

After two years of muted celebrations, holiday parties are back

Many local companies are going all-in on holiday festivities this year, for a change.

By **Diti Kohli** Globe Staff, Updated December 11, 2022, 6:07 p.m.



At the Redgate holiday party, employees and their guests listened to short speeches. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

The real estate firm Redgate chose not to host a holiday celebration in 2021. But 2022 is a different story.

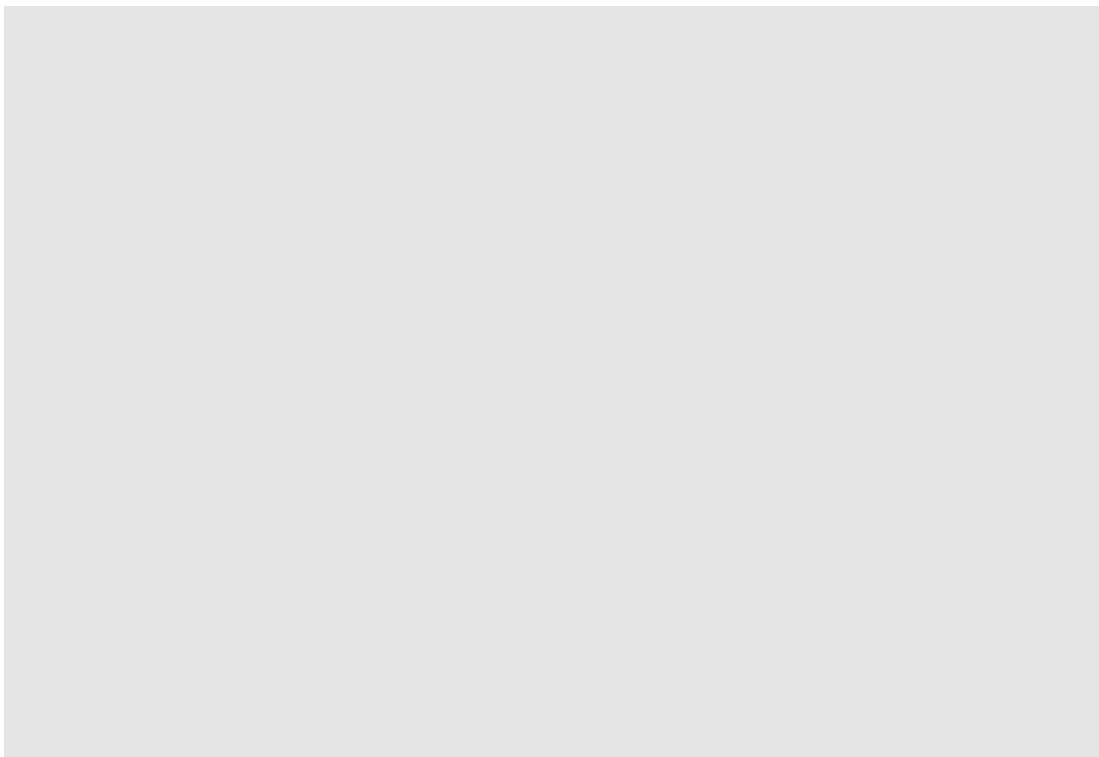
The Boston-based developer picked Woods Hill Pier 4, a swanky seafood restaurant

located roughly where the famous Anthony's once stood on Boston Harbor, to celebrate the season with its 55 employees and their plus-ones earlier this month. All the markers of a typical Christmastime gathering were in place: free drinks, short speeches, and sparkly shirts. Servers passed around popovers and saffron arancini. Dessert? Bite-sized beignets with chocolate sauce.

“Being able to go to a high-quality restaurant and mingle with your colleagues is something people don’t get to do every day,” said Kyle Warwick, a founding principal of Redgate. “A party is the way to demonstrate to our employees that we care, especially considering the past few years.”

Lots of other companies believe so, too. The end of 2022 has been marked by a resurgence of holiday parties after a long pandemic lull. In the past two years, pre-holiday COVID surges prompted the cancellation of many celebrations. Even before the pandemic, December festivities were falling out of favor in part because executives were — and probably still are — concerned about inappropriate conduct brought to light during the #MeToo movement.

