

**Source:** Downtown Publications

## Happy Hour

by Lisa Brody

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Happy Hour, that magical time of day between the end of the work day and dinner time, has become very in for restaurants once again. While the three-martini lunch has gone the way of Mad Men hats and lunchtime trysts, and breakfast meetings tend to be all work and no play, Happy Hours are an ideal time to get together and catch your breath before heading home for dinner. They can be a casual networking opportunity, or a relaxed way to connect with friends and colleagues. And the prices on drinks and appetizers couldn't be more right.

"Happy Hours aren't as agenda driven as other times; there isn't as much networking done then as other times of day," said Kevin Mazziotta, manager of Toast in Birmingham. "It's a more low pressure time of day. People can relax and unwind. It's that moment after work and before you go home, because we all have obligations at home."

Happy Hour is actually a marketing term for a period of time, almost always longer than an hour, when a restaurant or bar offers discounts on alcoholic drinks, like beer, wine and cocktails, and often, specially-priced appetizers. Most establishments have Happy Hours during the week as an incentive to get people in the door during a slow time of the day, well after the lunch crush is over, and before the dinner hour has begun. Some restaurants offer Happy Hours every day, and some others return to it late at night, after 10 p.m., as an incentive to have people return to their bar area after the dinner crowd has gone home.

It's believed that the term "Happy Hour," and the idea of drinking before dinner, has its roots in the Prohibition era. During that time, people would host cocktail hours, also known as "Happy Hours" at a speakeasy before going on to eat at a restaurant where alcohol could not be served. After the Constitution's 18th Amendment, which established Prohibition, was overturned, cocktail lounges continued the trend of drinking before dinner, and in the 1950s and 1960s, it became popular to enjoy a cocktail before dinner.

"TGIF's (the restaurant chain) had one of the original Happy Hours in the 1970s," said Fleming's Prime Steakhouse & Wine Bar chef partner Chris Gadulka. "The idea was that you were home by dinner. It was a slow time for restaurants. The concept was of giving you something small and inconsequential, and to sell it for a quarter of the price to get you in the door."

In the 1990s, as alcohol awareness programs and anti-drunk driving campaigns grew, as well as budgets for freewheeling dinners knew no bounds, Happy Hours at many restaurants met their demise.

"In the late 1990s, early 2000s, money was no object for lots of diners. For restaurants, there was less of a need to get people in. Then, with the downturn, people were turning inwards. Now, people want to treat themselves again," Gadulka said.

And restaurants, smarting from the lengthy recession, are once again looking to get patrons into dining rooms and lounges at a time of day that is typically very quiet.

"Happy Hours are important because we want to capture some of the after work crowd," said Toast's Mazziotta. "We're an unpretentious venue, and people come and relax."

A majority of Birmingham and Bloomfield's restaurants and bistros have adopted some kind of Happy Hour, often times for customers eager to find a place where everyone knows their name.

"In our area, at our restaurant, we have a pretty established clientele who come in for our Happy Hour," said John Bertoncin, manager of Hogan's Restaurant on Telegraph in Bloomfield Township. "We have our regulars. A lot of them come in for Happy Hour, and then stay for dinner."

Hogan's owner Rick Bochenek said they tend to get between 30 to 50 Happy Hour customers a day; more people stop in for a drink and appetizers in the winter than in the summer, even though they have an outdoor deck to enjoy Happy Hour cocktails. Hogan's Happy Hour is Monday through Friday from 3:30 to 5:30, with different drink specials daily, and half-off any menu appetizer.

"In the summer, a lot of people are traveling up north in the summer, especially on Fridays," Bochenek said. "We also get a lot of teachers after work during the school year."

Bochenek has found both the economic downturn and the road construction on Telegraph the last two years have played a large role in the success of their Happy Hour.

"People are really looking for value right now," he said. "It drives people in. They come in and ask what beer is on special, and what drinks are on special. Before, people never asked about what was on special."

"Some people just want to get out of the traffic on Telegraph," Bertoncin said. "Happy Hour is a nice break between work and going home." He noted that their crowd tends to be a middle-aged to older crowd enjoying a drink after work.

