stockton Street has seen better days. The curves of each letter have darkened, and it's tricky to make out the "Nik's" at all; the word was painted in a patchy white rectangle on top of the original "Nicco's" when longtime bartender Charles Lavagnino — known to everyone as Butch — purchased the bar from its original owners, Angelina and Antonio Nicco, in 1951.

But Angelina and Antonio's grandson, Mark Nicco, who bought the bar with his husband Dan Kent when Butch retired in 2000, can't bear to replace the original sign. "I've been told it's too old to re-neon," he says, "but I can't bring myself to take it down."

When Nicco was a child, he'd come down from the Marina to visit his grandfather at the bar each Sunday after church. "He would sit up in the corner table, reading the newspaper, drinking his orange juice. Growing up, I always thought this place was so cool."

Tony Nik's is old-school but not kitschy, clean but not snobby, fun but not divey. It's the kind of place you want to bring a particularly promising date to chat at a cozy back table over potent boulevardiers. It's the sort of spot where you can gather a crowd of friends for beers before heading out for pizza, or roll in solo to talk with whoever's working that night.

"You walk in a stranger and you leave as a friend," says manager Sebastian Scala, who fell in love with the bar in 2004 and claims to know 65 percent of its patrons on any given night.

On the eve of Tony Nik's 85th anniversary, I ask Nicco and Scala how the bar has changed — and stayed the same — over the years. "In my grandfather's days," Nicco says, "it was absolute locals here. The bar was an extension of people's living rooms. It wasn't the same bar culture we have now." Tony Nicco served his go-to bourbon, Old Crow (which is still in the well here), and he was known for his holiday batch of manhattans, which he aged in the fridge with tangerine and lemon zest instead of bitters. His grandson still makes the recipe every year.

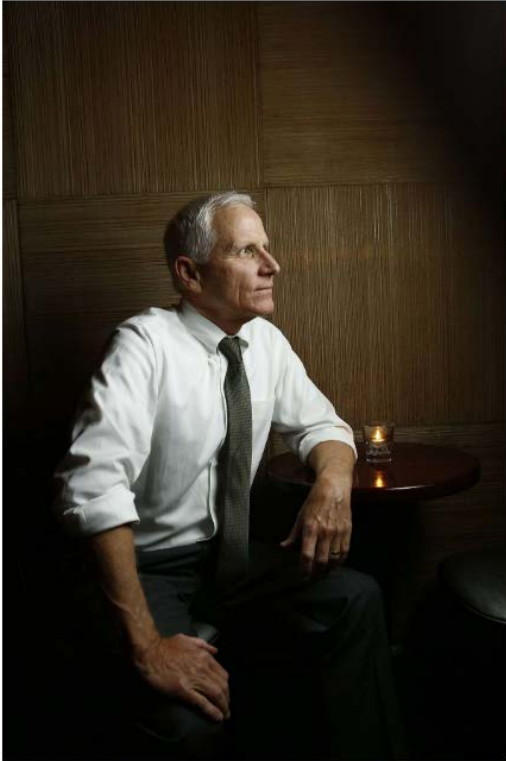


Tony Nik's on Stockton Street in North Beach celebrated its 85th anniversary. It is now run by the grandson of the original owners, who opened it as Tony Nicco's.
Santiago Mejia/The Chronicle

This space wasn't always a bar, though. Antonio and Angelina Nicco came to North Beach from Northern Italy in the 1910s and bought the building at 1534 Stockton St., moving into the apartment upstairs. They set up a French laundry called Madame Nicco's at street level, in the space where Tony Nik's now stands.

Angelina gave birth to Nicco's father in the office that's still used for bar administration today. "I guess it happened during work," Nicco laughs. "When you own your own business, you gotta be here, right?"

They were ready to convert the ground floor into a bar and cafe by December 1933: “They’d been making wine — and perhaps other things — downstairs during Prohibition,” Nicco says. In those days, the mafia tried to muscle into the local liquor business, but the legend goes that Tony was known to stand on the roof brandishing a rifle. He stayed independent.



