

Marin changes policy to now allow dogs to sit with owners at restaurants with outdoor seating

by Rob Rogers

They don't make reservations, aren't much for dinner conversation and rarely (if ever) tip. Yet **dogs are now welcome in Marin County's outdoor dining areas**, thanks to a change of heart by the county Department of Environmental Health.

"It's allowed—but only when the dining area has access from the outside," said David Smail, supervising registered environmental health specialist with the department. "We're not allowing animals with their owner to go through the food facility. The health and safety code prohibits them from coming inside, unless they are guide animals, signal animals or security animals."

Smail said his department changed a long-standing policy after receiving complaints from local restaurateurs.

"Our take had been that if the seating was under control of the food facility, then the seating was part of that food facility," Smail said. "We looked carefully at what the health and safety code prohibits and/or allows, and found that policy decision wasn't reasonable."

One of those who complained was San Francisco attorney Rubin Glickman. Glickman, who represents the Sausalito restaurant Poggio, questioned why restaurants were receiving \$150 tickets for serving al fresco diners with dogs - when the same dogs could legally sit on a public sidewalk just a few inches away.

"People want to come eat with their dogs," Glickman said. "But they couldn't get into a restaurant without being penalized. And it's not the dog owner who was being ticketed, but the restaurant."

Several restaurant owners said they welcomed the change of policy, while a few said they'd already found ways to accommodate four-legged guests.

"We're very dog-friendly outside, and very strict inside," said Nina Bonfiglio, an employee at the Sausalito restaurant Fish. "A lot of people definitely bring their dogs. We have bowls outside, and they love it. We haven't experienced one dog fight, one person being offended or one person's dog being annoyed. Everyone knows they're allowed outside, and are appreciative of that."

That's exactly the kind of policy the Marin Humane Society can support, spokeswoman Carrie Harrington said.

"We can endorse that, as long as people have their dogs under control and are respectful of other people," Harrington said. "That's the key—to think of it as a privilege. It's the same thing that applies while walking your dog: always be respectful of others and follow the rules. It only takes one person not following the rules to make all dog owners look bad."

Marin's new policy may be unusual; Napa, for example, bans dogs at outdoor dining areas. But it's a policy that seems to be in keeping with the desires of local restaurants and their customers: the website Dogfriendly.com lists 36 Marin eateries with outdoor dining areas willing to accommodate pets.

"In Marin, you're dealing with a significant part of the population that has dogs," Harrington said. "I think people have been wanting to do that (dine outside with their dogs) for a long time."

Mark Sheff agrees.

"We absolutely have a lot of people who have their dogs with them and want to sit next to them outside," said Sheff, manager of Bolinas' Coast Cafe. "I worked at the Station House Cafe in Point Reyes Station for a long time, and a lot of people wanted to have their dogs there, too."

