



THE NOE VALLEY VOICE

Ringling in the Season in Noel Valley

From Christmas and Holiday Fests to Chanukah Wonderland

By Kit Cameron

There's all kinds of merry going on in the 'hood for the holiday season in December.

Starting off the month, on Saturday, Dec. 3, you will get to sashay your Santa groove at the Noe Valley Town Square, starting at 5 p.m. Jaime's Martial Arts students will bust some moves, and the vocal group the Loosies will get you to warm up those pipes with some Christmas carols as the Mission High cheerleading squad counts down to the tree lighting at 5:30. But the biggest sparkle of all will come when Flow Arts gets us to trip the LED light fantastic. Wear UV-reactive clothes to take advantage of the black light flooding the square.

You won't want to miss the Baltic Christmas Fair that same day at Latvian Hall, 425 Hoffman Ave., from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Neighbors of the 60-plus-year-old church are always glad for the opportunity to see inside the ballroom, with its 25-foot ceilings of pressed tin, glimmering chandeliers, and ornately carved walls. And there is no charge for admission!

This joyous event will give you a chance to do some holiday shopping—vendors from the Baltic community will be selling everything from knitted goods, ceramics, woodwork, toys, and dolls to jam and other traditional food. The Estonian, Latvian, and



Miles of Smiles. Fadi Shatara shows his approval after receiving news that the convenience store he manages at 1001 Castro St. sold a million-dollar-plus winner in the California Lottery. See story on page 9. Photo by Corrie M. Anders

Lithuanian-American communities have been putting on this event for eight years and were thrilled, after being downed by Covid, to be back again in full force last year. The organizers bring all their energy and love to this fair, with the Estonian Community Choir singing at 11 a.m. and additional cultural programming throughout the afternoon. Santa promises to make a visit. And you can get a delicious lunch made by the ladies of the church. Be sure early, as the lunch always sells out.

Before you head over to the Town Square, stop by Chung 24 Gallery at 4071 24th St. (between the bakery and the chocolate store)) for the reception of "Perceptions," featuring the fine-art photography of Icelandic artist Charlotte Hauksdottir from 2 to 5 p.m.

Then comes Sunday, Dec. 4, also known as the Second Sunday of Advent in our local churches. And nothing says Advent, the season of waiting and contemplation, like a vocal chamber ensemble with a repertoire of sacred (and secular) music spanning a thousand years.

In "Sweet Was the Song," the men of Clerestory will evoke the joy and mystery of the season with a performance at 7:30 p.m. at the Noe Valley Ministry Presbyterian Church. As they put it, "From Renaissance masters like Tallis, Josquin, and Lassus, to 20th-century choral craftsmen Britten, Howells, and Rutter...the Christmas story is brought to life through music. You can get

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Caution Rules As Citizens Adapt To Covid

Dr. Wachter Offers His Forecast On Our Winter Vulnerability

By Liz Highleyman

Covid cases are rising in San Francisco, now accompanied by an upsurge of flu and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV) in kids, but experts don't foresee a huge winter wave like last year's Omicron surge. Nevertheless, they warn, the coronavirus could take us by surprise again.

Speaking at his final White House Covid briefing on Nov. 22, Dr. Anthony Fauci said the administration hoped that enough people had immunity from vaccination or previous infection that "we're not going to see a repeat of what we saw last year at this time."

At this time last year, cases were at a low ebb and many experts thought we could avoid a big winter upswing. But the highly transmissible Omicron variant, first detected in San Francisco at the start of December, changed everything, leading to the largest wave yet in January and February.

But how much should we worry about what lies ahead? For a look at where we are now and where we might be headed, the *Noe Valley Voice* once again turned to longtime Noe Valley resident Dr. Bob Wachter, chairman of the Department of Medicine at the University of California, San Francisco.

San Francisco is now seeing a "mild surge" in cases and a small increase in

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Residents Contend With Glut of Gophers

Critters Having a Field Day in Diamond Heights

By Matthew S. Bajko

Residents concerned about a housing development slated to be built on a hillside near the border of Noe Valley and Diamond Heights hired ecologist Shawn Smallwood, Ph.D., to do an environmental assessment of the property. During his visits over two days in July last year, Smallwood was struck by the telltale signs of a small furry animal at the site, *Thomomys bottae*.