A portrait of Mark Nicco at Tony Nik's bar and lounge on Wednesday, Nov. 23, 2016, in San Francisco, Calif. Tony Nik's is located at 1834 Stockton St. Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

Over the decades, Tony Nik's continued to be a place where regulars could be counted on. In 1994, Herb Caen interviewed the 78-year old Lavagnino for *The Chronicle*, noticing that he'd pushed the bar's opening from 9 a.m. to 10 a.m. after taking a break to recover from an illness. “Well,” he explained to Caen, “I got five 9 a.m. customers and four died while I was out, and the fifth moved to Petaluma.”

Lavagnino would close the bar each evening in time for dinner — or sooner if the ice, which was kept in a fridge in the back, ran out. That fridge was so inconvenient that he'd grab two beers if you ordered one. “Butch wasn't going to shuffle back there again. It was too far. So he'd just bring you two beers,” Nicco recalls.

Regulars always drank Campari drinks and Fernet Branca at Tony Nik's, and today the bar sells so much Fernet that it's among the top accounts in the city. Nicco chuckles, saying, “When I was a kid, Fernet was medicine. When you were sick, if your mother was Italian, she'd give you a shot of Fernet. If you didn't want to drink it,” he explains, “then you weren't sick.”



Bartender Devon Hersh at Tony Nik's bar and lounge on Wednesday, Nov. 23, 2016, in San Francisco, Calif. Tony Nik's is located at 1834 Stockton St. Santiago Mejia / The Chronicle

These days, we take our medicine gladly (it's offered as a shot-and-beer special called the Happy Meal for 10 bucks), or go for an excellent old-fashioned (\$11), made with 100-proof rye, plenty of muddled orange peel, and instead of sugar, a dollop of the syrup from Luxardo cherries. Moscow Mules and French 75s are popular, and on a crowded night, you may need to dodge an errant selfie stick. But while time marches on, Tony Nik's still feels a bit like a friend's living room. Some nights, the music's mellow, shifting from Dylan to Emmylou

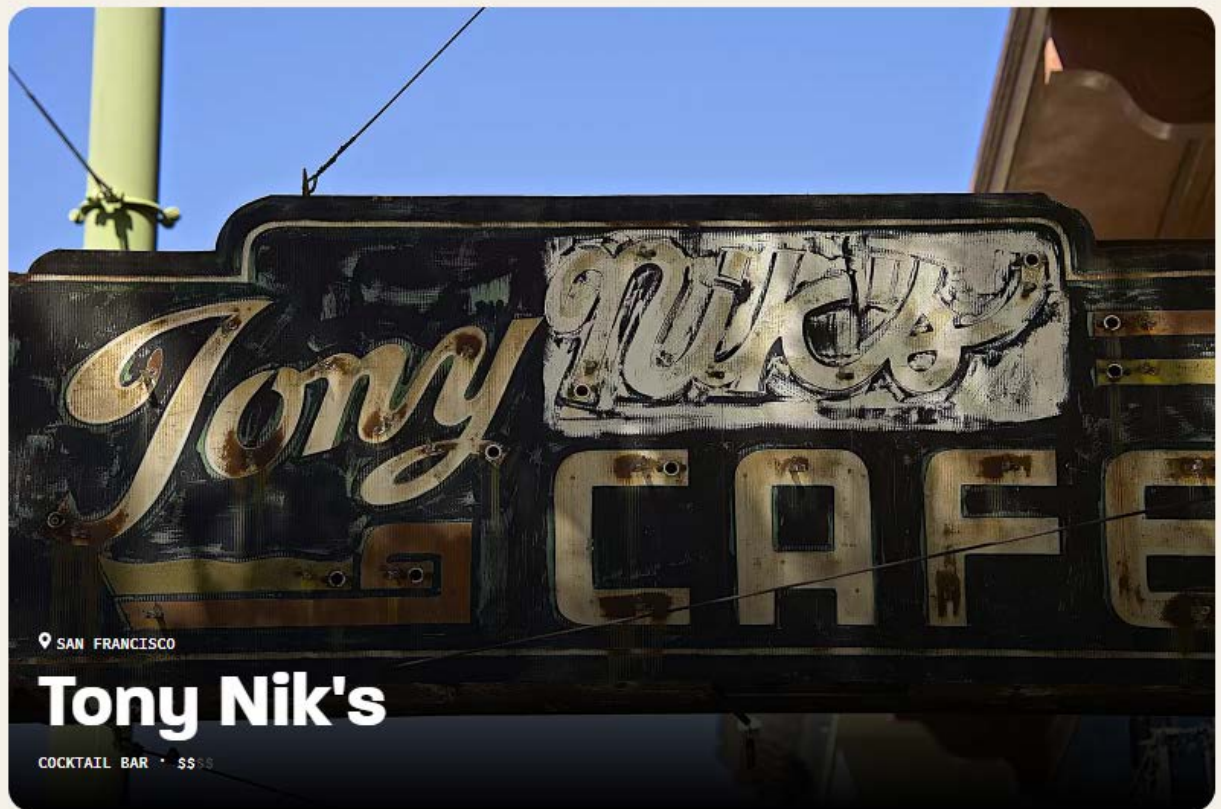
Harris, but on a recent Monday, our bartender turned it up and danced a little from one side of the bar to another, watching the game between pours. He was wearing knitted 49ers garb worthy of any Ugly Christmas Sweater prize, and brought us into the fold of conversation, inquiring about our holiday plans.

