

Fully Vaccinated and Time to Party: If You Are 70

Older Americans still make up a majority of those who have been inoculated, and many are taking advantage and venturing out.



Marcia Bosseler, 85, is back to playing Ping-Pong — and beating all the men, she says — at her apartment complex in Coral Gables, Fla. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times



By Jennifer Steinhauer

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Bobby Stuckey flipped through receipts this month, surprised to see a huge increase in cocktail sales, the highest in the 17-year history of his restaurant, even though the bar has been closed. The septuagenarians are back.

“Every night we are seeing another couple or a pair of couples in the dining room, and they feel so much relief,” said Mr. Stuckey, the owner of Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo. “Covid was hard on everybody, but you can’t even think of the emotional toll in this group. They haven’t gone out. They want to have the complete experience. It is just joyful to see them again.”

Older people, who represent the vast majority of Americans who are fully vaccinated against the coronavirus, are emerging this spring with the daffodils, tilting their faces to the sunlight outdoors. They are filling restaurants, hugging grandchildren and booking flights.

Marcia Bosseler is back to playing Ping-Pong — and beating all the men, she says — at her apartment complex in Coral Gables, Fla.

Randy and Rochelle Forester went out to eat with another couple for the first time in a year, and Ms. Forester celebrated the pleasure of being “out of sweats, to put on some pretty earrings and lipstick and be back in the world a little bit.” Fully vaccinated, Louis Manus Jr., an 82-year-old Navy veteran in Rapid City, S.D., is getting ready for his first vintage car club meeting in a year.



Diners at Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder, Colo. “Every night we are seeing another couple or a pair of couples in the dining room, and they feel so much relief,” said Bobby Stuckey, the owner. Eliza Earle for The New York Times



Randy and Rochelle Forester, right, out to eat with longtime friends Phyllis and Sheldon Schwartz in Detroit. Ms. Forester celebrated being “out of sweats, to put on some pretty earrings and lipstick and be back in the world a little bit.” Cydni Elledge for The New York Times

The upside-down world in which older Americans are drinking more martinis inside restaurants at a far greater rate than millennials will be short-lived. It's a fleeting Covid-era interregnum in which the elders celebrate while their younger counterparts lurk in grocery stores in search of leftover shots or rage on social media, envious of those who have received a vaccine. In a few months, all that will most likely be over, and vaccines will be available to all who want them.

For now, about two-thirds of Americans over 65 have started the vaccination process and nearly 38 percent are fully vaccinated, compared with 12 percent of the overall population, giving the rest of the nation a glimpse into the after times.

“I am just enjoying my life,” said Robbie Bell, 75, who recently went out with two friends for a birthday celebration in Miami — one of whom was hospitalized last year with a dangerous case of Covid — and even hit the dance floor.

“This is my just due,” Ms. Bell said. “Seniors gave up more than anybody else.”



From left, Loretta McNeir, 68, Robbie Bell, 75, and Anita McGruder, 72, dance to the restaurant's music as they left after dinner in Miami. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times



Ms. Bell, left, and Ms. McNeir, surprised by a friend while out to dinner. “This is my just due,” Ms. Bell said. “Seniors gave up more than anybody else.” Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Mrs. Bosseler, who is 85, is thrilled to go back to live games of Ping-Pong and mahjong at The Palace in Coral Gables.

“This is very exciting for me,” she said in a telephone interview.

She is happiest to get back to “relationship with friends,” she said.

“What was difficult was losing that intimacy of walking together and talking face-to-face. I missed not shaking a hand, or putting a hand on a shoulder:”

Her neighbor Modesto Maidique, who is 80, has tiptoed out into the world, grabbing his sandwich indoors. But his central goal, like many older people, is to see his grandchildren.

“I am about ready to jump in a plane and fly, and the sooner the better,” Mr. Maidique said. He also teaches a course on “lessons in life, love and leadership” at Florida International University in Miami and “dreaded the thought of people being online and my not having the ability to interact with others,” he said.

His tentative plan is to hold a normal class in September.

Other older Americans still in the work force are finding their way back into that world before many of the rest of us, too. Ms. Bell, a real estate broker, spent the last year driving around Miami in a car separate from clients, who would then go inside houses by themselves. She recently gave a client a tour of the city from her car speakerphone, pointing out landmarks. “That is how I had to function,” she said. “For the first time last week, someone came who had her shots, too. I picked her up and I did my showings.”



Modesto Maidique, 80, is excited to see his grandchildren. “I am about ready to jump in a plane and fly, and the sooner the better,” Mr. Maidique said. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times



Ms. Bosseler, back at the Ping-Pong table, is eager to reestablish friendships. “I missed not shaking a hand, or putting a hand on a shoulder,” she said. Scott McIntyre for The New York Times

Ms. Bell also dared to go out with two girlfriends for a birthday celebration. She and one of the friends are members of a ski club that suffered three deaths related to a trip to Sun Valley, Idaho, early in the pandemic, and one of her two dinner companions also became sick enough to be hospitalized. Their first dinner out was so jubilant that Ms. Bell made her way to the dance floor, where an older gentleman tried to grab her hand and dance. (For that, she was not ready, and she said she swatted him away.) She and her pals “were talking about how great we felt and how nice it was even to be in each other’s company and talk and laugh,” she said.