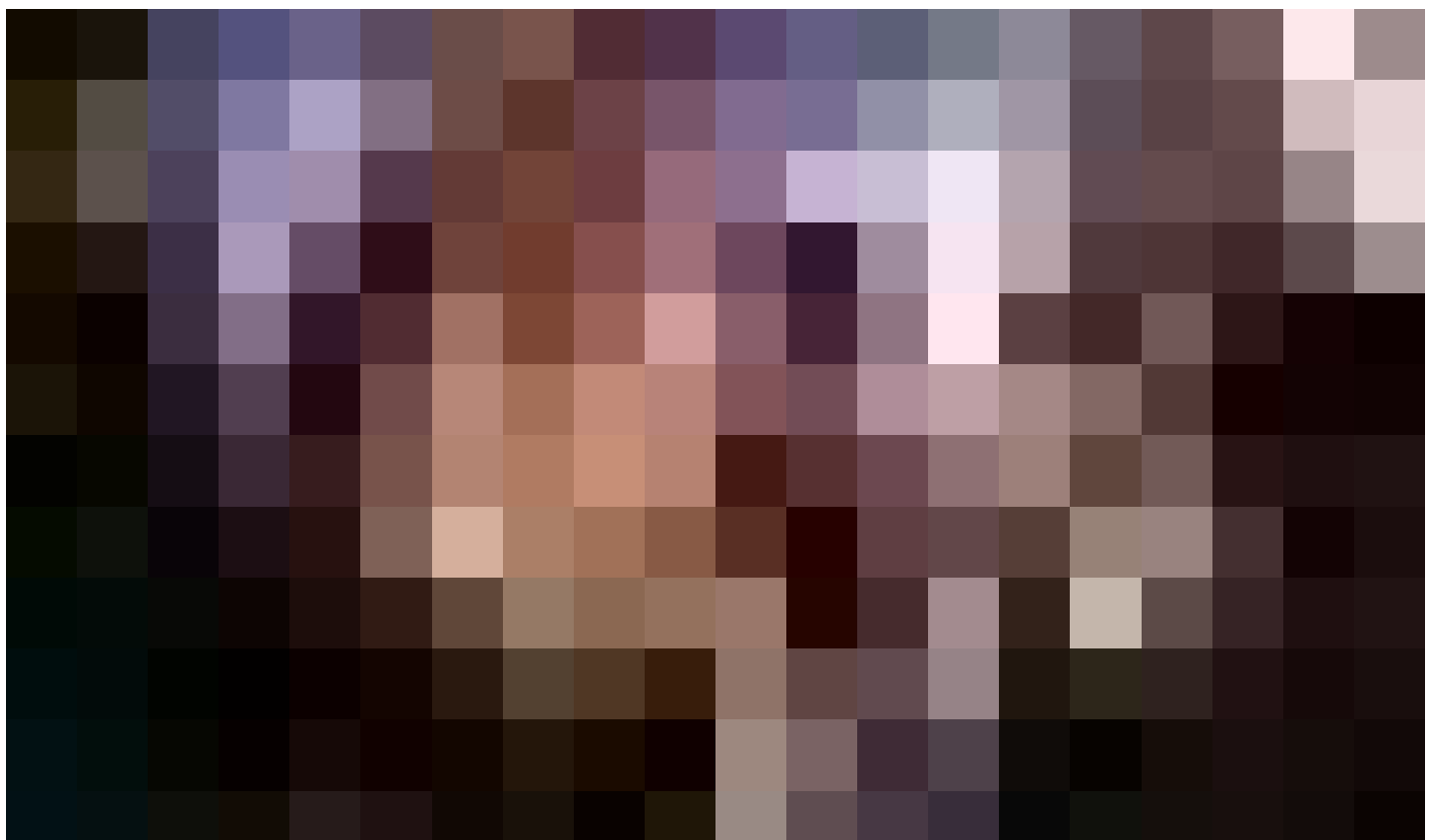
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But this time around, 57 percent of employers are holding end-of-year celebrations — more than double those in 2021 and up from 5 percent in 2020, according to [research](#) from outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas. Less than 2 percent have stuck with the kind of virtual events that were commonplace during the first year of COVID: [at-home champagne delivery, parking lot parties, and Zoom gingerbread house-making workshops](#).

Not everyone is ready to celebrate as usual, said Patrizia Chambers, the general manager of Servia, in the Financial District. Holiday gatherings today can be more intimate due to enduring safety concerns. Then there are worries of a recession. “There’s more awareness of how the dollar is spent,” Chambers said.