There's no fireplace at Tony Nik's, but it feels warm, still.

"Despite all the changes in San Francisco," Nicco tells me later, "North Beach is still an incredible neighborhood, with a lot of history, and this old bar is really a part of it. I don't take any credit for the success of this place — it's the place."

Maggie Hoffman is the author of "The One-Bottle Cocktail: More than 80 Recipes With Fresh Ingredients and a Single Spirit" (Ten Speed Press).

Twitter: [@maggiejhoffman](https://twitter.com/maggiejhoffman) Email: food@sfchronicle.com



Don't be fooled by the "café" sign out front -- one of the oldest signs in North Beach -- this cocktail spot doesn't actually serve food, but has kept its original moniker as a relic from its roots when bars had to have a kitchen in order to get a liquor license. One of the first bars to open after Prohibition (and in North Beach period), this classic has had plenty of time to perfect its cocktail-slinging craft. Today the vibe feels frozen in the '60s with wood paneling on the walls, and sleek low booths, making it the perfect place to order a Manhattan.

NEIGHBORHOODS

Preserving North Beach history, one martini at a time: the story of Tony Nik's bar

By Al Saracevic | Examiner columnist Jul 22, 2022 Updated Aug 26, 2022

1 of 2



Sebastian Scala, new owner of Tony Nik's in North Beach, holds up one of the bar's signature drinks.

Craig Lee/The Examiner

Tony Nik's feels like putting on your favorite sweater. Sure, it keeps you warm. But it's the comfort and coziness that makes it special.

The North Beach bar has been one of San Francisco's favorite sweaters for decades now, starting way back in 1933 when its first proprietors threw open the doors to celebrate the end of Prohibition. Nearly a century later, the place is going strong. When it reopened after an extended pandemic closure last June, neighborhood locals lined the streets waiting to get in.

It's that kind of place. And it's not going anywhere, thanks to Sebastian Scala. The bar's longtime general manager and primary barkeep took ownership of Tony Nik's on June 29, having bought the place from longtime owners Mark Nicco and Dan Kent. All parties involved said they felt this was the right thing to do. As Scala put it during a recent sit-down, "There is nobody on this planet of 7.7 billion people who intimately understands what works here and what doesn't work here better than myself."