Vera Day Rizer, general manager of Big Rock Chophouse on Eton in Birmingham, which has a Happy Hour Monday through Friday with food service from 4 to 6, and at the bar, from 4 to 7, said it has been a good endeavor for the restaurant.

"We have had Happy Hours for a couple of years," she said. "We have found it's a good way to fill a slower time of the day for us, and a good way to wrap up the end of the day for many of our customers. People like to come in to an energized place, and it's really nice to have that activity in the dining room at a dead time of the day."

Rizer said Big Rock has a rewards program, and Happy Hour drinks and appetizers, which include \$2 buffalo chicken sliders with fries and ground beef tenderloin sliders and fries, and \$3 salmon cakes, as well as oysters on the half shell and calamari for \$4, all counting towards their rewards program. "The program (the rewards program) is free, and every dollar spent counts towards it," she said.

She said they see many of the same faces, and enjoy both their regulars and periodic drop ins. "We're packed every day. People love it," she said.

"We extend our Happy Hour to the dining room until 6, and at the bar until 7, and then at 6, we ask for those seats in the restaurant to be given up for restaurant reservations," she said.

Happy Hour socializing often spills into the dining room at Fleming's as well, said Robert Loomis, operating partner. While their Happy Hour technically starts at 5, going until 7, regulars frequently wander in as early as 4:30 to get a good seat in their bar area.

"Everyone has a cocktail in the bar, and a bottle of wine in the dining room," Loomis said.

Fleming's offers their Happy Hour nightly, including weekends, where there are five special appetizers for \$6, five wines by the glass for \$6, and five special cocktails, including martinis, cosmopolitans and "skinny" cocktails that are only 99 calories, for \$6 each. The specialty cocktails change monthly.

Fleming's chef Gadulka said, "All of the appetizers on our Happy Hour menu are offered full-size in our main dining room as appetizers. The best deal of all is our Fleming's Prime Burger, which is our full-size burger, that's \$6 until 7, and then is \$12."

"We see the same people two to three times a week, and we welcome them," said Loomis. "We have an engaging staff who want to be friends with the people who are here. We're thrilled to have them at that time of day, because it's in the front of the restaurant, and it shows the busyness and vibrancy of the establishment. Often, by 6, it's standing room only in here."

Susan Peabody, owner with her sisters of Peabody's Restaurant on Woodward in Birmingham, said they get a variety of people coming in each day at Happy Hour. They actually offer two different Happy Hours; one, from 3 to 6, Monday

through Saturday; and a unique one on Mondays through Thursdays from 9 until close, when they offer well drinks for \$3, house wines for \$3.50, pints of beer for \$2.50, and four appetizer specials.

"We get some people earlier in the day than they would have come if we didn't have a Happy Hour, and then they stay for dinner, and then on Mondays through Thursdays, we have a great group later in the evening," she said. "We view it as a win-win for both the bar and the kitchen."

"Our Happy Hour is very popular, especially on certain days," said Fadi Achour, general manager of Zazio's on Woodward at Maple in Birmingham. Their Happy Hour is Mondays through Fridays, from 4 to 7. "On Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, we get a lot of local business people after work coming in, socializing. We also get a lot of 'girls night out' after work, where girls meet up for martinis and appetizers."

He said there are some customers who translate into dinner, but most are there strictly for the Happy Hour. "It's a pit stop before going home," Achour said. "Our bar is very attractive. Often, people will stay and enjoy our full menu at the bar, eating right on the bar itself. Our bar has a very fun atmosphere. Diners seem to come in to dine."

He enjoys having his Happy Hour crowd, and appreciates every customer. "Happy Hour is a space you want to fill," he said. "Not everyone wants to come in and spend \$200 or \$300. Some people are on a budget, or have very limited time. Happy Hour is something else that brings people in. At another time, they may come back for dinner in the dining room or at the chef's table. And on the weekends, the bar is filled up with locals and people waiting for tables. So during the week, it's great for filling seats in the bar."