Commonly known as Botta's pocket gopher—named for 19th-century California naturalist Paul-Émile Botta—the burrowing mammal had left its holes and mounds all across the sloped parcel at 1900 Diamond St. Smallwood snapped several photos of them and included them in his report. "Pocket gophers turn the soil over,



A Proliferation of "Pocket Gophers" on the hillside called Topaz Open Space has prompted a group (of humans) to ask the city to assess the damage caused by extensive burrowing near where Diamond Street meets Diamond Heights Boulevard. Photo by Art Bodner

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Dr. Bob Wachter's Thoughts on Covid This Winter

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hospitalizations after “a pretty benign” last six months, “but it’s nowhere near what we saw last January,” Wachter said in a late November interview.

On Nov. 22, the number of new cases averaged 115 per day, Covid hospitalizations stood at 79, and only one death had been reported thus far during the month, according to the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

Wachter attributed the rise to “new and somewhat more immune-evasive variants and less cautious behavior.”

Since July, the BA.5 Omicron variant has been the dominant strain in the U.S., but now two descendants, BQ.1 and BQ.1.1, have taken over.

These variants are “a little bit better at evading immunity,” Wachter said, but so far they are “not any more severe than the prior ones, and they still seem to be held in check fairly well by the amazing amount of immunity in the population. People have either been vaccinated or gotten infected or both.”

While vaccines and natural immunity are not as good at preventing infection with the newer variants, they still dramatically lower the risk of severe illness and death.

What's Safe to Do Now?

Since early in the pandemic, Wachter's Twitter followers—now numbering more than 270,000—have eagerly awaited his tweets on how he assesses the risk of certain activities, such as indoor dining, shopping, or hosting a poker game, one of his rou-

tine pleasures. As far as he knows, he still hasn't had Covid.

At age 65, in generally good health, and up to date with boosters, Wachter has set his personal risk threshold at 10 new cases per 100,000 people per day. As the number goes up or down, he adjusts his behavior accordingly.

San Francisco fell below Wachter's threshold in early October, but by late November, the number was back up to 14 cases per 100,000.

“The risk two months ago got down to where I was comfortable doing indoor dining, comfortable with my poker games, but now the case numbers in San Francisco are about twice what they were in early October,” he said. “It's now crossed my indoor dining threshold. It's just a little too risky for me.”

Fortunately, Noe Valley and surrounding neighborhoods have plenty of heated outdoor dining options.

“I still wear a mask in crowded public places, including airplanes or on a bus,” Wachter continued. “If I don't need to be inside in a poorly ventilated space without a mask, then I'm going to choose not to [be inside].”

He noted he was comfortable having a small number of vaccinated people at his house if everyone had been tested. He also said he hosted 12 guests for Thanksgiving dinner—mostly outside, but as the temperature got chillier, the group came inside for dessert. He estimated that testing before an event lowered risk by about 50 percent.

Get Your Shots

Like Wachter, Noe Valley residents seem to be calibrating their behavior as cases rise. More people on 24th Street are wearing masks now—indoors and out—than they were a month ago.

In addition to behavior changes,



November walkers and bakery-goers on 24th Street seem confident of the future, despite nearing a fourth year of Covid health precautions. Photo by Jan Brittonson

Wachter encourages people to get the updated Pfizer or Moderna bivalent boosters, which contain both the original Covid variant and BA.5. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends the new boosters for people ages 5 and up.

“There's just no question that if your last booster or infection was more than six months ago, then your immunity has waned significantly, and you're at much higher risk than you could be if you got this booster,” Wachter said.

For those who do come down with Covid, particularly older people, he recommends the antiviral drug Paxlovid, which lowers the risk of severe outcomes.

On top of Covid, San Francisco is having “a moderate surge in flu, which we haven't seen for three years,” and a “severe outbreak of RSV, which is nearly overwhelming children's hospitals,”

he said. Wachter recommends the flu shot for both adults and children—it's available for ages 6 months and up. There are no RSV vaccines yet, but that could change next year.