Oftentimes, companies opt for smaller dinners or allow teams to decide for themselves how to celebrate. Chambers said people come with colleagues to Servia’s private chef’s table for a low-key holiday get-together or swing by for tapas to toast to a year well-spent.





Two raffle winners, Sara Warwick (left) and Bevin Andrews (right), opened their gifts at the Redgate holiday party at Woods Hill Pier 4. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

But others see the 2022 season as an opportunity to go large.

At least 16 percent of companies, according to the Challenger survey, say parties have come back bigger and more expensive than they were before. With those budgets, employers have hired outside vendors or loaded up the drink menu. Event spaces in hotels, including the Hyatt Regency downtown, have seen an influx of bookings compared to 2021, said Emily Conroy, its senior event sales manager.

For Shane Stineford, founder of Sterling-based Creative Events, the current surge of corporate and private gatherings “makes 2019, which was a record-breaking year, seem like a walk in the park. I can’t say people were comfortable putting 500 people in the Marriott Copley ballroom last year. Now, it’s happened a few times in a couple of weeks.”

And maybe, enthusiasm is up, too.

“Before the pandemic, going to your company party might have been more of an obligation than something you’re looking forward to,” Stineford added. “I think things have changed.”

That seems to be the case for Lauren Poitras, sales manager at the Back Bay surf ‘n’ turf spot, Grill 23 & Bar. The events offerings at the restaurant are “busier than ever,” she said, with seven private rooms often booked back to back. For one holiday lunch, the beverage director led 150 employees through a wine-and-cheese tasting. On a different night, the Banks Fish House, a nearby eatery under the same ownership, had its second floor bought out for a reception with a hot chocolate bar, complete with homemade whipped cream, mini candy canes, and marshmallows. (Adding alcohol, Poitras said, was optional.)

The buzz is a boon for workers emerging from the isolation of COVID, but also for restaurants hurting from inflation and other fallout of the pandemic, she added.

“Revenue is pretty amazing, and it has been since September.”



Redgate's party had all the markers of a typical Christmastime gathering: free drinks, short speeches, and sparkly shirts. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

In a few instances, the strong demand for holiday events has prolonged the season of festivities. Leo Fonseca, chief operating officer of Kings Dining and Entertainment, said “parties were organically pushed earlier to November or later to January” because December dates booked up quickly. Those who could reserve a spot are bowling and playing pool, but also opting for the extras: ice carvings, magicians, live music, or specialty drinks with smoke bubbles.

“You can throw a great party without all of it, but companies are springing for it,” Fonseca added. “They’re not balking at the price.”

Then there are a few parties that it’s fair to proclaim truly extravagant.

One bash at an undisclosed Boston location — planned by Swank Events owner Kristin

Healy — will be a Hollywood-themed spectacle for a tech company. Guests will walk the red carpet surrounded by fake paparazzi before meeting a champagne girl wearing a dress of bubbly flutes. A space attached to a ballroom foyer will transform into a speakeasy jazz lounge with leather furniture and blackjack tables. A realtor working with Stineford at Creative Events is doing something of a “destination holiday party,” whisking roughly 250 employees away for a four-day getaway on Cape Cod. It’ll feature golf and recreational activities, plus an evening gala with professional cigar rollers, a giant money machine, and a playable “Family Feud” replica.

“Almost like a live circus,” Stineford said.



Fifty-seven percent of employers are holding end-of-year celebrations this season, more than double those in 2021 and up from 5 percent in 2020. PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

But even those hosting more conventional gatherings are just happy to see them return.

Ryan D. Williams, president of Wakefield’s 128 Plumbing, said his company’s plans this year, far exceed the last couple of holiday seasons. They’ve rented out most of the Night

Shift Brewing taproom in Everett so that upwards of 200 guests can wander freely, with cocktails and draft beer.

Last year, Williams added, “people were exhausted” by COVID restrictions and had to test before arrival. “Now we’re here to party.”

Then take Michelle Landers, executive director of the New England chapter of the Urban Land Institute. She brought together dozens of the real estate trade group’s members — developers, architects, and engineers — earlier this month in a private tent at Snowport, an outdoor holiday market in Seaport. It wasn’t a radical change from the pre-pandemic parties, but it was sorely needed.

“There are enough Zoom meetings in this world,” Landers said. “Let’s at least celebrate in-person.”

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