Ms. Bell said she tries not to dwell on the losses and the pain of the last year. “I am not going there,” she said, preferring to focus on the cheerful now. But when she talked about her grandchildren, she began to weep. “Do you know how bad it was not to hug your grandchild?” she asked. “I try not to think about it, it’s so hurtful.”

When we last spoke with Marsha Henderson, she had just been vaccinated and was helping her friends and neighbors find vaccine appointments in Washington, D.C. As she and her friends crawl out, she said, they are beginning to look at shaking up some of their routes. “The Book Club Sisters will meet in April for the first time since Covid,” she said. “The pandemic has encouraged us to look to a new genre, not our usual biographies or politics. We are trying to look to the future, Afro Futuristic short stories. No more Zoom. It will be a hoot!”



Marsha Henderson looks forward to her book club meeting in person. “We are trying to look to the future, Afro Futuristic short stories,” she said. “No more Zoom. It will be a hoot!” Michael A. McCoy for The New York Times

Many of those fully vaccinated — older and younger — are as cautious as ever, more like those crocuses that bloom in the day only to fold quietly back into their stems at night. “I would say that we are less afraid, but not fear-free,” said John Barkin, 76, who lives with his wife, Chris, 70, in Chestertown, Md. “There are so many stories about mutations, etc., and so many yet-to-be-vaccinated people seem to be acting more and more irresponsibly. Both of us feel that we have invested a year of being careful, so to continue on conservatively seems the way to go.”

Many said that their vigilance stems from the spread of some more contagious variants of the virus and from uncertainty over whether those who are vaccinated can still spread it. Lindsey J. Leininger, a health policy researcher and a clinical professor at the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth in Hanover, N.H., said that the public health messaging has been “overcautious” at times.

“But I suspect there’s something much deeper at play,” she said.

“We’re biologically wired to avoid viral threats and abhor uncertainty,” Dr. Leininger continued. “Sadly, the variants inject some serious uncertainty, although we’re hopeful about emerging data suggesting our vaccines remain protective and that effective boosters can be produced. Some people cope with uncertainty by saying ‘To heck with it!’ and avoid all precaution, while others

become super cautious.”

Paul Einbund, owner of The Morris in San Francisco, is seeing the adventurers out again. “We are getting more of our older clientele coming back,” he said. “Normally these are people who if I hadn’t seen in a year it would be so weird I would call them to see if they were OK.” One man who told him before the pandemic that he had a terminal illness came in the other night, to his great shock. “He was dining with three businessmen, and they went big and ordered this incredible chartreuse,” Mr. Einbund said. “That table gave me so much energy that night.”



Cocktail sales this month at Frasca Food and Wine in Boulder were the highest in the restaurant’s 17-year history, thanks to older patrons. “It is just joyful to see them again,” said Mr. Stuckey, the owner. Eliza Earle for The New York Times



The Foresters, right, and their friends, the Schwartzes, toasted the 80th birthday of Phyllis, left, and retirement for Sheldon, right. Cydni Elledge for The New York Times

Nancy Arcadipone, 71, who splits time between Chicago and Kalamazoo, Mich., is planning her first trip to the Southwest in 45 years, and plotting when she can next enjoy eggplant parmigiana at La Scarola and a margarita next to a couple of tacos at Frontera Grill, both in Chicago, and live music performances. All within tantalizing reach.

Still, her elation is tempered by the generational reversal of vaccine fortunes.

“I feel the worst for the younger generation,” Ms. Arcadipone said. “My generation really got to live, experience and experiment. I feel sad for younger people. I find it kind of strange that our generation gets to be socially free first after a year of isolation.”

Andrea Westberg, 73, sees it through all lenses, having missed out on a customized tour of Italy last summer with her teenage grandchildren. She and her husband, Gary, 74, moved to an active adult community in Roseville, Calif., two months before the world locked down and immediately longed for the incipient community pickleball, wine club get-togethers, potlucks and seeing new neighbors.

“We were so disappointed,” Ms. Westberg said. “We kept busy decorating a new home, but not being able to share it with guests, including our sons and families, was very sad and lonely.”

At last, she is together with family again.

“I am hopeful for the future but cautious,” she said. “I grieve for those lives lost and hope that science and truth prevail in the years to come.”

Jennifer Steinhauer has been a Times reporter since 1994. She has worked on the Metro, Business and National desks, and served as City Hall bureau chief and Los Angeles bureau chief before moving to Washington in 2010. She is the author of a novel, two cookbooks and “The Firsts” the story of the women of the 116th Congress. @jestei