

How San Francisco's Ferry Building Became a Can't Miss Attraction



By [Renee Brincks](#)

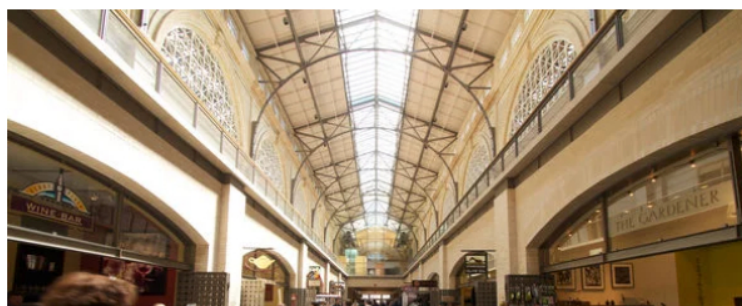
A reimagined Ferry Building revitalized San Francisco's downtown shoreline.



The Ferry Building on San Francisco's Embarcadero (©Karlis Dambrans/Creative Commons)

San Francisco's iconic Ferry Building anchors Market Street, with two symmetrical wings extending from its 245-foot towerlike open arms welcoming travelers to the waterfront. This legendary Embarcadero structure has served as a symbol of the city for more than a century, starting as a major transit hub and standing tall through two major earthquakes to become today's community gathering space and culinary destination.

Before bridges spanned the San Francisco Bay, the Ferry Building served as a major entry point for passengers arriving from the north and east. Soon after its 1898 opening, the structure saw more than 50,000 commuters each day—and that made it the second-busiest transit terminal in the world.



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Inside the Ferry Building Marketplace (©Visit California)

“Passengers came through the second-floor grand hall and walked down the historic stairs under the clock tower to the foot of Market Street. They were greeted by dozens and dozens of trolley cars and train lines,” says Jane Connors, senior property manager at Equity Office, the company that manages the Ferry Building.

By the late 1930s, however, cars started crossing the newly constructed Bay and Golden Gate bridges. Two decades later, a new double-decker freeway opened to Embarcadero traffic and visually separated the Ferry Building from downtown San Francisco. Soon, local ferry companies ended service. The terminal was divided into offices, and linoleum was laid over the second floor’s stunning marble mosaic tile.

Though ferries eventually returned, the Ferry Building remained an afterthought until the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. As the damaged Embarcadero Freeway was removed, it sparked a community-wide conversation about the waterfront.

“When that was taken down, it connected the Ferry Building all along Market Street and up to Twin Peaks,” says Connors. “There was suddenly this new interest in the building, and you started to see what San Francisco was meant to be.”



Chocolate for sale in the Ferry Building Marketplace (©SF Travel/Scott Chernis)

That multi-year design discussion led to a \$110 million restoration project that brought the stately Beaux Arts Ferry Building back to life. Builders refurbished four 22-foot diameter clock faces on the central tower. Crews rebuilt skylights in the 660-foot Grand Nave. Craftspeople replaced nearly 140,000 individual mosaic tiles and rehabbed marble cornices and wrought-iron trusses. New cutouts connected various floors of the building, flooding the interior with natural light. Finally, inviting storefronts were carved out of street-level stalls that once stored luggage and supplies.

Today, those stalls house local food purveyors, boutiques and cafes, along with cookware shops and wine retailers.

“Because the store facades stay open—there’s no glass on them—it creates this really convivial experience,” says Connors. “It’s like a little main street. There is a 25-foot wide interior path that people walk down, going from shop to shop. You discover things in a very organic way.”



The Embarcadero in front of the Ferry Building (©Gary Yost Photography)

After selecting a stylish stem vase from [Heath Ceramics](#), for example, shoppers can sample olive oil at [McEvoy Ranch](#) or swing by [Prather Ranch Meat Company](#) for a sandwich. Depending on the hour, the scent of [Cowgirl Creamery's](#) grilled cheese, warm herb slab from [Acme Bread Company](#) or fresh [Blue Bottle Coffee](#) might fill the air.

Blue Bottle Coffee was one of the Ferry Building's earliest tenants, and it remains a popular stop for downtown employees, shoppers and travelers.

"Our Ferry Building space is beautiful. It's a bit like a modern library, architecturally," says Blue Bottle's Vanessa Gates Mowell. "It was incredibly special for us to have one of our first brick and mortar locations at a building where we had our modest farmers market stand for years."



Tri-weekly Ferry Plaza Farmers Market (©SF Travel/Scott Chernis)

Several Ferry Building businesses got their start at the [Ferry Plaza Farmers Market](#), a weekly staple since 1993. The event debuted as a one-time gathering in the Embarcadero roadway, a few years after the freeway came down. It now takes place every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday, linking local farmers with a vast urban audience.

"The Ferry Building and the farmers market have really transformed this area, making it not only a tourist destination but also a food destination," says Marcy Coburn, executive director of the Center for Urban Education about Sustainable Agriculture ([CUESA](#)), the nonprofit that runs the market and associated educational programs. "It's an incredibly compelling location. It's also a great

educational programs. It's an incredibly compelling location...it's also a great way to experience the city."

Bill Crepps, owner of the farm [Everything Under the Sun](#), has been selling at the Ferry Building since the first farmers market set up there. His clientele includes both residents and chefs from [Nopa](#), [Contigo](#) and other respected San Francisco restaurants. CUESA estimates that some 400 area chefs source fresh, seasonal ingredients from Ferry Plaza Farmers Market vendors.



Mushrooms at the Ferry Plaza Farmers Market (@Katy Lynch/Creative Commons)

Crepps also serves travelers searching for tasty souvenirs. "It's become an event as well as a farmers market. I hear a lot of people say, 'Oh, I can put this in my suitcase and take it home...'" says Crepps, who sells fresh produce plus sun-dried fruits and other travel-friendly foods.

When they're done sampling local cuisine and shopping for San Francisco keepsakes, visitors will find plenty of other activities at the Ferry Building. Benches on the promenade overlook the bay and offer scenic views. Photos inside and in front of the building outline waterfront history. Several culinary and city tours pass through the structure. And, the Ferry Building is considered a catalyst for new neighboring waterfront attractions such as the [Exploratorium](#), which relocated to Pier 15 in 2013.

Repurposing yesterday's structures can reinvigorate neighborhoods for years to come, explains Mike Buhler, executive director of [San Francisco Heritage](#). His nonprofit leads local preservation and advocacy efforts, and he calls today's Ferry Building a well-planned example of adaptive reuse.

"One of the central tenets of historic preservation is that historic buildings must have an active use, and must be valued by people, in order to survive and thrive," he says. "The revitalization and rehabilitation of the Ferry Building not only restored its historic features, but also successfully ensured that it will have an active, thriving use well into the future."



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