What works is the atmosphere. I started coming to the place (located at 1534 Stockton St.) in the 1990s and it instantly became one of my favorites in all of San Francisco. It has a throwback, comfortable vibe that evokes classier times. The days of hats and heels and ice cold martinis. The mood lighting keeps things chill, and the music never overwhelms. You can sit belly up to the bar, where Sebastian usually chats everyone up and keeps the drinks moving. Or you can lounge on the funky banquets in the back under a mural that dates back to 1949 and a parquet wall that ties it all together. Tony Nik's is a mood, all right. A good mood.

And the best news of all? Scala isn't planning on changing much. He speaks of subtle changes, but the core ambiance will remain the same.

"It's a public house. It's a meeting place. It's safe, in a world that gets more and more unsafe," said Scala, describing his vision of Tony Nik's appeal. "It's a place that is comfortable where you can sit and have a drink with confidence and know that the person next to you isn't crazy or goofy or anything else. One of the things that I pride myself on, and our staff prides itself on, is that a single female can walk in here and feel comfortable having a drink. Again, it's comfortable and safe. That's what we want to cultivate. That's what we want to hang our hats on."

One minor point of contention is the aging sign that hangs out front of the bar. It's been in a charming state of disrepair for decades. Scala plans to restore it. Some people have complained about the plan, saying it's a local landmark, just as it is. But Scala wants to spruce it up.

"It's gonna be the same sign," said Scala. "But I believe that a sign should illuminate and attract. It has two functions in life. And I think it lost its illumination and it struggled with attraction. Some people are intimidated by it. ... One of my customers is a wonderful guy named Nick, a retired police officer. I was talking to him and he was against (restoring) it, originally. But then he said, 'I wonder what it looked like when it worked, when it was functional and doing its job?' So that's what I really want to do. I really want to restore it. Make it pop."

It's reassuring to see Scala assume ownership of this gem, in essence preserving one of The City's great watering holes. For those of us who have been here for a while, that's important. Too many of our great bars have vanished, places like the Elbo Room and Chameleon in the Mission.

Or Portal's Tavern in West Portal. We all shed a tear, or a beer, when Market Street dive bar Lucky 13 shut down in December. And I miss me some Lefty O'Douls, too.

But Tony Nik's remains, not too far from other North Beach mainstays like Gino & Carlo, Specs' and Vesuvio Cafe. Those are the four horsemen of the North Beach bar scene, in my book. (Shout out to my buddies at LaRocca's Corner, too.)

Scala lives a few blocks from his bar, with his wife, Mary, and two children, Giuseppe (16) and Savona (10). He coaches baseball, volleyball and basketball, and has a passion for wrestling, which he pursued as an athlete in his younger years. He peppers his conversation with "Sebastianisms," clever sayings and truisms that make the guy a born bartender.

In terms of how he makes Tony Nik's work, he fell back on his grappling career context. "So, in this industry, you can't be everything for everybody. I wrestled for 16 years and people would come up to me and say, 'You must know 1,000 moves.' I'd look at them and go, 'No, I know four moves really well. And that's kind of like this business. You want to really establish a niche and fit into that. For us, that niche is is a comfortable, safe environment where you know you're gonna get a well-crafted cocktail, you're gonna get a great conversation and you know you can be heard."

Amen to that.

Talking to Scala reminds you of how important North Beach is to San Francisco. Like many of our other quaint villages, it held firm through the pandemic, keeping San Francisco's fabric stitched together.

"I tell people this all the time. North Beach is like Mayberry R.F.D.," said Scala, referring to the fictional home of TV's "Andy Griffith Show." "There's something about the community, the people that stay. We become an enclave, we become a really a small town, a Mayberry. Any kid walking down the street, if I don't know him, he's on vacation. There's something about this community. That is why we're here. ... When I find out someone just moved here, I always say, 'You just won a winning lottery ticket.'"

And they can cash it in at Tony Nik's.



LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HEARING DATE: JANUARY 18, 2023

Filing Date: December 21, 2022
Case No.: 2022-012788LBR
Business Name: Tony Nik's Café
Business Address: 1534 Stockton Street
Zoning: NCD (North Beach Neighborhood Commercial) Zoning District
40-X Height and Bulk District
Block/Lot: 0116/021
Applicant: Sebastian Scala, Owner
1918 Powell Street
San Francisco, CA 94133
Nominated By: Supervisor Aaron Peskin
Located In: District 3
Staff Contact: Dakota Spycher – (628) 652-7588
Dakota.Spycher@sfgov.org

Recommendation: Adopt a Resolution to Recommend Approval

Business Description

Tony Nik's Café, originally and dry cleaning service named Madame Nicco's French Laundry, was opened by Italian immigrants Angelina and Antonio "Tony" Nicco during the 1920s Prohibition era and 1930s Depression years. In 1933, after the repeal of Prohibition, Tony opened Tony Nicco's Café, becoming one of the first bars to obtain a liquor license in North Beach. At the time, food was required to be served with alcohol, which led the business to include Café in its name.

In 1949, the bar was remodeled, adding a stylish bar canopy, the unique checkerboard wooden wall tiles, and wall mural by a local artist names Nadine Torrance, all of which are experienced by patrons today. Tony retired in 1951 and sold the bar to Charles "Butch" Lavagnino, a lifetime friend and bartender who changed the name to Tony Nik's. Butch owned and operated Tony Nik's for nearly 50 years, and in 1999 sold the business to Mark Nikko, Tony's grandson. Due to the global outbreak of COVID-19, Tony Nik's was forced to close from March 15, 2020 to June 2, 2021. In March of 2022, the bar was sold to its current owner and longtime General Manager, Sebastian Scala.

The business has been owned and operating by people of Italian descent, serving as a popular location for residents and locals of North Beach. The bar has also hosted numerous actors, athletes, artist, and politicians throughout the years proving to be an important place of gathering for all walks of life. Great care has been taken to restore and maintain the elements that makes Tony Nik's Café unique, such as the original neon "Tony Nik's" sign that hangs outside, one of the oldest signs in North Beach. The interior features unique décor such as the stylish bar canopy, the unique checkerboard wooden wall tiles, and wall mural by Nadine Torrance has been enjoyed by patrons for nearly seven decades and will continue to serve North Beach for decades to come.

The business's primary location at 1534 Stockton Street is a Category A (Historic Resource Present) structure on the east side of Stockton Street between Union Street, Green Street, and Columbus Avenue in the North Beach neighborhood. It is within the North Beach Neighborhood Commercial Zoning District and a 40-X Height and Bulk District. 1534 Stockton Street was identified as eligible for listing on the California Register or National Register in the 1984 North Beach Survey.

Staff Analysis

Review Criteria

1. *When was business founded?*

The business was founded in 1933.

2. *Does the business qualify for listing on the Legacy Business Registry? If so, how?*

Yes. Tony Nik's Café qualifies for listing on the Legacy Business Registry because it meets all of the eligibility Criteria:

- a. Tony Nik's Café has operated continuously in San Francisco for 90 years.
- b. Tony Nik's Café has contributed to the history and identity of the North Beach neighborhood and San Francisco.
- c. Tony Nik's Café is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the organization.

3. *Is the business associated with a culturally significant art/craft/cuisine/tradition?*

Yes. The business is associated with craft and classic cocktails.

4. *Is the business or its building associated with significant events, persons, and/or architecture?*

Yes. Several actors, athletes, artist, and politicians have spent time at Tony Nik's Café. The bar has hosted several celebrities throughout its many decades in service, including Winona Ryder, Keanu Reeves, and Sammy Hagar. Pat Burrell, Shawn Estes, and Sergio Romo would often come in for a quiet drink to unwind after a San Francisco Giants victory. David Chiu threw his inaugural launch party at Tony Nik's when running for Board of Supervisors; and Vice President Kamala Harris would often come in as she and the previous owner, Mark Nicco, were colleagues and good friends.

5. *Is the property associated with the business listed on a local, state, or federal historic resource registry?*

Yes. This parcel was surveyed during the 1984 North Beach Survey and was determined to be eligible for National Register of California Register. The Planning Department also lists the Historic Resource Status of this property as, A - Historic Resource Present.