“I have huge sympathy for parents trying to navigate this,” Wachter said. “I wouldn't say parents can't take their kids to the grocery store, but if I had a little baby, I would be careful about being in crowded spaces with bad ventilation. A lot of RSV spread is from touching, so hand-washing is more important for RSV than it is for Covid.”

Long Covid Still a Concern

Wachter said he is not currently concerned about severe acute Covid or death, but he worries about the long-term consequences, both the persistent symptoms known as long Covid and an elevated long-term risk of heart attacks and other health problems.

On TV and social media, Wachter and his wife, journalist and author Katie Hafner, have discussed the lingering symptoms she experienced after a bout of Covid in May.

She's “about 80 to 90 percent back to normal,” said Wachter, but still she gets fatigued more easily and “feels like her brain is a little foggy.” She's now careful to avoid another case of Covid because it could get worse again, he said.

“The possibility that I'm going to die if I get Covid almost doesn't factor into my thinking anymore. It's really all about long Covid,” Wachter said. “In 2020, I didn't want to be in the intensive-care unit on a ventilator or die. Today, it's the long-term risks.”

“It's no longer a situation where it feels reasonable to me to be isolated, but it does feel reasonable to take the precautions that really don't compromise my quality of life,” he said. ■

Mastering the Art of Aging

By Suzanne Herel

Research shows that we're living up to 20 years longer than previous generations. So how do we make the most of that “extra” time?

On Lok, which operates an array of senior services at 30th Street Senior Center, has one of the answers: enroll in the Aging Mastery Program (AMP).

AMP is a 10-week curriculum that explores a different topic each session, such as exercise, medication, food choices, or relationships. The next course is set to kick off Jan. 10, 2:30 to 4:30 p.m.

Valorie Vilella, senior program development director for On Lok, said the organization is the only licensed provider in San Francisco offering the program, which was developed by the National Council on Aging.

Prospective enrollees are asked to take a half-hour orientation, so they know what to expect, Vilella said. Those sessions are set for Dec. 8, Dec. 15, and Dec. 29, from 3 to 3:30 p.m.

“There's not a ‘how to grow older’ book,” Vilella said. “This is a comprehensive bunch of topics that you usually have to go to different seminars to find.”

The course emphasizes lifestyle changes that can enhance your health, financial security, and sense of well-being.

Started during Covid, the AMP workshop is virtual and open to any Bay Area resident 55 or older who can navigate Zoom. Tuition is \$100, but those experiencing hardship can request the program be subsidized by On Lok.

Since January 2021, On Lok has



Graduates of On Lok's Aging Mastery Program give the course a high-five. The next 10-week course starts in January. Photo courtesy Valorie Vilella

graduated 172 participants, many from Noe Valley.

One of the first was Kevin Wallace, a retired remodeling contractor who lives at Noe and Day streets.

“I considered it just a good light-weight primer for things that affect people in my age group,” said Wallace, who is 71.

“When you're in high school and college, it's kind of laid out. There's nothing laid out when you are older,” he said. “The main thing is that it corroborated what I'd already been doing—my big thing is eat right, sleep, exercise, and socialize.”

Charles Hostetter, a retired medical consultant who lives on 26th Street

between Church and Sanchez streets, said he enrolled after being intrigued by some of the topics on the flyer a friend showed him. At 82, he felt he was on the right track, but also thought he could learn a thing or two.

One of the takeaways for him was the importance of maintaining relationships.

“It caused me to reassess for myself that I do have a few relationships that are close and ongoing, but that I should probably make greater efforts to expand the scope of my relationships,” Hostetter said.

“One of the things I've been more attentive to is being more open to even talking to people in the coffee shop. I

tend to be a closed-in person, but I learned all I need to do is say hello and, ‘I love your dog,’” he said with a laugh.

Vilella said the program draws on the rich field of experts in the Bay Area and includes guest speakers for half of the sessions. But she stresses that it is workshop-based and interactive.

“One of the goals is to create, as much as we can, a sense of community and connectedness and to give people tools for this stage,” she said.

Following graduation, “we're keeping tabs on these people,” she said, in part through an alumni network.

Those interested in signing up for the orientation can contact Vilella at 415-439-9364 or valorie@onlok.org. ■