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Risks and rewards of booking your table online - Part II

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Chris Keff, chef/owner of Flying Fish, is skeptical. "The question with these online services is, can they provide you with business you wouldn't have otherwise? And that's a hard question to answer." Keff used OpenTable years ago before nixing it, due, in large part, to its cost. "If I look at the \$400 to \$500 a month spent on it, I think, 'Well, I can pay for my ad in the theater programs and boost my late-night dining instead.' "

Personally, I'm slow to embrace new technologies. The way I see it, why would a diner want to go through a "third party" rather than call the restaurant directly and speak to a human being?

Why, indeed.

Have you ever tried to make a reservation only to have the phone ring off the hook because the restaurant is closed or staffers are too busy to answer the phone? Ever been put on hold for what seems like eons? Happens to me all the time.

So I thought I'd give OpenTable a try. I found it an effortless way to gather information about a city's better restaurants (42 U.S. states are represented), and though I didn't need to be a member to use the service, membership offers a variety of perks, including a frequent-diner program. I was impressed by the informative site whose detailed information includes restaurant bios, photos, hours, parking info, dress code and maps — and by the fact that I could make a reservations 24/7.

For business or holiday travel, it's like having your own personal concierge. Just for kicks, I hit the New York entry last week to see about scoring a table for two at 7 p.m. Saturday, Aug. 27. Within seconds I learned that I could be accommodated at 264 restaurants in Manhattan alone, including Alain Ducasse, Aix and Artisanal — and that was just a fraction of the "A"-list. Impressive.

Locally, more restaurants are adopting the system. Cascadia just did. Zöe and The Herbfarm will soon be hooked up. Even Keff is reconsidering: She's giving OpenTable a second chance at Flying Fish with a three-month trial beginning in October.

Meanwhile, we'll have to wait and see whether more restaurants — hopefully a wider variety — adopt the system. If so, it could have a significant impact on our dining experiences, whether we go online and use it or not.

"Soon," speculates Smith, "the OpenTable terminal is going to scream at the waiter when they pass, yelling 'It's table 19's birthday!' And aren't you more likely to go back to a restaurant if they make you feel special? If they were really emotionally invested in your evening? For me, that's well worth a dollar. Or even a few dollars."