6. *Is the business mentioned in a local historic context statement?*

Yes. This property is mentioned in the North Beach Historic Context Statement that was adopted December 7, 2022.

7. *Has the business been cited in published literature, newspapers, journals, etc.?*

Yes. There have been several features and articles on Tony Nik's Café throughout the years including ones written by The San Francisco Chronicle, San Francisco Examiner, and Eater San Francisco. Further, the bar was written about by Herb Caen's articles in The Chronicle. Thrillist has featured Tony Nik's as one of the top 25 nightspots in San Francisco. More recently, the bar has been mentioned in the Dear San Francisco show at Club Fugazi. Tony Nik's Café has also received numerous awards including Eater San Francisco naming Tony Nik's the second-best cocktail bar in the city in 2019, San Francisco Bay Guardian's Best of the Bay awarded Tony Nik's as the best first date bar in the City, and the SF Gate praising the bar as a must stop destination when in North Beach.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business

Location(s) associated with the business:

Current Locations:

- 1534 Stockton Street (1933-Present)

Recommended by Applicant

- Original neon sign
- Glass brick tile entrance

Additional Recommended by Staff

- Identity as an iconic bar
- Bar canopy
- Checkerboard wooden wall tiles
- Wall mural by Nadine Torrance

Basis for Recommendation

The Department recommends the Historic Preservation Commission adopt a resolution recommending the business listed above be adopted by the Small Business Commission to the Legacy Business Registry.

ATTACHMENTS

Draft Resolution

Legacy Business Registry Application:

- Application Review Sheet
- Section 1 – Business / Applicant Information
- Section 2 – Business Location(s)
- Section 3 – Disclosure Statement
- Section 4 – Written Historical Narrative
 - Criterion 1 – History and Description of Business
 - Criterion 2 – Contribution to Local History
 - Criterion 3 – Business Characteristics
- Contextual Photographs and Background Documentation



HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RESOLUTION NO. 1297

HEARING DATE: JANUARY 18, 2023

Case No.: 2022-012788LBR
Business Name: Tony Nik's Café
Business Address: 1534 Stockton Street
Zoning: NCD (North Beach Neighborhood Commercial) Zoning District
40-X Height and Bulk District
Block/Lot: 0116/021
Applicant: Sebastian Scala, Owner
1918 Powell Street
San Francisco, CA 94133
Nominated By: Supervisor Aaron Peskin
Located In: District 3
Staff Contact: Dakota Spycher – (628) 652-7588
Dakota.Spycher@sfgov.org

ADOPTING FINDINGS RECOMMENDING TO THE SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSION APPROVAL OF THE LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY NOMINATION FOR TONY NIK'S CAFÉ CURRENTLY LOCATED AT 1534 STOCKTON STREET; BLOCK/LOT 0116/021.

WHEREAS, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has contributed to the City's history and identity; and

WHEREAS, the subject business is committed to maintaining the traditions that define the business; and

WHEREAS, at a duly noticed public hearing held on January 18, 2023, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed documents, correspondence and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry nomination.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends that Tony Nik's Café qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) as it has operated for 30 or more years and has continued to contribute to the community.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions for 1534 Stockton Street.

Location(s):

Current Locations:

- 1534 Stockton Street (1933-Present)

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business

- Original neon sign
- Glass brick tile entrance
- Identity as an iconic bar
- Bar canopy
- Checkerboard wooden wall tiles
- Wall mural by Nadine Torrance

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission's findings and recommendations are made solely for the purpose of evaluating the subject business's eligibility for the Legacy Business Registry, and the Historic Preservation Commission makes no finding that the subject property or any of its features constitutes a historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5(a).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby directs its Commission Secretary to transmit this Resolution and other pertinent materials in the case file 2022-012788LBR to the Office of Small Business on January 18, 2023.



Jonas P. Ionin
Commission Secretary

AYES: Wright, Black, Foley, Johns, So, Nageswaran, Matsuda

NOES: None

ABSENT: None

ADOPTED: January 18, 2023