

EDIBLE: The top ten happy hours in Monterey County.

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By [Mark Anderson](#)

Forget the pursuit of happiness. Let us pursue the happiest hour.

Just like happiness, the happiest hour can be difficult to define. Here's what merited consideration.

Points for length and duration. Doing a single hour is better than nothing, but not impressive. Same for stingy Monday through Thursday runs. Hence three hour times – especially those that happen daily – get big love.

Points for not skimping too early into the afternoon, when people are actually earning money to spend at happy hour. No honest happy hour should start at 2:30pm unless it ends hours later.

Points for creativity and depth. A buck off everything lacks imagination.

Points for patios and views, because those pair well with sunshine.

Points for quality stuff, like the craft beers made on the premises at a handful of these spots. Points for ambiance too.

A final note: We stuck to locally owned, even if **El Torito** has a good oceanview happy hour that lasts four hours.

Here's my current top 10. (OK, top 14, given all the ties.) Add yours on Facebook, the food blog, www.mcweekly.com/edible or via edible@mcweekly.com.

Also on the blog: honorable mentions, which include places where happy never stops (think divey **Cuz's Sportsman** in Seaside) and once-a-week happy days that should happen more often but are good when they do (**Bayonet-Blackhorse**).

10. Alvarado Street Brewing Company (3-6pm daily, 655-2337) does its award-winning beers like the Minesweeper IPA (normally \$7) for \$5 in a lively and attractive setting that pops on farmers market Tuesdays.

9. (Tie) Because students deserve a great happy hour. And because **Otter's Den** (883-1227 Mon-Fri, 4-6:30pm) gets dirt cheap: Beers for as little as \$2.50 with Long Islands for \$5, plus beer pong tables. Speaking of cheap: **Salinas Sports Tavern** (3-7pm Mon-Fri, 422-5652) does \$2 Bud Light drafts and \$15 beer buckets (with five aluminum bottles) when the game is on during happy hour, plus deals like \$4.99 nachos, \$6 mega 22-ounce drafts and \$5 well drinks, wines and margaritas during normal HH.

8. Under Municipal Wharf II, in Monterey, locals haunt **Sand Bar & Grill** (4-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 373-2818) does draft beer pints for \$3.75, well drinks for \$5, and house wines for \$6.50, in addition to a special appetizer menu of deals like \$4.50 clam chowder bowl, \$5 artichoke, \$4 onion rings, or \$7 sand dabs.

7. A three-way tie for three uniquely flavorful set of happies from three sibling restaurants in the **Downtown Dining** family. **Rio Grill** (4-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 4-close Sun, 625-5436); does \$4 well drinks, house white and red wine and \$6 house wines in the Carmel Crossroads. Stylish downtown Monterey joint **Montrio Bistro** (4:30-6:30pm Mon-Fri, 648-8880) has \$5 wines and tap beers, \$4.50 well drinks and a variety of creative cocktail options for six bucks each. **Tarpy's** (3-6pm, Mon-Fri, 647-1444) offers a sweet setting, along with \$6 cocktails, \$5 drafts and \$4 well drinks, with bar bites ranging \$3-\$7 and free wine tasting for Wine Down Wednesdays.

6. **Kula Ranch Island Steakhouse & Sushi** (4-6:30pm daily, 883-9479) rocks \$2 sliders, \$2 wings, \$3 drafts, \$4 margaritas, mai-tais and well drinks. Just a well-rounded range of bargains in a value-conscious spot. It may not be sunny in Marina all that often, but the fire pits on the generous decks are nice.

5. **Cibo Ristorante Italiano** (4-7pm daily, 649-8151) calls this the "Cheap-o" \$3 happy hour: \$3 well drinks, beer and wine, and a small bites menu including roasted tomato bruschetta for \$3, polenta caprese for \$3, pizza del giorno for \$7, lemon – and caper-dusted calamari for \$6, or the sweet potato fries with garlic aioli for \$5. If it wasn't so dark in there, it would rank higher.

4. (Tie) **Bull and Bear Whiskey Bar & Taphouse** (4-7pm daily, 655-3031): \$2 off draft beers, \$4 well drinks and 20 percent off appetizers, with a big fat patio to enjoy daylight. Across the street, **Lallapalooza** (4-6pm daily, 645-9036) delivers \$1.50 oysters, \$2 steak bites, \$4 duck-fat fries and other snacks, \$5 martinis, \$5 drafts and \$7 designer drinks, and \$12.99 early entrées to boot.

3. **Hula's Island Grill** (4-6pm Sun-Mon, 2pm-close Tue, 2-6pm Wed-Sat, 655-4852) stretches its "hour" – into seven-plus on Tuesday – and enjoys a vivacious vibe. Fancy cocktails like Dr. Funks, Zombies, and infused Pink Bikini martinis, crispy coconut shrimp rolls, superb Hawaiian ceviche and jalapeño bacon mac and cheese are all \$6.

2. **Hacienda Mexican Grill** (3-6pm daily, 424-6400) on North Davis in Salinas is the rare spot with \$10 pitchers, plus \$3 pints and \$4 house margaritas and well drinks. Sister restaurant **Casa Sorrento** (3-6pm daily, 757-2720) in Oldtown also does three hours, daily, with the same deals, often with live entertainment, and all day Monday.

1. The definition of best happy hour is debateable. The fundamentals at **Peter B's BrewPub** (4-6:30pm daily, 649-2699) in downtown Monterey are not. The hour is two and a half, it takes no breaks for weekends, features several of the best dozen draft beers in town at bargain rates (\$4 pints and \$6 25-ounce house-brewed microbeer) and extensive appetizer specials – think crispy cheese curds for \$4 and big bowl of buffalo chili with cornbread for \$5. One of the best HHs around.